

María Irene Fornés, Writer of Spare, Poetic Plays, Dies at 88

[nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com) Updated Nov 2nd, 2018

María Irene Fornés, Writer of Spare, Poetic Plays, Dies at 88

Image



The playwright María Irene Fornés in 2000. She was a favorite of many critics, theater scholars and fellow playwrights, who often

many critics, theater scholars and fellow playwrights, who often declared that her achievements far outstripped her fame. Credit Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

By [Bruce Weber](#)

Oct. 31, 2018

María Irene Fornés, a Cuban-born American playwright whose spare, poetic and emotionally forceful works were hallmarks of experimental theater for four decades, died on Tuesday in Manhattan. She was 88.

Her death, at the Amsterdam Nursing Home, was confirmed by the playwright Migdalia Cruz, a friend and former student of Ms. Fornés's. She had had Alzheimer's disease for some time.

A favorite of many critics, theater scholars and fellow playwrights, who often declared that her achievements far outstripped her fame, Ms. Fornés came to playwriting relatively late — her first artistic pursuit was painting — and never earned the popular regard of contemporaries like [Edward Albee](#), [Sam Shepard](#), [John Guare](#) and [Lanford Wilson](#).

Her plays earned eight Obie awards, the Off Broadway equivalent of the Tonys, and she was given an Obie for lifetime achievement in 1982. But her only work to appear on Broadway, a 1966 comedy called "The Office," [directed by Jerome Robbins](#), closed in previews.

Please disable your ad blocker.

Advertising helps fund Times journalism.

Still, over a long career during which she wrote dozens of plays, many of which she directed herself, and fostered the high-minded idea of the sovereign playwright by producing experimental plays

and teaching a generation of younger playwrights, Ms. Fornés gained a reputation within the theater world as an underrecognized genius.

Image



Ms. Fornés with, from left, her fellow playwrights Arthur Miller, John Guare, Edward Albee and Horton Foote before a round-table discussion at the Signature Theater in 2000. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

“She’s not spoken of as an important American playwright, and she should be,” the playwright Tony Kushner said in an interview for this obituary in 2013, adding: “She had terrifyingly high standards and was terribly blunt about what others did with her work. Her productions were unforgettable. She was really a magical maker of theater.”

Ms. Fornés (pronounced for-NESS) made a name for herself early in her career with antic and allusive work that drew on the renegade, absurdist spirit of the 1960s and helped define Off Off Broadway and the American avant-garde.

Later, as her work became less surreal and more resonant, she became known for her sparse dialogue; brief, seemingly disjointed scenes; emotionally fraught, often threatening circumstances; and her use of strikingly suggestive set designs and choreography.

Please disable your ad blocker.

Advertising helps fund Times journalism.

“It’s hard to separate Fornés the writer from Fornés the director,” Marc Robinson, a Yale professor who edited a collection of essays about her work, said in 2013. “For her there was no division between writing dialogue for a character and thinking how the actor playing that character would hold her hands onstage, or where the chair would be placed, or how the light would fall at the end of the scene. She was also a master of stage silence.”

In 1965, collaborating with the composer [Al Carmines](#), Ms. Fornés wrote the book and lyrics for “Promenade,” a wry, elliptical musical about two honest convicts who have escaped into a corrupt world. The show made its debut at the Judson Poets Theater in Greenwich Village and had a successful Off Broadway run in 1969 and [a well-received revival](#) in 1983.

Image

Tai Jimenez and Matthew Floyd Miller in the Signature Theater Company’s production of “Letters From Cuba” in 2000, Ms. Fornés’s final work, in 2000. Credit [Barbara Alper](#) for The New York Times

“Miss Fornés’s lyrics, like her book, seem to have a sweetly irrelevant relevance,” Clive Barnes wrote in his New York Times [review of the 1969 production](#). “There is a Dada zaniness here that creeps up on you where you least expect it, and a topsy-turvy Brechtian morality that is most attractive.”

As time went on, though Ms. Fornés never entirely eschewed allegory and elaborate metaphor, her work grew more realistic and psychologically probing. Like Chekhov, whom she acknowledged as a chief influence, she concentrated on characters, some more astute than others, who are bent on self-examination, seeking to confirm their dignity.

Perhaps her best-known play was “Fefu and Her Friends,” a 1977 drama first presented by New York Theater Strategy, a company she helped found.

A signature work of feminist theater set in the 1930s, the play portrayed eight women who, gathered in the home of their friend Fefu (“middle-aged, loving, brilliant and tormented,” as one reviewer described her), reveal their rivalries, anxieties and sympathies amid the unfolding of multiple conflicts. “The dramatic equivalent of a collection of poems,” [Richard Eder of The Times wrote of the play](#) when it was presented Off Broadway in 1978.

