



The Legacy of Maria Irene Fornes: A Collection of Impressions and Exercises
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THE LEGACY OF MARIA IRENE FORNES

A Collection of Impressions and Exercises

Caridad Svich

*Writing is only another way of giving, a courtesy,
if you will, and a form of love.*
Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*

I trained with Maria Irene Fornes at the INTAR Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory in New York City from 1988 to 1992 during which time I also served as her Lab assistant. In 1995, Fornes directed my play *Any Place But Here*, which had been written while I was in the INTAR Lab under her mentorship, at Theatre for the New City. In 2000 I edited with UK scholar Maria M. Delgado *Conducting a Life: Reflections on the Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes*. As playwright, translator, and teacher, the four consecutive years during which I trained with Irene have impacted my work in every way. Although my undergraduate and graduate school training in theatre at the University of North Carolina–Charlotte and the University of California–San Diego respectively gave me a strong foundation and emboldened me as a young artist, it was the work at the INTAR Lab, where I later returned as a TCG/Pew National Theatre Artist-in-Residence in 2003, that truly gave me the audacity to investigate theatrical form and to explore the U.S. Latino/a writing voice. As a practitioner-scholar and editor, a great deal of my work has been devoted to enabling the publication of and documenting the work of the “in-between” generation of U.S. Latino/a playwrights who trained with Fornes in New York City and in California at the Padua Hills Playwrights Conference.

Students and emerging playwrights often ask me, “What was it like to work with *Maria Irene Fornes*?” They usually ask me this question with awe and wonder in their eyes and a little bit of envy, because they know that the opportunity to work directly with Irene is no longer possible for them. Many of us in that middle generation of U.S. Latino/a playwrights have in fact taken on the job of passing on the methodology that she developed at the INTAR Lab and other organizations. Our job is humble and old-fashioned. We took down notes first-hand in the writing room, notes that we kept and have retold through our own dramatic visions in classrooms and workshops to the next generation(s) of American playwrights. As years pass the retelling becomes more complex because we are not only responding to our own memories and their transcription but also to how Fornes’s work has been received

over the years. As less of her extraordinary work is produced (unfortunately) on U.S. and world stages, the task becomes greater in passing on the legacy, for it becomes an instance of sharing a way of working in the room.

This short collection of memories and writing exercises from some of Fornes's distinguished former students (Brooke Berman, Migdalia Cruz, Julie Hebert, Anne Garcia-Romero, Jennifer Maisel, Oliver Mayer, Han Ong, Lisa Schlesinger, Alisa Solomon, Alina Troyano) over the years is a cross-section of not only time and geography but also length of apprenticeship under La Maestra, as we all affectionately called her. Among those featured in this special section of *PAJ*, Migdalia Cruz and I are the playwrights who worked with her for the longest, most concentrated period of time. Both of us were her assistants at different intervals in the Lab's history, which meant not only setting up the room for work every session but also writing down all the exercises every day for years. This act of transcription was to be the foundation for a book on playwriting Fornes was one day going to write entitled *The Anatomy of Inspiration*. Both of us were also part of the last year that she ran the Lab at INTAR (1992), a year when she decided she only wanted to work with writers whom she had previously trained. Among the writers that last year were Nilo Cruz, Lorraine Llamas, Lorenzo Mans, and Ela Troyano.

It is nearly impossible to document with exactitude a sequence of exercises at the Lab, because work with Fornes was not only about fulfilling writing exercises but also about re-seeing the world and the possibilities that theatre can hold for a dramatist working with text and image. Part of the reason I think so many truly gifted and fearless writers came out of the Lab (Cherrie Moraga, Eduardo Machado, Milcha Sanchez-Scott, Luis Santeiro, Octavio Solis, etc.) over its many years in existence under her leadership was the fact that she encouraged a very ruthless search for honesty: a profound unlocking of the verbal and visual imagination. Much of the writing that came from the Lab is noted critically for its visual daring, and Maria Irene Fornes is often cited as the influence for this because of her own early background in the visual arts. But I think that although the visual was certainly emphasized in the Lab, there was a great deal, if not more emphasis, on the power of language, the vibrating force of (sung and spoken) words in space, and the precision that theatre demands from a writer. Fornes pushed each of her writers, who were already gifted and were selected competitively through national application, to resist ease and comfort, to challenge language to its limits, and to test the resonant spaces of words themselves and their ability to shift energy and motion in a play. The training inevitably centered on character and how characters, even if they're mere unnamed voices, are the molecules that move a play forward and anchor an audience to the world onstage.

To open this section, I begin with notes on landscape and voice that I've written inspired by the hours and years spent in the LAB. These notes are followed by an exercise from my work with Irene, specifically, from the second year I worked with her (1989). After this short essay and exercise, memories and transcriptions follow from colleagues of mine in the field. My thanks to them for generously giving their

time to record their memories. I first encountered Irene's plays when *PAJ* editor Bonnie Marranca taught a dramatic literature course at the University of California–San Diego in 1985. That encounter with the plays profoundly impacted my journey as an artist and thinker. My thanks to Bonnie Marranca for first bringing Fornes's work to my attention, and for asking me to put together this section for *PAJ*.

LANDSCAPE AND VOICE

To paraphrase Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

The blank page is like a map 'detached from actual social practices,' effacing historical process and creating in its place a new logic: in writing we draw on what is external as our raw material, strip it of its particularity, process it through the mechanism of style and create a new product from it.

And yet, while the blank page can be perceived as "detached," I also think once you begin to put pen to paper, the manner in which you inscribe its surface is very much part of a historical process of writing (and not, for example, oral storytelling). The page thus becomes part of a continuum of writers writing, and as a writer you are drawing as much on the raw material of the external as of the internal, and the history of writing itself (down to the page, parchment, scroll, etc.)

Much has been written about the writer's relationship to landscape (tangible, physical, specific, geographic) as well as the internal terrain of emotions, memories, erasures, sensations, etc. Both (and more) come into play when you are writing a text for performance. For example, there are some plays I have written directly inspired by a place or city or series of cities where I have been. Other plays have been created out of scraps of places encountered: an invented landscape. Whether drawing directly from a site or making a site out of others the places where your play lives (inside the world of the play) are always, in the end, invented/made up. It cannot help but be so because in the act of making a play you are already involved in a process of transformation.

Some plays are governed more by landscape than others. For instance, in *Landscape and Theatre*, Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri speak eloquently about the way many of the "language playwrights" (Mac Wellman, Suzan-Lori Parks, Ruth Margraff, Matthew Maguire, Len Jenkin, Erik Ehn) are truly "landscape playwrights." Their use of language is topographical, expansive, physical, and demands embodiment in a different manner than say, the work of more "interior" playwrights like Christopher Shinn, Rebecca Gilman, Neil LaBute, and so forth. It is true that plays are always, ultimately, in the *here* of place. Whether we call it Illyria, Athens, or Chicago, the here is always the theatre space itself. Some writers use the theatre as their only space: a space without necessary referents. But even some of the wildest of self-referents will occasionally refer to another Here in the here, so that the theatre space is always doubled or tripled in perspective.



Maria Irene Fornes, author, spring 2007. Photo: Courtesy Bonnie Marranta.

Maria Irene Fornes, Federico García Lorca, Tennessee Williams, Sam Shepard, and other poets of the theatre have understood how to make the landscapes of their plays, which merge direct referents with personal identifications and disidentifications, resonate within them and at their best extend outside them. So, for instance, New Orleans will always contain *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the California desert will always contain the warrior brothers in *True West*.

What is the map we see inside the blank page? What are the maps we make when we write? What is their essential geography? And what new points do we make on the larger, global map when we write a play?

