



## MARIA IRENE FORNES DISCUSSES FORTY YEARS IN THEATRE WITH MARIA M. DELGADO\*

DELGADO: Rather than start at the beginning I want to begin by asking you about your most recent works like *The Summer in Gossensass*. How did that play come about?

FORNES: I used to find reading plays difficult. The descriptions of the characters, their actions and moods were so minimal that I frequently found myself lost as to what they were doing or what was the significance of what they said. *Hedda Gabler* was the first play I read from start to finish without stopping. The dialogue was so clear that it immediately invoked living images in my mind. When John Dillon asked me to direct a play at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre for the 1986-87 season, I immediately chose *Hedda Gabler*. While discussing the play with the cast I discovered that my impressions of Hedda and of the whole play were different from the impressions they had. They believed that Lovborg was Hedda's love, (I thought the start of his name Lov contributes to that belief) that he is handsome and romantic. And that Hedda was forced to marry Tesman for the sake of stability and financial security. I was amazed. I wondered if they had seen a Hollywood version of the play. I read the play over trying to see if I had misinterpreted everything. My views didn't change. I didn't think Ibsen intended for Lovborg to be a poetic, dissolute leading man. I thought the photo album scene makes it quite clear that she is not attracted to him while it is clear that he is quite attracted to her.

I also thought the belief that Hedda's unusual character was caused by her being brought up without a mother by a military father who raised her like a boy was quite bizarre. The only thing the play says about her father is that she went riding with him. Which seems like a nice

thing for a father and daughter to do. And that she looked beautiful in her riding outfit. They say that the fact that he raised her as a boy was what made her turn out the way she did. I wrack my brain trying to figure out what in Hedda's character is masculine when she is the perfect picture of the glamorous, stylish, camp superbitch with a great sense of humor. What boy do you see pulling his friend's hair the way she is said to have pulled poor Thea's hair. That she has a picture of her father in the living room seems to me more to indicate that the house is her house and not Tesman's house rather than that she has some sort of fixation on her father. When I read the play I didn't believe for a moment that she is in love with Lovborg. Just look at the way she treats him and you'll see that she's not in love with him.

Being curious about the name Lovborg I looked up the word in a Norwegian dictionary and discovered that it means "dead leaf". Not very likely the name an author would choose for the romantic hero, (unless Norwegians find dead leaves romantic). I also suspect that Ibsen did not intend Hedda to be pregnant, that when he had her say..."In my condition..." rather than implying she is pregnant, he is showing her gall and cunning, pretending to be pregnant (as if pregnant women go around burning manuscripts) to justify the burning of Lovborg's book, which she burns, not as the romantics believe, because the book represents Lovborg's and Thea's child, but because the destruction of the book means that Lovborg will not get the job Tesman seeks. I think Ibsen was more interested in showing her cunning than in justifying her.

Each detail of what is the prevalent interpretation of the play seems to be as if concocted by a Hollywood team of script writers trying to turn a fine play into a laughable soap opera. Audiences at the turn of the century may have needed a justification to enjoy and love Hedda but today we can get a kick out of people like her as long as they are not part of our real life. In the play it is quite clear that Lovborg is not a dashing romantic hero, that Hedda had no interest in the house Tesman bought for her. She says, in their rides when he took her home, she talked about the house to make conversation and relieve him of his discomfort because the poor man had no conversation. However the public and critics insist that Tesman bought her the house of her dreams.

It was these recognitions that first got me thinking. There were also

some details like Lily Langtry being cast to play Hedda Gabler in the first English production. She couldn't do it so they kept cutting bits from the play. Then Elizabeth Robins, an American actress who was living in London, got the rights to stage the play. I thought there were enough interesting things about getting the production together which would let me discuss the interpretation of the play. While they are rehearsing I can have them talking about the play.

DELGADO: So the first production of *Hedda Gabler* in London becomes a narrative framework for you to hinge a new reading of the play?

FORNES: Yes, but what then happened was that I found the person of Elizabeth Robins so interesting. She was a novelist, playwright, and actress who then went on to perform in other English premieres of Ibsen plays like *The Master Builder* where you also have a young woman who takes possession of a man. Ibsen was obsessed with the personality of a woman who was very attractive, enigmatic, and interesting. She's not just a little sexy, there's something a little odd about her. Before he wrote *Hedda Gabler*, when he was around sixty-three, Ibsen met Emilie Bardach, a young girl of around eighteen or nineteen, in the place where he spent his family summer vacations. He and his wife and son went there to Gossensass in the Tyrol when his son was little. One year, I think he went alone and he met this young girl who was also there with her mother for the summer. He had a platonic relationship with her that was in a sense similar to Hedda's relationship with older men. Either the girl was controlling or else he was so afraid of being enamored of her that he saw her as manipulative. When he went back to Oslo, he told his medical doctor, who was a good friend of his, that he had met this girl who was enigmatic and fascinating. He claimed she wanted to grab him, but instead it was he who grabbed her for his play. So it's quite clear that what he was writing was not a little social soap opera. You can see that when you read the play. Hedda has a power that is almost mystical. She subjugates all the men in the play. As badly as she treats people there is something so attractive about her.

I wrote a draft of the play but didn't get fully to the question of interpretation because I got so involved in the first production of the

play and Elizabeth Robins. I found out how she produced the play with very little money but help from George Bernard Shaw and Arthur Archer, the translator of Ibsen who was a good friend and possibly her lover. Robins wrote novels and plays and became a suffragette. In the first production of *The Summer in Gossensass* in January 1997, Elizabeth Robins was taking over. I had to think that maybe if I wanted to write a play about Elizabeth Robins, it should be another play and I should just finish this play about *Hedda Gabler*. As a playwright I find the question of interpretation a nightmare. People don't understand something that to me seems very clear in the play. They don't understand it because their sensitivity doesn't go to that place. Even if someone were to try and explain it to them, they would say, "Yes, but that is not interesting."

DELGADO: You're continuing to work on the play. Did you know how you were going to rewrite it after the first workshop production?

FORNES: Sometimes I have ideas about what I want to do, but what happens is that I put away the play for a few months and sometimes I don't get a chance to come back to it. With *The Summer in Gossensass* the first workshop production in 1997 helped me to understand what things are there but without full force or full clarity. It is not as though I have made a list of the things. It's almost as if I know some things are not there yet and if you asked me to give you a list of what the things are, maybe I don't know yet. But when I have put away the play for some time and I next read it I immediately see it. I work on what I'm now looking at fresh. In the case of *Gossensass* it's a little more than that. I want to get to that point which inspired me to write the play, which had to do with the question of interpretation and misinterpretation. Usually when I write a play, I don't want to make a point, but in this case I do.

