

GRIPPING PLAY, COMPELLING PRODUCTION

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Maria Irene Fornes' gripping English-language play, *Mud*, is on the assimilated end of the spectrum of works to be shown during Miami's second Hispanic Theater Festival.

Judging by the red earth spilled on the sides of the set and the twang on the tongues of the characters, the play, which opened Thursday at the South End Alternative Theatre, is probably set in the Georgia mountains. Metaphorically, though, it is set anywhere where ignorance and poverty defile the human spirit.

The three characters are the dregs of the earth, and the lead woman, Mae, is so kicked-over that her most idealistic aspiration is to die not in the mud, but in a hospital with clean sheets. When the play opens, she is locked into a love-hate relationship with a human animal, Lloyd, who grovels, masturbates, spits on the floor and howls at Mae for urging him to go to a clinic to get his debilitating fever treated.

Mae returns from a visit to the clinic with another man, Henry, in tow who is at least moderately literate. To Mae, Henry is goodness and enlightenment incarnate. He encourages her when she attempts to read, and the passages from her reader become the key metaphors of the play. Mae kicks Lloyd out of her bed and installs Henry. But the three go on living together, and the ensuing jealousies and twists bring the play to a sharp, classical denouement.

Fornes, a Cuban-American who lives in New York, has won Obie awards for her play writing. If *Mud* is an example, it is taut and laced with spare metaphor, attuned to the rhythms of the English language and to barely verbalized emotional currents. Her characters are desperate -- more after Faulkner than Tennessee Williams. Fornes' concern isn't social mores; it is basic human dignity.

Helped by three strong actors, director Nilo Cruz has skillfully taken the necessary risks in setting this off-off-Broadwayish material. Instead of interrupting scenes with blackouts, he has the actors freeze into tableaux as lighting designer Richard Gross drops the lights to half-power. The effect is often painterly: a frozen after-image, like an American primitive painting, of rural misery. The sexuality is graphic; the outbursts terrifying. At one point, Cruz has actor Juan Cejas climb a downstage pole like a monkey -- turning that annoying feature of the primitive Bakehouse Art Complex stage into an asset.

Cejas' performance as Lloyd is extraordinary: He conducts himself about as much like an animal as a human being can without getting arrested. Patricia Dolan Gross as Mae is a whipcord of anger. Bob Harbaum as Henry peels off a veneer of civility to become, by the end of the play, a desperate mass of needs.

The Bakehouse complex is hot, stuffy and difficult to find, but the discomfort is worth it to see this kind of serious, intimate theater.

CAST

Juan Cejas, Patricia Dolan Gross, Bob Harbaum.

CREDITS

Playwright: Maria Irene Fornes; Director: Nilo Cruz; Assistant Director: Maria Questa; Sets: Nilo Cruz and Richard Gross; Lighting Design: Richard Gross.

At South End Alternative Theatre at the Bakehouse Art Complex, 561 NW 32nd St., Miami; 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday through May 30; in English; tickets \$10; call 887-3511.

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