

**A STUDY GUIDE FOR
FEFU AND HER FRIENDS
BY
MARÍA IRENE FORNÉS**

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PLAYWRIGHT: MARÍA IRENE FORNÉS



Photo Credit: James R. Kent

María Irene Fornés (1930-2018) was born in Havana, Cuba, and first came to New York City in 1945. Her first play, *Tango Palace*, was produced in 1963. She wrote more than three dozen works for the stage. Among her most celebrated plays are *Promenade*, *The Successful Life of 3*, *Fefu and Her Friends*, *The Danube*, *Mud*, *The Conduct of Life*, *What of the Night?*, *Abingdon Square*, *The Summer in Gossensass* and *Oscar and Bertha*.

Four volumes of her plays, *Promenade and Other Plays*, *Fornés Plays*, *What of the Night and Selected Plays*, and *Letters from Cuba and Other Plays*, have been published by the Performing Arts Journal and other plays have appeared in various anthologies. Besides directing most of her own plays, she directed plays by Calderon, Ibsen, Chekhov and several contemporary authors, including Leo Garcia, Cherrie Moraga and Caridad Svich.

Ms. Fornés was the recipient of eight Obie Awards, one of which was for Sustained Achievement in Theater. She received a Distinguished Artists Award from the National Endowment for the Arts, Rockefeller Foundation grants, a Guggenheim grant, an award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Literary Award, a New York State Governor's Arts Award, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She was also a TCG/PEW Artist-in-Residence at Women's Project & Productions.

Ms. Fornés conducted playwriting workshops in theaters and universities in the United States and abroad. From 1973-79, she was the managing director of the New York Theatre Strategy. From 1981-1992, she was Director of the INTAR (International Arts Relations) Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory, a national program to stimulate and develop writing abilities of Hispanic playwrights. Her students have won Obie Awards, National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, a MacArthur Fellowship, and a Pulitzer Prize. Ms. Fornés taught at some of America's most prestigious universities, including Yale, Princeton, Brown, Wesleyan, and Iowa, and led workshops at leading theatres, such as the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, Scotland.¹

INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

By Scott T. Cummings²

"My husband married me to have a constant reminder of how loathsome women are." This is the provocative first line of *Fefu and Her Friends*, a play about eight women who gather in the spring of 1935 to plan, prepare, and rehearse for a fundraising event. The play opened on May 5, 1977 at a little-known venue on the Lower East Side, and within six months, it won an Obie (Fornés's second) and was remounted at the American Place Theatre. The play circulated more and more widely, thanks in part to its publication in an early issue of *Performing Arts Journal*. Within two years, Fornés also directed the play at the Padua Hills Festival, the Pasadena Community Arts Center, and the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. Professional productions soon followed in San Francisco and Seattle. The play offered what one scholar called "a progress report" (Kent 1996: 144) on the continuing struggle for equal rights and "women's liberation." Over time, it became recognized as "a foundational text in feminist theatre" (Farfan 1997: 450) and one of the most important American plays in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Fefu and Her Friends signaled a more explicit focus in Fornés's writing on female characters seeking to break free of dependent or oppressive relations with male characters, a shift that lasted for more than a decade and led to Fornés's categorization as a "woman playwright" and a feminist. Her plays were produced by women's theater collectives, discussed in studies of the rising tide of female playwrights, and published in anthologies of plays by women. Fornés herself participated in international women playwrights conferences in Buffalo in 1988 and Toronto in 1991, but she was wary about being pigeon-holed strictly as a feminist in the heightened political sense of the day. Some activist feminists took issue with some of her playwrighting choices, challenging the portrayal of characters (Fefu, Julia, and the others, Mae, Sarita, Leticia and Nena) as victims and calling for more aggressive (and successful) resistance to patriarchy as part of the dramatic action. But Fornés resisted the notion that her characters should be role models or mouthpieces:

I am a feminist in that I am very concerned and I suffer when women are treated in a discriminatory manner and when I am treated in a discriminatory manner because I am a woman. But I never thought I should not do certain work because I'm a woman nor did I think I should do certain work because I'm a woman.

(Cummings 1985: 55)

She set *Fefu and Her Friends* in 1935 partly to avoid direct participation in ongoing political debates regarding women and feminism. "I prefer for the play to be more personal thoughts" (Fornés, Follies interview). The play, she said, "is not fighting anything, not negating anything" (Marranca 1978: 109) in explicit political terms. Still, the play's depiction of the women's psychic struggle to free themselves from oppression by men is palpable and powerful.

PLAY STRUCTURE

In *Fefu and Her Friends*, Fornés's Obie-award-winning play that she directed and first produced in 1977, she presents eight Anglo women in a New England country house in 1935 as they gather to rehearse for a fund-raiser to benefit the education of children.

Each character plays a role in this event. Before and after their rehearsal, the women interact with one another, and share their thoughts and feelings about life along with their personal struggles and societal concerns.³

The play is divided into three parts.

Part 1 begins at noon in the living room of Fefu's country home as the women gather to prepare for their rehearsal.

Part 2 takes place in the afternoon.

- In the 1977 script, Fornés created four scenes in different areas of the house: the lawn (Fefu and Emma), the study (Christina and Cindy), the bedroom (Julia), and the kitchen (Paula, Sue and Cecilia). The audience is divided into groups to watch each scene, then they rotate to the next set, as the scene is repeated until each group has seen all four scenes.
- In 1996, Fornés directed a revised version of her play where she created a single set version of Part 2 that takes place in the living room.

Part 3 continues in the evening in the living room as the women rehearse for their fundraiser. After the rehearsal, the play concludes with Julia's sudden death after Fefu shoots and kills a rabbit.

