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The Wild Invention of *Fefu and Her Friends*, and the (Latest!) Rewrite of *A Bright Room Called Day*

By Helen Shaw







From *Fefu*. Photo: Gerry Goodstein

A lot has been written about María Irene Fornés—and not enough. Search her name and you’ll find dozens of articles about how she’s the “playwright’s playwright,” the best dramatist “you don’t know,” and the Cuban-American mother of downtown theater. Scholars and writers (many of whom were her students) organize conferences of Fornésiana; there’s a small shelf’s worth of books on her teaching methods and avant-garde poetics. Yet when people write about her, and I include myself here, there’s still a sense of furious protectiveness. Her work is so glittering and various and powerful that it deserves *cases* of books! It certainly deserves hundreds of productions.

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But to stage *Fefu and Her Friends*, her 1977 masterpiece, you need an adventurous spirit, and too often the world has failed her. Fornés wasn’t content just writing beautiful plays (*Mud, The Conduct of Life, Promenade*); she also directed, and with *Fefu*, she basically invented the deconstructed promenade theater form. (Way back at the Relativity Media Lab in the late ’70s, Fornés was pioneering the genre that’s everywhere now from *House and Garden* to *Sleep No More*.) After the first act in which eight women assemble in their hostess’s parlor, the audience is divided in four and ushered into a series of locations—the bedroom, the study, the kitchen, the garden—where the interlocking, interconnected life of Fefu’s house goes on. All the scenes are simultaneous, so the performers do them four times, once for each audience group. To produce *Fefu* you need a theater that’s willing to let the audience wander around and a company able to choreograph the sequences precisely. When a woman passes through one room carrying some food, she’ll enter into another scene at exactly the right moment to offer it, which will then need to happen the same way four times over. I saw a production in college—Fornés is taught more than she’s produced—and I hadn’t the *faintest* idea what was going on, only that there were actresses dashing past me with sou[] laughing like children.



So thank goddess that Theater for a New Audience has decided to stage the first Off Broadway revival. Since it's a play that deliberately avoids conventional structure, it doesn't parcel out its thrills in the same manner that others play do. How could it? Since the audience experiences the play in four different sequences, we can't all climb the mountain of rising action together. Rather, the structure winds tight and then spins loose then winds tight again, like a spindle. These coiling energies—some erotic, others eerie—aren't explained; Fornés was not an expository playwright. In this play she was a fine-grained texturalist: To watch *Fefu*, it's best to pay keen attention, but feel free to lose yourself in the way a woman turns the pages of her book. You won't have missed the point.

It would be easy to over-emphasize its radical qualities, though. This is not experimentalism as difficulty: It's pleasure after pleasure. Director Lileana Blain-Cruz leans into its sense of overabundance by ignoring its birth in Off-Off scrappiness and staging the play as a trove of Fabergé eggs, each space a jewellike interior. *Fefu and Her Friends* takes place in 1935, and its all-woman cast and New England sumptuousness deliberately recall George Cukor's 1939 film *The Women*, though with a touch of bitchery. In the movie, Cukor made sure that everything onscreen was female, down to the horses and the paintings c

wall. Blain-Cruz and her designers Adam Rigg (set) and Montana Levi Blanco (costume) were clearly thinking about that film: Fefu's sumptuously appointed house is stuffed with animals—charcoal leopard drawings and gilt tiger-based lamps and a pink-and-green wallpaper choked with jungle vegetation—and the women's gorgeous clothing is often covered in big cats or zebra stripes. I'm willing to bet that all of those leopards are ladies.

When Fornés described the play, she called it “plotless,” though there are certainly events and urgencies. (“A plotless play,” she once said, “doesn't deal with the mechanics of the practical arrangement of life but deals with the mechanics of the mind, some kind of spiritual survival, a process of thought.”) The gathering itself has been called to organize a fundraising evening for an educational arts program—a version of the actual reformer Emma Sheridan Fry is a character—and the women approach it as a retreat, taking little breaks to play croquet or read. Their host is the splendid nonconformist Fefu (Amelia Workman), a vision in a Louise Brooks bob and tawny banker's vest, who shocks some of her guests with her swaggering riotousness. She provocatively calls women “repulsive,” though she then explains that she's fascinated by the “underneath” of things where the slimy insects live. And her favorite game is to fire a shotgun at her unseen husband, who then must fall down wherever he is. It's a blank cartridge, Fefu thinks, though who can be sure? “He's up!” she cries merrily, looking down the lawn, after the thunderclap of the gun. If Workman hadn't taken the part, their second choice was probably the ghost of Katherine Hepburn.

