

LETTERS FROM CUBA & MANUAL FOR A DESPERATE CROSSING

A STUDY GUIDE

BY LAYNIE CALDERWOOD
AND ANGELA MOSER,
DRAMATURGS

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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

MARÍA IRENE FORNÉS



María Irene Fornés is a name that should be known by every student of storytelling and theatre. She was a brilliant playwright, an ingenious creator,

and loved experimenting on stage. Born in Cuba, Fornés chose to write in English but never hid the bicultural inspiration in her works. Her imagination was profoundly Cuban. Throughout her lifetime, she often said, “Cuba is my soul.”

Entirely self-taught, Fornés based her work on styles of painting and movies rather than other theatre or literature. She once said about her writing process, “Let the thing you want to write come to you; become intimate with your own imagination.”



Experimentation is what drew her to theatre. Fornés was always trying new things, which makes it difficult to assign a specific style to her plays. There is no “Fornés signature” to capture the attention of either the casual theatergoer or the middle-brow critic. Even her admirers are at times made a little uncomfortable by Fornés’ different voices.



In these plays, Fornés explores character by adjusting her approach to realism. She presents people without tying them down to psychology, moralism, or even

sentimentality. Her characters are not required to explain themselves, or to interpret their own actions; they are shown in emotive moments, and immediate thought processes. The author lived by the phrase, “Expose everything about you. The bad and the good. Then you are a free person.” Watching a play by María Irene Fornés allows the audience to focus on compassionate representation of the human condition.

All quotes taken from this book:

Robinson, Marc. *The Theater of María Irene Fornés*. The John Hopkins University Press, 1999.

FORNÉS FUN FACTS

She only completed an elementary education.

She won a total of nine Obie Awards.

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett was the only play that she ever saw.

She would sometimes buy an object from a thrift store and base an entire stage design on that object.

She immigrated to the United States at the age of fifteen.

She lived most of her life in New York City.

ABOUT THE PLAYS

SOBRE LAS OBRAS DE TEATRO

Letters from Cuba takes place in a liminal space, meaning that the stage is simultaneously Cuba and New York City. This shared space allows us as the audience



to take an intimate look at letters being exchanged between a brother and sister; the brother, Luis, is in Cuba and Fran, his sister, has already immigrated to the US and is living in an apartment in New York.

Manual for a Desperate Crossing is a story of Cubans trying to reach the coast of Florida. They are fleeing the communist regime and are so desperate to leave Cuba that they innovate handmade rafts in order to cross the Florida Straits. The situation almost seems fictional, but is a well-documented event called the [“Cuban Diaspora”](#) (see section “A Fourth Wave: Balsaeros”).

The play was initially written as an opera and has only recently been adapted for a non-operatic stage. The musical nature of this play builds gorgeous poetry around a deeply tragic situation. Fornés dedicates the play with this beautifully simple line:

“To Horacio, and to thousands of men, women, and children who perished crossing the Florida Straits on rickety rafts.”





In response to the most recent calls for wider civil change, the BYU Theatre Department is actively working to better fulfill the prophet's invitation to "abandon all attitudes and actions of prejudice." The first step is diversifying the stories that we tell on stage; *Letters from Cuba* and *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* quickly emerged as a vital and important place to begin.

On her inspiration for this production, director Kris W. Peterson made the following statement:

"As a Latina faculty member I am interested in diversifying the representation in our productions, so I began reading work by Latinx playwrights. María Irene Fornés' one acts spoke to me and her experimental staging seemed to lend itself well to the brand new and experimental format of Zoom."

We hope you enjoy the production and find meaning in the world we are creating on this digital platform—distanced, yet closer than ever.

STATEMENTS FROM THE CAST

DECLARACIONES DEL ELENCO DE ACTORES

This production has one of the largest Latinx casts that has ever performed for BYU Theatre. This exciting breakthrough was best expressed by our director, Kris Peterson: “Representation matters.” Below are some statements from the cast on what it means to them to be involved in *Letters from Cuba* and *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*.



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Maria Angelica Sanchez Carr: It means a lot to me to be part of *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*. After a 7-year ordeal trying to leave communist Cuba, my parents, sisters, and I came to the US as refugees

seeking freedom. We didn't come on a raft, but I have an understanding of the desperation that can drive a person to make such a crossing.

