

Box Variations

BY ALISA SOLOMON

BOX PLAYS. Eight one-act plays: *First Vows* by Manuel Pereiras, directed by Donald Squires; *Dog*, written and directed by Leo Garcia; *Not Time's Fool*, written and directed by Migdalia Cruz; *What Did You See?*, written and directed by Ana Maria Simo; *Looking for Angels*, written and directed by Lisa Loomer; *Snakes in the Grass*, written and directed by Lourdes Blanco; *Cadillac Ranch*, written and directed by Jose Pelaez; *Art* by Maria Irene Fornes, directed by Donald Squires. Presented by Intar, 420 West 42nd Street. (Closed, reopens at the Public Theater's Latino Festival, August 20.)

In their program bios, several of the playwrights whose works make up this charming evening of one-acts give praise and thanks to "La Fornes." That they refer to the director of Intar's Hispanic Playwrights' Lab with such a fulsome term seems perfectly natural: Maria Irene Fornes is clearly the mentor, maestra, and mother of the *Box Plays*. This doesn't mean the young playwrights who take her workshop are Fornes clones—imitation would be impossible since she has never settled on any distinctive style. But her spirit is clearly present in all seven of her pupils' works.

Refreshingly, these playwrights have not been taught the rules. Unlike most showcases from writers' labs, the *Box Plays* (named after Ricardo Morin's forced-perspective tiny box set) have not been smothered by Exposition, Conflict, Resolution, Motivation, etc. The most successful works do follow clear lines of development, but their shape is clearly generated by a complete dramatic conception, not by the stodgy imposition of official techniques. The better plays, like Fornes's works, tend to avoid behavioristic conventions of naturalism by distilling the essence of characters through particular situations. Moreover, these situations are not always the entire story, as they so often are with fledgling writers.

The students typically rely more on observed or experienced material than on imagined events; several plays are presumably autobiographical. Thus they are more personal than Fornes's works, and more ordinary. Although one involves only two characters, several are about children. But where they do edge toward the trite concerns of young authors, they are saved by their marginality: most of the *Box Plays* reflect Hispanic culture; the two that don't specifically, concern gay characters. For the better writers this alternative world provides a critical frame for simple action.

All have been given top-notch productions with fine actors. Lisa Loomer's witty *Looking for Angels* is the strongest script. Two 11-year-old girls chat on a bench in East Harlem, spinning myths out of found ideas. Without maudlin pronouncements, Loomer paints each child's world: one lives in a project, and is trying to cope with the imposition of a new baby in the family; the other lives in a shelter. We learn this information almost indirectly. The one from the project finally reveals her address—so that St. Anthony ("He's cute! He looks like Prince.") can deliver the TVs they request. "You live there all the time?" her friend asks. "Your mother live there, too?" Without condescension, Loomer captures the quirky internal logic of children's imaginations: In Russia, one says, "They only got one kind of cereal: Cream of Wheat. So what do I want to go to ballet school for?"

Jose Pelaez's portrait of young men's escape into fantasy is less successful. *Cadillac Ranch* presents working-class teenagers who dream of driving out of their New Jersey misery to California. One's father is an alcoholic, the other's died in Vietnam, and both have no sense of the future. Pelaez never gets past clichés about down-and-out boys with nowhere to go. Manuel Pereiras demonstrates a finer touch with dialogue in *First Vows*, a sweet vignette about two little boys who promise to be lovers forever.

Ana Maria Simo's *What Do You See?* presents a less idyllic love story about two women living together on the Lower East Side. Simo intersperses rather common scenes of a melodramatic breakup ("We've had this conversation a thousand times.") with hyperrealistic songs setting the relationship against the background of a violent neighborhood that would seem to make any kind of love impossible. Though the dialogue gets overwrought, the songs create a sharp perspective on it. In Migdalia Cruz's *Not Time's Fool*, the lovers have been married for years. Their good-natured bickering brings most of the evening's laughs, though some of the one-liners require contrived setups.

Leo Garcia's *Dog* depicts a sadistic relationship between a poor, seemingly deranged woman and a severely injured man, presumably her son; the characters, neither specific nor symbolic, have no clear action, and the point of the play remains murky. Even less satisfying is Lourdes Blanco's *Snakes in the Grass*, a simplistic, plotless work about three women who grow old sharing the secret that one of them was raped as a child by her uncle.

Fornes's own contribution to the evening is disappointing in a provocative

way. Her *Art* is a staged political cartoon. Two men in business suits clinically describe an event that occurs downstage: a man gnaws on a bloody woman, tearing her to pieces, occasionally plopping organs onto the stage. One businessman expresses his alarm and insists that they do something; the other remains aloof, describing the barbarism from a distance. Though the conceit is simple—women are mutilated while men do nothing—the presentation is dangerously complex: The audience, though aware that the gruesome action is only staged, watches a woman being abused right before its eyes. We, too, are called upon to aestheticize the event. Certainly it made me uncomfortable, but from La Fornes, I expect more of an idea about what to do with such discomfort. ■