

Review: In *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, Fornés Explores the Repetition of Domesticity

The La MaMa revival re-creates a piece taken from a real 1909 diary.

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Ellen Lauren and Violeta Picayo star in María Irene Fornés's *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, directed by Alice Reagan, at La MaMa.
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Theater is an inherently ephemeral art, especially theater of the downtown variety, and it's rarely recorded. This was certainly the case for [*Evelyn Brown \(A Diary\)*](#), a piece conceived and originally directed by María Irene Fornés, which had a short run in 1980 but was almost lost to history before dramaturg and professor Gwendolyn Alker began a campaign to revive it.

The piece is drawn from a real-life diary and tells of Brown's life as a domestic servant in 1909 New Hampshire. Fornés was intrigued by this found object and used it as a source text to create an experimental piece where two performers (as alternate versions of Evelyn Brown) perform mechanistic tasks and recite words directly from the book. However, there is no surviving definitive script for the piece; likewise, the actual diary itself has been lost.

While *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* is an obscure piece, it is a fascinating one, which experimental theater historians like Alker have a deep affinity for, so reviving it is a noble cause. The piece, which feels quite at home at La MaMa, has no plot to speak of, and technically no dialogue. Also, don't let the term "diary" fool you: Evelyn Brown wrote almost nothing personal. In hearing the daily entries for four months over the course of 65 minutes, we learn almost nothing about her as a person, just the banal details, often recited while the performers sit still in chairs: "Tuesday 23rd. Cool and Windy. Helping around the house and ironing. Trying to get ready to see Ada. Went for the mail." The boredom is the entire point; if we feel restless or unentertained, we are meant to.

The text-based bits are broken up with sections where chores are completed. The performers make bread dough. They sweep and mop. They set various dining tables with tablecloths, china plates, forks, knives, and spoons over and over. In hearing and watching the repetitive tasks repeated, we get a sense of a life. Despite its simplicity, *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* has a vast amount to say about class, gender, and women's labor. Fornés's genius comes through in every beat, as does her love for Evelyn Brown, who, although we know almost nothing about her, we end up feeling deeply for, empathizing with her labor. The more you hear the text, the more you adjust to the scarcity and the

world, picking up occasionally fleeting references Evelyn makes to feeling sick or tired, fatigued by her long days of work.



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Director Alice Reagan does an excellent job highlighting the power of the piece. Ellen Lauren (as Evelyn) and Violeta Picayo (as Evelyn Brown) both perform a matter-of-fact pathos. While it's not entirely clear what makes these two Evelyn's distinct, other than age and time, this is a question that doesn't really need answering. Costume designer Gabriel Berry differentiates them in subtle but important ways: Picayo, as the younger avatar, has a kerchief covering her hair and heeled, percussive boots, while the elder Lauren simplifies, without either. Donald Eastman's set is an all-wood room with many doors, somewhere between a temple, a barn, and a New England home. A set model in the lobby has the walls made out of lined paper, complete with

margins-as-molding, a key inspiration, albeit a detail so small it could be easily missed.

But then again, this entire piece is all about the tiny details. It makes you lean in and listen closely, even as it bores you. It is not, in a traditional sense, entertaining, but there is something undeniably captivating about it. For an hour, you are transported into someone else's uneventful life. It brings naturalism to new heights.

From a historical and dramaturgical perspective, *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* is a masterful experiment, a rich text that, thanks to Alker, Reagan, and their team, can be not only studied, but also experienced. They have done crucial excavation work helping to archive a revelatory piece by an important playwright. While this may in some ways be an academic exercise, it is nonetheless, like Evelyn Brown's diary itself, a vital piece of theatrical record.