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REVIEW

"You have to do what you think is of value"

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Herrera, Brian Eugenio, and Anne García-Romero, eds. *María Irene Fornés in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2025. xxxvii + **376 pages. ISBN 978-1- 009-28041-9. Hb. €99.20.**

The drama of Cuban-born American playwright María Irene Fornés (1930–2018) never ceased to astonish and fascinate theater-goers, critics, and scholars throughout her lifetime, a tendency that has undeniably intensified in recent years as new generations continue to be intrigued by her multifaceted legacy. *María Irene Fornés in Context,* edited by Brian Eugenio Herrera and Anne García-Romero,[1] aptly exemplifies the ever-growing scholarly interest in Fornés as a dramatist, director, and teacher of playwriting. This compelling and informative collection of contributions encourages the reader to discover Fornés in her own context, in the cities, artistic institutions, and workshops that influenced her, as well as in the avant-garde American theater of the second half of the twentieth century. The book also devotes ample attention to exploring the various ways her invaluable legacy is kept alive in print, in the theater, in film, and in the works of younger playwright generations.

The volume is a synthesizing endeavor about Fornés's life, work, and legacy, yet not without antecedents as five scholarly works dealing with Fornés's drama with different focuses were already published during her lifetime, namely, Diane Lynn Moroff's *Fornes: Theatre in the Present Tense* (1996), Caridad Svich and Maria Delgado, eds., *Conducting a Life: Reflections on the Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes* (1999), Marc Robinson, ed., *The Theater of Maria Irene Fornes* (1999), Scott T. Cummings's *Maria Irene Fornes* (2012**)**, and Anne García-Romero's *The Fornes Frame: Contemporary Latina Playwrights and the Legacy of Maria Irene Fornes* (2016).

María Irene Fornés in Context begins with a substantially argued introduction that provides concise information about Fornés's life and works, marked with dates, and followed by clearly stated objectives. Here the editors draw attention to the recurrence of certain topics, events, and experiences in entries, which results in some overlap, nevertheless they complement Fornés's complex portrait emerging in the book. Surprisingly,

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the repetitions thus occurring (details about workshops, teaching methodology, genesis of certain plays), like mosaics reflecting light from different angles, add to the overall image about Fornés and her drama. Owing to the logic of structuring the volume, the chapters often generate a kind of dialogue between each other, thereby expanding on a particular topic.

The collection contains thirty chapters arranged in four main contextual areas: "Places and People," "Theatre," "Culture, Society and Politics," and "Legacy." Unconventionally, the writings in each section appear across a wide range of styles, genres, and registers, which seems to be a definite editorial goal arguing that this heterogeneity accurately mirrors Fornés's "dynamic experimentalism and defiant anti-disciplinarity" (xxxi). Accordingly, scholarly essays, micro-plays, personal recollections, sample teaching lessons of playwriting, and interviews feature in the collection. Indeed, the eclecticism evident in the variety of voices and approaches considerably enriches the book; however, it results in many descriptive and informative writings at the expense of critical analyses.

The first seven writings in the "Places and People" section are arranged chronologically, thus providing a progressive narrative of the influences that shaped Fornés's writerly evolution. In the opening study, Eric Mayer-Garcia deals with a hitherto unexplored aspect in Fornés's life and art, namely, the impulses she received from her own family and Cuban avant-garde art flourishing in the 1920s–1940s. He dispels a widely held misconception that Fornés's lack of formal training in theater and drama explains her nonconventional practice in theater. He contends that Fornés's "bohemian" upbringing—regular discussions on readings in her parents' salon in Havana—and Cuba's avant-garde endeavors in visual arts, jazz, and theater fostered her imagination. Specifically, Cubist painter Amelia Peláez (1896–1968), jazz musician Mario Bauzá (1911–1993), and theater director Virgilio Pinera (1912–1979) are highlighted as inspirational for her.

The revelatory experience Fornés felt after seeing Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in Paris in 1954 is powerfully captured in a short play entitled *Harriet and Irene: Infinite Muses* by Elaine Romero. In the imaginary dialogue between Harriet Sohmers and Fornés, who had a romantic relationship then, Fornés realizes that her artistic talents are no good for painting. Although she was the student of Abstract Expressionist painter Hans Hoffman (1880–1966) in Paris, she senses she has another calling. "I know that this charcoal drawing no longer makes sense, and I hear things

now . . . everything I am dreaming is happening in real space and landing in my belly."

