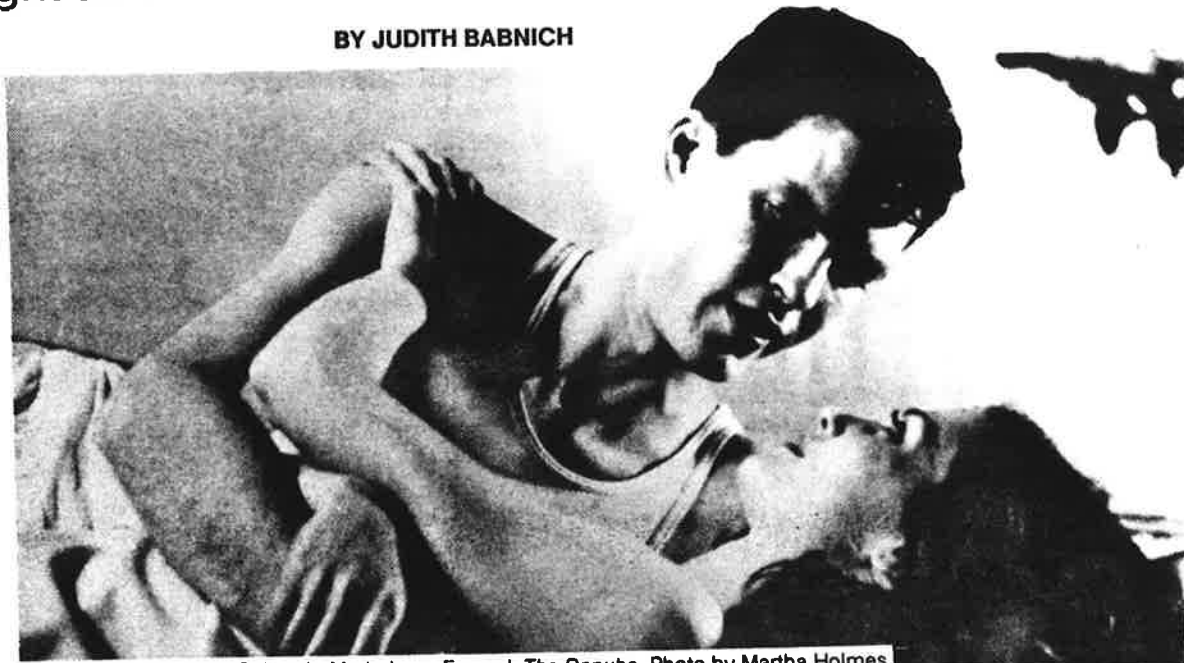


Talking with Maria Irene Fornes

Playwright as Director

Director as Playwright

BY JUDITH BABNICH



Richard Sale and Kate Collins in Maria Irene Fornes' *The Danube*. Photo by Martha Holmes.

C

uban born American playwright, Maria Irene Fornes, is one of today's leading women playwrights. Author of such critically acclaimed plays as *The Successful Life of 3* (1965), *Promenade* (1965), *FeFu and Her Friends* (1977), and more recently *The Danube* (1982), *Mud* (1983), and *The Conduct of Life* (1985). Fornes has received numerous playwriting awards. She

has been the recipient of over 11 OBIE awards for Distinguished Playwriting, the Yale Fellowship in Film Writing, a Rockefeller Grant from the Office of Advanced Drama Research in Minneapolis, and she is also the holder of a John Hay Whitney Fellowship. In addition to being a successful playwright, Fornes is also an accomplished director, set, and costume designer. She believes in being involved in all aspects of the theatrical experience. Most recently, she has directed a production of *Hedda Gabler* at The Milwaukee Repertory Theatre and her newest play, *Hunger* (1987), a one-act about the homeless plus three other of her plays are scheduled to be produced at The Milwaukee Rep.

STAGES: Not many people write plays and also direct them. What is it like? Do you like directing more than playwrighting?

FORNES: Well, I like them both because they are both the same.

STAGES: How are they the same?

FORNES: You will have to explain to me how they are different.

STAGES: I have directed plays, but I don't think I could write one.

FORNES: Maybe you can't, and there are writers who don't

have the ability to direct, but it's like saying that you are a painter, but there are people who do the drawing and people who do the coloring for you. So, if you are a painter, you say to a drawer, "You draw this for me," and you say to another person, "You color this for me." This could happen. The art director of a magazine does that in a sense. He does not actually do the illustration or the photography or the lettering, but he has the idea and assigns the work to the illustrator and the photographer. But can you imagine saying to Rembrandt, "You give us your outline and we'll color it for you." I think a theatre production is all one unit. When you see that thing on stage—the way the actors behave, and the words they say, and how the whole thing works—it is one unit. People believe in specialization as something efficient and as a way of achieving the maximum degree of excellence. They believe in teamwork as something brotherly, a return to the family. They don't see specialization as something dangerous, because if an expert gets nasty, another expert can be brought in. All of that may be true, but that's how you get formula art the way Hollywood used to. The auteur theory threatened to revolutionize the film industry. There is no reason to be suspicious of the same principle in the theatre.