EXERCISE FROM INTAR LAB, NEW YORK CITY, OCTOBER 1989

Step 1: Focus on an object in space. Is it still or moving? Let it go up into your field of vision, and as it goes up let it collide with another object. Is the original object dented, broken, or fine? What is the original object's resilience? And what is the new object with which it has collided? Draw in your notebook the aftermath of the collision, as you see it.

Step 2: As you draw, think where this is happening geographically. See the landscape clearly and everything it contains. Write down what emerges as significant.

Step 3: Think of the first color you associate with childhood. Let this color go into the geographic location you have discovered. Now, is there someone else there in this location seeped with color? Perhaps someone you have forgotten? Describe the color first and then how it relates to the location. Once you have described the color/location, build a sequence of dramatic scenes using the following three lines as your prompts:

“The dog was barking.”
“He puts down the glass.”
“What is normal?”

Step 4: Shift in time. Focus on one character. Discover what they do when they're alone. Look at behavior, movement, or perhaps it is a specific action in which you find the character alone.

Step 5: Have two different characters from different times in your life or two different texts meet and have an encounter of some sort. If it helps you to focus on a secret one of the individuals is harboring, then do so.

Step 6: Write down memories of your characters at different ages in this order: age twelve, age seventeen, age eight, age four. What does the character or characters fear? Let them tell you or discover it.

Step 7: Think now how Voice(s) ARE your landscape, how the music of Voice reflects, animates, contains the essences of your play's landscape. Is the landscape inhabited by dry, barren, parched voices or melodious, smooth tones? Are there rough Voices/rough patches in the landscape? Write a scene for your play-in-progress (in the making) that is especially attuned to Voice(s).



Brooke Berman

NOTES FROM TAXCO, MEXICO WORKSHOP, 1998

January 1998 (a two-week workshop in Central Mexico. Participants include myself, Andy Bragen, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, Sarah Ruhl, Debbie Saivetz, Ken Prestininzi, and others).

Exercise 1

Each person is asked to write the name of someone they trust on a piece of paper. That piece of paper is handed to someone else in the group.

We are asked to open the paper, look at the name, and then asked to close our eyes and breathe. We are told that today we will be visited by a very knowledgeable writing expert, someone who can answer all of the questions we have about our plays. We are told that this person goes by the name on the paper we were handed. We are asked to see this person, really see him or her, the hands, the texture of the hair, the height, the clothing, the fingernails. And we are asked to see where this person is and how he or she stands and then we are asked to draw a quick sketch of this person.

We are told that this person has come to us today to answer questions we may have and to give us advice.

We are given this line: "I have read your work, and these are the thoughts I have about it."

Then, we are asked to write the rest of the expert's advice and wisdom and we're encouraged to ask questions. At one point, Irene gives us the line: "I think it would be interesting, for example, if. . . ."

Keep writing.

Finish.

Read them to one another.

Exercise 2

Irene says, “Start a play with a very small powerful sense of something, rather than a Big Idea.” We are asked to close our eyes and visualize a character from the back. Consider a dream your character has had, a vacation s/he’s taken but never talked about. Draw your character from the back. Write.



Migdalia Cruz

INTAR LAB, NEW YORK CITY, NOVEMBER 1984

I was Irene’s student from 1984 to 1991, and for the first two of those years, I was also her assistant, which meant I made coffee, unlocked the doors, made sure the desks were arranged in a circle with their two front edges touching the desk to either side. [Irene said this was so that our writing spirits could travel through the desks and we could gain and share energy with one another as we wrote.] I also wrote down each exercise verbatim as Irene spoke them to us, typed them, and gave them to her so she could compile them for the book she unfortunately never got to write. I was transcribing as I was also trying to actually do the exercise, so I know I missed some things. Also, I may have changed some words according to what I heard.

Between her accent and my ears there was sometimes a gap. But the exercises I have selected below are as faithful to her original words as I could come to remembering them. Also, Irene improvised her exercises. She spoke as things occurred to her. Sometimes everything fit perfectly and at other times, we had to struggle to make sense of her words. For each one of us, it was a deep journey into the minds of our characters, with Irene as our personal guide into our memories and into the souls of our characters. The Dalai Lama brings light into each room he enters—Irene brings truth.

The three and a half-hour workshop, from 9 A.M. to 12:30 P.M., was structured like this:

- 20–45 minutes: Yoga, Tai-Chi, etc. The floor exercises were meant to place the participants in a meditative place, a place where one could sit and write without fidgeting and restlessness.
- 2 to 2½ hours: A writing exercise could begin from the floor or she might send us directly to our desks to begin to write. She would decide based on the energy of the group. She might begin with a memory from our lives or have us work directly with characters.
- ½ to 1 hour of reading what we had just written. We could volunteer but she would most often pick who would read. We could read all or any part of the

exercise. She might first ask us how we felt about the exercise—everyone would answer—and then she would pick someone to read. She sometimes responded to our work directly or just responded to an issue brought up by what we read, especially if the work needed help. Other times she would just give us an impromptu lecture about something that was on her mind and there was no time to read. Every day was different.

The following exercises are from November 1984 during Maria Irene Fornes's Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory at INTAR, in New York City. The participants in the 1984–1985 workshop were: Migdalia Cruz, Ana Maria Simo, Manuel Pereiras, Lorenzo Mans, Cherrie Moraga, Juan Shamsul Alam, Oscar Colón, José Pelaez, Bernardo Solano, John Faro PiRoman, Leo García, and Alicia Castroleal (who left after the first session because she couldn't use her computer in workshop—paper and pen or pencil only) These exercises all come from my first month with Irene.

Playwriting Workshop Report No. 3, November 9, 1984

Close your eyes and feel the rug. Imagine that you are blind. Feel the texture of the rug and imagine it is something you have never seen before. Feel the edge of the rug.

Now rise and go to your tables without opening your eyes—still imagining that you are blind. When you find your desk, sit and feel the desk and the things on it. Take out paper and pen and find a blank page completely through touch.

Imagine a familiar place. Imagine a blind person in this place. Imagine all the details of this person. The shape of the face, the color of the skin, eyebrows, eyelashes, ears, lips, chin, neck, torso. What do the hips look like? The legs, arms, hands? What is this person wearing? Does this person have anything in his hands? Is anyone with this person? Is there someone else there? Is it someone you know? Examine the person's physical appearance. What are the details of his appearance? Is this person holding something? Is he sitting or standing? Define in detail. Write a dialogue involving these two people. Use the following lines, if possible:

“I must ask you to tell me what you mean when you say I am negative.”

“If you can find me work.”

“You will see how appropriate this is.”

“We will discuss the details when we meet.”

Think of an occupation. Write it on a slip of paper and pass it to the person on your right. Incorporate this occupation into your scene or write a scene where the person describes his occupation or his feelings toward his occupation.

Think of a crime. Write it down on a slip of paper and pass it to the person second from the right of you.

At any point in the scene, when new elements are brought in, the scene can shift to another time and place.

Silence. Time passes.

After J's reading, Irene talked about being careful not to think in terms of story or plot at this early stage.

After M's reading, Irene talked about just writing—not putting an obligation into something. The reason for this is that the thought interferes with the truth and reality of the moment. It begins to shortchange the gaining of knowledge of the character. A character should never behave according to our preconceived notions.

Playwriting Workshop Report No. 6, November 16, 1984

Go to your desks.

Close your eyes.

Make sure your feet are planted firmly on the ground.

Imagine that a string is pulling you from your spine through your neck and up.

Feel that stretch and relax.

In your mind's eye think of a person whose behavior can be extreme. Imagine that person in an extreme situation. Allow the situation to become even more extreme. Imagine the experience of this person in this extreme situation. Imagine the place where this scene is taking place.