Fefu's guests, her many dear old school chums, include the strong-but-sad divorcee Cindy (Jennifer Lim), who has brought along the prim-as-a-teacake Christina (Juliana Canfield). Everyone is eager to see Julia (Brittany Bradford) again, though no one quite understands the mysterious accident that has put her in a wheelchair. The initiative's animating genius Emma (Helen Cespedes, a dead ringer for Rosalind Russell) wants to rehearse her presentation in front of educator Paula (Lindsay Rico) and treasurer Sue (Ronete Levenson), though everyone's slightly distracted by Cecilia (Carmen Zilles), whose romantic history with one of the women ruffles the waters.

You could luxuriate in these scenes for days, listening to the sound of women's voices, watching as they charge their work and idleness with various kinds of love. Fornés said “I feel the characters in *Fefu* standing around me,” and it's a sensation of languor in delicious company that most characterizes the play. But there's something wicked waiting, some kind of determined resistance to this cheerful gathering. During one of the nomadic scenes, the audience stares down through a hole in t

at Julia, who tosses on a bed, tormented by hallucinations of the “judges” who persecute her. Her accident, one of the women whispers, was a crypto-sympathetic one: A hunter shot a deer, but somehow it was Julia that fell. When we finally hear what Julia’s muttering into her coverlet (sound designer Palmer Hefferan lets us eavesdrop through headphones), we perceive that she’s being stalked by Patriarchy itself. It’s a murderous judiciary that wants her to acknowledge that true humanity is male—and brave Fefu is next in their sights.

Fornés uses modes of speech that are familiar in everyday life but that are strangely rare onstage: The women read each other the good bits from magazines, practice their French, try to do sums out loud (on the life expectancy of a love affair), retell a weird dream, recite a Shakespeare sonnet. Despite the threat of hidden forces, the text is more naturalistic, more like something that’s been overheard, than the stuff you find in so-called realistic drama. After making a joke that flops, Paula retreats from the living room, saying with a shrug, “It was a kitchen joke.” *Fefu* is full of kitchen language and bedroom language and study language and garden language. It’s one reason why Fornés inspired a thousand women to write plays—you encounter her and realize how many languages you know.

Fornés is so casual in her compositional power here that she excerpts *another writer* for the climax. Emma performs a long prologue written by the real Emma Fry, a baroque passage of prewar invective and idealism. Why did anyone ever write like Fry? It’s all clotted metaphors, with figurative women holding up lamps to light the way while Environment (what?) becomes our secret bridegroom—I genuinely do not know. I read this play once a year, and I have thrown my hands up at this speech every time. But the quicksilver Cespedes delivers it thrillingly, like a Martha Graham solo, wrapping herself in her operatic red robe and striking dramatic postures with its dagged sleeves. Imbued with such passion, the passage finally makes sense. This, *this*, is why someone had to stage *Fefu!* It lets you hear that Fornés had indeed found another language: the language of instruction, organization, and inspiration. It’s the sound of a particular sort of American women’s movement. You’ll hear echoes of Heidi Schreck’s rallying cry *What the Constitution Means To Me* in it, and, I hope, future voices too.

With some shreds of my critical sangfroid still gathered around me, I can say: It’s a strong and necessary production. Blain-Cruz leads a mostly good, sometimes marvelous, cast; each performer has a showcase moment, yet they serve the play and each other with palpable generosity. And the design—chef’s kiss! But it must be obvious by now that I can not pretend a kind of objectivity about Fornés. I never met her, yet I miss her. The plays, even just on the page, have been friends for

years. She taught so many playwrights I love, and *those* playwrights taught the other playwrights I love, and in this way too her thinking has seeped down into our water table. There is Fornés in everything. Should you not be able to get to this production, don't worry. Just go to any new play, and I promise you—Fefu will be there.