STAGES: How would you describe your directing technique?

FORNES: I am a traditional director and I think that way. I am very interested in the truth of the character and in the images of the actor in connection with that character. But, I am also very visual, and I would ask an actor to stand in a particular spot, "move a little, two inches back, right there." There are actors who will not accept that; who don't see the point of such practice; who don't see there is a difference; cannot tell the difference between one place and the next.

STAGES: So, you are very exacting in your blocking.

FORNES: Oh, yes. But, there are actors who think that this is limiting to their expression. It isn't. There are certain places on stage, certain positions that can enhance the expression of an actor, and there are actors who know this immediately, who sense it. Space is very important for me also; the shape of the set and the movement within it. In theatre, there is an awareness of, an importance given to, meaning (social or philosophical) and depth of character. But there is very little attention paid to visual aesthetics and space. Designers in theatre go crazy because their work is underestimated. Not only that, but a designer is expected not to think aesthetically, but interpretatively. A designer is expected to interpret the play. You see how this leads to literalness, which is the reason why we see so many ugly sets.

STAGES: During the Sixties in the alternative theatre movement, many directors used self-discovery, dream exploration and sound and movement. You were involved in the work of the Open Theatre. Did you ever use those techniques?

FORNES: I never used them.

STAGES: Never? Well, can I ask you about your experiences in the Open Theatre?

FORNES: When I joined the Open Theatre, they had not yet started doing their large pieces. Mostly they were doing exercises and short pieces. They did my play *The Successful Life of 3* as part of an evening of short works. I was always interested in watching their work, which I found fascinating, but I was never really able to write for them. In a couple of cases when I would bring writing I wanted the actors to do, I would also give them exercises to work with. But, I found that they were suspicious of me because I was a writer. If you were a director, you could ask actors to stand on their heads for three hours and they'd do it. If you were a writer, they assumed you didn't know what you were doing. I thought, "Why are they giving me a hard time?" So I decided to go and just enjoy watching them. But I never thought we were aesthetically compatible.

STAGES: The last time we talked, you mentioned your work with the Hispanic Theatre INTAR. What have your experiences



A scene from the Fornes musical, *Sarita*. With Sheila Dabney and Michael Carmine. Photo by Carol Rosegg.

with the group been like?

FORNES: I have worked with them on and off since 1973. I am very interested in teaching Hispanic playwrights and finding out if there is a Hispanic sensibility for writing for theatre. For the most part, American Hispanic playwrights have been expected to write plays where what is Hispanic about the play is simply the Hispanic theme, but not the Hispanic sensibility. As you know in Jewish theatre, there is a Jewish sensibility, point of view, that's going to be different from an English person. There is certainly an American sensibility, and if America is, you know, composed of many races and nationalities, to find out if there is a Hispanic sensibility has always been very interesting to me and whether the play has to do with a Hispanic theme or non-Hispanic theme. That's what my work at INTAR and my workshops have been developing—that sensibility.

STAGES: Do you think that the theatre you do has had an impact on mainstream theatre?

FORNES: No, I cannot say my theatre has had an impact. But the experimental theatre as a whole has had an influence. The Broadway theatre has completely changed its look and style. You don't see many plays with conventional format on Broadway any more.

STAGES: What do you see as the future of the theatre?

FORNES: Well, I think the future of the theatre is what I am doing. No, I laugh when I say that because it sounds very stupid. You can't say, "theatre", because it is like two different arts, the same way that, for example, the fine arts and the graphic arts are two different arts. It is the same way with the commercial theatre and the theatre that, for the want of a better term, we call avant garde theatre. The purpose of the avant garde theatre is not to be done in a large place and to attract hundreds of thousands of people and to make a million dollars. The purpose of the avant garde theatre is to create art, and I am not embarrassed to use the word, art. In the 1960s the avant garde theatre was trying to break out of a stifling mold on the stage and to attack the structure of society. Today, the structure of society is completely disintegrating, and there is no point in attacking it. I see the avant garde theatre addressing itself to ordinary life. I see it addressing itself to the life of the ordinary person, to the sense of the alienation of the ordinary individual. I see it becoming more real, even having more of a story line. I see this happening in my work. I feel a greater concern for the affairs of the ordinary person. ~