



“Enter the Night”: The dream world of Maria Irene Fornes

Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble brings Fornes to Portland and to life

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At the start of María Irene Fornés’s “Enter the Night,” we are actually leaving the night.

Tressa, an R.N. who tends to the desperately ill in their homes, has returned from her night shift. Her friend Paula is asleep, but wakes up soon after Tressa’s arrival. Paula has had a dream: The arrival of a thief in baggy zoot suit pants and suspenders, Latino, with a big moustache, who announced himself as Jose Luis. He had rifled through a drawer, searching for a tool of some sort.

Tressa explains soothingly that this Jose Luis must have been their friend Jack, who likes to play dress-up games. But Paula sticks by her story. And adds to it: “Then he leaned forward and said, ‘Do your legs want to wrap themselves around me?’ I said, ‘Sure.’”

By this time Tressa has changed her mind: “You dreamt it.”

This is a good (though insufficient) explanation for what happens in “Enter the Night,” this debate between what is actually happening in the awake world and what is part of the dreamed or remembered one. And although Tressa is wrong, or rather, was right the first time (it WAS Jack), she is right, too. Because María Irene Fornés’s theater emerges from a dream state recorded by a very advanced dreamer.

“It may sound selfish, but in my workshops I teach people to write about whatever comes to their minds,” she has said. “You have to approach the state of dreaming, where you put yourself into contact with things that are saying something. The only way to do it is by allowing part of your mind to dream.”*



Amber Whitehall, Jacob Coleman and Cristi Miles in “Enter the Night”/Photo Owen Carey

So, yes, though it is dawn as the play begins on the spare stage of [Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble’s sure reading](#) of the play, night is never far away, as the title suggests. Or commands. “What we said is that they are trying to get through the night,” director Alice Reagan** says about the characters in the play.

Among other things, “Night” means dreaming. And maybe something more extreme than that.

Portland theater companies have rarely produced Fornés’s plays. Right off hand, I can’t think of another major production (maybe someone will remind me of one). They aren’t easy to do: Fornés experimented with various structural systems—she was among the first to introduce black-outs between short scenes, for example, a tool lots of playwrights use today—that undermined the narrative continuities audiences (and theater artists) expected when they go to the theater; she was a feminist playwright before that was acceptable; she was a surrealist in an art form devoted to realism during most of her creative life; the characters she engaged in dream-time tended to be outsiders.

Fornés was born in Cuba in 1930 and moved to New York City after her father died and World War II ended, in 1945, at the age of 15. She worked in a Capezio factory for a while, but then went to school, learned English, and started translating for a living. She was attracted to abstract art and took classes with the great teacher and painter Hans Hoffman. She moved to Paris with her love Helen Sohmers, and after seeing a French production of “Waiting for Godot,” she decided to concentrate on playwriting.

She moved back to New York, began a long-term relationship with critic Susan Sontag, and started writing plays informed by the work of Joseph Chaikin at the Open Theatre and the other intense performance experiments going on during the 1960s in New York. She won Obie awards (“The Successful Life of 3” in 1965, for example, the first of nine) for her work and wrote musicals and operas. (This was a fertile time for Sontag, too: Her breakthrough essay, “Notes on Camp,” was published in 1964.) Her 1977 play “Fefu and Her Friends” featured an all-female cast and took place in four locations simultaneously around the theater: The audience circulated among them. (Another device much more common these days.) And in 1990 she was a Pulitzer finalist for “And What of the Night?”, an award won that year by August Wilson for “The Piano Player.”

“Enter the Night” was commissioned by the New City Theater in Seattle and premiered April 16, 1993. It’s [New York premiere](#) came six years later during Signature Theater’s season of Fornés plays. Fornés is still alive in New York, though she has been living with Alzheimer’s for the past decade, so “Enter the Night” belongs to the late phase of her career as a playwright, when she focused on contemporary issues in the the U.S. in the here and now, according to Reagan.