THE BASIC ACTION

by Scott T. Cummings⁴

The surface action of *Fefu and Her Friends* is disarmingly simple. Written in three acts - Fornés calls them Parts - the play unfolds with a rhythm that is casual, playful, and Chekhovian, governed by the simple ebb and flow of a social gathering rather than by characters with competing aims caught up in a conflict. Part One takes place in the living room of the New England country home of Stephany Beckmann, affectionately known as Fefu. Christina and Cindy are the first to arrive, and Fefu shocks them when she picks up a shotgun, opens a French door, and shoots at her husband across the lawn outside. She explains that the gun is loaded with blanks and the shooting is part of an odd marital game they play. With that, Fefu goes off to repair a broken toilet. Over the remainder of Part One, the other women arrive in ones and twos: first Julia, who is confined to a wheelchair, then Emma, Paula, and Sue, and finally, Cecilia. They make small talk until the whole group is there and ready for lunch.

Part Two takes place in four different rooms around Fefu's house and presents four intimate conversations in which the women talk about romance, love, and sex. Three of the scenes begin on a tranquil or whimsical note. On the lawn, Emma and Fefu fantasize about "a divine registry of sexual performance" which sends passionate, devoted lovers to heaven and "the duds" to hell. In the study, Cindy and Christina wonder what actually happens to the feet "when a person is swept off their feet" in love. In the kitchen, Paula calculates the duration of a love affair with mathematical precision. But each scene takes an ominous and disturbing turn before it ends. Paula has an awkward, painful reunion with her former lover, Cecilia. Cindy reveals a terrible dream in which she is harassed and molested by a series of male figures. Fefu confesses to being in spiritual anguish, a condition associated with a mangy stray cat that shits all over her kitchen floor. The fourth scene is the most foreboding: it shows Julia alone in bed in a dark room, caught up in a convulsive hallucination, twisting and turning as if being beaten under interrogation as she murmurs about "the judges."

In Part Three, as afternoon turns to evening, the action returns to the living room where the women conduct the meeting that has brought them together. They plan the agenda for what seems to be a fundraising event to support arts education. Fefu will introduce "the project" and talk about "the stifling conditions of primary school education." Paula will speak about "Art as a Tool for Learning." Sue, the treasurer, will explain the finances and ask for pledges. Emma will perform an interpretive reading, which she rehearses on the spot, with flamboyant gestures and expressive poses suggestive of Isadora Duncan or Mary Wigman. As they exchange ideas, they rearrange the order of events until they reach consensus, and when the formal meeting winds down, they simply relax together, singing an old song, serving and sipping coffee, reminiscing about their school days together. At one point, several of the women get in a rambunctious water fight. All this while, little biographical information about these women is revealed, beyond that they are friends who share a common cause, the details of which remain sketchy.

This principle of narrative indeterminacy erupts into full-blown mystery when Julia arrives midway through the first act. She is wan, subject to petit mal seizures, and still paralyzed from the waist down more than a year after a bizarre hunting accident. A hunter in the woods took aim and fired a shot, killing a deer but also bringing Julia to the ground, bleeding from the head, semi-conscious, and muttering deliriously about persecution, torture, and keeping silent. In the bedroom scene in Part Two, Julia's raving suggests that at the time of the accident she was

initially killed but then allowed by the "judges" to live, albeit weak and wheelchair-bound, as long as she abided by their "prayer." Julia says, "They say when I believe the prayer I will forget the judges. And when I forget the judges I will believe the prayer. They say both happen at once. And all women have done it. Why can't I?" (Fornés 1992: 35). In an ambiguous incident in Part Three, Fefu observes the disabled Julia walk into the living room and out again under her own power, raising questions about Julia's paralysis or Fefu's vulnerability to hallucinations like Julia's. Both women seem to be under attack by a pernicious, unrelenting, invisible enemy. The mystery climaxes in the play's stunning final moments when Fefu confronts Julia, shaking her wheelchair violently and commanding her to "Fight with me!" again and again. When Christina walks in on their confrontation, Fefu asks for forgiveness, grabs the shotgun leaning against the wall, and heads outside. A moment later, a shot rings out. Julia grabs her head. Fefu enters and stands behind Julia, a dead rabbit in her hands. Julia's head falls back, bleeding. The other women enter and surround her in shock as the lights fade to black. This abrupt and violent ending triggers an immediate desire to know exactly what happened and what it means, but the play frustrates such an urge, ending on a note of profound ambiguity that leaves it open to a wide range of interpretation.

Whatever this final sequence represents -Is Julia dead? Did Fefu kill her? Is Fefu acting of her own volition or is she now an agent of "the judges"? What does the rabbit symbolize? -the play examines the powerful potential of women recognizing each other as women, both as individuals with their own personal preoccupations and private struggles and as a community gathered together for a purpose. "Women are restless with each other," says Fefu, ever the provocateur: "They are like live wires ... they are always eager for men to arrive. When they do, they can put themselves at rest, tranquilized and in a mild stupor ... The danger is gone, but the price is the mind and the spirit" (Fornés 1992: 15). But no men arrive in the play - Fefu's husband Phillip, his brother, and a gardener remain offstage - and in their absence the restlessness of women manifests itself in a variety of ways, some playful and relaxed, some agitated and ill at ease, and some that suggest that "the mind and the spirit" of women carries with it the force of its own oppression or liberation.

Julia's debilitating medical condition develops as a complex and resonant metaphor for the ways in which women internalize the stifling forces of patriarchy and misogyny. The "prayer" which "the judges" force Julia to recite makes this plain:

The human being is of the masculine gender. The human being is a boy as a child and grown up he is a man. Everything on earth is for the human being, which is man ... Woman is not a human being. She is: 1 - A mystery. 2 -Another species. 3 -As yet undefined. 4 - Unpredictable; therefore wicked and gentle and evil and good which is evil.