DELGADO: Do you find critics want to read your plays in certain ways?

FORNES: Oh, yes. I think there is a degree of prejudging, of assuming what a work is or should be according to who the writer is and what is happening at the moment regarding criticism. We probably all do

that in one way or another but I think a critic has a professional responsibility the rest of us don't have. The critic has a responsibility not unlike a doctor when he diagnoses a patient. A friend can give you an aspirin and say you'll be fine when you have an aneurysm but a doctor ought not to do that.

I see that happening with my work. Young people in college read essays and literary criticism on my work that distorts their viewing of the work, and I doubt that they will ever see it any differently. I think it's probably because they are looking for something dramatic and meaningful.

People want things to add up. They need a number two for the addition to come out right, so they see a number two. It is not a two, they just bring it in as a two. It's about what they want to say. Academics listen to each other. If they don't understand something or even if they understand it, rather than read it again to see if that's indeed there, they have more trust in the explanation of another academic. It is as if you are a detective and you don't follow the real clues, but make them up. That's criminal.

I don't care so much if in an essay something is being misinterpreted, but then when I see production after production of the play where this happens, it makes me sad. It's like when you buy a dress and it says silk on the label but when you touch it you see it's not silk. You're not going to buy it because it says it's silk you're going buy it because you know what it is. People more and more believe the essays and not the work.

DELGADO: Do you think it has happened a lot with your work? That it has been misinterpreted by critics?

FORNES: I think it happens with everybody. The thing is that *I* mind it.

DELGADO: Do you read what the critics write about your work or do you tend to avoid it?

FORNES: I tend to avoid it, because I just get upset. But then I love learning more about my work, and sometimes I learn by reading about

it. This has happened a couple of times. For example, Susan Sontag said that my work was about heartbreak.<sup>1</sup> Or somebody saying my work was about immigrants as the plays all deal with a person going to another world. It's not necessarily a physical world of another city or another country but it has to do with being a stranger or something. But if I see critics having an idea and then looking for proof and but not even proving it, it's just a twisted thing. To me that's a mistake. In my work — and in any work that is worthwhile — what's important is the spirit of the thing not the interpretation. The spirit of the thing is where something hits you and you don't know what it is. This is much more powerful than when it speaks to your rational mind and something that you agree with, so you like it, and you praise it. To me that's not as profound as when what you have experienced is something that you don't even understand.

DELGADO: How do you respond to negative reviews of your work?

FORNES: They annoy me of course. Who likes a negative review? If the critic is wrong I feel murderous naturally. How can you take it lightly when someone is prejudicing the world against you? But if the critic is right I am the first to agree. Writers rewrite their work time and time again because they know something or other is wrong or is not quite right yet. If a writer doesn't have the ability to look at his work objectively I don't see how they could ever create anything of interest.

DELGADO: You are often referred to as an avant-garde writer. Do you perceive your work as "avant-garde"?

FORNES: No, I think that if the work is based on character and story it is not avant-garde. My work is based on character and story and I think that those elements place the work in the realm of the traditional. Avant-garde characters seem to be subject to the imagery and the tones of the piece while traditional characters are mainly subject to their relationship with other characters. In the vanguard we frequently see a detached character, a stranger in an eerie world. One who sees the eerie world as normal. Or we see extroverts, characters who speak and act

without inhibition and without understanding of traditional norms. My work, in its structure, is not traditional, but in its content it deals with the real world and it is basically humanitarian. In the early sixties my work may have been considered avant-garde when a great many people believed that the Aristotelian "well-made" play was the proper form for a play. But I believe by now people prefer a theatre that is exciting because of the singular way in which it is written and performed, as well as because of its content. I feel that today we want the play to follow its own impulses and to let those impulses determine the play's form. The playwright must form the play but the form must respond to its content, not the content to the form.

There is also a question of time. The creative avant-garde in theatre has been marching on since before the beginning of the century. Something that has been with us that long cannot be called avant-garde. By now it has become part of the main body. When the existing forms become tired artists and audiences alike wish for new forms and as with any other art theatre must renew itself again and again. Old forms are dear and beautiful but there is always an excitement, a freshness to doing things and seeing things in a new way.

DELGADO: Do you think of yourself as a writer, a director, an artist? Do these roles merge and converge?

FORNES: Yes, I started drawing and painting before I did any writing or even imagined I would be working in theatre.

I believe the work of the writer, the director, the artist, the actor, the composer, the dancer is all one at the onset. I think the creative impulse, the energy that makes us interested in studying something, analyzing something or creating something is all the same. The form that it takes when the creative process starts will differ, but at the root they all spring from the same place. In theatre especially, each person's work depends on the others in such a way that one cannot think of one as independent of the other. Practicing music, for example, will develop our sensitivity to tempo and tone of voice, to the importance of silence, of violent, abrupt and stormy tones. Music will make a director more aware of sounds, the sound of steps, the sound of voices in other rooms.

Painting, of course will make us aware of the importance of tones of light, of mood created by tones of light, but also of the dimensions in space, the mystery of the space of a hallway, a person stopping at the landing on a stairs, a person leaning out a window. A director who looks at paintings will be a better director, one who has acted will be a better director and so will an actor who writes or directs be a better actor.

DELGADO: You started writing in the hope of inspiring Susan Sontag to write.

FORNES: Oh, yes. It was a sort of game. We were in a cafe in Greenwich Village, hoping we would see a friend or someone who would know of a party and invite us. It was not very likely. I had been in Europe for three years and I didn't know many people in the Village any more and Susan had only lived in New York as a child. In the meantime Susan starts talking about how she is not too happy because she wants to start writing and doesn't seem to find the time or the way to start. I was in a positive and optimistic mood and said, "Start right now?" And she said, "I know, I keep postponing it." And I said, "Do. Start right now. I'll write too." She said, "Now?" and I said, "Sure, let's go and start now. I'll write too." She was quite surprised at the idea and so was I. We start to look for the waiter when, suddenly the devil puts his hand in. Someone I had met in Paris two years before walks in. Friendly greetings, the unimaginable, he is going to a party and invites us. Temptation. We look at each other. Susan is thrilled at the idea of a party and so am I. But I become virtuous. I say, "Oh, what a pity, we can't go. We have work to do." Susan says, "You mean it?" I say, "Sure, aren't we going to go write?" "You're going to write too?" I say, "Sure." I am trying to act as if writing is the easiest thing in the world. Like even a painter can do it. We go to her place and sit at the table. She at the typewriter. I have paper and pencil. She starts typing and my mind is blank. I reach for a book on the bookcase hoping I'll find the way. I start writing a sentence using the first word on the top left corner of the page. That sentence leads to another and another. I continue writing until the flow stops. Then, I look at the word on the top right corner of the same page and again I start writing using that word. I continue

writing using my system. I have now two pages. My writing was not extraordinary but was not lacking in charm. More importantly, it taught me how to put aside a writer's block. And Susan started an essay that was published shortly after.

