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Photo by Nat Ordonez

Juan Gamero and Calia Katz in Latine Theater Lab's inaugural production of Maria Irene Fornes's powerful play, *Mud*.

By AARON KRAUSE

Launching a new theater company with a live production can be frightening. But Latine Theater Lab founding artistic director Alex Gonzalez shows courage by making a bold choice for the company's inaugural effort. Gonzalez leans into the horror of María Irene Fornés's disturbing play *Mud*, creating theater that unsettles without veering into melodrama.

That choice did not drive audience members away; on the contrary, after the reviewed performance, several attendees approached Gonzalez to praise his direction.

You have a few more chances to catch *Mud* at Ft. Lauderdale's Empire Stage, the company's intimate 49-seat home. There, the intermission-less, 70-minute production runs through June 14. Certainly, the intimacy of the theater space translates into visceral, powerful drama that might be diminished in a much larger venue.

In *Mud*, the groundbreaking Fornés (1930–2018) deals with themes and subjects that are, unfortunately, grim realities for many — poverty, illiteracy, illness, physical deterioration, and emotional abuse. By treating these social ills not just as sad circumstances but as sources of terror, this production reminds us that the world Fornés often presents is not merely bleak — it is brutal. But amid the darkness lies clarity. It is as though Latine Theater Lab is holding up a harsh light to the pain of human suffering.

Many regard Fornés, a Cuban-American playwright often associated with the Off-Off-Broadway movement, as the godmother of experimental American theater and a feminist trailblazer. While she never achieved the prominent status of her male peers, her influence runs deep — in the work of playwrights such as Paula Vogel, Tony Kushner, and Suzan-Lori Parks.

Fornés's unflinching gaze on poverty, gender dynamics, and human desperation feels especially urgent in an era marked by divisiveness and eroding public trust.

Mud is one of her most harrowing plays. It distills Fornés's signature style: elliptical dialogue, minimalism, and a keen empathy for society's most invisible people. The play's title is fitting — the characters are trapped in the mud of their circumstances, physically and spiritually.

By staging this piece, Latine Theater Lab honors a neglected pioneer and exposes audiences to the very inequalities Fornés spent a lifetime exploring. Of course, this company is not the only one in South Florida to stage Fornés's work. Thinking Cap Theatre, under artistic director Nicole Stodard, has smartly staged the playwright's work in recent years. Kudos must go out to companies such as Thinking Cap — and now Latine Theater Lab — for not only keeping Fornés's work alive, but doing so with flair.

Curiously, set and costume designer Andrew Rodriguez-Triana covers the stage floor with sand. This is an evocative choice that might suggest a beach setting, although the production takes place in a Cuban farmhouse. Could the sand, instead, stand for instability?

A young woman named Mae lives in this farmhouse, designed sparingly yet realistically by Rodriguez-Triana. Mae, who cannot read, seeks escape from her bleak life through education. She attends school to learn to read and do arithmetic.

Mae lives with Lloyd, an ailing and incoherent young man who is her companion and lover. But Lloyd resists Mae's attempts to learn. He represents resistance to change that often comes with lives lived in poverty.

When Henry moves in, ostensibly to help Mae, a fraught love-hate triangle forms — one that ultimately undercuts her efforts to rise above her station.

Mud is a tragedy. But even as Mae lies dying at the end, she fights with a defiance that refuses surrender.

You feel unsettled as soon as you enter the theater. A foreboding sound — like someone moaning in a windstorm — fills the space. Then, even before the show officially "begins," you see a body lying on the stage floor. It lies still before stirring, shaking off the sand, stumbling, and moving to another part of the set. As you try to make sense of it, the figure appears to begin masturbating — a disquieting, ambiguous act. It hints at the play's raw view of human need, dominance, and isolation. It dramatizes the raw, often dehumanizing link between sex and power.

Soon, without warning, we see a young woman in a harsh light smelling a rose. It feels like a tender, even poetic contrast to the unsettling image we encountered moments earlier. In fact, you may wonder whether all of this is some sort of fever dream.

Rest assured, though, that you are not imagining Calia Katz's nuanced and sensitive portrayal of Mae. This Miami-grown theater artist often leans physically into the male characters, radiating believable passion and determination. Certainly, as Katz portrays her, you sense that this young woman possesses a hunger not just for food, but for knowledge, connection, meaning. A stubborn vitality defines Katz's Mae — hers is a spirit that seems hard to break. And by physically pressing toward the men in her life, Katz creates a Mae who is trying, with everything she has, to be seen and understood.