“Most plays have four, five vital moments in the play and the rest of the play is just getting to it. It’s just fill. I don’t know why, whether it’s just to create the sense that it’s real or that you have to spend two hours to experience the power (you have to see not just snapshots). But I find it very boring. I go to sleep when I see plays like that, and I go to sleep writing it. I would just actually fall asleep at the typewriter and would not be able to finish a scene written like that.”***
—María Irene Fornés

“Enter the Night” is a three-hander set in the apartment/loft of Tressa (played here by Amber Whitehall). She’s an RN who tends to the desperately ill in their homes, and she enjoys dressing as a man when she’s at home, specifically an Asian man. Her best friend is Jack (Jacob Coleman), who is a stage manager for a small theater in the city. He is also gay, and his partner Joey has just died of AIDS. He’s sure he is HIV-positive himself, though tests indicate otherwise. And Paula (Cristi Miles) is visiting from her financially failing farm in Vermont: On this trip he needs to borrow money from the bank, find a job, and visit her doctor for a heart condition that is looking dire. All of this personal information is revealed fairly early in the play, which isn’t “about” Jack’s gayness, Tressa’s cross-dressing, or Paula’s disease. What is it all about? If it was the sort of play that could be reduced to a sentence, I would probably fall asleep at my keyboard before I could finish typing it...I might have fallen asleep in the theater watching it.



“Enter the Night” by Maria Irene Fornes, Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble/Photo by Owen Carey

The play begins with a long first act, and then a blackout-punctuated second act follows, though Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble plays it without intermission. Disease figure prominently, and not just in the conditions (imaginary and otherwise) of the characters and their loved ones. In one long, brilliant, darkly hilarious riff, Jack imagines a time when everyone is ill. “Everything in our minds will be illness, the ill, the dying. All art will be about illness. All plays will be about illness. And the ill. The characters will be defined by their illness. It is the characters’ illnesses that will determine the plot. Instead of the ingenue, the romantic lead, the friend, the villain, the characters will be defined by their illnesses: the cancer victim, the AIDS victim, the tubercular, the diabetic.” The plot will be determined by the development of illnesses and the politics around the treatment of the ill. The best actors will be the ones best at recreating disease. “The leading characters will have the illness most common among theatergoers. Since theatergoers prefer to have plays written about them. Plays will be funded by pharmaceutical laboratories.”

“Enter the Night” is full of spasms, moments, episodes. Right before Jack launches into his description of a Theater of Disease, he convinces Tressa and Paula to read the first part of his new play...in heavy German accents. It is set on a farm. It is also ridiculous, though Tressa and Paula perform it with gusto, of course.

Wilma: Eric, my husband, you work too hard. You want to work all the time?—Put some fish in the pond and we can go fishing on Sundays.

Eric: Good Wilma. I am so glad I have you for a wife. I am happy because you are my wife, Wilma, my wife.

Wilma: I am happy, Eric, my husband. Put fish in the pond and we can go fishing on Sundays.

Eric: Ah, yah. I am glad I married you, Wilma. You make life a paradise.

And to open Act Two, Jack and Tressa pantomime the silent movie “Broken Blossoms” by D.W. Griffith (after the movie has been projected for us on the wall behind the stage and on the screen of a small television on the set). Jack plays the Lillian Gish role, an abused young woman, and Tressa is her rescuer Huang. It’s quite beautiful.

Moments like this come and go through “Enter the Night,” some very short, a line or two, and some longer (a graphic account of Jack’s gang rape, Jack’s attempt to memorize stage directions for a wacky play, Paula’s drunken account of hitting Jack’s car, etc.). The events aren’t connected, really. They bubble up in the course of the play, and though they reveal character, the characters don’t really change.

What holds these episodes together? “...character creation is the cornerstone of Fornés’ pedagogy,” wrote Anne Garcia-Romero, a former student of Fornés in 2013.***** “Rather than instructing her students to generate an airtight structure that focuses on conflict and resolution, Fornés guides playwrights through a process that helps them intuitively connect to character, which then can become the foundation of a play’s construction. Fornés seems more interested in the genesis of an idiosyncratic character-driven theatrical world than a pre-determined well-made structure. She also encourages multiplicity of ideas, forms and cultural influences on the path toward writing a play.”