DELGADO: How did you write your first play? Was it soon after that night?

FORNES: I don't believe it was soon. After that I started translating letters that were written to my great grandfather in Cuba by his cousin Angela who had lived in Cuba in her youth but was at the time living in Seville with her mother and aunts. The letters were written in 1906–07. But concerned events that took place from 1860 on. I translated the letters to become more intimate with them and to offer them to my friends to read.

Then, soon after — I don't remember how soon — one day I woke up with an idea for a play. This idea was obsessive. For a few days I thought about nothing else. I started writing and wrote day and night obsessively. Nineteen days later I had written a rough first draft.

DELGADO: And this became *Tango Palace*.

FORNES: Yes. I didn't know anything about theatre. I had never been involved in rehearsals, never known an actor, never known a director, never known a playwright. But I had, five years earlier, a very profound experience seeing the first production of *Waiting for Godot* in Paris. I didn't know French so I didn't understand a word and yet this was theatre like I had never seen before. It never occurred to me then that seeing this play would later inspire me to become a playwright. But I have no doubt that it did. Soon after I finished the play, Herbert Blau, a very distinguished director of a theatre in San Francisco, by chance read my play and decided to stage it. I was amazed. I was invited to attend rehearsals (the first rehearsals I had ever seen). The production was extraordinary and I became a produced playwright.

DELGADO: Of course this was the time when Off-Off-Broadway started

developing and you were very involved in forging that alternative theatre culture with figures like Sam Shepard, Ellen Stewart, Lanford Wilson, and Tom O'Horgan.

FORNES: I think about writing a play around some of those writers just because it's interesting how each one of us was so different from the others. We were working in the same theatres, we were extremely interested in each other's work. It was also the start of the *Village Voice*, whose brilliant critic, Michael Smith, contributed greatly to the Off-Off-Broadway scene's becoming a movement rather than just an accident. We were not consciously breaking ground or doing anything extraordinary. We were writing plays that were very natural to us. We just thought we were doing things that were interesting and that delighted us.

But it wasn't just the theatre that was stimulating us. The whole world of art was doing somersaults, the painters were doing happenings. These were more like theatre than living paintings. In them people spoke words. Not words that resemble everyday conversation, but short sentences, as personal outbursts, or statements that reflected a thought process. The dancers were doing work that reflected more states of being than aspects of human grace.

The Off-Off-Broadway movement was very small when it started, four spaces of which two were churches and two coffee houses. The churches were Judson Church, the person in charge was the junior minister, a composer and wonderful singer Al Carmines; Theatre Genesis at Saint Mark's Church, with Ralph Cook as artistic director, Cafe La MaMa run by the extraordinary Ellen Stewart and Caffe Cino run by the very charming Joe Cino where theatrical "camp" had its birth. Each was running a theatre filled with talent, charm, and imagination, playwrights with genius and personal styles, actors with individuality and charm, choreographers and dancers who were breaking ground in the most simple, natural, and magical form possible. Each brought a new vocabulary to the twentieth-century art. Theatre, dance, and musical pieces were done in all spaces. Directors started forming companies of actors who through improvisations developed important pieces namely Joe Chaikin with the Open Theatre, Tom O'Horgan with Theatre Genesis, Andrei Serban at La MaMa, Richard Schechner with the Performance

Group. These companies were not exclusively dependent on language. Physical dexterity was important to them and nonverbal sounds were sometimes their way of communicating. This freedom from language enabled them to perform in foreign countries. The playwrights' works could be done in non-English speaking countries only if translated.

Feeling that at that time playwrights work was beginning to take a second place to the company work, the playwright-actress Julie Bovasso and I decided to apply for a "non for profit" status which would make us eligible for Government and Foundation grants and produce our own work. We received some grants, named the organization "The New York Theatre Strategy" and started production. I was appointed President which meant doing everything in the world toward production. This included bookkeeping, hammering sets, making costumes, and applying for more grants. This meant that for three years I worked around the clock helping put on other people's plays. At the start of the fourth year I began to write a play. I asked a director and friend, Barbara Rosoff to be the managing director for the season and she agreed. I started work on my new play, *Fefu and Her Friends*. It was the start of the feminist movement. I had attended several consciousness-raising meetings where I had discovered how many of the things I had experienced as a woman were things that many other women shared.

I started writing scenes, speeches, some things I was saying to myself in my head. I had a file of material that I started to assemble and work into a play. I enjoyed very much the manner or technique that I used to construct the play. It resembled the making of a collage. When I was about to finish the first part, Barbara suggested we see a loft that was advertised as a performance place. We went to see it and I liked it. The person running it was used to renting it for parties or concerts. He took us to his office which was simply a small partition in the loft. There he had a beautiful Persian carpet, a lovely antique desk, bookshelves on the walls filled with books, and several lovely Victorian chairs. I said to Barbara, "This could be Fefu's study." I asked the man if we could use the whole space and he said "Yes. Would you like to use the kitchen too?" How thrilling. I said to Barbara, "I think I'm going to do the play here."

I did and it was thrilling. Besides the living room, the study, and

the kitchen, there was a room in the back that became the bedroom, and the lawn was part of the set to the side of the living room.

DELGADO: *Fefu and Her Friends* also has characteristics that have been features of your plays since then. I'm thinking particularly of setting your plays in specific times and places in the past. We see this in *Sarita*, *Abingdon Square*, *What of the Night?*, and *The Summer in Gossensass*. Do you find it helpful to go back to a specific period in the past?