As directed by Ms. Fornés, four of the play’s second-act scenes are performed simultaneously in different parts of the theater, standing in for the rooms of Fefu’s house, and the audience, divided into four groups, leaves its seats and makes the rounds of the locations.

Image

Ms. Fornés in 1999 at a rehearsal of her one-act plays “Mud” and “Drowning,” presented by the Signature Theater Company as part of a season devoted to her work. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Her other later plays included “Mud” (1983), about a woman whose attempt to escape her life amid stifling ignorance on a remote farm is violently derailed; “The Danube,” an early-1980s story of a sweet romance that shrivels, as if by a poisoned world; “The Conduct of Life” (1985), about the savage home life of a Latin American soldier

whose job is torturing prisoners; “Abingdon Square” (1987), about a young woman’s emerging self-awareness, both sexual and spiritual; “Enter the Night” (1993), a play about mortality and personal responsibility set in Manhattan during the AIDS plague; and “Letters From Cuba” (2000), a sweet-tempered autobiographical play based on decades of letters that Ms. Fornés had received from a brother who never left Havana.

In that play, the character who stands in for Ms. Fornés is a dancer who is given few lines but expresses herself in eloquent movement, practicing balletic moves in her Manhattan apartment. The play, Ms. Fornés’s final one, was commissioned and given its premiere by the Signature Theater Company in Manhattan, culminating an entire season devoted to her work.

“Irene was a pioneer in the American theater, though innovation was not her goal,” James Houghton, the founding artistic director of Signature, said in an email in 2013. ([Mr. Houghton died in 2016.](#)) “She merely wrote from her gut, creating highly theatrical, impactful and visceral work.”

In late August, the Public Theater in Manhattan staged a 12-hour marathon of staged readings of Ms. Fornés’s work, led by the director JoAnne Akalaitis. In an interview with The Times, Ms. Akalaitis placed Ms. Fornés “in the pantheon of the great writers like Beckett or Pinter or Caryl Churchill” but said she was not as well known as she deserved to be because she “simply fell through the cracks.”

That same month “The Rest I Make Up,” a documentary about Ms. Fornés directed by Michelle Memran, was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.





Notable Deaths 2018: Stage and Screen

A memorial to those who lost their lives in 2018

Aug. 3, 2018

Ms. Fornés, who was called Irene by friends, leaves no immediate survivors. Her romantic partners over the years included the writer [Susan Sontag](#) and the writer and artists' model [Harriet Sohmers Zwerling](#).

María Irene Fornés was born in Havana on May 14, 1930. Her family was poor, and she had little formal education, though her parents were book lovers and her mother, Carmen, taught school. Her father, Carlos, a low-level Civil Service worker, died shortly before she moved with her mother and a sister to New York City in 1945.

Ms. Fornés held a variety of jobs, including one in a factory that made medals for the military. Taking up painting, she studied for a time with the Abstract Expressionist [Hans Hofmann](#), whose “push-pull” theory of painting — that the juxtaposition of abstract forms and their surrounding space creates a sense of depth and

movement — influenced her work as a playwright and director.

“I compose my plays guided not by story line but more by energies that take place within each scene, and the energies that take place within one scene and the scene that follows,” she said in 1990. “It’s like Hofmann’s push-pull in that the narrative doesn’t control how the play proceeds, but the development of the energies within the play.”

In the 1950s Ms. Fornés lived in Europe, mostly in Paris, where she was inspired, she said, by the original production of Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot.”

She taught playwriting at New York University, the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival in California, the Intar Hispanic American Arts Center in Manhattan and elsewhere. The playwrights [Paula Vogel](#), [Sarah Ruhl](#), [Nilo Cruz](#) and [Eduardo Machado](#), among others, credit her as an influence.

“I taught with her at N.Y.U.,” Mr. Kushner said, “and every grad student I worked with told me she had changed their lives.”

Correction: October 31, 2018

An earlier version of a picture caption with this obituary misstated the name of the actor shown with Tai Jimenez in a production of Ms. Fornés’s “Letters From Cuba.” He is Matthew Floyd Miller, not Floyd Miller.

A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 1, 2018, on Page B14 of the New York edition with the headline: María Irene Fornés, 88, Playwright Who, to Her Peers, Was a Genius. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today’s Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

Subscribe for \$2 a week.

Subscribe

campaign: nov_elections_acq_bau, creative: Dock Multi-Link with ABRA support, source: optimizely, creator: KPM



Unparalleled coverage of the midterms.
And their consequences.

Subscribe for \$2 a week.

Subscribe now

Evernote makes it easy to remember things big and small from your everyday life using your computer, tablet, phone and the web.

[Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)