(Fornés 1992: 35)

Onstage, in the fever pitch of Julia's delirium in the bedroom, this prayer may come out sounding like nonsense, the pitiable raving of an hysteric, but on the page it clearly implies that over the centuries women have been, in effect, brainwashed to view themselves as less than human and have served thereby as unwitting accomplices in their own domination by men. Conversely, in the larger context of the play, it also suggests that if Woman - as gender, as "another species" - is unpredictable, mysterious, and undefined at present, then the process of women defining themselves has the potential to be joyful, transformative, and explosive, in Fefu's words, "as if a god once said 'and if they shall recognize each other, the world will be blown apart'"

CHARACTERS

Stephany “Fefu” Beckman

Fefu (pronounced Feh-foo) is the host of this gathering, which is held at her house in the New England countryside. She is friends with everyone except Christina, whom she has just met. Fefu is a well-heeled philanthropist, giving talks and fundraising for education. At her house, she is a thorough and welcoming host and has a playful, fun spirit. There are also glimpses of her dropping under some kind of strain. The audience is introduced to Fefu's unusual relationship with her husband Phillip at the very beginning of the play but Fefu's bright behavior glosses over her unhappiness, which only gradually emerges. In part 2, she tells Emma she is in some sort of spiritual pain. The poem Emma recites, "Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck," is Shakespeare's "Sonnet 14," and the last line, "Thy end is truth's and beauty's doom and date," expresses Emma's deep respect for Fefu's character-she believes in her friend even though Fefu doesn't much believe in herself anymore. Christina, meanwhile, represents how many other people respond to Fefu's brash comments and actions. She is appalled and repulsed, which Fefu sees and tries to mitigate by asking Christina to laugh at her. In part 3, Fefu is sitting on the stairs near the living room, glum, a face she hides from everyone else as she dashes around to get lunch or fetch lemonade or fix a toilet. She fully reveals her unhappiness to Julia at the end of the play: "Phillip can't stand me...I need him, Julia. I need his kiss. I need the person he is." Her torment is that Phillip does not need or want her. Fefu, a scholar and a feminist, is crippled by her own powerlessness in her marriage.⁵

Emma Blake

Emma is boisterous and outgoing, jumping into Julia's lap and kissing one of the women sitting on the couch, and taking part in the water fight. She is wealthy and likes to travel, showing up at Fefu's house wearing an outfit she bought in Turkey. Emma has also brought along an even more outlandish costume to wear for their fundraiser event. Emma is a performer and likes to recite. Her recitation of Emma Sheridan Frye's work is the core performance of their fundraising event. Emma and Fefu are especially close with each other. Despite her extroverted behavior, Emma pays close attention to her friends and has keen insight into their personalities; however, her own emotions are not revealed.⁶

Julia

Julia is one of the central characters of this play. She is wheelchair-bound following a mysterious hunting accident. She now suffers from petit mal seizures, also known as absent seizures, where the person loses consciousness for a few seconds. Julia may in fact be epileptic and her seizures were brought on by the bang of the hunter's gun rather than a blow to the head. Julia assures everyone that she is adapting well. She matter-of-factly tells Cindy, "I'm very morbid these days. I think of death all the time." There is a lot of tension surrounding Julia's presence in Fefu's house because of the gun Fornés has placed in the living room. At the end of the play, the tension is resolved by Julia's death-another mysterious hunting accident. Fefu is outside shooting rabbit (an irony since Cindy told Christina in part I that Fefu doesn't hunt anymore because of her love of animals and because the gun is supposedly loaded with blanks) but at the crack of Fefu's gun, Julia slumps over, dead. In part 2, alone in her room, the audience observes Julia's most private thoughts. She hallucinates freely, wrought with guilt and tormented by imaginary judges. These imaginary judges hold her accountable for deviant thoughts and behavior and the slightest misstep brings further pain. Julia tries to comply with their wishes but knows she will not be free of them until she truly believes, in her heart, what they tell her is fact. The things she is to believe include the fact that she is not smart, that Fefu is not smart, that human beings are men

while women are both evil and a gift to men just like oxen for farming. Julia's death may be foreshadowing Fefu's future decline.⁷

Christina

Christina is new to this circle of friends and only knows Cindy and Julia. She is disturbed by Fefu's talk and frightened by the group's outlandish behavior, such as Fefu shooting blanks at her husband and the extensive water fight over who will do the dishes. Christina prefers to conform-to not stand out or be involved in conflict-and she admits to Cindy that Fefu confuses her. "I suppose I do hold back for fear of being disrespectful or destroying something-and I admire those who are not. But I also feel they are dangerous to me." Christina's remark to Fefu at the end of the play, when Fefu picks up her rifle again, is telling of Christina's priorities: "I don't care if you shoot yourself. I just don't like the mess you're making." This concern is domestic to an extreme rather than compassionate.⁸

Cindy

Cindy is a friend of Fefu's and cares for her despite Fefu's wild behavior. She is patient and spends most of the play in company with Christina, who doesn't know this group of friends. Cindy does not express an opinion as to whether she approves of Fefu or not, giving readers the impression that she rides the fence: she mutely goes along with Fefu's ideas but maintains a calm, normal exterior, not talking or behaving like Fefu or Emma. Cindy has a disturbing dream wherein an angry young doctor chases her. Her dream draws on a fear of authority figures: her significant other, Mike; a young male doctor; and secret policemen. In her dream, she is aided only by her sister Meg. For a moment in the dream Cindy commands everyone's respects by yelling, "Stop and listen to me." She has been separated for a few months from Mike and there are hints that she is unhappy, but, except for describing the dream, Cindy never opens up about her feelings.⁹

Paula Cori

Paula, like the other women, is a friend of Fefu's and an educator. She is less well off than her wealthy friends but has come to the conclusion that she is no less happy. Paula and Cecilia had a romantic relationship that has recently fizzled out. Paula tells Cecilia, "I'm not lusting after you," when Cecilia continues to give her mixed signals. Paula is clearly still drawn to Cecilia but determined to not be the less-dominant figure in any future relationship. When Cecilia repeatedly, emptily promises to call Paula so they can talk, but refuses to commit to a time, Paula refuses to be infinitely available to her. The stronger Paula is, the more Cecilia is attracted to her. But unlike Cecilia, this is not manipulation on Paula's part. She sincerely cares for Cecilia and is willing to walk away from their relationship if Cecilia continues to abuse her emotionally.