FORNES: Thinking of the present creatively is like thinking of Grand Central station as a place to write. Things are on top of you all around you. It is difficult to have any perspective. When you think of the past you not only have a better perspective. But your mind can also pick up nuances of behavior and feelings that are very subtle. It may be that we romanticize other times. People sometimes ask me why do you do this or that in your plays. For example, I have been asked, "Why do you have people read out loud in your plays?" I never realized I did that, or rather I had not realized that other writers don't do it. I do it because it is a lovely and harmonious thing for people to do. As simple as that. And because my father spent a few hours each day with a book in his hands. And sometimes he would read a passage to us and often would talk to us about what he was reading. It was peaceful and charming and exciting. If it happens in a play of mine, it's because it is natural to me. It doesn't seem like something extraordinary. It reflects a moment of harmony. Sometimes it happens because there is a text, something written by someone else, that I want to have as part of the play. And of course it has to be clear that it is not something I wrote. For example, in *Mud* I looked for a grammar school text to bring to a rehearsal of a new scene where Mae was learning how to read. I picked up a book on mollusks in a thrift store. At rehearsal I looked through the book and chose the starfish. I handed it to the actress playing Mae and asked her to read it as someone who is just learning how to read. She did and I was amazed that the description of the starfish's primitive eye is an accurate and poetic description of Mae's mind.

A certain speech in my play *Fefu and Her Friends* actually comes from a little book I found called *Educational Dramatics* written by Emma

Sheridan Fry. The book was published in 1917. Emma had been teaching children at the Educational Alliance, in New York's Lower East Side from 1903 to 1909. Her method of teaching children acting involved a few children performing a play. Then on Sundays the kids would come to the Educational Alliance, which still exists on the Lower East Side, and watch the play. When the play was over, she would say to the kids: "Now, which one of you would like to come on stage and do the play?" And some of them would come up and maybe they would put on a little bit of costume, whatever. They would then do the play. They improvised and recreated the play. I thought this was so incredibly creative, and ahead of its time.

I found her book in a little secondhand store full of dust and I thought: "One day, I'm going to write a play about this woman." Of course I have plans to write many plays which don't get written. In fact I did not write a play about her, but I thought she'd be a character in *Fefu*. Then it turned out that I couldn't, but the character of Emma in *Fefu* recites from the prologue to *Educational Dramatics*. If people don't notice the note in the program, they think that I wrote this and that Emma Sheridan Fry is my invention. But this was inserted specifically to honor that person.

DELGADO: I remember when Rod Wooden interviewed you for the Manchester City of Drama conversation series he made the point that in all your work since *Fefu*, especially the more realistic plays like *Mud*, *Sarita*, and *Abingdon Square*, you do great honor to the characters. These individuals may be extremely disadvantaged or they may be obliged to perform very menial domestic tasks, like Olimpia in *The Conduct of Life* or Mae in *Mud*. Are you conscious of wishing to honor them?

FORNES: Indeed. I think Rod is a true gentleman to have noticed that. I don't think I would enjoy writing if I had to demean a character. I will deal with a character's darkest side, but I think I will always feel interest or a degree of tenderness or compassion, except for the character of Orlando (the military torturer in *The Conduct of Life*) for whom I feel no compassion. The best feelings I've had for him were when I felt he was too stupid to know better.

DELGADO: Your plays are very pictorial. There's always very detailed specific stage directions at the opening which allow us to imagine and create an environment for the action. Do you think that your painting background has influenced your writing and directing?

FORNES: When I write a play, I visualize a place or places, the characters, the action in detail but I never place them on a stage. The scenes I visualize are in real and varied places. Or perhaps in imaginary places. But never on a stage. This is just because like with real people, the characters' behavior will be much more genuine if they are in a real place rather than on a stage. I truly believe that to imagine the stage as you write will limit the characters' responses and thoughts. Of course after the scenes are written, the locations must be adapted to the possibilities of the stage. In this part of my creative process my training was the years I spent drawing and painting. The other part was the time I spent at the Actor's Studio observing the actors and directors sessions with Lee Strasberg. And some very basic Method acting classes I took at the Gene Frankel Theatre Workshop in New York.

In general all these points of view are necessary in theatre work. When I direct a play I prefer to think of the set after I have seen the theatre space. The space itself can sometimes suggest interesting things. Of course this is not always possible. But when it is possible I find that the theatre space has a spirit and that that spirit begins to suggest the way the play should be done in that space. I don't mean to be done on a bare stage but what structure should the set have in that space. I like space to be solid.

DELGADO: Is directing part of the writing process?

FORNES: It is with a new play. A play is not really finished until it is on a stage. No matter how much experience you have. You have to see it on a stage before you know the work is done.

DELGADO: How and when you did you start directing your own plays?

FORNES: The very first thing that I directed was not my own play. After I wrote *Tango Palace* in 1963, I started going to the Actor's Studio.

I became very interested in the acting techniques there. The techniques aimed at getting the actors to get in contact with their instincts and with personal memories which, if used in connection with the role, begin to form part of the unconscious of the character. I was fascinated and I started taking acting classes at the Gene Frankel Theatre Workshop where "Method" techniques were taught. I also took a directing class there where I directed a scene a friend wrote. I was terrified to tell the actors what to do and I was surprised that when I did tell them, they did do it without blinking an eye. Although terrifying, the whole thing was fascinating to me. I realized that the actual stage practice would contribute greatly to my ability as a playwright.

I was present at rehearsals when *The Successful Life of 3* was done at the Open Theatre. There were a number of things that I thought should be done differently, however every time I tried to explain to the director how I thought it should be done she would say that she didn't agree. I thought what a peculiar thing that she would not listen to me when it was I who wrote the play (little did I know). I told Joe Chaikin what was happening, and he looked at me kindly and shrugged his shoulders with a philosophical and sympathetic expression on his face. I didn't know if I would know how to accomplish what I wanted even if I had the opportunity to direct it, but it surprised me that no one thought I should have been allowed to work on it.

A little later, *Tango Palace* and *The Successful Life of 3* were being done at the Firehouse Theatre in Minneapolis. I asked the director if I could direct the second play. He said yes. Here too I felt tentative when I gave direction to the actors. I also had the problem that the people who were acting were not experienced actors, especially the young girl. She objected every time I changed the blocking — she would say "Why do you keep changing your mind. First you tell me to go here and now you tell me to go there." And I told her that that's how you direct a play. First you do it one way and then you change it. I knew that directors don't just stage the thing and keep repeating it until the actor memorizes it. That is really what I remember: how difficult it was dealing with the other people. If I had been using paper dolls and doing the scene, I would not have gotten nervous whether it was working or not working. My nervousness had to do with so intimately telling peo-

ple what to do. It's not that I didn't accomplish anything or learn anything. It's just that I did not do a particularly good job.