Open your eyes. Draw a sketch of this place and the person or persons involved.

When you are finished, look up.

Now describe it in words.

When you are done, close your eyes and imagine the characters in your mind's eye.

When you can see them clearly begin a dialogue with this line: "He will not miss them."

There is a question of a person hanging a picture or painting on the wall.

Line: "I'm not sleepy. I'm not going to bed yet."

Another line: “Come here and rest yourself a little.”

Let yourself be fluid and allow the lines to enter the dialogue. Try to use the elements as I give them to you.

There is a question of sweeping the floor.

See if you need another character.

There is a question of hair being cut.

Line: “Oh, he’s a filthy man. He always wants things.”

Line: “Gosh, that’s a kiss!”

Line: “It’s too much for me. I can’t understand it.”

There is a question of crying in relation to a cousin.

Line: “So, I’m busy. That’s all I have to say.”

Line: “My poor feet! They hurt a lot.”

Line: “You’ll see him here. I have invited him.”

Line: “You’ll see him here. I have invited him.”

There is the question of someone’s anxiety.

Silence. Time passes.

Coherence is not necessarily a goal. Let yourself go from one exercise to another freely. Be limber.

The main purpose of this exercise is to deal with action. This exercise was meant to deal with making something happen—events are occurring constantly. When you are light and limber—ready to accept what comes—you must allow yourself to go with it. Like the child’s game of “Chicken,” you must be light in order to sense the changes which will come.

Action is integral to a scene. The action is present, it has an influence—it is not talking about the action. The action is the atmosphere of the scene. It influences what is said and creates a center. Breath is given to a play when there is an action at the center of each scene. The action doesn’t have to be talked about to be present.

It is important just to read—not act out your words. Words, sentences, have their own energy. Don’t add an attitude because it fixes the scene.

Playwriting Workshop Report No. 7, November 19, 1984

This exercise began directly from our yoga on the rug.

Think of a person—it could be you or somebody else. Think of this person in a state of danger. Not necessarily a catastrophic danger but something he could overcome or prevent if he were aware of the danger.

Visualize this person in a place. When you have a picture of this person and place clearly in your mind, go to your desk and sketch the person in detail in a particular place.

Write a dialogue.

Line: “Sometimes there’s not enough room.”

Either use this line directly or use it to connect to something else.

Line: “I don’t think that anyone would say that this is a good situation.”

Stop writing and start the exercise again. Close your eyes and think of all the steps that this person needs to take to overcome this danger. What can he do? Deal with this step-by-step no matter how small the step. Step/obstacle/solution.

Think of a character and think what a similar problem is for that character. The problem should involve innocence and unawareness. Try to follow the steps of analysis. See if you can write a scene or just a few lines of dialogue. Even with the description of obstacles try to use those descriptions to write a few scenes.

Silence. Time passes.

Always try to meld the two planes of description and dialogue. Those few lines of dialogue may be a good jump for a full scene.

It is important to remember all the time that a problem is not always interesting.

Don’t try to tell a story. It’s too objective. Try to enter the situation and visualize the details of the scene completely. You record what happened without telling what happens. What happens should happen—not be described. You have to learn how to improvise. Exercise your creative possibilities. You can’t let structure destroy spontaneity. You have to allow yourself to have no idea where you’re going. Be surprised by your own writing.

This exercise is dedicated to S. Is he rewriting with all his senses? It is enormously important to use every bit of your time and talent to make your work show its best face, especially when your work is being presented for the first time in a wider level of production.

Playwriting Workshop Report No. 8, November 21, 1984

Beginning from the rug:

Go back to this morning—early—before you awoke. Imagine yourself sleeping and then just waking up. Imagine the light of day—where you see it coming from. How the sheets feel against your body. How the mattress feels. How the surface of the bed feels.

Imagine someone else is sleeping. Go inside their minds and imagine the state of that mind. Then imagine the room. Then imagine the tone of their mind in a color or substance.

Imagine how they look as they awaken and what they see when they wake up. Go to your desks and sketch this person asleep and then what they see when they're awake. Describe in detail what they are seeing.

Line: "I was serving coffee at the time."

Line: "No one is here, so . . ."—complete this sentence yourself.

Think of what one of these persons is angry about—even if the person isn't thinking about it at that moment.

Line: "Isn't this the garbage?"

A quick holiday exercise in honor of Thanksgiving:

Think of a name for a character and write a line of dialogue. Pass this note to the person on your right who will think of another character and start a dialogue with a reply to the first character's line. Send the scene back and forth between you, trading line for line. Start a second scene with the person on your left, following the same process.

Silence. Time passes.

If you understand the sexuality of your character, you understand the character at its core. You understand the structure of the character.

Playwriting Workshop Report No. 10, November 28, 1984

Adjust your body as you are seated. Adjust your bone structure. Your flesh is not what constitutes your body, but your skeleton. Imagine how your skeleton rests on the floor through your feet. Find the position where it rests with the most balance, without strain. Do that with each foot and move on up to adjust the legs so that they are resting on themselves with no effort to keep the positions they are in. Then

adjust the place where your buttocks rest on the chair so your spine rests on itself instead of some other muscular energy. Move up your spine. See whether your shoulders are resting on your spine comfortably. See if the neck is in such a position that the head rests on it. Move the head very gently to find the balance so that it is in the position of most balance and the least effort. Go back to your shoulders. Readjust them so that the arms are resting on the table—the bones of your hands should be resting on the table. Then review your whole body and see if your whole skeleton is at rest. Become aware of your skeleton in this position of rest. See what is uncomfortable about your flesh and skin. See if you can make them relax also.

Let a character come to your mind. As it comes to your mind, feel the character's bone structure. What position is the character in? Let it be whatever it is, don't try to relax it. Just try to think of him either at rest or he may be strained. Imagine him as he is in detail from the feet to the head. What time of day is it? What is the temperature? Where is the character? Let the place come to you. If you have previous experience with this character, don't necessarily put him in the same place. Let the place really come to your thoughts about the character at this particular moment. Look at this place carefully. The character is holding something in his hand. What is it? There is someone else at this place. Who is it and what is he doing there? If you have any doubts about the details, review the process.

Line: "That's my business but thanks all the same."

Line: "He gets into habits. He can't help it."

Make a drawing of the image of that character if you have not already done so.

Explore how one of your characters feels about the following things—not thinks—not your point-of-view—but how they feel about particular things. These scenes may not connect with previous scenes but just go with these new ideas. It may be in the near future or past.

How does your character feel about money?

How does your character feel about responsibility or obligation?

How does your character feel about hunting animals?

How does your character feel about humility?

Shift to another time in the future and have your character tell somebody else what has happened in the scene before.

Silence. Time passes.

Let your character be honest and unguarded. The unguarded person is most interesting because you get truth out of him. You learn something from him because he is not like real people who protect themselves.

Irene to B: When you write realistically your character becomes smart-alecky. You can't find the essence through a smart-alecky character because he is so protected.

Playwriting Workshop Report No. 11, November 30, 1984

Close your eyes. Let a character come to you. Observe the character.

What is your perspective? What is your angle of vision?

Where is the character? Look at his face. Look at his clothes. Let the face identify itself to you. Let the character speak. What is its name?

The character says to you "I'm doing my best under the circumstances."

Ask the character what the circumstances are. Interview the character.

Write down a question from your scene on a piece of paper and pass it to the person on your left. If you don't have any questions in your scene, make one up. The person on your left should try to use that question in his scene. He or she may alter it to fit the scene.

Time passes.

Irene to J: Your character was protecting herself too much. The facts came out too quickly and organized. Just let your character speak. Be patient with her. Don't write everything down so quickly. Give the line time to develop. Let her speak the truth.

