

María Irene Fornés' Legacy to Latino/a Theater: A Tapestry of Voices  
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In 2005, The International Hispanic Theatre Festival in Miami awarded its Lifetime Achievement Award to María Irene Fornés. To prepare for this presentation, I emailed a simple questionnaire to playwrights that had worked with her and asked them to send a congratulatory note, if they so desired. This presentation deviates from the work I usually do. As a critic, I would present an analysis and theoretical exegesis of the imprint or formal legacy of Fornés' work in the corpus of contemporary Latino/a playwrights. I would demonstrate, for example, how in Nilo Cruz and Caridad Svich's work, just like in Fornés, *characters and audience alike are continually subjected to the carefully crafted extraliterary spectacle of the human body, light, music, color and space*. I would also articulate how in Anne García Romero and Rogelio Martínez, like in Fornés, their method of playwriting is visual, and how they build rather than write a text. Most importantly, I would show that it is in Cruz's and Cortiñas' sense of *cubanía*, or Migdalia Cruz' and José Rivera's sense of Nuyorrican, or Elaine Romero and Oliver Mayer's sense of Chicanismo, or Carmelita Tropicana's and Cherrie Moraga's sense of lesbian, that is, in all of her students' *refusal to embrace an uncritical model of political identity*<sup>i</sup> that we can really see the incalculable impact that María Irene Fornés has had on the development of a whole generation of Latino/a artists. But Fornés has expressed her reservations about theater critics many times: "as a rule, we did not think about what critics wrote," she has said. Rather than follow the usual critical model, I developed this paper by interweaving my critical voice with the playwrights' own words about Fornés' legacy to Latino/a theater.

María Irene Fornés is a playwright, director, translator, lyricist, dramaturge, painter, costume designer, set designer, "*Mother Avant Garde, La gran dama del teatro*" (Tropicana)<sup>iii</sup> and, most

importantly, renowned teacher and mentor to a whole generation of directors, actors and playwrights. It is extremely difficult to talk about Fornés, *the greatest and the least acknowledged female playwright of our time*, and not use the language that she, herself, abhors. But it is impossible to avoid superlatives and begin to address a part, small part, of María Irene's legacy to Latino/a theatre and to American theater. She has 41 plays and adaptations, not counting many translations mainly of Piñera and García Lorca. Her first play, *La Viuda*, was published in Spanish in Havana in 1961, along with three other first plays of "new writers" which became luminaries in Cuban theater: Abelardo Estorino, Antón Arrufat, and Gloria Parrado. Her last play, *Letters from Cuba* (2000), takes her again to the Cuba that she has never abandoned. She has won 9 "Obie" awards given to distinction in non-commercial, off-Broadway theater. Her first "Obie" was in 1965 and her latest was in 2000 for *Letters from Cuba*. This makes her the only woman to win that many Obies and puts her in the company only of Beckett and Shepard. In 1999, Signature Theatre, a company that dedicates a complete season to a living playwright, honored her by producing a season of her plays. She thus became, once again, the only woman on a male roster that includes Arthur Miller, Sam Shepard and Edward Albee.

Her trajectory is indicative of her work: She lived in New York from 1945 to 1954; she then moved to Paris to study painting (1954-1957) and in 1957 returned to New York where she worked as a textile designer till 1960, and where she became an integral member of the avant-garde scene in the 1960s.<sup>iii</sup> However, by the end of the 1960's, the experimental theatre environment had drastically changed. Most of the playwrights who were active in the early years of the Off-Off Broadway movement became outcasts. Women playwrights, in particular, found it very difficult to get produced unless they were willing to make problematic compromises. As a result, María Irene Fornés, Adrienne Kennedy, Megan Terry, Rosalyn Drexler, Rochelle Owens, along with Sam Shepard and Ed Bullins formed the New York Theatre Strategy dedicated to the production of experimental work. From 1973 to 1979, she was the managing director and ran their workshop for five of its six years. The Workshop

provided playwrights a safe space for creative freedom and innovation where they could work at their own pace and bounce ideas among the other participants without having to worry about audience response. During that time, she also worked with the Judson Church (aka Judson Poets Theatre), where she staged plays in the choir pit for audiences seated on pews and floor cushions. This is where she collaborated with Al Carmines to create such plays as *Promenade* and *Dr. Kheal*. As Fornés has said in an interview, “Al would get on that piano, and it would be magic . . . That church was sacred. What happened there was magic.”<sup>iv</sup>