Then, Judson Church in New York did my play *Promenade*. It was a musical. The piece I wrote was tiny, only a few pages. Al Carmines wrote music for it and Larry [Lawrence] Kornfeld directed it. Watching them work was a delight. Each improvised the most magical and beautiful things at the spur of the moment. I wrote more and more lyrics, Al wrote more and more delightful music and Larry created more magical moments on the stage.

Larry is a director who doesn't spend much time with how the characters should be interpreted. He is interested in what happens on the stage and what a character does and how he does it. This is the way I feel one should create. Larry has genius and a real talent for creating a wonderful dynamic on stage. He has people behave in a manner that is charming, natural, and spontaneous. When he is directing an avant-garde play, his work is so attentive and full of charm.

Watching people direct, I didn't know that I was learning how to direct. I was just admiring how someone does something. The first time I directed after that, I paid attention to the things that really make life on the stage interesting. I realized the importance of physical movement, changes in rhythm, tempo and time and allowing for things to happen even accidentally.

Watching people like the choreographer Remy Charlip, observing the way Al Carmines would write music — improvised in the moment of rehearsal — I saw people who were connected to their own creativity and to the space they worked in.

I became a Judson addict. I helped in whatever way I could. I made costumes or props for other works of Al Carmines', Larry Kornfeld's, Remy Charlip's, Harry Koutoukas' and others' productions. I was still a frequent visitor at the Open Theatre sessions and saw wonderful people who were working with techniques that involved them physically and mentally as well as emotionally. They were fruitful and joyful days. The move to directing happened naturally.

**DELGADO:** As well as directing your own work, you direct the work of other writers. We've talked about your production of *Hedda Gabler*

and how that fed into your own writing. You've directed *Uncle Vanya* and the work of your students at INTAR. I'm thinking particularly here of Caridad Svich's *Any Place But Here* in 1995 and Ana María Simo's *Going to New England* in 1990. How did you begin directing other people's work and what attracts you to the works you chose to stage?

FORNES: Both Ana María and Caridad were in my playwriting workshop at INTAR, a theatre in New York City that presents works written in Spanish and translated into English and new plays written in English by Hispanics living in the United States. Ana María and Caridad wrote these plays in that workshop. I had a deep feeling for the work the writers were doing there, especially for these two plays. There was something I saw in the work that made me want to spend time with it. Sometimes there is a mystery about a work that is compelling, sometimes it is the passion in the work, sometimes it is a sadness and sometimes a joy, or a sense of life that the characters have. Sometimes it is something you learn from spending time with these people. It could be many things that make me want to spend time with these characters; a sense of life that is tragic or philosophical, sometimes it is the joy of the piece, and so on. What I notice may be different from what other people notice, but it's something that is there. I never think I have to bring something to the piece. If the piece is there it's there. All you have to do is be sensitive to it and put it on. Directors are told you have to have a concept. I wonder if that is what you need.

DELGADO: Is it very different for you to work on other people's writing?

FORNES: With other people's work, when I start I'm aware that I don't know it well. I feel as if I found the work and have adopted it and it begins to feel no different than when I wrote it myself.

DELGADO: What if when you are rehearsing, there is a line that you feel doesn't work, you might change it with your own writing, do you change it with other people's?

FORNES: Yes if the playwright is not around I'm convinced that they will be delighted that I changed it. If the playwright is around, I ask them if I can do it. Sometimes they explain why the line is there. In that case I will put the line back and suggest something to avoid the confusion that I myself felt.

One time, I made so many changes in a scene of Ana María Simo's work that I called her and said, "Ana María, I have to meet with you because I made some changes." I met with her in a restaurant with my copy of the script. I was apprehensive because there were so many changes. The page was full of things crossed out and arrows changing the position of sentences. It looked messy. I showed it to her and she read it with great concentration. She held the script against her chest and closed her eyes. I thought, "Oh no, she hates it." I waited and she still held the script against her chest. I said, "You don't like it." She said, "You have no idea how much I have thought about this scene, how much trouble I have had and you took care of it." I was ecstatic because I didn't know what I would do if she refused to make the changes. I felt that these were important changes to make.

The same thing happened with Caridad Svich's *Any Place But Here*, except that Caridad was not present during rehearsals. She came from Los Angeles to the last performance at Theater for the New City. I was scared because if she didn't like the changes there was nothing to be done about it. Luckily, she liked them. I do take possession of a play when I direct it. I find it difficult not to feel as if I wrote the play.

DELGADO: There are a lot of directors who might do a play once and never return to it. But you return to your own works and stage them again and again.

FORNES: When you love someone, don't you want to see them again? When you hear music that you love, don't you want to hear it again? When you work with a play you love, you want to work with it again. Then, if I have a new cast it's always different. With a new cast, you have to find ways of working that are different because *they* are different. Then, of course, what I love is when there are moments in a play where I can do a little rewrite and improve something. When a scene

is well written, it will always work. But there are times when a scene is passable, but not really right — there may be a moment that one hopes would go-fast-so-that-no-one-would-notice-that-it-wasn't-very-good. When I do the play again and I find out what is needed in terms of writing to make it right, it's wonderful.

DELGADO: You've recently been reworking *Fefu and Her Friends* for a single space.

FORNES: Yes, I have converted the four middle scenes into one scene that takes place in the living room, rather than in other rooms of the house. Theatres which have no adjacent spaces can do this version of the play on the main stage. I feel this version is not just a second best alternative. It turned out to be as interesting as the original draft. In some ways I think that this version may even have more resonance than the original.

I first made these changes because I was asked to translate the play into Spanish for a Latin American publication. It occurred to me that this would be the time when I could do a rewrite of the middle part, which I had for some time intended to do. In the process of translating, contrary to the idea that translation is simply a question of knowing both languages well, I needed to re-enter my original creative state of mind.

DELGADO: As well as translating your own work you've worked on translations of other plays, like Virgilio Piñera's *Cold Air*.