Irene to L: You attacked your character instead of protecting her and trying to understand her. You took sides against her and made her a mockery instead of a real study. It's very dangerous not to treat your characters with respect.



Julie Hébert

**MEMORY FROM PADUA HILLS PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE,
CALIFORNIA, 1983**

At Padua in 1983 one summer morning Irene talked about structure, urging us to make a play like a tree saying we could start anywhere because it was all attached. She then spilled out dozens of old photographs from a broken-down family album she had bought at a local flea market and instructed us to grab one, any one, and start writing a scene about what we saw. After a short time she said, now imagine

it is four hours later, and write another scene. A few minutes later she jumped us into the following day for the third scene. When we were deeply engrossed in the lives of these characters, writing like mad to finish scenes before Irene called time, she made us stop in mid-sentence, draw a line across the page and pull a second photograph from the pile in the center of the table. Now we were to incorporate this unrelated image, these new faces, into the narrative we had started.

It felt like lightning illuminating a tree at night—shadows, leaves, branches reaching into darkness, faces, gestures, unfinished stories, all attached. An alchemist of creativity, Irene had provoked us into glimpsing a full-blown world of our own imagination. My first play came out of this exercise.



Anne García-Romero

NOTES FROM CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY AT NORTHRIDGE, 1989 AND MORE

In 1989, on a warm July morning at California State University at Northridge, as I sat in my seat during my first workshop with Maria Irene Fornes, she commanded, “Close your eyes. Picture a character. This could be a character you are already working on or a totally new character. Once this character is in your mind’s eye, picture all aspects of your character, starting with the hair, then the face, the body.” Fornes’s hypnotic cadence drew me into an interior landscape, my private writer’s universe, a subconscious dream-like state where characters from inside of my being could arise, surprise, and inform me of their presence. Fornes’s exercise presupposed that I had access to this wealth of creative material and solely needed a shamanic guide to call it forth. Fornes’s meditative method bordered on the spiritual as characters presented themselves to each writer as if culled from the ether. Then, Fornes commanded, “When your character is clear to you, you can open your eyes and briefly describe your character. Also draw a picture of your character.” I now recorded this vision onto paper, as one records a dream, trying to remember every detail, often baffled by the information but paying close attention and embracing the mystery, which would hopefully be revealed in the future.

At that moment, I knew I needed to continue to study with Fornes, a playwright whom I’d never met before and whose plays I’d never read at that time. The power of her presence and the access she provided to create a character as the launching point for a play were transformative. Fornes’s method catapulted me right into the center of my creativity as a playwright, with the task of internally and subjectively discovering the play I needed to write. This intuitive, creative, visual, and unconventional method has had a huge impact on my path as a playwright and teacher. Fornes’s method values and empowers the playwright regardless of borders, backgrounds, experience, or knowledge. As in her plays, her teaching defies categories, encourages aesthetic diversity, and embraces all identities.

In the Fall of 1992, Fornes was one of my first instructors at the Yale School of Drama, where her methods were met by the students with a mixture of enthusiasm and reserve. The energetic attentiveness in the room at Padua was replaced by a somewhat cautious embrace at Yale. Was it her unconventional approach employing an intuitive, unpredictable, physically creative process versus a more deductive, cerebral writing process which led to this reception? Regardless of the setting, Fornes unequivocally offered her methods as a means to successful playwriting.

During the workshop at Yale, Fornes presented a variety of exercises focusing on generating new material as well as revising an existing play. Perhaps intuiting that some “walls” had arisen in the room, Fornes led us through an exercise using her signature visualization methods. She commanded, “Close your eyes. Picture a wall. What is the wall made of? Picture yourself walking through the wall. What is on the other side? Picture this. Open your eyes and draw a picture of the wall and what was on the other side. Write the following down in the corner of your paper: What shall I do with my things? I’m going to dance until I drop. Piece of bread. Looking at someone’s teeth. Now write a scene between two characters in this location on the other side of the wall. Use either the line of dialogue, the object, or the action in your scene only if it helps you.” Having just started graduate school, I relished her command to walk through my own internal walls of uncertainty into the abundant terrain of seemingly boundless creativity. At first I pictured a brick wall. As I walked through the brick wall, on the other side I saw myself facing a giant mudslide, leading to an asphalt slab which overlooked two pits of lava, one with an old man, the other with a middle-aged woman, as both bobbed up and down in the steaming, molten earth. To the left side, I could see a grassy area framed by acacia trees. I then wrote a scene between two young women. The scene began with one woman asking the other, “Hungry?”

I continually hunger for access to the deep, unconscious writing that Fornes’s exercises can elicit. When I began teaching playwriting, at first I was tentative about asking my students to close their eyes. However, once I began doing so I noted a dramatic shift in their work. The writing, often instantly, became more evocative, unpredictable, visceral, and theatrical. I now consistently employ Fornes’s visualization exercises whenever I teach and I continually experience the power of her approach. Fornes’s writing, teaching, artistry, humor, humanity, and passion continue to impact me deeply and I endeavor to pass on her legacy to my students so that the next generation of U.S. playwrights can have the opportunity to experience the transformational writing that Fornes’s mastery makes possible.



Jennifer Maisel

NOTES FROM PADUA HILLS PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE, CALIFORNIA, 1989 AND MORE

Padua 1989

All I know is everyone here speaks of her with such reverence. Intoxicated rumblings. It takes me a minute to figure it out that “Irene” is Maria Irene Fornes. That’s what you call her. I do not know what to expect.

Someone tells the story of Irene leading an exercise some Padua summer prior to this during which someone took out a handful of carrots and ate them while writing. That year, I’m told, everyone’s play had a carrot in it. I’m a little confused, a little curious, somewhat daunted. Carrots?

I came to Padua the first time in the middle of my two years of graduate school in Dramatic Writing at NYU. I had just spent a year crammed with Aristotle and lectures about dramatic structure (crisis and denouement, anyone?). I had a professor who wanted us to know exactly where we were going in our plays, plot point after plot point. I’ve never been very good at knowing all the plot points. I’ve never been very good at knowing how I’m getting where I’m going. Is it telling I have horrible trouble reading maps? Once I know exactly where I’m going, the exact route I am writing, I often don’t see the point of getting there. I hand in an outline and I see the fleshing out as drudgery rather than inspiration. Is there something I’m doing wrong?

I come to Padua. I meet Irene. I do not know what to expect. She has us stand and start the physical warm up. Shaking one hand out, the other, the arm, the other arm, leg, leg, pelvis, neck. I’m not an actor, you know, I’m a writer. I don’t get up and do physical things with a group of other people. I am a writer. I don’t shake my limbs and loosen up. I don’t need to do that to sit in corners with my notebooks. Someone might look at me, the way I’m spying on everyone else out of the corner of my eye to make sure I’m doing it right. How are they handling pelvic roll, the roll of the head? She stops us. We go back to our chairs, our notebooks. This is what I understand. “Close your eyes,” she says. Close my eyes? I peek. Everybody else is closing their eyes. “Draw a picture,” she says. Draw a picture? I surrender. I surrender and the words come.

What I did not expect (yet got) was this: the revelation of the physical state leading us into the writing stream. The tools to use the body to enter the mind. The expectation of demanding precision of language. The confirmation that starting with the big idea is the pathway to mediocre dialogue that is nakedly always trying to be something. The knowledge that the structure will let itself be known to you and to me in its own time. From Irene I learn, amongst so many things, that there

is no map we must follow, that we are creating the map in this moment, in our notebooks, word by word.