If you're still craving a revival after 1977's *Fefu*, you could head up to the Public, where you can get a taste of the Era of Reagan. Tony Kushner first mounted his *A Bright Room Called Day* in 1985, when he was just out of graduate school, and it's very much the play of a young and brilliant brain, crammed full with erudition and the anxiety that erudition brings. According to our program's director's note, Oskar Eustis first fell in love with Kushner's writing during *Bright Room*, which—since it led to Eustis commissioning *Angels in America* a few years later—means that this play has been a midwife to greatness. The play itself has a beginner's ten-cats-in-a-bag quality; Kushner gives the impression that he feared his ideas would be frogmarched away forever if he couldn't find a place for them here.

A Bright Room Called Day is about the way that indecision can kill you, whether you're the Communists trying to form a unity government after the Weimar collapse, a German actress who knows she needs to flee the Nazi takeover, or a playwright trying to revise. Things are certainly going worse and worse in 1932 and 1933 among Berlin's Bohemian set—Agnes the actress (Nikki M. James), her lover the Trotskyist Husz (Michael Esper), their communist buddy Annabella (Linda Emond), their gay friend Baz (Michael Urie), and another actress Paulinka (Grace Gummer) will all go under the boot heel if they don't escape. As they bicker about the right thing to do, history marches on—slides with helpful dates and details (von Hindenburg dissolves the Reichstag, etc.) flash by above them. A “modern day” interrupter/narrator called Zillah (Crystal Lucas-Perry) barges in occasionally to make connections to the rise of the American right under Reagan. So far, so 1985.

But having had various stinging critical responses since then, Kushner has revised. He has rewritten Zillah before, for other productions, but this time, guys, it's *audacious*. He has added an extra, 2019, up-to-date interrupter (Jonathan Hadary) called Xillah, who's clearly Kushner himself, here to tell us why certain characters exist (you've got to provide parts for superb actresses of “a certain age”) or where the title came from (he misheard the name of the Agnes de Mille ballet “A Bride Called Death”).

Xillah and Zillah bump heads over various storytelling issues, mainly whether the playwright will allow Zillah the Narrative Construct to enter the play to rescue Agnes. This becomes a more complicated argument about whether or not theater can actually do anything in times like these. “The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past,” said Walter Benjamin, the philosopher who stimulates so much of Kushner’s thinking, “is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy.” Looking back at the rise of the Nazis, Zillah and Xillah are afraid that we’re in another such time—that our current White House is killing the dead, the past and all its progress. Start by rescuing a fictional character, Zillah argues, end by rescuing the country.

The strange thing is that despite all Kushner’s protestations that the Zillah sections are what needed fine tuning, it’s now the German sections that look a little under-oiled. Hadary is such a good Kushner, and Kushner is such a great talker, that we could happily spend our three and a half hours at the Public listening to him go on rants about Trump or shout inaccurately at us about his process. “I’m a narrative realist now!” he cries, hilariously, just before the Devil (Mark Margolis) shows up or a *Drag Me To Hell*-style old-lady demon (the great Estelle Parsons, who just turned 92) clambers in through a window. I say this advisedly, given the running time, but everybody else is a little underwritten and underdirected. Urie manages to wrestle a person into his character, as does Nadine Malouf, who plays a warm-hearted Member of the Party. But the rest are a bit adrift, outlines only.

The hours you spend with *Bright Room* are tense ones—afterwards, I felt I needed to go back to *Fefu* to recapture Fornés’s confidence in theater as a form, in our ongoing spiritual education, in the possibilities of people speaking with one another. That impulse would drive this production nuts, since it expressly wants the audience to go out into the streets to Resist. But two very clever men, Eustis and Kushner, have made an artwork that talks a great deal about action while actually *imparting* inertia. If we know anything about how we overcome our resting state, it’s that we need to change our company, to be among those who are already in movement. There’s so much wonderful Kushnerian text in *Bright Room* that your ear and mind will be delighted. But that other part of you, the part that brandishes the sword, might slumber on.

Fefu and Her Friends is at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center through December 8.

A Bright Room Called Day is at the Public Theater through December 15.

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