Cecilia Johnson

Cecilia is a friend of Fefu's and is Paula's former lover.-She and Paula drifted apart although Cecilia's disinterest in the relationship seems to have precipitated the breakup. Throughout the play, Cecilia sends Paula mixed signals, sometimes being cold to her and sometimes affectionate. Cecilia is manipulative, trying to maintain control in their relationship, not inviting Paula to call her but telling Paula that she will call, and then refusing to commit to a time. When Paula shows her strength and refuses to be run over by this manipulation, Cecilia is inexplicably drawn to her ex-lover. In this play, Cecilia's dominating behavior is a masculine foil to Paula's feminist strength.¹⁰

Sue

Sue is an educator and a friend of Fefu's. She is helpful: making lunch, serving food and coffee, and washing dishes. She is also the treasurer of their fundraising group. Sue is playful, demonstrating the many uses of ice cubes on a stick as well as taking part in the water fight. She is also sensitive to others' feelings but does not push them when they do not want to talk. Little is known about her life outside this single day at Fefu's house, except that she, like the others there, has been smart enough not to be sent to the psychiatrist like some of their former friends were. Sue is a feminist-in-hiding, breaking out at the appropriate times but generally sticking to the gender role expected of her. Sue is one of the most domestic women in this play.¹¹

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

1935 U.S. history

The play is set in New England, Spring, 1935. A trying time in US history, with unemployment rates of 20% and those with jobs seeing wage cuts at approximately 40%, worsened by the devastating effects of the dust bowl. Severe dust storms across the great plains, often referred to as black blizzards, resulted in failed crops, death of livestock, and a mass exodus of farmers from the region. Education was another area suffering as many schools lost funding and were forced to run with limited resources or close even though the rate of attendance was increasing as a result of lack of employment for youth. Although financially schools were struggling teachers capitalized on the resurging importance of education to fight for higher standards in teaching with much success. Economic recovery, relief and policy reform were a high priority for President Franklin D Roosevelt as demonstrated in the “New Deal.” Many New Deal programs came into effect in 1935 such as the Soil Conservation Act, established to help farmers learn more sustainable farming techniques; the Work Progress Administration (WPA) both a student work program and out of school employment that trained and hired 16-24years old’s to build bridges, roads, public buildings and work in libraries; and the famous US Social Security Act establishing a system of federal benefits for the elderly and insurance against unemployment. Until this point the United States was the only modern industrial country without any national system of social security.

New England

A northeastern U.S. region comprising 6 states: Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. This region, which borders Canada to the North/ Northwest/ Northeast, New York state to the West and the Atlantic Ocean to the East/ Southeast, is home to the second successfully established English settlement, Plymouth Colony (1620), the Salem witch trials (1692-1693), first revolt towards independence from England (1775), and beginnings of public education in the early 19th century. The physical geography is incredibly diverse for such a small landmass, with narrow coastal plains in the southeast, jagged coastline to the east, with rolling hills and naturally eroded peaks of the Appalachian mountain in the northern and western regions.

Voltairine de Cleyre (Part 1)

In part 1, Paula commends Fefu on her talk about Voltairine de Cleyre. Named after the eighteenth-century French philosopher Voltaire, Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–1912) was an “American anarchist and feminist, attacked church, state, and the institution of marriage as colluding in the bondage of women.” De Cleyre taught English to Jewish immigrants in Philadelphia, where she learned to speak and write Yiddish. She later wrote an essay and raised funds to support the Mexican Revolution. Her lecture “Sex Slavery” denounced married women as bonded slaves. Theater scholar, Elinor Fuchs wonders whether this iconic woman is included in Fefu and Her Friends “as a kind of bulwark against the forms of feminine (un)consciousness represented in the play, as if to say that somewhere, in the background of women’s history, lay the possibility for a different path? Had Fefu not been in thrall to Phillip, had Julia not been vulnerable to the mysterious accident, they might have been Voltairine de Cleyres?” The inclusion of de Cleyre also provides an example of a feminist who values immigrant cultures and global activism.¹²

Isadora Duncan (Part 2)

In part 2, Fornés incorporates Isadora Duncan (1877–1927), acclaimed dancer and choreographer, “whose dancing was known in part for its new emphasis on gravity, on connection of the lower body with the ground.” Duncan, while born in the United States, spent a majority of her life in Europe and was influenced by French and Russian cultures, bore two children out of wedlock, and had both male and female lovers. “With free-flowing costumes, bare feet and loose hair, Duncan restored dancing to a new vitality using the solar plexus and the torso as the generating force for all movements to follow.” Julia, in her hallucination, defends Duncan as a woman who was not crazy and then girds herself against a possible blow from imaginary malevolent judges who threaten to strike and injure her. Julia’s sexual orientation is not directly addressed in the play, but Fornés contrasts her lack of physical mobility with Duncan’s innovative physical performance style. Fornés therefore links Julia to Duncan, an American bisexual female dancer who lived as an immigrant in Europe and performed internationally.¹³

Emma Sheridan Frye (Part 3)

In part 3, Fornés highlights the writing of Emma Sheridan Fry (1864–1936), an actor and educator, whose 1917 book, *Educational Dramatics*, provides the text for Emma’s speech to inspire attendees of the educational fund-raiser. Fry worked for the Educational Alliance in New York City from 1903 to 1909, teaching acting to children of Polish and Russian Jewish immigrant families on New York’s Lower East Side. As theatre education scholar Beatrice L. Tukesbury describes, “Fry’s work not only resulted in fine theatre for children, young people, and their parents, but reached into the lives of the players, raising their ethical, moral, and social standards, improving speech and appearance, stimulating imaginations, broadening horizons. “Fry utilized theater to educate and assimilate immigrant children. Fry’s text serves as a centerpiece for the play, a testimony to the power of education written by a woman who was deeply influenced by children from non-U.S. cultures. By incorporating culturally complex iconic feminists into each part of the play, Fornés highlights the global influences on her Anglo characters and the importance of seeking inspiration from, and connection to, disparate world cultures.¹⁴