Back to front: Cristi Miles, Amber Whitehall, and Jacob Coleman in “Enter the Night”/Photo by Owen Carey

So, yes, the characters and their peculiarities hold it together. And for “Enter the Night,” I would offer the relationships that Tressa, Paula, and Jacob share, the almost utopian cocoon of caring and love they create. “You’re good,” Jack says to Tressa. “You’re good,” he says to Paula. “That’s why I love you.” Later, Paula asks Tressa about her relationship with Jack, and Tressa says, “Once in love, always in love. We’re friends, I love him, and he loves me. Like friends. That’s the way love is.” They work, they struggle, they feel pain, they retreat to Tressa’s room, to Tressa’s affection, to each other’s arms, to the truths, dreamed or otherwise, that they can reveal to each other.

Reagan calls these characters “strange,” and they are, maybe not to the theater of her peers in New York in the ‘60s, Richard Foreman and Sam Shepard, and maybe not even to the Weird Portland of 2015 (though I think we’re never as weird as we want to be). But compared to the psychology of traditional theater characters, which tends to be mechanistic and falsely reductive, Tressa, Paula and Jack are quite strange.

That means they need “strange” actors to portray them, perhaps, and Coleman, Whitehall and Miles happen to have played dodos onstage.***** The extinct bird, I mean. So, it’s no surprise that their habitation of these characters is both subtle and arresting.*****

Reagan said that the rehearsal process took place in three parts. The first was devoted to arriving at a more or less traditional reading of the play, with the focus on the lines of the characters. In the second, the actors and director devised a “physical score” for the play; they choreographed it. And then they tried to bring the two together. I asked Reagan for an example, and she picked the moment when Paula (Miles), back from the bank, suddenly asks Tressa, “Do you want to buy my house?,” and then talks about how difficult it will be to lose her rural home. She concludes, “Why are they willing to sell it for nothing to anyone but me? Why can’t I buy it for nothing the way anyone else can?” This isn’t delivered as a rant; Paula isn’t a ranter; she has a quiet dignity and strength about her, as played by Miles. But during her set of rhetorical questions, Tressa/Whitehall sitting next to her, rolls on her back and kicks her feet in the air, in frustration, physically expressing the emotion behind what Paula’s saying.

I didn’t record this moment in my notes, but theater works subliminally, doesn’t it? The physical play in “Enter the Note” isn’t as expressive as it was in PETE’s “Song of the Dodo,” but more apparent than in the company’s most recent play, “Three Sisters.” Once the characters’ oddness is accepted, their eccentric physicality doesn’t seem out of place at all, the way Whitehall’s neck lolls to the side, say, or the way Coleman curls into fetal position.

Although disease, death and dying figure prominently in “Enter the Night,” not to mention foreclosure and experimental theater, it’s not a depressing play. Reagan, who has directed four other Fornés plays, says she is more likely to find the humor in her work than in the past. This production has its share of laughs, not least the celebratory toast after the play-within-a-play, it’s just that they are in on the jokes, too. Fornés doesn’t place herself, or us in the audience, beyond the characters, looking down at them and their idiosyncrasies.

I didn’t realize I needed a theater like that until I saw it, a theater that refuses to contrive to make the audience feel superior. And if you think maybe that sort of theater might be appealing, well, “Enter the Night” is for you.

NOTES

*From a New York Times interview, February, 2000, conducted by Randy Gener with Fornés and her former student, playwright Nilo Cruz.

**Phone conversation with Alice Reagan, who was taking a snow day from Barnard College where she teaches directing, though the Historic Blizzard failed to materialize in New York.

***From a BOMB magazine interview conducted by Allen Frame, 1984

****Anne Garcia-Romero, “Fornés and Artistic Mentorship,” TCG blog, August, 2013. Reagan says that Fornés continues to influence contemporary theater through the playwrights she has taught.

***** 2013’s “Song of the Dodo”

***** I have written about the Anne Bogart-inspired process behind PETE’s approach to theater. And I reviewed PETE’s “Three Sisters.”