The next four contributions describe how her playwriting technique developed through her collaboration with the Actors Studio, the avant-garde theater movement in New York, the Padua Hills Playwrights Workshop and Festival in the Los Angeles area, and the Latin American Writers workshop. Brian Eugenio Herrera's in-depth essay discusses Fornés's early encounter with the Actors Studio—renowned for refining Method Acting based on Constantin Stanislavsky's principles—and the multiple influences the Studio had on her. Fornés's "signature innovations" like "intuitive writing, the emphasis on theatrical realities rooted in moment-to-moment experience, disregard for conventional divisions of theatrical labor" (25) can be traced back to practices employed at the Studio.

Judson Memorial Church, a performance venue for experimental artists of the Off-Off-Broadway movement in the 1960s was Fornés's "true artistic home" (42) as Kaeli Rae Burja observes. The community-based activities and the large open spaces in the church (pews were removed) particularly motivated Fornés to discover theater-making. She experimented there with fusing "text and performance" (36), which led to producing her one-act musical *Promenade* (1965) in collaboration with composer Rev. Al Carmines. She created there *The Successful Life of 3* (1965), *A Vietnamese Wedding* (1967), *The Annunciation* (1967), and *Dr. Kheal* (1968). Typical Judsonian theatrical techniques like "grounding the plays in the present moment, sculpturing non-traditional movement" (43) became staple elements in her theatrical creations. Committed to experimental theater as well as teaching and playmaking, The Padua Hills Workshop and Festival (1978–1995) was an exceptionally fecund place for artists invited. In her article, Andréa J. Onstad describes in detail the history and genesis of this Festival founded by Murray Mednick (1939–2025). Fornés was a regular guest teacher for fifteen years creating her most successful plays there. Onstad points out that "quintessential Fornés" techniques were further refined at Padua, where spaces allowed "her painterly theatrical visions to explode on a vast canvas" (52). Having been a student herself at Padua in 1991, Onstad shares her personal recollections about Fornés's magical and unique teaching methods, whereby creative powers are brought on the surface. Kenneth Prestininzi's article "Latin American Writers Workshop" gives a vivid personal account of his experiences of Fornés's exceptional teaching method at the 1997/1998 writing workshop in Mexico.

The last three contributions in Part I explore Fornés's connections to Abstract Impressionist painter Hans Hoffman, writer and critic Susan Sontag (1933–2004), and her mother Carmen Collado Fornés (1891–1996). In her insightful essay, Christina A. León discusses Hoffman's direct influence on Fornés's dramatic technique. León highlights that "spatial tension and visual theater" (78) proclivities and the dynamism of Hoffman's theory of color were transposed into Fornés's theatrical language. Ultimately, Hoffman's "color dynamism" helped Fornés to create "a three-dimensional space out of a two-dimensional canvas" (80), which was instrumental for her stage. As for Susan Sontag's influence on Fornés in the early 1960s, Alisa Solomon states they "galvanized each other as they embarked on their professional career, producing a persistent synergy" (92). Anne García-Romero's warm-hearted writing reveals the profound influence that Carmen had on her youngest daughter, Irene (as she preferred to call her), and the special bond and affectionate love mother and daughter had. Carmen not only provided home-schooling for her children including Irene, but also supported her artistic career "both philosophically and materially" (105). The author concludes that Carmen filled Irene "with intellectual curiosity . . ., ingenuity, optimism, and spiritual generosity" (111).

Part II Theatre contains the fewest articles, merely six. It engages theatrical movements and traditions in which Fornés was a key influence. Scott T. Cumming's study examines Fornés's practice of writing and directing her own plays, which was not customary in American theatre traditions. From the 1970s, Fornés insisted on directing the premieres of her work. She often began "her workshop or first production before a script was finished," which became her "modus operandi for the remaining [sic] of her career" (117). Morgan Jenness provides a highly informative account of Fornés's involvement in the Off-Off-Broadway theatre movement from the early 1960s through discussing the significance of the New York Theatre Strategy formed by Fornés in the 1970s as well as her association with INTAR (an Off-Off-Broadway theater to further the work of Hispanic writers). Jenness asserts that Fornés could flourish in communities she built and could always retain her artistic freedom as she remained "true to the core of the Off-Off-Broadway zeitgeist until the end of her life" (127).