Petit Mal seizure

In Part 1, Cindy describes Julia’s condition as “petit mal”. Petit mal seizures, also known as generalized onset seizure and now referred to as absence seizures, are temporary changes in brain activity with brief lapses in attention or consciousness, usually lasting less than 15 seconds. Symptoms can be difficult to notice and include: staring into space, appearing suddenly motionless, stopping speech in the middle of a sentence, lip-smacking, eye fluttering, chewing motions, rhythmic muscle contractions and mental confusion. While brief and seemingly innocuous, loss of consciousness for any amount of time can cause absence seizures to be dangerous. Hyperventilation and bright flashing lights can trigger a seizure and some activities, such as driving or swimming can be dangerous for those with the disorder. This condition is rare, typically seen in children with many growing out of the disorder by adulthood. Although the cause of absence seizures is unclear it is believed to be genetically passed from one generation to the next. Typically, treatment with an anti-seizure medication can lessen or eradicate absence seizures.

Goya's Maja

In Part 2 during her monologue Julia refers to Goya's Maja as the male judges' example of an aesthetic woman who takes into account the weight of her entrails while striking a pose. Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828), a painter and printmaker who came into artistic maturity during the age of enlightenment, is considered the most important Spanish artist of the late 18th century and early 19th century. *The Nude Maja* (1797-1800) and its twin, *The Clothed Maja* (1798-1805) are two of Goya's most famous and controversial paintings. *The Nude Maja* depicts a nude woman lounging on a bed who seems to be looking directly at the viewer. the Maja, a term that referred to a person from Madrid's lower class, unapologetically depicted a naked contemporary figure of the time without mythological, metaphoric or historical undertones causing much controversy not only during the time period of which it was painted but even in modern times.

“Pennsylvania State University removed five artworks from C-203, a classroom on its branch campus in Schuylkill County, after a recent controversy over how women are portrayed in the 16th to 18th century paintings.

Nancy Stumhofer, a faculty member who taught in C-203, complained that one of the paintings - Goya's nude "La Maja" -- was sexually explicit and didn't belong in a workplace.”¹⁵

Although it is uncertain who this painting was made for historians believe it was commissioned by Manuel Goya, Spain's Secretary of State for his private nude painting collection. *The Clothed Maja*, finished five years after its sister painting, depicts a clothed version of the previous painting with other small differences such as size of the figure in relation to the bed, a difference that becomes most apparent when viewing the canvases side by side at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid, where they hang today.

Rubens' Women

In Part 2 during her monologue Julia refers to Rubens' woman as the male judges' example of an unaesthetic, revolting woman. “He said that a woman's bottom should be in a cushion, otherwise it's revolting.” Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), a Flemish painter and diplomat who was unusually well-born and educated for an artist of his era, is considered one of the great exponents of Baroque artistry. Rubens is known for his dynamic take on religious and political compositions that centered nude female figures mid-action. The term Rubenesque finds its origins in the shapely, full figured, and often unclothed woman featured in Rubens' paintings—a depiction of the aristocracy of the time as only those with wealth could afford to freely dine and drink without labor, resulting in a rotund stature. Some of Rubens' most famous paintings of woman include: *Susanna and The Elders* (1607), *The Disembarkation at Marseilles* (1625), *The Fall of Man* (1629), *Venus and Adonis* (1635), *The Three Graces* (1639), *Consequences of War* (1639), and *The Judgement of Paris* (1639).

Shakespeare's Sonnet 14

In Part 2, Emma recites Shakespeare's Sonnet 14 to an effigy of Fefu.

Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck;
 And yet methinks I have astronomy,
 But not to tell of good or evil luck,
 Of plagues, of dearths, or seasons' quality;
 Nor can I fortune to brief minutes tell,
 Pointing to each his thunder, rain and wind,
 Or say with princes if it shall go well,
 By oft predict that I in heaven find:
 But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,
 And, constant stars, in them I read such art
 As truth and beauty shall together thrive,
 If from thyself to store thou wouldst convert;
 Or else of thee this I prognosticate,
 Thy end is truth's and beauty's doom and date.

In Sonnet 14 the poet first reveals that it is not through science ("astronomy"), his own judgement, or personal experience that he obtains his knowledge about life and love -- all that he knows comes simply and only from his lover ("But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive"). And the primary lesson the poet learns from his lover's eyes is that, if his lover refuses to create a child to carry on his (or her) lineage, all the ideals embodied by his lover will cease to exist. This is yet another variation on Shakespeare's theme of the necessity of procreation that dominates the early sonnets.¹⁶

"Who is Sylvia" by Franz Schubert

In the living room for the start of part 3, the women sing "Who Is Sylvia," a nineteenth-century art song by Franz Schubert, with lyrics from act 4, scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, when Proteus, a young nobleman, declares his love for Sylvia, daughter of the Duke of Milan.