Sporting a kerchief and plain clothing, Katz's Mae evokes one of Teyve's daughters from *Fiddler on the Roof*. This is a visual that hints at the character's modest background and hunger for something beyond mere survival. Katz's fine portrayal also suggests a Mae struggling to maintain her dignity before the men in her life strip it away — or worse.

While Katz brings a sympathetic vitality to Mae, the character is far from perfect — and Fornés did not create her to be a martyr or heroine in the traditional sense. Mae is flawed, and arguably more compelling because of it. Her hunger for change sometimes bleeds into impatience or superiority. And Katz, at times assertive, sassy, and even confrontational, does not shy away from those darker shadings. The result is a portrait that feels emotionally honest: This is a woman driven not just by hope, but by fear, frustration, and the instinct to survive.

Along with Katz, the male actors perform equally well as the men in Mae's life. We first encounter Lloyd before the show begins. He is lying on the stage floor, still, his long, dark hair practically thick enough to serve as a pillow. The directorial choice to have one of the actors onstage in character before the show begins blurs the "fourth wall" separating the audience from the seemingly real world onstage. This decision by Gonzalez makes us think of Lloyd and his world as an extension of our world.

Eric Gospodinoff's Lloyd has a sullen demeanor, filthy clothes, and long, dark hair that sometimes falls into his face — a combination that immediately distances us. He resembles an unkempt, rebellious young man who rolls his eyes every time his parents make him do chores or homework. He moves as though he is drunk and at times faces away from Mae when the couple are not on good terms — which is often.

Gospodinoff, a recent New World School of the Arts graduate, grimaces convincingly at times to suggest emotional pain. While he is unsteady, unkempt, and seemingly lethargic, Lloyd, suddenly competing for Mae's attention, seems to awaken when Henry (Juan Gamero) arrives.

Henry is more refined and learned than Lloyd. In fact, Gamero dons glasses, and this helps Henry resemble someone who has attained the level of education that Mae aspires toward. Gamero charts Henry's descent with quiet precision. This change comes after Henry falls (we never learn if this is accidental). Following that unseen incident, a noticeable shift in power occurs. Suddenly, Henry is no longer the literate, commanding, and in-control figure he once was. Now, it is Lloyd who moves confidently, speaks with authority, and lords over Henry.

Gamero makes Henry seamlessly transform into dependency and near incapacitation. Toward the end, Henry barely looks or moves like the upright, confident figure that arrived earlier in the play.

At first, Henry may seem like the ticket Mae needs to escape her world of poverty and illiteracy. But *Mud* eventually turns into a deeper tragedy. The tale offers a grim reminder: even literacy and refinement offer no protection from physical decline, emotional dependence, or powerlessness.

Under Gonzalez's smart direction, it is always clear who seemingly wields power and who is more subservient. Gonzalez and intimacy director Nicole Perry also skillfully stage intimate scenes so that romantic moments between characters are convincing. And while the program does not credit a fight director, scenes involving physical contact occur believably. At times, the actors move on all fours, as though they were wild animals or brutes. And sound engineer Alex Tarradell incorporates sounds that may suggest a jungle.

The performers' beastlike movements reinforce the idea that poverty and desperation can strip people of their humanity, reducing them to instinct.

Startling sounds occur with an unpredictability that may unnerve you. In addition, blinking lights — which turn red to reinforce passion and violence — may upset your equilibrium. But Gonzalez inserts unsettling light effects and sounds at just the right moments to reinforce violence and sexuality.

Lighting designer/technical director Sergio Fuestes Jr. also varies the intensity of the lighting. During romantic scenes, for instance, the lighting is dimmer.

By the time the lights go down, you may not know what hit you — only that it left a mark. This is not just theater to watch. It demands to be felt. And you will feel it. This theater grips, bruises, and lingers.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Latiné Theatre Lab's inaugural production of *Mud* by María Irene Fornés

WHEN: Through June 14. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 5 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. Saturday, and 5 p.m. Sunday.

WHERE: Empire Stage, 1140 N. Flagler Drive in Ft. Lauderdale.

TICKETS: \$15-\$35 (\$15-\$25 on "Thrifty Thursday"). Go to <https://www.instagram.com/latinetheaterlab>. You can also email info@latinetheaterlab.com.

Photo by Nat Ordonez

Eric Gospodinoff portrays Lloyd in Latine Theater Lab's inaugural production of *Mud*.

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