In 1978, María Irene Fornés broke ground in another legendary chapter of U.S. theater history: the Padua Hills Festival and Playwrights Lab. Founder Murray Mudnick got together with five other playwrights, including María Irene Fornés, in the Padua Hills property in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, just above Claremont (California). The playwrights, as well as playwriting students and actors, were given free reign to re-investigate their creativity, developing writing exercises in the morning, rehearsing in the afternoon, and presenting the results in the evening. The festival and Playwrights Lab, one of the most important playwright labs in the country, functioned till 1995 and was associated with the most important avant-garde artists of the time such as María Irene Fornés herself, Sam Shepard, Jon Robin Baitz, John Stepping, and its founder.

Fornés’ contribution to U.S. theater is incalculable, but most importantly for the topic of this analysis, she is a pioneering figure for Latino/a theatre in the United States. To put it bluntly, Latino/a theater would not be what it is without her. Most of the leading Latino/a playwrights -- Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, Migdalia Cruz, Pulitzer-prize winner Nilo Cruz, Amparo García Romero, Eduardo Machado, Rogelio Martínez, Oliver Mayer, Dolores Prida, José Rivera, Elaine Romero, Milcha Sanchez - Scott, Luis Santeiro, Caridad Svich, Carmelita Tropicana—actors, directors, and many others, have emerged as outstanding artists out of Fornés’ playwriting workshops. *[U.S.] Latino writing knows fewer structural constraints, because of Irene. So, many of Irene’s students are poets on the page, and I think*

*she can be credited with bringing people to an authentic voice, no matter how scary, no matter how dark. I think my real gratitude to Irene is for the students she's mentored whose work I treasured, and her own amazing work, of course. She's ensured there's a lot of good work to read. Her students have a certain freedom to their work—that's an immeasurable gift (Romero).<sup>v</sup>*

Fornés led workshops everywhere, from her teaching at Yale, New York, and California, to England and Mexico. Not only are *her discussions on art and criticism invaluable (Tropicana)-- whenever she talks to me I learn something (Cortiñas)<sup>vi</sup>--* but she *gave Latino theater its own voice in America by training several generations of writers (Machado)<sup>vii</sup>* that shape what we know today as Latino/a theater. As a matter of fact, by the mid 1990s, many Latinos/as *felt very far out of the Latino/a theatre loop though that was the focus of their work simply because they had not studied with Irene (Machado).*

I need to highlight, in particular, her 11 years as founding and director of INTAR's Hispanic Playwrights in Residence Laboratory.<sup>viii</sup> INTAR was founded in 1966 as Adal by Max Ferrá who was its artistic director until 2004 when Eduardo Machado came on board. Thus, it is the oldest Latino theatre in the US producing in English. Bringing in her experience at the New York Theatre Strategy and Padua Hills Playwrights Lab, Fornés approached Ferrá with the magnificent idea of creating a fellowship program for emerging playwrights in order to “stimulate and develop writing abilities of Hispanic playwrights.” The Lab was launched with a four-year grant of \$150,000 from the Ford Foundation and it was a national program that ran from 1981 to 1992 under her guidance. Consulting the INTAR collection now held at the University of Miami Libraries Cuban Heritage Collection as part of the Cuban Theater Archive, we are discovering that INTAR's playwright lab was used as a model for other labs across the U.S. such as Mark Taper Forum Latino Theater Initiative, and South Coast Repertory Hispanic Playwrights Project. *I think Irene's workshop was the most valuable service that INTAR provided. Irene is an exceptionally gifted teacher who has mentored hundreds of writers*

(Tropicana). The importance of INTAR's Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory was recognized by the Playwriting Obie it received in 1988-89.