Source of inspiration: Mexican joke

The inspiration for Fefu and Her Friends underscores a bicultural reality. While she does not address Latinx culture in the play, Fornés reveals she was inspired by a Mexican joke, "The source of this play is a Mexican joke. There are two Mexicans in sombreros sitting at a bullfight and one says to the other, 'Isn't she beautiful, the one in yellow?' and he points to a woman on the other side of the arena crowded with people. The other one says, 'Which one?' and the first takes his gun and shoots her and says, 'The one that falls.' In the first draft of this play, Fefu explains that she started playing this game with her husband because of that joke. But in rewriting the play, I took out this explanation." In her play, Fornés does not address the Mexican machismo the joke skewers, but considers the effects of universal machismo on the lives of early twentieth-century Anglo women. The genesis of this play points to Fornés's link to Latin America.¹⁷

THEMES

Sexuality, Gender and Class

Fornés addresses female identity in this 1930s world by examining issues of gender, education, class, and sexuality, all of which contribute to the work's enduring influence. Fefu, ever the iconoclast, announces, "I like being like a man. Thinking like a man. Feeling like a man." Christina, the epitome of feminine decorum, is scandalized by Fefu and interjects, "She's crazy. "Emma, the effusive world traveler, adores dramatic expression: "Life is theatre. Theatre is life. If we're showing what life is, can be, we must do theatre." Paula, the only character from a working-class background, challenges the others' economic prosperity: "I think we should teach the poor and let the rich take care of themselves." Julia, the mystical yet paralyzed woman who was injured in a hunting accident, enters in a wheelchair and explores the terrain of mental illness, stating, "My hallucinations are madness, of course, but I wish I could be with others who hallucinate also." Cecilia and Paula, former lovers, address the complexities of homosexuality as they face the loss of their relationship. Paula confesses, "I'm not lusting after you." Cecilia replies, "I know that . . . I'll call you." After Paula's speech regarding the divide between the rich and poor, Fornés's stage directions state that "Cecilia opens her arms and puts them around Paula, engulfing her. She kisses Paula on the lips. Paula steps back. She is fearful." Fornés's characters either challenge or uphold varying aspects of the Anglo female status quo throughout the play.¹⁸

Parable of the Stone

Fefu addresses her colleagues Christina and Cindy in the living room of her New England country home and asks: "Have you ever turned a stone over in damp soil? . . . And when you turn it there are worms crawling on it? . . . And it's damp and full of fungus? . . . Were you revolted? . . . Were you fascinated? . . . There you have it! You too are fascinated with revulsion. . . . You see, that which is exposed to the exterior . . . is smooth and dry and clean. That which is not . . . underneath is slimy and filled with fungus and crawling with worms. It is another life parallel to the one we manifest. It's there. The way worms are underneath the stone. If you don't recognize it . . . (Whispering.) it eats you. That is my opinion. Well, who is ready for lunch?" Metaphorically, Fornés has constantly "turned a stone over" to examine "another life parallel" and has addressed the ensuing complexities in her playwriting. Fornés presents what theatre studies scholar Elinor Fuchs calls the "parable of the stone." Fuchs writes: "The stone, Fefu immediately makes clear, is not simply a metaphor for the difference between life and the grave. It is a metaphor for the crucial, characterological differences between men and women." Fuchs asserts that the underside of the stone, the worm-infested side, correlates to the women in the play, as noted in the play's first line when Fefu cheerfully relays, "My husband married me to have a constant reminder of how loathsome women are." Fuchs views the smooth side of the stone as corresponding to the world of men in Fornés's play, where men "are well together . . . out in the fresh and air and sun, while (women) sit . . . in the dark." Fuchs claims this metaphor categorizes the types of women in the play, some of whom are "ecstatic," while others descend to "horrific depths." However, Fuchs's stone metaphor focuses solely on gender. The stone in damp soil also presents an ecology of dualities that involves sunlight/shadow, dry/damp, smooth/slimy, clean/fungus, and fascination/revulsion. A person must recognize this parallel life, as Fefu suggests, lest she be consumed by it. Fornés constantly rotates the metaphorical stone to consciously complicate many dualities in Latina playwriting: Latinx/Anglo, Spanish/English, female/male, homosexual/heterosexual, supernatural/natural, experimentation/realism, and artist/teacher.¹⁹

Disability

Fornés utilizes the character Julia, who during a hunting trip experiences an unexplainable incident resulting in an epileptic seizure and paraplegia, as the catalyst to examine the treatment of disabled women. At the time this play is set, 1935, the disabled and epileptic were considered an undesirable burden on society during hard economic times resulting in forced institutionalization and sterilization of thousands of women. Although during this period the country's president, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), was disabled, the government provided little protection or resources for disabled people. In 1977, one month prior to Fefu's premiere, the Disability Right Protest in San Francisco—a sit-in at the federal offices of Health, Education, and Welfare lasting 25 days, resulted in the signing of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which helped pave the way for the American Disability Act (ADA) signed in 1990 and revised in 2008. According to American disability rights activist and Disability Right Protest organizer Kitty Cone, this was the first time that “disability really was looked at as an issue of civil rights rather than an issue of charity and rehabilitation at best, pity at worst.”

With how little protection women with disabilities had during this era Julia would have been at the mercy of her husband and/or family—who could institutionalize an unwilling Julia if her care or presence became a nuisance to their daily life. This brings into question who exactly are the judges Julia speaks to during her monologue in part II, are they Society, Government, The law, her family, men, or perhaps all of the above? Although one thing is for certain, due to her disability Julia's life choices were outside of her grasp.

Supernatural/Natural Worlds

Fornés devises supernatural interventions in her play through the character of Julia. When Julia enters the house in her wheelchair, her friends Cindy and Christina have a difficult time accepting Julia's paralysis. As Fefu brings Julia to her room, Cindy describes how a hunting incident caused Julia's condition. Cindy tells Christina that she was with Julia when a hunter shot a deer and “Julia and the deer fell. The deer was dead . . . dying and Julia was unconscious. She had convulsions . . . like the deer. He died and she didn't . . . apparently there was spinal nerve injury.” Thus, Julia is supernaturally paralyzed by the animal's death. In part 3, Fefu confronts Julia about her paralysis, telling her to fight and to try to walk. Their confrontation escalates in a ritualistic, almost liturgical exchange: JULIA: May no harm come to your head. FEFU: Fight! JULIA: May no harm come to your will. FEFU: Fight, Julia! (Fefu starts shaking the wheelchair and pulling Julia off the wheelchair.) After her violent gesture, Fefu exits to clean her rifle. The women comfort Julia, whose fragility seems intensified by Fefu's actions. Then, a shot is heard. Fornés writes: “(Julia puts her hand on her forehead. Her hand goes down slowly. There is blood on her forehead. Her head falls back. Fefu enters holding a dead white rabbit.)” Then Fefu speaks: “I killed it . . . I just shot . . . and killed it . . . Julia. . . .” Fefu's gunshot supernaturally causes the death of Julia. However, the death is handled realistically with no shift in lighting or scene design. Fornés merges the supernatural and natural worlds on stage as she closes her play.²⁰

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Fefu and Her Friends is one of Fornés's most produced works, with more than fifty productions occurring between 1977 and 2019.

