

AMERICAN THEATRE

A PUBLICATION OF THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

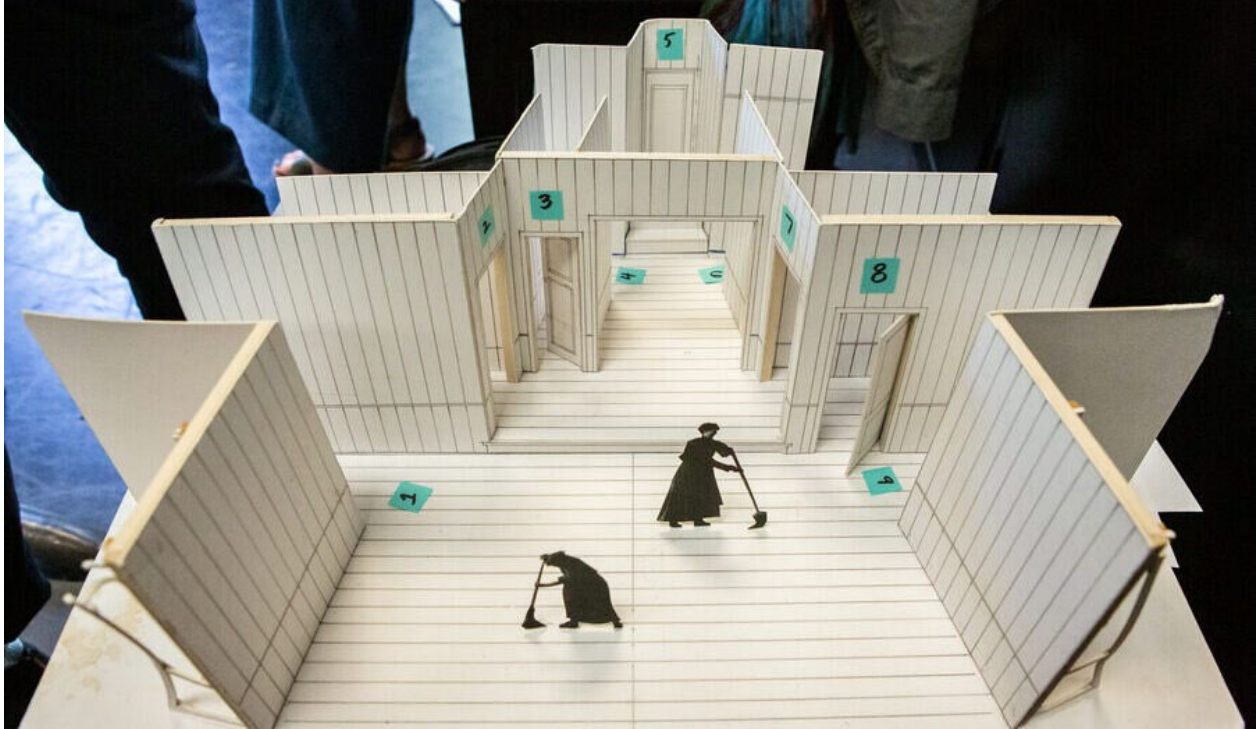
[ON THE SCENE MAY 22, 2023](#)

Pattern Recognition, Reconstructed: The Unlikely Return of Fornés's 'Evelyn Brown'

A new revival at La MaMa of the playwright's opaque verbatim play from 1980 gives a fresh window into her unique formal and thematic ambitions.

BY [SCOTT T. CUMMINGS](#)

The great American playwright María Irene Fornés loved flea markets, secondhand shops, thrift stores—anywhere she might find a discarded object that for her exuded a simple charm or raw beauty. On occasion, one of these hidden gems inspired her work on a new play, and none more so than the 1909 diary of a small town New Hampshire housekeeper named Evelyn Brown. Fornés came across the diary in a Massachusetts antique shop in the late 1970s and became so fascinated by its matter-of-fact accounts of daily routines—chores completed, visits made or received, news about the locals—that she decided to use portions of the diary as the text for a theatre piece featuring patterned movement, outbursts of music and dance, even breadmaking.