It is clear from the interviewed artists' work and words that they inherited from their Maestra the sense of playwriting as something sacred and magic. *I learned that the playwright is auteur and can and should contribute to creating the entire world of the play (design, direction, casting...)...I learned that playwriting is a noble and sacred calling (García Romero).<sup>ix</sup> María Irene Fornes is to writing what the Dalai Lama is to spirituality; she brings light with her when she enters a room. His Holiness calls it compassion, Irene calls it Truth . . . Irene, you are every bit the visionary I expected... Your voluptuous imagination and stark poetry bring infinite possibilities to an otherwise dull an increasingly finite world (Migdalia Cruz).<sup>x</sup> Her legacy also includes launching us into the world of theater with rich nourishment which we can draw upon for years after the participation in one of her workshops (Mayer). Thank you for making [us] all better writers, and inspiring us all with your consummate passion for art (Tropicana).*

Besides energy, passion, and nourishment, her workshops provided the tools needed to approach writing visually, poetically, and honestly, more than specific techniques for writing plays. Elaine Romero remembers: *when I got into the workshop, Irene announced that she was not giving us notes on our plays. I was mortified. Then, she took lines from our plays and started giving them to other playwrights to incorporate into what they were writing. I thought she was a nut, and then all the lines sort of leapt off the page "like crispy lettuce"—Irene's line. It made me feel that no words could truly be my own just because I threw them together. It made me feel like I could flip through a book, close my eyes, and finger a line, and stick it into my play and it would work to take the scene in an exciting new direction (Romero). Her commitment to making the surprising choice (Mayer)<sup>xi</sup> is, indeed, one of her trademarks that has left an imprint in her students' work. She taught them to *find ways back into material, the element of surprise, how to trick yourself into seeing something in a new**

way. *Invaluable lessons. She taught [them] to really feel the play viscerally through all the characters, and to feel the environment, the heat, the cold. And her trigger lines . . . always seemed to take the play deeper* (Machado). All of the playwrights have incorporated into their own teaching Fornés' visualization techniques because *they help a writer connect with her subconscious and intuitive impulse and which create deeper and truer characters* (Mayer). Those exercises used *sense memory to ground your characters in places of your true past. . . to elicit sense-memory events and ground the characters in those events.* (8) Furthermore, they are techniques that allow the artists to use *visualization to see every detail of [their] characters, to trust intuition and subconscious vision.... I learned that plays are not necessarily conflict but following the paths of one's characters' through a play, letting the character lead you* (Mayer). *So many playwrights only hear the play. Irene taught us to see the play, feel the play* (Machado). Rather than come with a fixed, premeditated idea, Fornés taught them to approach characters sensually. *You don't write a play about an idea—you write a play about characters. I think it's the only way to write. My impetus always begins with the characters; somehow later on I reflect on the political situation around those characters by asking, 'How does the human spirit transcend all this? I am not a theme-oriented kind of writer. If a character happens to be gay, I just run with it. In fact, there are aspects of a gay sensibility in all my work.*<sup>xii</sup>

Conducting the research for this presentation, I came across the following quote in an interview with Tony Kushner: “Every time I listen to Fornes, or read or see one of her plays, I feel this: she breathes, has always breathed, a finer, purer, sharper air.” Let’s remember that María Irene Fornés also has mentored a whole generation of U.S. playwrights of many ethnicities and, most importantly perhaps, a whole generation of female playwrights. One of the most beautiful and illuminating comments in this regard came from Paula Vogel: *I never took a workshop with Irene, but I am lucky to know her. At least half of my students in the Brown playwriting program have benefited from Irene's workshops. So I'd like to attest to the profound impact Irene Fornes has had on my own work, my own*

*teaching, and the American theatre. I've said before that there are two stages in any playwright's career: before she or he has read Irene, and after. There is a clarity in her work that opens windows: the brain has the same sense memory when as adults we remember a muscle, an activity, a sensation from childhood suddenly reawakened. Somehow Irene's work for me makes me remember when sensate experience was new; the world in translation, the world first tasted in childhood, the world newly created. Not a day goes by that I do not think of Irene, and thank her, and toast her. She is my model, and how wonderful for all of us that she has blazed the trail. And I will talk back to her for as long as I write, trying to match her exacting standards and her intense honesty on the page. My thanks to her, my love for her.*<sup>xiii</sup>