FORNES. I translated it because I wanted to stage it. When you translate you cannot just translate literally; a word may be the same in both English and Spanish but in each language it could have a different nuance. In my own plays I think I know what the mood should be, what the rhythms of the scene should be, the temperament of the characters, the character of the scene. The character may have a quiet temperament, but if I need a scene that has more dynamic, then the characters will have to become a little more dynamic than usual. When translating a play, you have to be careful not just to be accurate in the meaning of

the words, but also to be sensitive to the connotation and the mood of the language. If you substitute one word for another, a sense of mood can be sharper. It could even be a question of rhythm or sound. I think if an actor translates maybe he will be more aware of what I am talking about because the actor needs to speak the words and the sound of the word is part of the meaning of the word.

DELGADO: How does this work in team translation when there's a group working on an English version?

FORNES: The first time I was involved in a project like this was at INTAR. We had to work very quickly on a play by the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa. A team of three was set up to speed up the process. Someone suggested we each translate a third of the play. I was against that. I thought we would end up with three different styles. I suggested the three of us work together. We did. It happened purely by chance that each one of us had different origins and skills. This variety provided for a perfect team for the job. One was a perfectly bilingual Peruvian. The other was an American writer with some knowledge of Spanish. The third was me, a playwright whose native language was Spanish, but who had no sense of Peruvian connotations.

It was decided that since I was a playwright I would start so that the translation would have a conversational rather than literal tone. The Peruvian would make sure that my translation didn't miss Peruvian nuances. The American writer had his ear on the naturalness of the English translation. One can say he did a second draft. We did it so fast. In three or four hours the final draft was finished. This is what people should do when translating. A team like this would get translations done in no time at all.

DELGADO: Bearing in mind that English is your second language, did you ever think of writing in Spanish?

FORNES: If somebody asked me to write a play in Spanish I might find that if I do it, it's easy and natural, but I might find that it isn't

because I don't speak Spanish that frequently. I have now been speaking English for over fifty years. I think in English.

DELGADO: How important is your Cuban heritage?

FORNES: Very important. I think your life is divided in three parts. The first is between birth and the age of sixteen, the second between sixteen and forty, and the third is from forty on. I was fourteen-and-a-half years old when I came to New York. In New York I turned from childhood to adulthood, so this is my home. Cuba was the place of my birth and the start of my life. I will always be a Cuban even if I adore my new country, New York. New York is my country. Cuba is my country of birth. New York is my country of growth. The first part of your life is very important unless you want to forget it and I never did. But even if you have forgotten it, it has left traces in you. My writing has an off-center quality that is not exactly deliberate, but that I have not tried to change because I know its origin lies in the temperament and language of my birth. Besides, my primary interest has never been to reproduce a realistic, everyday world. Outside of the language itself, I know there are character values and priorities that suggest a foreign source. I know that sometimes I am moved by something because of my Cuban upbringing and I know that sometimes I notice something because of my Cuban upbringing. At the same time, in many ways, I think the way Americans think, and I feel very much at home in the United States.

DELGADO: You've often spoken of as a kind of mentor for a generation of Latino dramatists in the US...

FORNES: Most of them came out of my workshop at INTAR. Rather than teaching them how a play should be written in the sense of a formula, I tried not teaching them how to write but to present to them ways where they could find their creativity, how to become in touch with their own imagery and their own aesthetic.

DELGADO: Could you talk a bit about your workshops at INTAR. How did they come about?

FORNES: Well, they came about because at some point I was talking to Max Ferrá, the artistic director at INTAR, telling him that we must do a playwriting workshop for Hispanics. A workshop that doesn't just give them a formula to write a play, but a place where, through some form of meditation, visualizations, and writing exercises, I could lead them to exercising their imagination and creativity. I also thought that they should receive some sort of payment, at least the equivalent of what they would receive in a job for the same amount of hours they spent in the workshop. This would be three hours, three times a week, so they would not be too overwhelmingly burdened by financial need. The playwrights should be paid because if the playwrights were not paid it would never take off. Americans can dangle a carrot for young Americans who want to be playwrights. There are role models. Young people can say, "I want to write like O'Neill." They may not be very interested in writing but they think it will be attractive and romantic to be that kind of person. The immigrant Hispanic doesn't have any kind of person like that so there has to be another kind of stimulus for them to make the overwhelming effort. They have to be paid.

A grant was allowed and the workshop worked beautifully for three years. Most of the Hispanic writers active in theatre today came out of that workshop. To receive the grant, I needed to write a description of it. At first I thought that would be difficult. But then, it occurred to me that I should just try to imagine an ideal workshop which, if I heard of it, I myself would wish to attend. I proceeded to imagine a system which consisted of stretching exercises, meditation, visualization of character, drawing of spaces and characters, and other creative exercises common to actors' training, but not at all to playwrights' training. I decided we should start work at nine o'clock in the morning when everyone starts work so they would apply themselves with the same sense of duty as anyone going to work in the morning. From the beginning, I said, "At nine o'clock sharp the door is locked. And if you are not here, don't knock at the door, because the door will not be opened. And if you

don't come you won't get paid." This I never did. I never didn't pay them. But they got the idea and they were as punctual as soldiers.

DELGADO: How long would a writer be in the workshop?

FORNES: As long as I felt that they were profiting by the workshop. The workshop went on for seven years and some of them were there for as long as six years.

DELGADO: Did any become writers in different mediums?

FORNES: Some did some work in other mediums, but it was mostly in theatre.

DELGADO: Of course these workshops were not just confined to INTAR. You've been running writing workshops across America and beyond for many years now. Do you think playwriting can be taught?

FORNES: Of course. You can teach playwriting the way you can teach any other art. You don't teach an art by giving the person a bunch of rules. You teach it by encouraging the person to pay attention to their own imagination. To trust and respect their own imagination. To allow the work to be a meditation. To open their imagination and their sensitivity to the themes and aspects of human character that interest them. To trust their imagination in the most intimate and delicate way. To commit themselves to the integrity of the work. Not to drive the very work out of their hands by burdening it with external concerns. Those are the main things that people have to learn. You can teach a person how to breathe, how to meditate, how to listen to their own consciousness, even how to listen to their own desires. Why wouldn't you be able to teach a person how to find their own creativity?

Maybe the word is not teach but train. Some people have talent but they don't know how to use it. There are techniques to train people how to act. They don't know what the practice of what they are attempting to do consists of. Every art has methods of learning. A good method would usually consist of an application to a process rather than

to seeking a result. A good teacher can make the student aware of errors in his approach to the work. A lot of my ideas about teaching playwriting have to do with my understanding of acting techniques. The Method exercises are creative techniques. They are not techniques dealing with style and certainly not theme. People believe that Method is a style.