Stephen Scott-Bottoms suggests adapting Richard Schechner's term "environmental theatre" to Fornés's theater on the grounds there exists an "intrinsic connectivity between environment and behavior" (139). When

comparing the theatre practices of Schechner and Fornés, the author detects considerable differences, though. First, for the theorist, environmental theater is a non-frontal form in which "actors and audience occupy the same, shared space," while Fornés was not interested in the "interactive dynamics of stage place" (139). Second, for Schechner the playwright is of secondary importance, whereas Fornés considered directing as "a natural extension . . . of her writing process (141). Third, environment for Schechner "served only to provide raw materials . . . that could be mined as the director saw fit" (141). For Fornés, however, "staging choices should inform the writing of the play, as much as vice versa," (142) so the playwright could continue her text through the production process. This environmentally oriented working method proved to be ideal for Fornés especially at Padua, where the diverse spaces and various objects found proved to be stimulating for "molding" them into art. Eventually, Scott-Bottoms is right in concluding that "Fornés's texts might not look much like 'environmental theatre' in the sense outlined by Schechner, yet her mature work as a playwright-director was profoundly attentive to the specifics of her surroundings—and to the recyclable raw materials they afforded her" (148). Perhaps the author could have suggested another more appropriate term for this quality in Fornés's drama, or this attempt rather underscores the futility of reducing her drama to some categories. Additionally, Scott-Bottom's article includes new, invaluable materials such as his own unpublished interviews conducted with Fornés between 1994 and 2002, as well as an interview with three artists of the Goat Island group (1986–2009), who worked with Fornés at Padua.

Trevor Boffone's study on the use and function of music in Fornés's theater delves into a somewhat neglected area in the Fornés scholarship. He argues that music constitutes an integral part of her experimentation as songs punctuate or drive the narratives of several works, for instance "*Molly's Dream*, *Promenade*, *Sarita*, *Lovers and Keepers*, and *Balseros/Rafters*" (151). Boffone states that the plays fluctuate "back and forth between genres of straight plays and musicals" (153), thus underlying the difficulty of finding the adequate genre category. After all, this "in-betweenness" is justified since Fornés always strongly rejected any kind of categorization of her pieces. The author reflects on how Fornés's unconventional music theater continues to inspire not only new experimental productions, but new scholarly research as well. A most notable recovery effort is produced by company Mabou Mines (NYC) with

an intimate "pocket opera" that included the plays *Mud* and *Drowning* with new music by Philip Glass in 2020.

Theater director Julianna Frey-Méndez offers an analytical tool that allows students, directors, artists, and scholars "to enter into relationship" with Fornés's plays. Drawing on the dramatist's compositional technique based on chance juxtaposition and surprise, Frey-Méndez introduces the method of "The Fornésian Shuffle" (161) and, in a sample exercise, demonstrates how this approach works for Fornés's *Enter THE NIGHT* (1993).

Adam Versényi's lucidly argued analytical essay "Translation and Adaptation" deals with bilinguality, an overarching feature in Fornés's oeuvre. Fornés was a playwright writing in her second language, while she herself translated many of her plays written in English into Spanish. Versényi explores "how Fornés's playwriting method and the process of theatrical translation affect two translations of *The Conduct of Life* (1985) as *La conducta de la vida*, one by David Olguín and Fornés, published in 1995, and the other by Alberto Sarraín, published in 2005" (172). Versényi provides a nuanced reading of the minor or major linguistic and theatrical changes in the English and the Spanish versions of the play. He considers it "fascinating" (179) that Fornés's participation in the translation process led to revisions of *The Conduct of Life*, but she never introduced them in the English versions. A question, though, arises and remains unanswered: what creative and cognitive forces open up when the dramatist works in her own language? It would be interesting to read about the author's reflections on these subjects.

The titles in the third section, Culture, Society, and Politics, "Cuban," "Hispanic/Latinx/Latiné," "Avant-Gardist," "Environmentalist," "Feminist," "Lesbianism," and "Elder" adequately reflect the labels and identities to which the cultural, societal, and political context of the second half of the twentieth century in the US attempted to confine Fornés and her drama. Throughout her life and career, however, she resisted being identified by any of these labels. The contributions in the section consider how these contexts informed her drama and how certain communities viewed her work as the focus of their own projects.