Two other elements that were important in the workshop was Irene's sense of humor and her mother Carmen. Most of them met her mom at some point and comment that they *liked Irene's mom Carmen the most. She was a gas!* (Delgado) María Irene taught them that *to create Art, you just need to tell the truth, and be able to look like your mother while doing it* (8). Her sense of humor is really a very Cuban sense of humor as *choteo*. *Last workshop I attended in LA where Irene dramaturged I sat next to Irene enjoying our last meal as a group. With tortillas in hand, I elbowed Irene and teased her sassily with sexual innuendo. Another student interrupted our tete-a-tete and extended his hand, bowed, and reverentially thanked the Maestra. I was touched and a bit embarrassed that that's not how I treated her. Quickly Irene responded "That's because he is Mexican and he is a mixture of the Spaniard and el Indio, the native American. You are from the Cuban Caribbean and the product of the Spaniard and the African. How aptly she dismantled that moment* (Tropicana).

As an attempt to wrap up this tapestry of voices, María Irene Fornés' legacy to Latino theater is *to provide an alternative to Valdez; to stress the importance of teaching and opening paths for the writers, actors and directors of tomorrow; to encourage breadth, defying all stereotypes that the press tried to press onto her and the work; to ensure always that the Latino is not a homogenous entity but*

*rather a classification that recognizes the heterogeneous nature of the work produced by Latino artists; to serve as an imaginative and provocative model for writers across the globe (Delgado).<sup>xiv</sup> Really, it was Irene's workshop that began hooking people together and making it seem that there was a Latino playwriting community to think about. And now, we do know each other nationally, and I feel just as close to my Cubana playwriting colleagues as to my fellow Chicana playwrights. In fact, this sense of community has made me drop the division in a sense. I, also, think, Irene created many teachers ..., I learned more about teaching from Irene than playwriting. I know working with her convinced me that I needed to mentor others, even informally. I feel a responsibility to the next generation. I learned that sense of responsibility from Irene (Migdalia Cruz). Now that all of those projects have come to pass, it is this very sense of responsibility that has moved Caridad Svich and others to get together as a collective called NoPassport : "NoPassport is a coalition devoted to getting not only the word out about pan-american work here in the US but also devoted to staging, reading, sharing and advocating Latino/a work. We also seek actively academic liaisons to document our work as a living archive. NoPassport is a mobile community across the US devoted to envisioning anew text and performance... no dues, just passion, advocacy, imagination and a commitment to the hemispheric spirit." ([NoPassport@yahoo.com](mailto:NoPassport@yahoo.com))*

All the playwrights sent Irene their personal congratulatory note. I am going to finish with one of the quotes and one of the poems that were sent to her, in that order, leaving the last words to the artists and to poetry: *Irene is the greatest living teacher of playwriting in America. Her legacy cannot be categorized by any label. For us Latina/os, she is a goddess. I rarely use superlatives except when it comes to Irene. She is "La Maestra" of all our collective souls. She has taught many of us (and of them), how to follow our own paths, be true to our own voices and use the seemingly random to paint the painfully specific. She is our tribe's fire-keeper and for each of us who have passed before her flame, we maintain a flicker of her light and all those lights together are almost as bright as Irene's fire. That is her legacy. We would not have survived the dark without her (Migdalia Cruz).*



*Siempre una sonrisa/Always a smile  
para Irene/for Irene  
porque sin su tenacidad/because without the tenacity  
sentido de humor/sense of humor,  
y coraje/and courage  
en sus obras y vida/in her plays, and in her life  
el teatro Americano/American theatre  
seria/would be  
mucho menos/lesser (Caridad Svich).<sup>xv</sup>*

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Playwrights and Critics Personal Tribute (handed out and read to Fornés):

Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas Irene: “Te quiero!

Migdalia Cruz Irene is the greatest living teacher of playwriting in America. Her legacy cannot be categorized by any label. For us Latina/os, she is a goddess. I rarely use superlatives except when it comes to Irene. She is "La Maestra" of all our collective souls. She has taught many of us (and of them), how to follow our own paths, be true to our own voices and use the seemingly random to paint the painfully specific. She is our tribe's fire-keeper and for each of us who have passed before her flame, we maintain a flicker of her light and all those lights together are almost as bright as Irene's fire. That is her legacy. We would not have survived the dark without her. . . There are three women who keep me honest and whom I thank God for: My mother, my daughter, and Irene. Irene, you taught me that to create Art, you just need to tell the truth and be able to look like your mother while doing it.