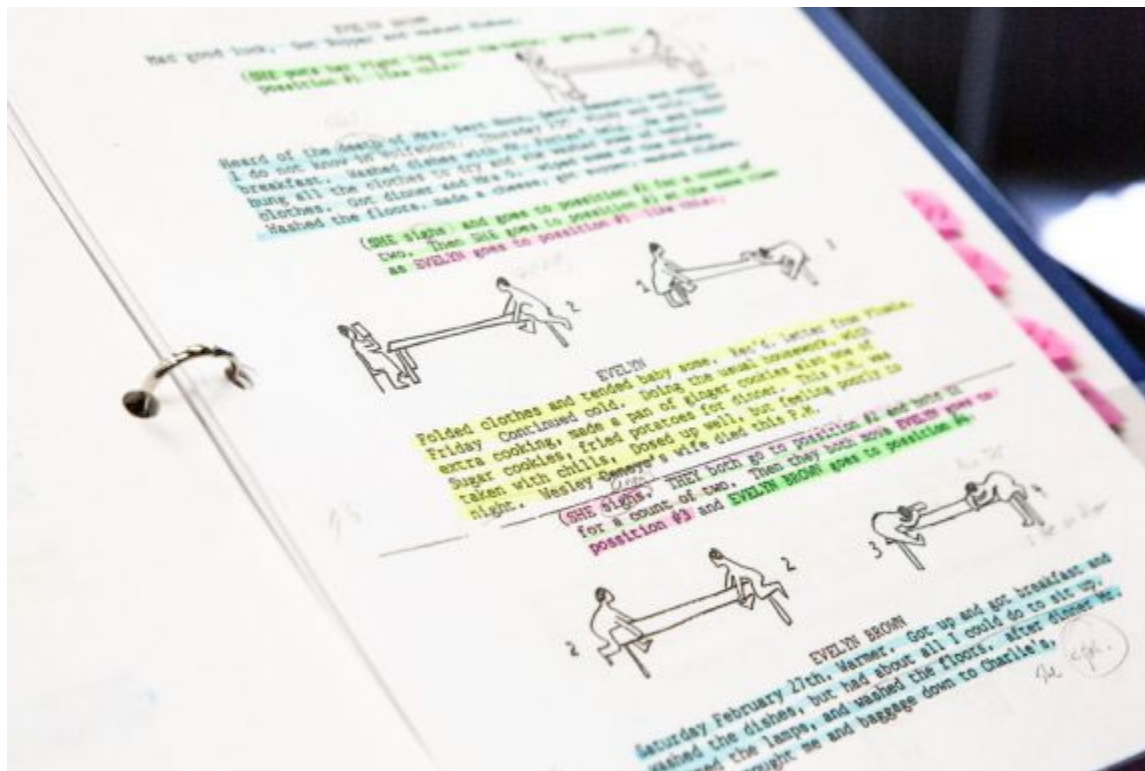
A maquette of Donald Eastman's set for "Evelyn Brown (A Diary)."

Fornés staged *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* at the East Village's [Theater for the New City](#) in the spring of 1980. It ran for five weeks and was all but forgotten except to a handful of downtown theatregoers who found it revelatory, and a community of latter-day Fornés enthusiasts who wished they could have seen it. One of those enthusiasts is scholar-dramaturg and NYU professor [Gwendolyn Alker](#), the driving force behind an effort over the past five years to bring the piece to life again. It is a tall order: There is no definitive script, no promptbook, no archival video. After numerous stops and starts, and a broad collaborative effort, Alker's passion project has come to fruition. The revived *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* opened last Friday at La MaMa's The Downstairs theatre, just around the corner from where it was first seen 43 years ago. (It [continues there through June 4.](#))

"This is not a play in the traditional sense," Alker reminded me in a recent phone conversation. "Irene didn't write any of the text. Which for me makes it valuable and interesting. I think of it as a movement piece. It shows her work as a director, as an adaptor, as someone in collaboration with two actors. Which are all parts of her work that are under-studied, and are central to her development as an artist. It comes at a moment when she is honing her identity as a director, refining the

playwriting techniques she taught at Padua and INTAR, and on some level learning how to get out of her own way.”

Preliminary work began in 2018 at an “oral history” gathering organized at NYU by Alker that included [Bonnie Marranca](#), Fornés’s editor and publisher; Aileen Passloff, a member of the original cast; Donald Eastman, the original scenic designer; Peter Littlefield, the original stage manager; and Rebecca High, Fornés’s assistant at the time. The goal of that meeting (which I attended as well, as a Fornés expert) was to determine if there was enough of a coherent script—several versions were tracked down and compared—and enough collective memory about 1980 to pursue the idea. As Alker recounted, “It seemed like there was enough of a ‘there there’ to proceed.” Crucial in that regard was a copy of the script that surfaced a year later that contained schematic drawings made by Fornés of the choreography and blocking sequences. Some of these sketches could be correlated to production and rehearsal photographs from 1980. A sense of the whole, however inchoate, was palpable.



A script for “Evelyn Brown (A Diary)” featuring original blocking sketches made by Fornés in 1980. (Photo by Hunter Canning)

Early on, when a production was far from a sure thing, Alker approached Alice Reagan about partnering with her on the project. Reagan is a freelance director who has [written about Fornés for this magazine](#) and directed several Fornés plays at [Barnard College](#), where she teaches, and also in Portland. After pandemic-related delays, Reagan and Alker were able to spend a semester working with students developing the piece through the [Atelier program at Princeton's Lewis Center for the Arts](#), culminating with a showcase performance in December 2021. Emboldened by the Princeton experiment, they resolved to push ahead and pursue a full professional production. A NYSCA grant, support from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, and a Kickstarter campaign helped to pave the way for putting together a production team, booking dates at La MaMa, casting the show, and getting rehearsals started.