Lee Strasberg may have limited his interest to psychological social drama but his intelligence, sensitivity, and sophistication in regard to the quality of acting was superb. He was a genius at inventing and developing exercises to keep the student focus on a genuine creative goal. That is, I suppose, the opposite of imitation and fakery.

DELGADO: Do the exercises have different aims and objectives?

FORNES: No, they are different approaches to arrive at the same thing, namely a fresh perspective toward the work. That is, a constant viewing of the work from a different point of view and with a fresh mind which really means a new viewing of the character from a different point of view. When you let your mind relax, you stop worrying about the scene you have to write, or about whether you are a good writer or not. The main point of my exercises is the same as acting, to try to stop people from concentrating on the result.

I have people do a visualization exercise. For example, I would have people remember a moment in their lives before the age of nine where there was something that had to do with water. I am not asking for something dramatic or significant. It can be the simplest thing. My aim is to make them understand that they can and should concentrate on simple things, as well as important, dramatic, and extraordinary things. It is indeed the opposite of what people teach a beginner student in a dramatic writing class. They would say, "Think of a moment that has great consequences." I would say, "Think of a moment that has no consequences." For me, to think of something that has great consequences is anti-productive. When you write a play, you have to start by putting seeds in the ground. Don't think of the great tree that will come out of it. I say to them, "Don't try to think of a memory that would be important. Just let your mind try to visualize a moment that has to do

with water." The reason I say with water is because it is simple and has a variety of forms and uses. It could be a day on the beach, or it could be someone drinking a glass of water, or taking a shower, or looking at the ocean. I ask questions: Is the image outdoors or is it indoors?, What kind of day is it? I ask them about the tone of the light, the temperature, the sounds, the colour of clothing of each person, the hands, the arms — are they hairy or smooth? I force them to stay within themselves, moving into it. When you keep trying to move into it, then you really do transport yourself.

I ask them to make a drawing of it. After making the drawing, I give them about three lines of dialogue that I pick out from a book or something. They write the lines.

DELGADO: Do they have to use those three lines?

FORNES: I tell them that they don't have to use them in the writing. The lines are there just to trigger speaking, to trigger sound. Then the process of creative writing is a process of listening to the characters and being curious about what you hear and what you see them do rather than a planning and deciding what they will do. It is almost as if you are watching the characters through a window. If you start deciding what they will do, the characters will go flat and start speaking like puppets, only not as cute. They will be dull. You have to allow for the character to surprise the writer.

Characters must have as much autonomy in their world as the characters in our subconscious have in our dreams. If we provide a trustworthy environment for them (that means an environment that is real and secure, not because it is safe but more because it is real), they will not let you down. When you daydream, things are happening in your mind; you're not controlling them. There is perhaps, a deeper wish that is controlling it, but it is not our rational will. The rational mind has pulled back and has stopped controlling things. When that happens you will have a knowledge of the characters. The exercises are not as complicated as they may seem. The imagination has a component of reality and it also has a side that is fake. The writer has to keep his eye on this question and not let the fake side take over.

In the workshop I don't give the writer's dramatic criticism. I concentrate on developing their ability to connect with the characters' truest and central state of mind. At the end of each session, two or three of them will read what they have just written in the session. Their reading is beneficial for those listening as well as for the one who is reading. When the writing is genuine, the characters immediately come alive.

DELGADO: But isn't it also about observation?

FORNES: Yes, it is about observation. Observation as a means of moving closer to the subject. Understanding the subject's physical and mental state. Becoming one with the subject and noticing what he or she says. And how they say it. Sometimes a person says something you may notice that they may say something other than what they mean. When you write dialogue, it could ring false if you don't pay attention to what they say or how they say it. If you don't have an ear for what rings true or false, you're not going to be able to write a good play unless the play is called "Bad Ear." Having a great idea doesn't mean you'll write a good play. When actors get hold of a play that rings true, they are in heaven and they perform well. I've seen satisfaction in actors' faces when they say true lines. The lines are activating them, rather than they having to activate the lines through labor and craft.

During rehearsals for a workshop production of *Abingdon Square* in 1984, John Aylward — the actor who played the role of Juster, the betrayed husband — and I were working on a scene where his emotions were painful and his response toward his wife was brutal. We kept doing it again and again. At some point, I began to feel guilty about putting him through this nastiness over and over and I said to him, "Are you tired? Would you like to break?" And he said, "No! This is good stuff!" The actor smiled and I was thinking, "What does he mean?" The situation and the lines were motivating him and he was flying with the scene. I was amazed that in spite of it being a moment where his character was in pain, humiliated, betrayed, he was enjoying it. I realized that an actor's most thrilling moment of his craft is when the material gives him enough fuel to take off without having to laboriously construct a state of mind.

In their training, writers are instructed to create a text where the subtext is evident, where there is a hidden emotional subtext. It is then evident that their duty is to reveal the subconscious motivation of the character. In some ways doing this is asking the playwright to betray the character. The existence of the subconscious in the human mind is a powerful and real emotion that the person so abhors that it becomes a necessity to conceal and deny it. A psychoanalyst has to work very hard to make the patient aware of these emotions that have been so successfully hidden. The person has been operating in all sincerity with the belief that what they are expressing or going through is the reality of their emotion. If the writer and the actor are directed to reveal that subconscious, they are betraying the behavior and reality of the character. There is a difference between having repressed emotions and lying.

DELGADO: You recently worked with the Florida Grand Opera Company on the libretto for a new opera with music by Robert Ashley which you called *Manual for a desperate crossing* but was later titled *Balseros/Rafters*. Was this very different from writing a play?

FORNES: Yes. The text for an opera should be closer to a poem than to natural speech. Another thing that is very different is that, as the music is written, the importance of the words begins to subside to the power of the music. The music can change the nature and meaning of a text. It can therefore begin to act as co-writer. The music can also begin to act as director. It can turn a lyrical solo into a lively quintet. The composer can turn a serious piece into comedy, or the other way around. What was wrong with *Manual for a desperate crossing* is that Ashley had no respect for my work as is evident in his changing the title of the piece without even consulting me.

DELGADO: Was it very different working on an opera like *Lovers and Keepers*?

FORNES: *Lovers and Keepers* was not an opera. For one, there was much more spoken language than is customary in opera. Then, the music had

a very definite popular flavor; Tito Puente and Fernando Rivas wrote it. I would call it a play with songs.

DELGADO: Like a musical?