New York University

I return to graduate school with writing plays now equated with a freedom. I am unleashed. Irene comes and teaches her seminar in the seventh floor black box theatre, table pushed against the curtains so there is room for my fellow grad students to loosen their limbs with the same look of agony on their faces I know I first had. We sit at the table and I can't wait to close my eyes and find out what will come. Irene being here brings together the playwriting schools of heart and head for me.

Padua 1991

I return to Padua and to the hallowed scalding un-airconditioned rooms of Cal State–Northridge after a year of juggling several unrewarding jobs simultaneously in New York, with a successful yet emotionally draining production of my first full-length play with a theatre company I helped found. I needed to be grounded again, to indulge in being all about writing, to find out how to pull from distraction rather than be distracted by distraction.

According to my notebook, Irene was the first of the playwrights to lead writing exercises that summer. Next to the now fading pencil drawings is the litany of how she drew us in: writing is about diving into the unknown. She talked about character and how the person we are channeling could be “totally unattractive.” And told us that the social world is the enemy of the writer.

We did the physical warm-up, and I had to admit I hadn't done that in a long time. I was rusty, stiff. We went to table—and she started.

The Exercise

Close your eyes.

Two faces and a place.

Draw a picture of them.

Describe what the picture tells you.

There is a line, you can use the line or not use the line. “Why didn't you eat anything?”

“Yes, very tall and strong.”

“You don't know what you're missing out on.”

“Everything seems so far away.”

“I want to go home but I have no home.”

We wrote. I had been out of a writing routine because I'd locked myself into “if it isn't great coming right on to the page mode, it isn't worth it.” So it was somewhat rough going for me at first. My assumption was that I'd immediately hit the vein, instead I agonized. I really had forgotten how much bad stuff you have to write to get to the good stuff.

Irene asked us to come to a stopping point. We went around the table and most people read what they had written. What I had on the page was spurred by a memory of a strange doctor making a housecall when I was a small child. It feels fake and forced to me and not worth anything.

In the afternoon I maybe put seventeen words on the page. Irene spotted that several of us were having trouble, that we were out of the routine of writing. “You do have to recognize,” she told us, “when you are going flat.” She posited, in her sweet voice, that writing was a slight state of hypnosis. That we didn't want to be premeditated in what we were creating. We needed to go off subject. “Find the language for the inarticulate,” Irene told us. “Something slightly arbitrary is always taking place.” It always seemed so simple with her, the way she would quickly pinpoint the issues at hand as if while we were writing she could absorb our energy.

I didn't hit the vein until the next day when Irene brought in the exercise with the photographs. Something about being presented with an actual physical world as a leaping off point for inspiration struck a chord in me. Suddenly I had characters speaking to me, to each other, rather than me forcing dialogue from their mouths.

The Exercise

Irene handed out photographs. They were photographs she had bought or perhaps found but they were of no relationship to her or to each other. They were old, black and white and sepia toned. The one I received was of a woman and two men dressed in clothes that appeared to be from the 1940s. The woman and one of the men were lying in the hammock, her eyes wide, staring straight at the camera, him more on his side, towards her, his arm flung across her body possessively. The other man stood over them. He could have been related to the man in the hammock. He seemed not to know where to look.

Choose a photograph.

Draw a picture of the photograph.

Describe the picture. Write what you see.

Use this moment as a starting point. What happens?

Let the characters speak.

There is a line. You can use the line or not use the line.

“Don’t be nice to me.”
“We didn’t know where you were.”
“I’m still lonely.”

The Next Exercise with the same characters

Give your character a dream.

There is a line.
“In four years no one will remember.”
“I don’t listen to anything I don’t want to happen in my life.”

When I reflect on Irene’s exercises what strikes me is their crystallized simplicity. The gifts she gives all writers is that starting point to go back to that place of simple, elegant inspiration. The tools to use the world, newspapers, photos, art, dreams, overheard words in a coffee shop, and so on, as a catalyst, to appropriate inspiration. Rather than waiting to be inspired Irene showed us how to cause it. I realize when I write, when I lead exercises, when I create them for myself, the best work comes from what Irene gave me: the doorways into that “slight stage of hypnosis,” and the faith that with a gentle rigor and an opening of your mind and heart the right words will come. Thank you, Irene. You have exceeded all expectations.



Oliver Mayer

**MARK TAPER FORUM THEATRE,
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, 1990–91**

First, an apology in the way of explanation.

Unlike many of my comrades, I did not study for a long period in a Maria Irene Fornes writing workshop. In 1990–91, when Oskar Eustis and I created the Mentor Playwrights Project at the Mark Taper Forum, and chose the first batch of young edgy West Coast playwrights whose work we hoped to groom through mentorship with established artists and teachers, Irene was the top mentor on both our lists. We invited her to Los Angeles for a three-month writing workshop, and she did indeed come, along with her mother Carmen. Those three months comprise the bulk of my knowledge of Irene as teacher. After her departure, we brought in other mentors as diverse as John Steppling, Luis Valdez, and Mac Wellman. So I apologize if Irene’s lessons and prompts are not as deep-seated within me as they might be.

It is a testament to Irene as teacher that I remember as much as I do. The first memories are purely visual. When I think back, I see us (Han Ong, Alice Tuan, Leon Martell, Kelly Stuart, Luis Alfaro, and myself) sprawled on the floor, following Irene’s lead as she took us through an hour’s worth of yoga poses. The visual gives way to aural memories as I hear us again laughing at our own lack of dexterity

and Irene's surprisingly lithe and nimble body control. I also hear Carmen, nearly one hundred, talking loudly at Irene and us in Spanish in between naps. Blinking, I now remember piles of paper scraps on Irene's desk, arranged neatly, each with some cryptic written image or sentence. These, she told us, would somehow string together and become a play. Thinking back, I wonder now if in those neat piles I was looking at the earliest stirrings of *Enter THE NIGHT* or *Terra Incognita*.

I remember the foreignness of Irene's delivery, her sing-song accented English urging us to feel more than think, her idiosyncratic aphorisms designed to open us up, and how, paradoxically, they began to illuminate our connections to her and to each other, as people as much as artists. I remember that her comments could be harsh, or at least brusque, particularly when she felt that one of us was writing to show off more than to explore or question in a real way. Even when she applauded an open-ended questioning scene in all its awkward newness she might still do so brusquely. Her tough love didn't hurt so much as addle us slightly, forcing us out of our preconceptions and making us see our own writing as something with a life, mind, and heart of its own.

Now that I think about it I realize that Irene was trying to teach us how to *play*. I often tell my own writing students now to remember that playwriting begins with play literally to amuse oneself, to recreate, to engage in sport, to gamble, to act in jest, to make love in a playful way, to trifle, to act, to perform. The *writing* in playwriting may be the reason we would all meet and listen to Irene, but the *play* was what was we were actually doing. Of all the lessons passed along by my many mentors this is the one I hold closest to my own curious and playful playwriting heart.

Over the years I would see Irene in Manhattan or Los Angeles and the memories would fly back to me, not simply of her or Carmen but of the gorgeous collegiality of our Mentor Playwrights Project that came together with all of us on the floor doing a decidedly Cubanized form of yoga, playing together.

A few years ago my mother saw Irene at Davidson College in North Carolina and called me afterwards. She told me that Irene couldn't remember me at first, that she seemed altered. Then, like a cloud passing over the sun, she remembered again and passed along her good wishes my way. But I knew something was wrong, or at the least changed, within Irene. Not long thereafter, our circle of writer friends began to pass along the bad news about Irene's health and memory loss.

There is a very fine new documentary directed by Michelle Memran about Irene that shows her recently, wraithlike, almost diaphanous, her mind and spirit elsewhere. And yet, the *play* within her never leaves, and I hope never will. I remember clearly that when the documentarian asks her who Maria Irene Fornes was, Irene says with a knowing smile, "She was a great dancer."