World Premiere

1977 Off-Off Broadway World Premiere directed by Fornés, New York Theatre Strategy

Revival

2019 Off-Off Broadway Revival, directed by Lileana Blaine-Cruz, Theater for A New Audience

Single-Set vs. Multi-Set version of Fefu and Her Friends

In 1996, as the Baker Artist-in-Residence at Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania, María Irene Fornés adapted and directed her play in a one-set version. For this staging, the audience remained in place throughout the entire performance rather than breaking up into groups and moving to four different scenes in Part II. In directing the new version, nearly two decades after the original production, Fornés significantly shifted the order of scenes in Part II. Several new entrances and exits were added, and references in the scene on the lawn were changed from croquet to tennis. Fornés had always planned to create a simplified version of her play so that it could be done in theatres that did not have the spatial capacity of the initial conception.²¹

FORNÉS INTERVIEW

From July 5, 2017 issue of American Theatre Magazine:

The Path of 'Fefu,' From a Gun Joke to a Feminist Play Sans Plot

How María Irene Fornés shaped 'Fefu and Her Friends,' from a 1977 interview.

By Bonnie Marranca

July 2017 marked the publication of a new expanded edition of possibly María Irene Fornés's most famous play, *Fefu and Her Friends*, by PAJ Publications. Among the new features of the publication is an extended interview from 1977 with PAJ cofounder Bonnie Marranca. Below is an excerpt from that interview, republished in American Theatre Magazine with permission.

Bonnie Marranca: *Fefu and Her Friends* is a departure from your other plays, which are non-realistic, isn't it?

María Irene Fornés: My first work on the play actually was less realistic. The play started in 1964. That is when I wrote some of the first scene, when Fefu takes a gun and shoots at her husband out the window... Whether the play is realistic or less realistic has to do with the distance I have from it. I feel that the characters of Fefu are standing around me, while other plays I see more at a distance. When I view a play far away from me, perhaps the characters become two-dimensional. They become more like drawings than flesh and blood. The question of what ends up being a realistic play has to do with the fact that one can feel the characters breathe, rather than in a more abstract play, where it is the play that breathes, not the characters.

BM: Do you feel that each of the eight women is symbolic or representative of a female personality type or quality?

MIF: I don't think so at all. Doesn't every character in every play have a different character than the next one? The fact that Fefu is plotless might contribute to the feeling that if the women are not related to each other, and not related to the plot, then perhaps they represent certain types. In a plot play the woman is either the mother or the sister or the girlfriend or the daughter. The purpose of the character is to serve a plot so the relationship is responding to the needs of the plot. Although Fefu is realistic, the relationship of the women, in that sense, is abstract. The purposes these characters are serving is different from how a character serves a plot.

BM: How are you distinguishing between plot and plotless plays?

MIF: Plot, which has generally been the basis for plays, deals with the mechanics of life in a practical sense, with the mechanics of the peculiar arrangement a society makes. For example, a plot story in Alaska might be that in winter there was more sun than usual, the protagonist is in deep distress and commits suicide. And we would say: Why is that a reason for distress? Then we find out that there is reason for distress when there is more sun because the fish don't swim close to the surface. Therefore, there is no food and there is a reason for famine. There is a reason for unhappiness, a reason to commit suicide. So in dealing with plot we are dealing with those things that have to do with external life—the mechanics of how we manage in the world. A

plotless play doesn't deal with the mechanics of the practical arrangement of life but deals with the mechanics of the mind, some kind of spiritual survival, a process of thought.

BM: Fefu is a fascinating woman. She seems to be the center of the play, the most complex woman in it. Did the idea of the play grow out of the idea of Fefu?

MIF: Fefu took over the play...She is the woman in the first scene that I wrote, the woman who shoots her husband as a game. The source of this play is a Mexican joke: There are two Mexicans in sombreros sitting at a bullfight and one says to the other, "Isn't she beautiful, the one in yellow?" and he points to a woman on the other side of the arena crowded with people. The other one says, "Which one?" and he takes his gun and shoots her and says, "The one that falls." In the first draft of the play Fefu explains that she started playing this game with her husband because of that joke. But in rewriting the play I took out this explanation.

The woman who plays such a game with her husband grabbed me. Fefu is complex, but I find her a very unified person. However, by conventional terms she is contradictory—she is very outrageous. Fefu is very close to me, so I tend to understand her and find her not unusual at all.

BM: In some ways Fefu seems Chekhovian—a kind of mood piece. Do you think so?

MIF: I think so, even though I didn't think of Chekhov when I wrote it. I don't know if one could analyze it technically and find similarities. What would be similarities? The way dialogue proceeds, the presentation of a section of an event. I haven't studied Chekhov. But I think in spirit it is very Chekhovian, and also, though it is realistic, Fefu is very abstract, as Chekhov is.

BM: Is it a feminist play? Fefu shows women together onstage as they have rarely been seen before.

MIF: Yes, it is a feminist play. The play is about women. It's a play that deals with each one of these women with enormous tenderness and affection. I have not deliberately attempted to see these women "as women have rarely been seen before." I show the women as I see them, and if it is different from the way they've been seen before, it's because that's how I see them. The play is not fighting anything, not negating anything. My intention has not been to confront anything. I felt as I wrote the play that I was surrounded by friends. I felt very happy to have such good and interesting friends.