In her article, Lillian Manzor provides valuable new insights into Fornés's dynamic relationship to Havana and Cuba shaped by her connection to her family there, to the Cuban theater, and to the distinct rhythms of Cuban Spanish. Since Fornés left Cuba with her mother for economic reasons in 1945, her Cuban identity is clearly distinguished from

the "Cubanness based on nationalist ideologies of playwrights" leaving their homeland after 1959 (183). Special attention is paid to Fornés's first trip back to Havana in 1960, when she wrote her first play, *La Viuda* [The Widow], based on the letters of her great-grandfather's cousin. The author points out an often-ignored aspect of the play that it should be read within the 1959–1961 historical context (the Cuban revolution in 1959, the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961). The theme of exile in *La Viuda* in the first years of 1900 resonates with the thousands of Cubans living in exile in the US in the early 1960s. In their study, Jon D. Rossini and Patricia Ybarra trace the changes in the different designations of ethnic identity (Hispanic, Latina/o, Latinx, Latiné) and attempt to reveal why Fornés never accepted any of them. They convincingly argue that Fornés's resistance to delimiting labels has its roots in her specific biography, her aesthetics, and politics. Like many of her contemporaries with Latiné roots, Fornés never assimilated to the middle-class US culture, which is "overtly Latiné" (196). Although Fornés rejected ethnic identification, she insisted on the need for a "Hispanic aesthetic" or "Hispanic Sensibility," which she fostered through her Hispanic Playwrights in Residence Laboratory at INTAR. This seminar "radically changed the face, voice, sound, and form of Latinx theater in the US" (197). Rossini and Ybarra claim that for Fornés it is the form and image, the formal experimentation in a play that the writer's politics should come through, which, at the same time, constitutes Hispanic Sensibility.

For many critics and theater practitioners Fornés's name and dramatic techniques are equated with avant-garde theater practices, yet she never identified herself with any art or theater movement. In his contribution, Roy Pérez explores if this association with her drama is appropriate. He states that her plays in the 1960s and 1970s show characteristically avant-garde techniques; however, *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977) marks a new phase since elements of American realism are combined with "surreal incidents and associative language" (208). Perez distinguishes marked differences between Fornés's avant-gardism and "the spirit of avant-garde," which was largely the "domain of men whose work featured formal risks but rarely considered the domestic, gendered, sexual, and cultural dynamics with which Fornés experimented" (210). In his view the focus of avant-garde is "on unpragmatic political ideals, aesthetic difficulty for its own sake, or humorless alienation"; by contrast, "Fornés's plays seem instead to dance the characters and the viewers through spellbinding thought experiments, making lofty questions seem like everyday ruminations that we can pursue with a sense of play" (215). Gwendolyn

Alker's article exemplifies how the environmentalist community took up Fornés's drama for their own purposes. Alker offers an in-depth reading of Fornés's *Mud* (1983) in the frame of "Fornésian ecology" (217). She suggests that this frame allows for a better understanding of the nature and the dynamics of the far from simple triangular relationship between the characters of Mae, Lloyd, and Henry. Indeed, the parallels established between the life-cycle of the starfish and Mae as a "starfish-human hybrid" (221) illuminate the complexity of the relationship between the three characters. *Mud*'s world is treated as an ecological system in which the interdependence of the characters and their relationship to the environment, including nonhuman characters, are in the focus of an analysis. It would require further study, though, to say to what extent this frame is applicable to other Fornés works.

Artist-scholars Michael Breslin and Catherine Maria "Cat" Rodriguez choose a distinct way to discuss the much-debated issue whether Fornés's drama is feminist or not. They present their own piece entitled *Truffle Pigs*, in which three students' differing views on this question clash before their exam on her drama. Following some Fornésian dramatic tools—found object, writing message—the authors create a highly witty and humorous play that mimics the intense disagreement, curiosity, and disbelief that usually occur in scholarly and artistic research of the ways feminism does or does not define the dramaturgy of Fornés.

Nicole Stodard explores the representation and presence of queerness in Fornés's dramatic oeuvre. Stodard affirms that "lesbianism figures into Fornés's writing in every decade of her career but bears significantly on only a quarter of her more than forty published plays and manuscripts" (245). She discusses the veiled presence of lesbianism in Fornés's early plays, while showing examples of its overt appearance in her later works. Stodard's thorough analyses of *Tango Palace* (1963), *Fefu and Her Friends*, *Enter THE NIGHT*, and *The House at 27 Rue de Fleurus* (2001) reveal dramatic and stylistic devices that indicate queerness in Fornés's drama.

Michelle Memran and Katie Pearl's co-written piece titled "Elder" is a grievous yet inspiring document memoir that gives "a glimpse into the last decade of Irene's remarkable life—her vitality, her pedagogy, her Elderhood—in her own words" (257). From the hundreds of hours of "video diary" that Memran recorded for more than a decade with the dramatist and which was condensed into a highly celebrated 79-minute film *The Rest I Make Up* (2018), Fornés's own words can be read from "footage outtakes" (257). In the genre of a film script Fornés's fragmented and

incomplete answers to Memran's questions radiate her wisdom: "you have to do what you think is of value and forget completely what the times [expect]" (qtd. in 261).