This is true. She was, and is.

Now, a confession. I fell in love with Irene's *Sarita*, not just the play but the character. Reading it as a young man, the passion of *Sarita* affected and infected me, the same way a wave of desire might knock me over for a real girl I loved. For me, *Sarita* *was* real, precisely because her passion was larger than the bounds of the play. *Sarita* remains a great love, even after all these years. Those who know my writing may now realize why I named the only female "Sarita" in my play *Blade to the Heat*, and why she (for me at least) burns throughout the play with passion, fire, frustration, and love.

In the end, that's the biggest lesson Irene taught us all. She wanted us to burn, not simply with emotion, but with passion. She wanted us not simply to think, but to feel with open-ended questioning of the world that revealed itself in our work, particularly in those awkward moments when we were caught with pants down. She wanted these moments onstage. Now I understand the piles of paper, the physicality of her classes, her exotic birdlike responses to our scenes, her utter commitment to each moment as artist and teacher. She meant for us to play with fire.

Exercises

LISTS

Lists of all kinds: your character's possessions, his/her favorite toys, games, movies, books, the favorite part of his/her body.

LETTERS

Have your character write a letter: to his/her lover, to God. Say everything that can't be said in person. But don't send it.

POSTCARDS

Find images of postcard size to use as setting in a new scene.

DIALOGUE

Open a book and find a word, a phrase, a sentence, completely at random. This will be your first line in a new scene.

Use these and all exercises liberally and actively.



Han Ong

THOUGHTS FROM LOS ANGELES, 1992 OR 1993

I met Maria Irene Fornes in 1992 or 1993 when she came to preside over a group of young L.A.-area playwrights in what the Mark Taper Forum was calling its Mentor Playwrights Project. Luis Alfaro was there. So was Kelly Stuart. Irene's mother, Carmen, flirty at ninety-something, was in tow, sitting in on Irene's classes. Irene's patented "visualization" exercise, that's what I remember the most: Close your eyes, try

to see the character you're working on: what shoes is he wearing, what pants, which shirt, is the hair long or short? Then, try to see the room in which this character is standing or sitting: is there a ceiling, what is the source of light, is the ground carpeted or wood-floored? All these details are meant to root you in the reality of the character; their sum total is the life, the circumstance in which the character finds himself. When you feel you have a good grasp of all these details, open your eyes and begin writing.

I thought of the exercise at first as “space-cadety.” But I see now, years later, that I was wrong. What Irene wanted us to understand—without ever articulating it—was that we were beholden to facts, to detail, but that being beholden didn't mean being tyrannized or boxed in. Using the visualization exercise, she meant for her students to start with what all actors start with: the body, the objects at hand. This, better than ideas, say, would give birth to lines that are muscular, weight-bearing, *tested*. She wanted us to have the intelligence of good actors. Of being inside the body. But then using that only as a starting point. From which we could fly off in whatever direction we so chose. What is best about this way of teaching writing is the roominess, the generosity of allowing the writer's individual style to come in, to play, to interact with the solid, corporeal, terrestrial ingredients at hand. So if you have a bent for poetry or lyricism, go right ahead. If you're more of a confrontational, rat-a-tat rhythm guy, by all means, don't let me stop you. But first and foremost, don't stint on knowledge of the world, don't bullshit about verifiable facts and don't think you can “airy-fairy” your way out of the fundamental contract with yourself, your fellow writers, and with the audience: show that you have a grasp of the way the world works, of the way people live: In objects, in clothes, in the characters' bodies' stance is a first clue, embedded or maybe sitting there right at the surface: picture it, decipher it, then start writing.



Lisa Schlesinger

NOTES FROM IOWA 1993–94

I met Maria Irene Fornes when she came to the Iowa Playwrights Workshop during the 1993–1994 academic year to give a playwriting workshop. One of our privileges and responsibilities as playwrights was to pick up the visiting playwrights and I went to meet her up at the Cedar Rapids airport. Once in the car, she had places she wanted to see. So one of my first experiences with Irene was taking her to the Amana Colonies to look for old photos and postcards in antique shops. Part of my education with her was out of the classroom, in the car, driving and talking, rummaging and collecting. I was pleased to take the journey with her because with Irene it was a seeking and an adventure, and it was participatory.

Every day of class started with what Irene called *yoga*. It was not *yoga*, as we know it today, but a series of isolation exercises: head rolls, shoulder rolls, scrunching up your face and releasing it, rib isolations, windmills with our arms, circling our

wrists, and shaking our hands until they buzzed. We circled our hips—it was great to see Irene up at the front of the group circling her hips. We shook our legs, ankles, scrunched our toes, and jumped up and down. She had us move each part of our bodies and then we lay on the ground for relaxation. Needless to say, after the first day some people who were not comfortable with this, and/or did not see its relevance to playwriting, did not show up for her class again. The exercise I love the most is the one in which we swung one arm in a circle going forward while turning the other arm in the opposite direction. I don't remember if Irene said that this required the use of both hemispheres of the brain, but that is how I remember it, and what I have decided it does when I do it with my own students. I do know it was something I could not do when I began her class, and felt very proud of when I got the hang of it.

Before Irene I was a playwright who “heard” characters speaking. The skill I developed in Irene's classes was imaginative seeing. There has been nothing that has changed my writing practice as much as learning that skill. In subsequent years, this has helped me as a teacher as well since I now realize that some writers are uneven this way, and that rounding out our skills in sensory experience can help our writing practice tremendously.

There are two Irene exercises that stand out for me:

Irene had us close our eyes and imagine a place before we started writing. This place would later, once we started writing, become the scene of the action. She asked us questions about what we saw, before the characters ever entered the scene. She did not define this place in terms of a stage set but just the place itself. I believe this brought forth details we might not have seen if we'd started with dialogue. Then she would ask us to—when we were ready—open our eyes and to draw the scene out on a piece of paper. I remember realizing a magical realism in these imagined spaces. Once we'd drawn it out, often really primitive sketches, we were to close our eyes and see the space again, this time imagining two characters entering the space. We were to wait and watch them and listen. Nothing fancy, just to stimulate the seeing. Once we heard them speaking, we were to write down what they said and thus started writing our scenes. After a bit she'd call out a random line. She said them aloud and wrote them on the board and we were to include those phrases in our scenes. While we wrote she often sat at the front of the class writing as well.

Recently, when David Henry Hwang came to teach at Columbia College here in Chicago in our Playwriting Program, he used this same exercise. He left out the yoga. I know my students were very glad about this, though they would have done the yoga if DHH had asked them. What he did differently in his class is he had students write the beginning of the scene with no drop-in lines and then on the second round of writing added the drop-in lines. Irene never did that with us as far as I remember.

The other exercise I liked very much was one in which she laid out many old photographs and postcards that she had collected in the center of the room. Each person chose one and used the setting and characters from the photograph to write a scene. Again, these visual details really affected my writing, so much so that I don't try to write plays without photographs of both the places and characters. The old photographs and postcards became very important to me. Not only do I use photographs now in every play I write, but also I think of scenes, sometimes, as postcards.

Ultimately, what I learned through her exercises and her presence was to see. Her exercises moved me as a writer from a way of hearing to a way of envisioning and this affected my writing more than any other playwriting teacher.

Lastly, Irene shared with me the way she started writing plays that has inspired me my whole writing life. She said she was a secretary and one day she had an idea for a play. She called in sick to work and started writing it. The next day she called in sick again. She called in sick for three weeks. And then she had written her first play. Then she quit her job because she was a playwright. I share this story with my students. Because one of the things Irene taught me is we become what we do and what we practice.