BM: There is a contemporary perspective in the characters. Yet the play is set in 1935. Why?

MIF: The women were created in a certain way because of an affection I have for a kind of world which I feel is closer to the '30s than any other period. Simply because it is pre-Freud, in the way that people manifested themselves with each other there was something more wholesome and trusting, in a sense. People accepted each other at face value. They were not constantly interpreting each other or themselves. Before Freud became popular and infiltrated our social and emotional lives, if a person said, "I love so-and-so," the person listening would believe the statement. Today, there is an automatic disbelieving of everything that is said, and an interpreting of it. It's implied that there's always some kind of self-deception about an emotion.

BM: For me one of the great pleasures of Fefu has to do with your choice of a "natural," almost effortless performance style. What were you attempting in the direction of the play?

MIF: In the process of auditioning there were people who read for me who were extremely talented but I thought they would shatter the play. I began to see the play almost as if it had glass walls and I felt there were people who would break the walls. A lot has been said about the style of acting and the style of production in Fefu, and that surprised me. I told the actors that the style of acting should be film acting. That's how I saw it. Perhaps when you do film acting onstage it seems very special.

BM: Does Fefu tell us where your future interests in drama lie?

MIF: Perhaps it does. However, a great many people have found Fefu to be my most important work, and in doing so I feel that there is a subtle denial of my other plays. I like Fefu very, very much but I feel almost like a mother who's had eight children and the ninth is called the beautiful one, the intelligent one, and everybody is saying, "Aren't you glad you had this one?" You feel they are all your children. It could very well be that Fefu is more successful than my other plays and that it would be a clever thing for me to continue writing in this manner. I will if that is my inclination, but not because I feel I have been on the wrong track previously. I don't see my work in relation to its possible impact in the world of theatre or the history of theatre. The shape that a play of mine takes has to do with my own need for a certain creative output.

IMAGE GALLERY



The original New York Theater Strategy production of "Fefu and Her Friends" at Relativity Media Lab in 1977. Left to right, seated: Connie Cicone, Margaret Harrington, Gordana Rashovich, Gwendolyn Brown, and Carolyn Hearn; standing: Rebecca Schull, Joan Voukides, Janet Biehl. (Photo by Rena Hansen) [Link](#)



Rebecca Schull as Fefu in "Fefu and Her Friends" in the original New York Theater Strategy production at Relativity Media Lab in 1977. (Photo by Rena Hansen) [Link](#)



The 2019 cast of 'Fefu and Her Friends.' From left, Ronete Levenson, Lindsay Rico, Helen Cespedes, Jennifer Lim, and Brittany Bradford, at Theatre for a New Audience. (Photo by Henry Grossman) [Link](#).



Amelia Workman as Fefu in the 2019 revival at Theatre for a New Audience. (Photo by Henry Grossman) [Link](#).



Voltairine de Cleyre (1866-1912) in Philadelphia in 1901

[Link](#)



Isadora Duncan (1877-1927)

[Link](#)



Emma Sheridan Frye (1864-1936)

[Link](#)



The Clothed Maja (1807)
by Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828)
Museo del Prado, Madrid

[Link](#)



Susanna and the Elders (1607)
By Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640)
Borghese Gallery, Rome

[Link](#)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gender roles - then and now

How does this 1977 play resonate with gender roles today?

Feminism

How are the feminine and masculine worlds represented in the play? How do the women find empowerment while navigating a patriarchal world?

Sexuality

How do the women in this play deal with the issue of sexuality in their lives and relationships?

Friendship

How do the women in this play explore their friendships as they address issues of intimacy, vulnerability and conformity.

Education and Creativity

How are education and creativity connected? Is Emma the only character in this play who believes in this connection?

Supernatural/Natural Worlds

How do the supernatural and natural worlds collide at the end of the play when Fefu kills the rabbit and Julia dies?

Did Fefu know Julia's death would happen or did she think the opposite would happen - that Julia would be released from her hallucination of paralysis and live to "fight with me"?

How does this final moment inform the other supernatural or hyper real events that occur throughout the play?

Immersive Theater

How does the audience moving from room to room in Part 2 inform the reception of this play?

How does the single set version of the play, in which Part 2 takes place in one room, inform the reception of the play?

RESOURCES

Documentary Film: *The Rest I Make Up* by Michelle Memran (2018)
www.therestimakeup.com

“Little camera,” Irene said, “I tell you things I didn’t even know I knew.” August 2003, unlikely friends, incomparable Cuban-American dramatist María “call me Irene” Fornés and young aspiring writer-director Michelle Memran (*who met during a six-hour interview for American Magazine in 1999*), ventured to Brighton Beach with bathing suits and a never-used Hi-8 camera. “Irene, does the camera make you uncomfortable?” asked Michelle, in a noisy beachside café. “Don’t you understand,” Irene answered coyly into the lens, “the camera to me is my beloved, the one who wants me always, and I give everything . . . I have . . . to a camera.”

This is how the film began. These two women—one young and one old, both lost in their own lives but with a shared urge to create—came together in a journey that revealed how the creative spirit continues to thrive even as one’s ability to create is compromised. The feature-length documentary follows Irene’s memories, weaving together footage of the present with archival from the past, all the while moving mentor and student towards an ever-deepening connection in the face of forgetting.

Digital Archive: The Fornés Institute
www.fornesinstitute.com

The Fornés Institute, an initiative of the Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC), aims to preserve and to amplify María Irene Fornés’s legacy as a teacher, mentor and artist, through workshops, convenings and advocacy. The initiative espouses future plans for a permanent home, which might include a library, archive, workshop and/or retreat space. The Fornés Institute is guided by a voluntary committee of artists and scholars from across the United States

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NOTES

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