Nilo Cruz Irene came to the college [Miami Dade College] to do a workshop [in 1988 invited by Teresa María Rojas], and she liked what I had written. She said she had one space available at INTAR. She asked me if I wanted to take the workshop, but I had to make the decision right away. . . My whole life changed. (Excerpted from Randy Gener.)

María Delgado Gracias por ser mi amiga, gracias por tu pasión y energía. Your courage, determination and breadth are an example to us all.

**Anne García Romero** Congratulations on this lifetime achievement award. Your life has been such a gift to me and so many others. Your artistry, teaching and insight continue to guide my writing (and my teaching) to this day. I am especially grateful for those times we met for coffee while I lived in New York City. One time, in particular, I was depressed because a production of a play of mine had not gone well. You said to me, "Did you learn one thing?" I said, "Yes," You said, "Good. Then you did your job." Next we walked back out onto 7th Avenue and you said there should be an anthem for playwrights, "Playwrights unite!" Thank you for your words which continue to encourage me. With love,

**Eduardo Machado** You made me who I am today. I hope you are proud.

**Oliver Meyer** Irene, Besos!

**Elaine Romero** Your work lives on. Your teaching lives on. Your words live on. Thank you for your gifts, your love, and helping me find a way back into the world of my plays when I'm trapped in the stiffness of the already created. May you truly know, at the deepest level, all you have given. Your generosity has spawned generosity, and your words, a generation. Thank you, my teacher.

**Caridad Svich** Siempre una sonrisa/Always a smile  
para Irene/for Irene  
porque sin su tenacidad/because without the tenacity  
sentido de humor/sense of humor,  
y coraje/and courage  
en sus obras y vida/in her plays, and in her life  
el teatro Americano/American theatre  
seria/would be  
mucho menos/lesser.

Y claro tambien/And also  
mi afecto/my affection  
para la maestra/for the teacher  
que pudo ver/who could see  
hasta en mis obras mas salvajes/even in the most savage of my plays  
la ternura/the tenderness  
esencial/absolute  
de donde venian.../from which they sprung  
y de donde podian/and from which they could  
tomar vuelo/ truly take flight.

Carmelita  
**Tropicana**

There are few people I can think of where I can go into my memory bank and retrieve conversations, statements on art, or moments that seem ordinary and are illuminated and made significant by Irene. It is like that old TV ad about an investment company, “when they talk you listen.” That is Irene. . . Thank you for making me a better writer, and inspiring us all with your consummate passion for art.

Paula **Vogel**

Not a day goes by that I do not think of Irene, and thank her, and toast her. She is my model, and how wonderful for all of us that she has blazed the trail. And I will talk back to her for as long as I write, trying to match her exacting standards and her intense honesty on the page. My thanks to her, my love for her.

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## End Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> American Theater
- <sup>ii</sup> Carmelita Tropicana, aka Alina Troyano, email interview. All future quotes from her will be included in italics in the text.
- <sup>iii</sup> For the most recent studies on this period see Bottoms and Crespy.
- <sup>iv</sup> See “Selected Documents.”
- <sup>v</sup> Elaine Romero, email interview. All future quotes from her will be included in italics in the text.
- <sup>vi</sup> Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, email interview. All future quotes from her will be included in italics in the text.
- <sup>vii</sup> Eduardo Machado, email interview. All future quotes from her will be included in italics in the text.
- <sup>viii</sup> See Intar Hispanic Playwrights Residence Lab, *Cuban Theater Digital Archive*. <http://cubantheater.org/festival/84>
- <sup>ix</sup> Anne García Romero, email interview. All future quotes from her will be included in italics in the text.
- <sup>x</sup> Migdalia Cruz, email interview. All future quotes from her will be included in italics in the text.
- <sup>xi</sup> Oliver Mayer, email interview. All future quotes from her will be included in italics in the text.
- <sup>xii</sup> Nilo Cruz, TCG
- <sup>xiii</sup> Paula Vogel, email interview.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Maria Delgado, email interview. All future quotes from her will be included in italics in the text.
- <sup>xv</sup> Caridad Svich, email interview.

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