Alisa Solomon

INTAR LAB, NEW YORK CITY, 1986–87

I stretched out on the floor a little while ago, flat on my back with my toes reaching as far as they could in one direction, my fingers, above my head, scraping against the carpet in the other. I rolled over and arched up, then caved, in a vague approximation of cat-and-cow. I sat up and crossed my legs, then dropped my head, let it roll from side to side. I closed my eyes and followed my breathing. Quietly, I walked to my desk and counted out some more Zen breathing, until she appeared: Irene. Wearing sweats and a flirty smile.

It seemed only fitting to prepare to recall Maria Irene Fornes's playwriting workshops that way since that's how the sessions I was privileged to attend at INTAR in the Fall and Winter of 1986–87 always began. Stretch, breathe, move to table, breathe. Then wait, listen, breathe, listen. Write. "The quiet of yoga takes us inside ourselves," Irene explained one morning, though nobody had asked her to justify something that felt so right. "Athletic exercises are not good for writing. They are too expressive, too outer." We needed to go inside ourselves not because we were supposed to pour our guts out. That's not what Irene meant by "self"—not the store of personal grievance, milky nostalgia, and familial complaint that seemed to be the substance of so much psychological drama of the day. Rather, we needed to pay heed to our bodies because that's where the imagination would manifest itself—IF we stayed still enough to notice. "The stronger a character is," Irene told us one day, "the more I

feel as if their voice is in my chest. I feel a contraction in my throat when I'm writing or I find I may be mouthing or gesturing along."

There was a lot of talk in those days among Foucauldians and feminist theorists about how social being was inscribed on our bodies. They figured the body as a blank page onto which cultural values were written (rather like the condemnatory lines engraved onto the skin of a culprit in Kafka's "The Penal Colony," I always imagined). Irene audaciously seemed to be proposing the body itself as the writing machine. At the very least, she invited us to engage playwriting as a carnal enterprise—like sex or eating, an activity that involved discernment and skill but that sprang from deep, organic urges. We needed to learn to hear them rumble through us. The idea sounded a little nutty, but made perfect sense in the doing of it. Theatre is an embodied art form after all, and Irene didn't think a playwright's words could be made flesh on the stage if they hadn't somehow started out that way.

The intense physicality of the approach—including writing by hand for a couple of hours each day until our wrists ached (I wonder how our results would have differed if we'd had laptops back then)—probably explains why I found myself creating scenes about a group of underground revolutionaries, one of whom had been tortured, and then about a women's basketball squad. I am amazed to look back at my notebook now, for the first time in these twenty-odd years, and discover these unexpected characters and their various urgencies. Sure, they drew on real experiences I'd had (an ANC-activist lover, school years playing sports seriously) but these personae, who come across so vividly even though the ink that gave them life is fading, are pure and intricate inventions. If the pages didn't bear my handwriting I could easily believe that someone else had conjured them.

Irene's workshop generated revelations day after day. Material I had no idea was in me poured out from a place I hadn't known was there. And I learned (among many other things) that such magic comes from discipline—the daily drills, the constant practice, the patience, the trust. I can hardly say that my scenes were "good," but I had, perhaps uniquely in the group, the privilege not to care: I had no ambition to become a playwright. Thus, I brought less anxiety, less need to excel, than I did to enterprises where I felt more was at stake, and that, too, taught me an important lesson: creativity requires that ego get out of the way.

Why Irene allowed me to participate in her Hispanic Playwrights workshop, I don't recall (if I ever knew). I'm not Hispanic, either. I do remember her giggling when she assented and saying she'd just call me "Salamón" if anybody questioned my presence. As far as I know, nobody did. A quiet camaraderie bound the participants, an intense shared sense of purpose. No one chattered or made elaborate dates for lunch, though everyone was agreeable. It's just, we went each morning to write.

I went, too, to learn dramatic and pedagogic theory. Or so I can tell myself now as I look at my notebook and see how I wrote down everything Irene said about

her method. I had been blown away by *The Danube* and *Mud* and *Sarita* and *The Conduct of Life*—plays that resembled nothing else I’d seen before I came to New York in 1982, fresh from graduate school, and that forced me to rethink how drama functioned. I wanted to understand how Irene compressed so much power into such simple forms, how inchoate desire could emerge so forcefully out of laconic language, how the inability to articulate could drive dramatic action, how simple scenes of mundane life could pack so much mystery, how bluntness could live harmoniously alongside delicacy and humor. And, of course, I had a crush on Irene.

The prompts Irene gave us as we sat at the table with our eyes closed were meant to “induce inspiration,” she told us. “Otherwise you have to wait for the muse to come—IF the muse comes. The exercises are a man-made muse.” Usually they comprised three items: a line of dialogue, an object, an issue or feeling. She’d say them, and the rest was silence for the next several hours, save pen scratching against paper. If there was time later some of us would read aloud from what we’d written and Irene would respond, seldom to offer commentary on the passage itself, but to draw some general principle about writing—“Don’t babble. That’s the conscious mind being a busy-body. The more we listen to that conscious part of the mind saying, ‘I’ll take care of it,’ the less we hear the other part. You do need the busybody to take over later, when you’re editing, but the other part is usually not heard from and that’s what the exercises are for.” Or, “We have to be totally exposed as writers. When we lie on the floor here, we have to imagine ourselves cut open, trusting that no one is going to come along and put his foot in. That is the obligation of the writer.”

In those months, Irene became particularly concerned with developing ways to teach structure implicitly. The prompts, which always contained the seeds of relationship and action—lines like “I don’t think I want to give it to you” or “How long are you going to keep this up?”—now had temporal elements that hinted at beginnings, middles, and ends (though not necessarily in that order): “I just don’t feel the same way any more.” “I’m glad you’re back.” Soon prompts came periodically as we were writing: “Three days later,” then, “one hour before the last scene.”

Maria Irene Fornes described her struggle with teaching structure and, surprisingly, turned to the turn-of-the-century masters of naturalism to make the point. Chekhov creates event without exposing the set-up, she explained, while Ibsen’s assembly glares. In *Hedda Gabler* Aunt Julie puts her bonnet down precisely so that Hedda can insult it later. “You see the building going up and you have to admire it,” Irene said. “The structure is so powerful it’s devastating.” Irene threw her head back and let out one of those thin cackles. The more profound her idea the higher her voice would get. And then that laugh—gleeful, wacky, the sparkle of insight.

Exercises

Imagine one of your organs. Describe it.
Hand it to someone you trust.

A series of prompts over the course of a couple of hours of writing:

“I would appreciate it if you explained it.”

A question of respect.

Object: a doll.

Action: drinking.

Six months later.

“I’m not listening. We’ll talk later.”

A question of generosity.

Object: a tear.

Action: trembling.

Three days later.

“That is my favorite dish.”

An element of fear.

Object: a box or a jar.

Action: striking or hitting.

One hour before the last scene.

“I don’t think you’ll get away with that.”

A question of anger.

Object: a hammer.

Action: closing.

Three days later.

“I do the best I can.”

A question of exhaustion.

Object: a piece of paper.

Action: making noises (with mouth).

Seven days later.

“I think she likes me.”

A question of greed.

Object: a machine part.

Action: running or moving fast.

An hour later.

“He doesn’t say what he means.”

An element of trust.

Object: a chicken leg.

Action: praying.



INTAR LAB, NEW YORK CITY, 1986

Irene remains one of the best teachers I've ever had. Her commentaries on art were always thought-provoking and her passion for art never fails to inspire.