Fast forward to just a week ago, after a month of rehearsals. Reagan shared with me an excerpt from her own rehearsal diary: “The piece is a tour de force of overlapping, intertwining, damnably hard patterns. The challenge is to make something that seems simple. It *is* simple, but there is a complicated math holding the whole thing up. Right now, at this stage, I’m looking for those moments when the actors can break free of the patterns, have their own eruptions of choice, feeling, movement. They’re coming.”

When Fornés first created *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, she made the shrewd and uncanny decision to cast two performers—her long-time associates Margaret Harrington and Aileen Passloff—to represent the diary’s author. One played “Evelyn” and the other “Evelyn Brown.” At La MaMa, those roles are filled by Ellen Lauren and Violeta Picayo, respectively. Lauren is a founding member and former co-artistic director of SITI Company, which [ceased operations at the end of 2022](#). In fact, decades of continuous work with SITI and with Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) meant that Lauren’s audition for the Fornés piece was her first in 40 years. Picayo is a more recent SITI associate artist who appeared in their revival of *The Medium* and their swan song adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*; she is also a company member with Bedlam.

Lauren’s work with SITI gave her plenty of experience speaking non-dramatic material in a theatrical context. The work on *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* reminded her especially of *Room*, a solo piece she created with director Anne Bogart based on the prose of Virginia Woolf.

“This is different,” Lauren clarified to me as the production was heading into tech. “There is very little point of view in the diary, very little ego. As the days roll out, she lists what she did. She lists the day, the weather, the passing of people, tending a baby, the people who come in and out of her life on a daily basis. It’s like looking at someone through a translucent curtain. We really don’t see her. It’s more mysterious than Woolf, but like Woolf it is pointing at how hard it is to describe any given human being.”



Ellen Lauren and Violeta Picayo in “Evelyn Brown (A Diary).” (Photo by Steven Pisano)

That mystery is reinforced by the presence of two Evelyns and the unavoidable question of the relationship between them. When I asked Reagan, as director, about this as rehearsals were just getting under way, she responded: “I know a few things: They are one woman, not two. They seldom touch, if ever. They do not look at each other much either. Two separate entities in one space, but one woman. Beyond that, my main job is to hold the space for Ellen and Violeta to work it out between themselves and between themselves and the text.”

When I asked Lauren the same question four weeks later, she said, “I don’t know what the relationship is. I know there is one. But I am not going to panic that I have to figure it out. For one of the first times for me, it’s okay to not know—to

know that I don't know. And not fight it. And not pretend I do know or force anything. Much like the text itself, the doing of it is what it means."

Perhaps the most direct connection to the original production is Donald Eastman, who designed the set in 1980, in the first of 10 collaborations with Fornés over the next 20 years, and who has returned in 2023 to recreate that design. "It's pretty darn close," Eastman told me on the phone from onstage with a paintbrush in his hand, "The dimensions, the depth, the materials."

He said that he and Fornés took inspiration from aspects of coal mines, Cambodian temples, and unadorned Shaker rooms to create an undefined wooden interior marked by a series of doors and the suggestion of spaces within spaces. "It's weird, because you can't say exactly what this place is. It's not a realistic set. It's a construction, a continuous landscape of the same materials and elements. Tone on tone on tone. Which I find not claustrophobic but liberating in a way. It's definitely an emotional space."

Costume designer Gabriel Berry designed the clothes for six Fornés productions in the 1980s, and while *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* was not one of them, her participation lends a degree of authenticity, an embodied knowledge of Fornés's aesthetic, to the project. The design team is rounded out by Christina Watanabe (lighting) and Jordan Bernstein (sound).

Fornés's working career effectively ended in 2000 with her production of *Letters From Cuba*, as part of the Signature Theatre season in her honor. Since then, and increasingly since her death in 2018, there have been numerous efforts to examine and preserve the Fornés legacy, including Bonnie Marranca [keeping the plays in print](#); Michelle Memran's documentary [The Rest I Make Up](#) (2018); a 12-hour marathon of staged readings spearheaded by JoAnne Akalaitis at the Public Theater (2018); high-profile productions of [Fefu and Her Friends](#) at Theatre for a New Audience (2019) and American Conservatory Theater (2022); playwriting workshops by [her former students](#); numerous [scholarly publications](#) and gatherings; and ongoing activities by the Fornés Institute, an ad hoc coalition of Fornésians.

The revival of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* is a unique and special contribution to that ongoing project. This little-known one-off creation should be seen as a touchstone for many aspects of Fornés's work: a central female figure marked by yearning; adaptation of verbatim material as spoken text; reverence for domestic labor or "women's work"; compositional directing that is painterly in its austerity

and precision; stage settings that include spaces within spaces; a simple, resonant lyricism. Thanks to Gwendolyn Alker and her artistic collaborators, audiences in 2023 have a rare chance to go back in time and experience this “lost” work, and in the process get a sense of the spirit, the rigor, and the beauty of Fornés’s theatre.

Scott T. Cummings (he/him) teaches and directs plays in the [Theatre Department at Boston College](#). He is the author of [Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company](#) (2006), and, more recently, [The Theatre of Les Waters: More Like the Weather](#) (2022).