FORNES: In a way it was like a musical but the dialogue in a musical seems to be lighthearted and inconsequential. Some of the dialogue in *Lovers and Keepers* was humorous, but a great deal of it was naturalistic and in some cases crude and blunt like a play rather than a musical. It is three stories about three couples. In the middle story, for example, Elena and her husband are going through a stormy and desperate period. She becomes pregnant by another man. She delivers a desperate song sitting on her bed. There is a blackout. When the lights come up the sheets are full of blood. She delivers a song that is profoundly painful and tragic.

I did another piece called *Cap-a-pie* in 1975 with the composer Jose Raul Bernardo which was based on events, stories, experiences in the performers lives. These were collected during a period of workshops where the actors reminisced on childhood memories, first impressions of New York and other memories. Each told a story which I selected from what they had recounted in the workshop. I chose, from their narrative, two tales from each. Trimmed down the story, selected a moment where I turned the narrative into lyrics for a song. Jose Raul Bernardo wrote the music and each actor told his or her story and sang their song. Here are two extremes: one imperfect and two perfect collaborations.

DELGADO: And after directing the next production of *The Summer in Gossensass*, what next?

FORNES: To work on *What of the Night?*, to look over the text. I made some minor changes on *Springtime* when I worked on it last time. Then I'll put it aside for a while. *Springtime* was wonderful. Molly Powell played Greta. She has an interesting quality, an internal stillness. At the end of the play, she finds Rainbow's letter where Rainbow explains why she has left her. After she reads the letter, she stands center stage looking

toward the window, her back is to the audience. The lights start to fade, leaving her in a pool of light. There is a visible tremor in her body. The lights fade to black. I gave Molly a note asking her to make the tremor smaller. The next day, the tremor was still too strong. I asked her to make it smaller and she said, "I am not making it happen this way. I can't help it. This is how it happens after I read the letter." I then said, "This is much much later, Rainbow is still gone, and you are still waiting for her." And she said, "I see what you mean. The reason I could not control it is because I thought the moment of the letter is immediately after Rainbow has left." And then, in the last performance, the stage lights began to come down as her pool of light started to come up, and the tremor was much more gentle. And the end of the play was beautiful. And it seemed that Greta would spend the rest of her life in great sorrow, waiting for Rainbow.

#### POSTSCRIPT

DELGADO: It's now August 1999, we've just looked over the interview we did in 1997 and revised it for publication. You redirected *The Summer in Gossensass* at the Judith Anderson Theatre in 1998, wrote a new short play called *The Audition* staged at Theater for the New City later that year, and have recently directed *Fefu and Her Friends* at Santa Fe Stages. What comes next?

FORNES: The Signature Theatre, which is dedicating this season to my work, has commissioned me to write a new play. The play is about three friends, a playwright, a dancer, and a designer who have had a long and profound friendship. It starts with a conversation between the designer and the dancer about a creative crisis the playwright is going through. He cannot get a grip on his play and is restless, unpleasant and accusatory. The other two are concerned and try to find the way to help. Gradually the playwright's condition has created such tension that it starts to poison each of their relationships. An atmosphere of artistic jealousy, treachery, and despair has set in. The play is a study of the delicacy and susceptibility of the creative mind. A peaceful state

of mind can allow it to flow steadily and be fruitful or it can make it go dormant. Tension and despair can block it or it can inspire it and cause it to burst open like a volcano.

\* From an interview conducted in Brighton and London on October 26, 1997. Additional unpublished material from Rod Wooden's interview with Maria Irene Fornes for Manchester's City of Drama conversation series, November 20, 1994. The interview was revised for publication in July and August 1999.

1 See p. 19.



## DEIRDRE O'CONNELL

*actress*

### A FINAL THOUGHT

IRENE HAS THE MOST FUN OF ANYONE I know. People that don't know her and see her plays might think she is sad or dark, but I have never seen her sad.

Ever since I saw *Mud* a million years ago, I have sat at her feet and if she had been a sad person it wouldn't have been nearly as much sheer pleasure to do so.

She is always funny.

She is always inspiring.

She always speaks in direct language about how art is actually made, and the art she makes is the great art. She can drive you insane in the quest for the great art.

She does not suffer fools at all or weakness at all.

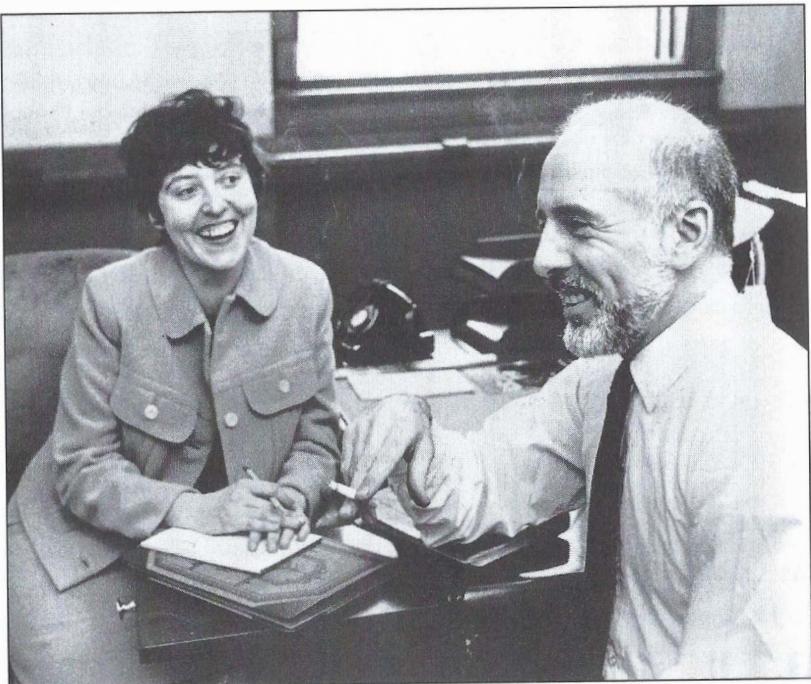
She does not allow you to be less brave than she is. She pretends the terror doesn't exist, and she banishes it.

When you fall in love with her she is like a riddle — why is this woman so joyful?

So quick to laugh and so utterly engaged?

I think maybe the answer is that she only and absolutely does what she wants to do and only and absolutely makes the art she wants to see.

She is completely true.



Maria Irene Fornes and Jerome Robbins during rehearsal of  
*THE OFFICE*  
Henry Miller Theatre, New York City, 1966