

Theatre in Review: *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*

La MaMa

Is it possible to be bored and gripped at the same time? The question came to mind when seeing *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, a strange footnote to the career of **María Irene Fornés**. Produced exactly once, in 1980, and not seen since then, it is the only piece by the formidable playwright to make use



Ellen Lauren, Violeta Picayo.
Photo: Steven Pisano

of a found text, the 1909 diary of a housekeeper in rural New Hampshire. Covering about four months, from January through April, it is on the surface, an account of unrelieved daily drudgery. At first you may wonder what Fornés saw in it.

Alice Reagan's production begins on a haunting note, with a long, slow lights-up cue revealing **Ellen Lauren**, who plays the title character, and, in the distance, **Violeta Picayo**, who represents her alter ego. Interestingly, both women are initially seen blindfolded -- a comment, perhaps, on a life spent running from one chore to the next with little thought of anything else. "Working at housework as usual," goes a typical passage. "Finished ironing. Went out to the cottage this pm. Scoured sweet peas and painted and ironed. Called to Aunt Lydia this morn." One day is very much like the next, so burdened with work that one almost cheers when Evelyn reports having had a little time to indulge in a little Bible-reading or a trip to church. More often, she ends her day ready to pass out from exhaustion.

And yet, Evelyn never complains; indeed, her unsentimental recital of the day's tasks begins to exert a certain fascination. Her seemingly endless litany is occasionally broken by onstage events, for example, a tutorial in the making of potato bread. The utter certainty of the two Evelyns at work,

using inherited knowledge instead of a recipe, is something to see -- not least the authoritative way they pound the dough to a pulp.

Somewhere along the line, the monotony of the text falls away, leaving one immersed in an utterly foreign world view, utilitarian and devoid of the technology that makes modern life easy. Buried inside these mysteriously stoic words are all sorts of unspoken assumptions about women, faith, and maybe the organization of rural society. The mystery deepens when Evelyn begins to note a series of deaths in her community. The number of passings is startling, yet no reason is given. Are they the result of an epidemic? An especially rough winter? Or are getting a glimpse of a grim fact of life in 1909? Evelyn never says.

About two-thirds of the way through, the text peters out and the two women bring out a table, cover it with a cloth, and lay down place settings, actions that are repeated until the stage is set for a large dinner. The sequence is a silent analogue to Evelyn's diary, another way of demonstrating her task-filled life. Watching it -- staged with surgical precision -- it is impossible not to wonder: Who was Evelyn? What was her relationship to the people in her diary? Did she have attachments? Was there anything to her life other than toil? What, if any, were her satisfactions? In a strange way, the secret of the show's power lies in withholding such information.

Fornés' pieces require enormous rigor if they are to succeed, a quality here supplied in spades by Reagan and her performers, both of whom execute their tasks as if they have spent their lives in service. Lauren's brisk way with Evelyn's writing is enormously evocative; Picayo supplies a silent scream that strongly implies a sense of inner turmoil. The production reunites two members of the original design team: **Donald Eastman's** set, which resembles an unfurnished farmhouse, is filled with the scent of fresh pine wood. **Gabriel Berry's** costumes look like they were transported to La MaMa directly from early twentieth century New England. **Christina Watanabe's** lighting and **Jordan Rose Bernstein's** sound design are solidly executed.

If, like me, you attend the theatre looking for drama, the spectacle of ideas and personalities in conflict, you will want to approach *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* with caution. Even at sixty-five minutes, I found my patience occasionally stretched thin. And yet, days later, I can't get Evelyn out of my mind.

--**David Barbour**

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