I met Irene at INTAR when I was chosen as a writer for the Musical Theatre Lab. The date was 1986. And if I may clarify—I was chosen to participate in the Musical Theatre Lab and when I had a bad case of writer's block I begged Irene to audit her Playwriting Lab. Irene did not teach the Musical Theatre Lab. At the time I'd only written a few monologues and writing a musical seemed like a Herculean task. I thought Chekhov and my writing pad turned whiter with each passing day. Desperate I begged Irene to let me audit her Playwriting Lab. So there I was doing yoga, drinking coffee, sitting at a desk that made up a circle with the other desks whose corners had to touch the desks next to it. Irene led the exercises and asked us to close our eyes. I saw some with foreheads on desks, others raised their heads up like the blind trying to see. After she gave us a series of exercises, we wrote for about an hour. Then she asked us to read. I never volunteered and one day she asked me to read. She said my writing did not ring true. I was putting words into people's mouths and I had to let them speak for themselves. She told me writing is quiet observation. If I imagined that outside it was snowing and there was a man with a snow shovel the man could be shoveling or not. I had to observe. He could speak or not speak. One day she gave us an exercise she said was useful for actors to develop biographies of their characters. I was in Ana Maria Simo's play where I played Trotsky and I used it. And then it happened I fell into that trance-like state where everything disappears and I could have sworn I heard Trotsky. When Irene asked me to read she said: "See the difference." That approval was heaven.

The following exercises can be useful for actors creating the biography of a character.

Let a character come to mind. Visualize this person. What color are this person's eyes? What kind of hair do they have—straight, curly, long? What color is the skin? If you touched this person what would this person's skin feel like—rough, smooth? What is this person wearing? Where is this person—outdoors, indoors? Is there light? Where is the light coming from? Are there smells, colors? Do you hear any sounds? Have a visual image and describe in detail.

Use these lines of dialogue.

"You don't believe me because you don't want to."

"What does she have to do with any of this?"

See one of your characters indoors. Experience in detail the atmosphere of this indoor place. Then the character goes out through a door into the open. Now the

character is walking outdoors carrying something. What is it? Where is the character going? Facing the first door, there's another door where a second character emerges. Who is this character?

Use these lines of dialogue

"I'm glad you're back."

"I only had three dollars."

"What kind of book is that?"

Choose a character you are working on and think of the first time this character had a sense of self. Where is this character? Are there other people around or is the character alone? Describe in as much detail as possible.

This "heart" exercise I find especially useful when I teach kids.

Draw your heart but not as it appears anatomically—not what you would see in a science book but as you imagine it to be. Use your imagination. What's your heart made of—is it solid? Liquid, gas? Is it one color or many colors? Is it big? Can you hold it in your hands or is it so big you cannot? Touch it. What does it feel like? What's the texture, the temperature? When you have an idea draw this heart and describe it.

The last time I was in an Irene workshop was in 2001 at The Mark Taper Forum's Latino Theatre Initiative. At dinner, I flirted with her and was making double entendres when I was interrupted by a Chicano playwright who with bowed head thanked Irene the "Maestra" and I felt I'd been cheap and hadn't given the Maestra her due, but Irene said you are Caribbean, a mix of the Spaniard and the African prone to sassy comments; he is a mix of Spaniard and the indigenous people, more prone to reverence.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

BROOKE BERMAN is an alumna of New Dramatists and the author of *Smashing*, *A Perfect Couple*, *Hunting and Gathering* and many other plays.

MIGDALIA CRUZ has written more than thirty plays, operas, and musicals—ten of them in Maria Irene Fornes's workshop at INTAR. She is an alumna of New Dramatists. Her most recent play, *El Grito Del Bronx*, was performed at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts last year and will be produced by Milagro Theatre in a forthcoming staging at the Goodman Theatre, in a co-production with Teatro Vista & CollaborAction.

JULIE HÉBERT is a writer and stage director living in Los Angeles. She is also a television producer and director. Her plays include *Saint Joan and the Dancing Sickness* and *Ruby's Bucket of Blood*.

ANNE GARCÍA-ROMERO is an alumna of New Dramatists whose plays include: *Earthquake Chica*, *Mary Peabody in Cuba*, *Desert Longing*, and *Santa Concepcion*. Her plays have been developed and produced most notably at the Public Theater, The Mark Taper Forum, Borderlands Theatre, and South Coast Repertory. She has taught at UC–Santa Barbara, California Institute of the Arts, Wesleyan University, and Macalester College. A collection of her plays is published by NoPassport Press.

JENNIFER MAISEL has written several plays, among them *Goody Fucking TwoShoes* (a Heideman Finalist), *The Last Seder*, *Mallbaby, birds*, and *There or Here*, and *STAGES*. They have been produced at Theatre J in DC, EST LA project, Teatro de Juventude (Brasil), Rorschach, Sundance, and elsewhere.

OLIVER MAYER is the author of *Blade to the Heat*, *Conjunto*, *Ragged Time*, *Joe Louis Blues*, and many other plays. A collection of his work was recently published by NoPassport Press. He teaches playwriting at the University of Southern California.

HAN ONG is the youngest playwright to be awarded a MacArthur fellowship. He has written two novels: *Fixer Chao*, hailed as a new immigrant classic by *The New York Times*, and *The Disinherited*, nominated for a Lambda Literary Award. His plays have been produced at such distinguished venues as American Repertory Theatre, the Magic Theatre, Berkeley Rep, the Public Theater, and the Almeida Theatre (London).

LISA SCHLESINGER is a playwright and author whose most recent plays include: *Celestial Bodies*, *Harmonicus Mundi*, *Wal-Martyrs*, and *Twenty One Positions* (co-written with Naomi Wallace and Abdel Fattah Abu-Srouf). She teaches playwriting at Columbia College in Chicago.

ALISA SOLOMON directs the Arts & Culture concentration in the MA Program at the Journalism School at Columbia University. In addition to contributing occasionally to *The Nation*, *The Forward*, *The New York Times*, and other publications, she was on staff at the *Village Voice* for twenty-one years, where she won awards for her reporting on reproductive rights, electoral politics, women's sports, and immigration policy. Currently, she is a regular contributor of theatre commentaries on WNYC and a contributing editor on the weekly radio program "Beyond the Pale: Radical Jewish Culture and Politics" (WBAI). She has edited the volumes, *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (with Tony Kushner) and *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theatre* (with Framji Minwalla). Her book, *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theatre and Gender*, won the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism.

ALINA TROYANO aka CARMELITA TROPICANA is an Obie award-winning performance artist and the author of the volume *I, Carmelita Tropicana: Performing Between Cultures*, a compilation of plays, scripts, and essays. She is currently the Associate Artistic Director of INTAR.

CARIDAD SVICH's plays include *12 Ophelias*, *Any Place But Here*, *Alchemy of Desire/Dead-Man's Blues*, *Fugitive Pieces*, *Iphigenia Crash Lands On The Neon Shell That Was Once Her Heart (A Rave Fable)*, *The Booth Variations*, and a stage adaptation of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. She is an alumna of New Dramatists, founder of theatre alliance and the press NoPassport, contributing editor of *TheatreForum*, associate editor of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, and member of PEN American Center and The Dramatists Guild. She has taught playwriting at Rutgers University–New Brunswick, Bard College, Yale School of Drama, University of California–San Diego, and Bennington College. She is the editor of several books on theatre, including *Trans-Global Readings: Crossing Theatrical Boundaries*, *Theatre in Crisis?*, *Divine Fire*, and *Out of the Fringe: Contemporary Latino Theatre and Performance*. Caridad Svich has also translated nearly all of Federico García Lorca's plays as well as works by Julio Cortazar, Lope de Vega, Calderon de la Barca, and contemporary plays from Cuba, Mexico, and Spain.