The contributions in Part IV, Legacy, provide a comprehensive overview of how Fornés's complex artistic and pedagogic heritage lives on to inspire new generations of playwrights, researchers, and theater-goers. The contribution of award-winning playwright Migdalia Cruz exemplifies how Fornés's unique playwriting methodology—comprising yoga exercises, meditation, and visualization—survives. Her "thirty-eight-year love/fear relationship" with Fornés began when she joined the Hispanic Playwrights in Residence Laboratory at INTAR in 1984 (274). Now Cruz is a mentor to new generations of playwrights as she passes on the principles underpinning the Fornésian playwriting techniques. In her article, Cruz provides the main pedagogic priorities of Fornés's method followed by a typical playwriting exercise amended with her own ideas and some optional homework suggestions for future sessions. In his "Alumni Playwrights," distinguished Chicano playwright Luis Alfaro shares his personal, nostalgic, verging on poetic, memories about Fornés by recalling places, scenes, and encounters with her at the Mark Taper Forum Theater in Los Angeles. Her teaching method, her relationship with her colleagues, and her deep emotional bond with her mother Carmen all seared into his mind. Her powerful impact is present in his classroom: "in an empty seat I reserve for her" (288).

Carla Della Gatta's study "Documentation" discusses a large number of difficulties arising in cataloguing, documenting, and preserving Fornés's scholarship. She carefully considers all the complications deriving not only from the abundance of various kinds of available materials but also from Fornés being a bilingual, bicultural artist. A further challenge in documenting Fornés's work lies in documenting "the eccentricities, detours, and playfulness of creativity" (304). She cites the present volume as a good example of documentation as it is "a combination of act of archive formation critical analysis, and artmaking, drawing forward a necessary integration of styles, forms, and perspectives" (306). The expansive interview between performance studies scholar Jennifer Parker-Starbuck and Bonnie Marranca, the founding editor of *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* discusses the importance of publishing Fornés's plays in PAJ publications since 1978. It also significantly enriches the image of Fornés's unique personality.

Anne García-Romero's second contribution in the volume concerns the recuperation and reconstruction of the lost, unfinished, or incomplete

works left behind by Fornés. The author offers a comprehensive and thoughtful methodology for researching and restoring works that deserve wider recognition. Olga Sanchez Saltveit provides an informative account on how colleagues, theater artists, as well as former students and mentees collaborated to create circles of care around Fornés's legacy. The author offers a highly detailed history of three community-based projects: The Festival Irene (2013), *Mud/Burro* (2017), and the María Irene Fornés Marathon (2018).

Maria Delgado's essay closing the volume is an engaging and delightful read, and an apt conclusion to the book. She endeavors to define the Fornésian tradition, "which is a contradiction in terms" (346) as she herself acknowledges. Delgado presents an array of opinions and considers "the elusive qualities of the Fornésian and its traces across the practice of different generations of artists" (347). She finds that the Fornésian "is identified as transformative and enabling—a way of seeing and doing things differently" (355). In my view, the "jazz riff" metaphor captures best the Fornésian tradition: "the Fornésian feels like a jazz riff—endless variation and possibilities that never cease to surprise and delight" (356).

Maria Irene Fornes in Context is a valuable and indispensable volume for a wide audience including students and teachers of drama, theater and drama studies scholars, as well as theater makers.

Lenke Németh, Associate Professor of American Studies, University of Debrecen, has published widely on experimental and postmodern American drama in journals such as *Filológiai Közlöny*, *Hungarian Journal of English*, *Focus: Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies*, *Eger Journal of English and American Studies*, *Studia Litteraria*, and *British and American Studies*. Her studies also appeared in edited books: *Intertextuality, Intersubjectivity, and Narrative Identity* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), *Arthur Miller öröksége: Centenáriumi írások műveiről* [Heritage of Arthur Miller: centenary essays about his works] (Americana ebooks, 2015), *A fattyú művészet nyomában: Írások amerikai drámáról és színházról* [Beyond the bastard art. Essays on American drama and theater] (Americana ebooks, 2012), *Staging Interculturality. Contemporary Drama in English* (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2010). She has published a book on David Mamet, *All It Is, It's a Carnival: Reading David Mamet's Female Characters with Bakthin* (Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2007).

Note

1. This review adopts the editors' principle in following the individual authors' preferences in their use of terminology and their orthography—for instance, Latino/a, Latinx, Latiné, theater/theatre—and I also indicate the diacritical marks in spelling María Irene Fornés's name, while I retain the original spelling in the source material.