See 4thWallDramaturgy.byu.edu for more of Maria's story.

Max Jennings: I am so excited to be a part of this production and to show the experiences of the Latinx community—both the joys and the struggles of those who immigrated to America. As my grandmother immigrated from Costa Rica I hope to show honor and respect through this medium.

See 4thWallDramaturgy.byu.edu for more *declaraciones*.

DRAMATURG'S NOTE

NOTA DE DRAMATURGO

The Real Stories of Immigration

In all honesty, this dramaturgical project really pushed me out of my comfort zone. I am a white American; the last immigrants in my ancestral line lived nearly 200 years ago. But even more, I grew up understanding a single story of immigration. I've always been told people come to America for a better life, to pursue their "American Dream." I've always been taught that every immigrant gains more by coming here than what they leave behind.

Prolific Nigerian writer, Chimanda Ngozi Adichie, says, "The problem with [single stories] is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete" (The Danger of a Single Story, TED Talks). I found in my dramaturgical process that many immigrants *did* experience some components of the single story I had been taught all my life, but that all of their processes were more complex and layered than I originally had assumed. These complexities challenged me; they made me rethink and question a lot of what I felt I had known.

These complexities are an integral part of *Letters from Cuba* and *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*. We watch characters reach for a dream in America that they believe in, but we experience heartbreak with them as we witness what they sacrifice as well.

I am grateful for María Irene Fornés. I'm grateful that in her wisdom, she crafted these two plays that inspired a journey of relearning for me. I hope that you can have a similar experience.

Laynie Calderwood

LIVED EXPERIENCES

EXPERIENCIAS VIVIDAS

The avant garde style of María Irene Fornés paints a beautiful and intricate backdrop of the feelings involved with the immigration process. We wanted to ground the work in the meaningful stories of our friends who have immigrated to the US within the last 20 years or so. While not all of the stories are of people from Cuba specifically, their stories give dimension to Fornés' gorgeous writing by providing multiple perspectives. To read more of these stories and interviews, click [here](#).



Paco from Cuba

Paco just decided he'd had enough. He was either going to fight against the communist regime in Cuba, or he was going to leave. He had heard stories of people building rafts, but after being denied asylum in the US, he headed for Spain instead.



Correa-Lazaro Family from Peru

Arminda was a women's rights activist in Peru. She knew the work was important, but that it put her family in great danger. When her husband was jumped on the way home from work, they decided it was time to leave for a safer life.



Lucas Orides from Brazil

A failed business venture in Brazil caused Lucas to rethink what his goals were in life. Through the help of a few great friends, he applied for a student visa, earned another degree, found great work with the US Health Department and met the love of his life.



Carmen from Cuba

Carmen already knew she needed to get out of Cuba, but being harassed in the park by two police officers for not stopping to sing the national anthem was the last straw. She applied for the Green Card lottery and she won. She has never looked back.



Diego Salinas from El Salvador

When he was just 5 years old, Diego's parents fled El Salvador after a series of US foreign policies devastated the country. Now 24, Diego is struggling to reconcile his Salvadoran heritage with his American upbringing.

See 4thWallDramaturgy.byu.edu for more *experiencias vividas*.

DRAMATURG'S NOTE

NOTA DE DRAMATURGO

Sharing the Burden of Biculturalism

The first time I read both of these plays I had a feeling of familiarity. I had the impression I had read those stories before, even though I had not. I never crossed the ocean on a boat. I never feared I might not make it to the other side. I did not leave my family thinking I might not see them ever again. But I left, too. And that feeling, that heaviness in your heart that comes from leaving, belongs to all those who leave their motherland. I was 18 years old when I hopped on a plane at the Rome airport and landed in Salt Lake City, Utah. I had never been on an airplane before. I didn't speak any English. So you might have guessed why this play is relevant to me. You might be thinking why is it relevant to you? And why now?

This is the story of many people you pass by everyday. Being bicultural is hard, and sharing the burden makes it easier. This is important because compassion and understanding are what make us human beings. More understanding and knowledge equals more power in our relationships. Now is always the best time to increase awareness. Now is a gift, no reason to wait longer. María Irene Fornés was able to unmask some of the deepest feelings that belong to the human condition. It is worth watching. It is worth learning about it.

Angela Moser