

**“Close your eyes. Picture a character. . .”: A Route to Imagery and Creativity**

Lenke Németh

**García-Romero, Anne. *The Fornes Frame: Contemporary Latina Playwrights and the Legacy of Maria Irene Fornes*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2016. xiii + 240 pages. ISBN 978-0816531448. Pbk. \$24.95.**

Inspired and intrigued by the diversity and vibrancy of newly arising Latina/o theatrical voices in the mid-2000s, Latina playwright and theatre studies scholar Anne García-Romero found it imperative to include the representatives of a new generation of playwrights in Latina/o theatre studies scholarship and also search for the origins of this cultural nascence on stage. Her book *The Fornes Frame: Contemporary Latina Playwrights and the Legacy of Maria Irene Fornes* (2016) fully accomplishes this aim as García-Romero examines selected works of five nationally and internationally acclaimed contemporary Latina playwrights and identifies Cuban born American avant-garde dramatist Maria Irene Fornes (1930-2018) as the fountainhead and driving force of Latina playwriting.

An experimental dramatist, director, costume designer, as well as a drama teacher and mentor of many young Latina authors of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, Fornes laid the foundation of Latina playwriting by providing “innovative and useful models of what a Latina play can be” (6). The guiding principle of the book, the “Fornes frame,” embracing the manifold influences of Fornes’s theatrical art on new generations’ drama, is appropriately chosen by the author and allows for a comprehensive and nuanced examination of the work of Caridad Svich (1963-), Karen Zacarías (1969-), Elaine Romero (birth date unpublicized), Cusi Cram (1967-), and Quira Alegria Hudes (1977-). Out of the immensely rich and varied thematic preoccupations and the often astonishing but truly original dramaturgical strategies in Fornes’s legacy, García-Romero chooses four concepts—cultural multiplicity, supernatural intervention, Latina identity, and theatrical experimentation—as guiding principles for the analyses of the selected dramatists’ works. The conceptual framework thus narrowed down and applied for the investigation results in a clearly structured and lucidly argued book.

*The Introduction: Defining the Fornes Frame*—set in italics along with the *Conclusion* by García-Romero herself, highlighting the frames she creates around the analytic chapters in this preeminently visible way, too—offers a thorough explanation of the Fornesian frame as well as a detailed rationale for

the choices made by the author. The four concepts described in this part are relevant to Fornes's oeuvre. The clarification of the specificity of supernatural intervention in Latina/o literature in general and in Latina drama in particular is useful as is the identification of the term of *facultad* ("supernatural sight," 8) characteristically occurring in these literary texts. Likewise, the emphasis on Fornes's theatrical experimentation that pushes the borders of any conventional dramaturgical strategy is vital for new generations to be able to create their own distinct dramaturgy and language on stage. The creative and innovative power of Fornes's art is aptly formulated by Marc Robinson: her theatre "is the gift of someone who regularly lets herself be astonished" (90).

It is legitimate to claim that Fornes's drama addresses the themes of cultural multiplicity and Latina identity, yet it must be added that it does so merely indirectly. García-Romero also notes that "Fornes's plays traverse cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic borders" (6). Arguably, in the drama of Fornes's students, these two issues gain prominence in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. However, the author's claim that late-twentieth-century dramatists like "Migdalia Cruz and Cherríe Moraga . . . explore characters that are often negotiating their Latina lives within a single cultural world" (7) can be contested. The worlds of the characters always incorporate at least two different cultures, for instance, Puerto Rican vs. American and Mexican American vs. American, which, in the latter case is further complicated with a claim for the indigenous heritage. By no means can these worlds be considered single. Similarly, Latina identity as dramatized in the works of Cruz and Moraga is a composite one. The author's claim that "Latina playwrights have previously explored the centrality of the Latina body as a site of representation, but the emphasis has been on a *single national identity*" (11, emphasis added) mistakenly suggests a homogeneous identity. The shaping forces of the heterogeneous Latina identity as presented by Cruz and Moraga incorporate Puerto Rican and American as well as Mexican American, indigenous, and even Chicana identities, respectively. Indeed, the Latina/o community in the United States "encompasses a wide array of cultures from Latin America, to the Caribbean, to Spain and onward" (9), especially from the twenty-first century, and this diversity is truly reflected in the theatrical presentations of the selected Latina playwrights. A more refined phrasing that accentuates the multiplication of cultures and communities involved in identity building of Latina characters after the new millennium would resolve the ambiguities highlighted.

The Introduction is followed by six major chapters each devoted to a different Latina playwright. The first chapter discusses Fornes's two widely acknowledged plays, *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977) and *Sarita* (1984), and

effectively demonstrates the working of the selected Fornesian concepts. In addition to the scholarly discussion in this part, however, García-Romero includes valuable and substantial information about Fornes's idiosyncratic method of teaching playwriting, which she terms "environmental pedagogy" (46). Having been a student of Fornes's playwriting courses in various contexts for an extended period of time, the author describes in detail what this practice involves and how Fornes departs from giving rigid formulas of drama writing: "her methods encourage creating new play material through inhabiting multiple environments such as interior meditative terrain, exterior diverse geographies, visual art techniques, and yoga practice" (46). Highlighting the centrality of character creation in Fornes's drama and connecting it with abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann's (1880-1966) influence on her dramatic technique shows the dynamic correlation between visuality and spatiality in her art.

The ensuing chapters focusing on the five young playwrights are arranged logically "according to several elements: the playwright's connection to Fornes as a teacher, the playwright's career longevity in the field of Latina theatre, and the concepts in this study" (22). The five selected theatrical voices are "all professionally trained and enjoy award-winning playwriting careers" (19) in the US. They share an engagement with varied cultural complexities in their work and their intent to experiment with structure and language. The second chapter, entitled "Caridad Svich: Imprinting the Fornes Frame," focuses on "a direct theatrical descendant of Fornes" (23), Svich, who is of Cuban-Spanish and Argentinean-Croatian descent. It argues that her works unambiguously demonstrate the pervasive influence of the Fornesian theatre in terms of themes as well as form. "Karen Zacarías: Navigating Multiple Borders" suggests that Fornes's legacy can be clearly traced in the drama of Zacarías of Mexican-Lebanese-Danish descent, though she is not a Fornes disciple. The fourth chapter—"Elaine Romero: Viewing Latin@ Realism"—discusses the works of the Mexican American dramatist and depicts the sacred world in her drama thus linking spirituality, as her thematic preference, to Fornes's art. At this stage it must be noted that in her study García-Romero prefers using "the '@' symbol to replace the previous 'a/o' ending" in the term Latina/o (13). No matter how practical the use of this symbol may prove to be, "this new orthography has relevance only in a print context," since "both Latina/o and Latin@ are pronounced as Latina/Latino" (14). "Cusi Cram: Performing Latina Identity" addresses the cultural complexities of building Latina identity in the case of an author with Bolivian-Scottish origins. A playwright of Puerto Rican and Jewish descent is in the focus of the last chapter, entitled "Quira Alegría Hudes: Conducting Theatrical

Experimentation” that deals with the innovative structures she uses in her plays, thus echoing Fornes’s groundbreaking dramaturgical techniques.

The chapter entitled *Conclusion: The Legacy of Maria Irene Fornes* completes the frame around the six main parts of the book recounting most recent achievements of Fornes’s “daughters” as well as foreseeing how her “playwriting and pedagogy will continue to serve as a beacon to generations of artists” (175). *The Epilogue: Fornes Is the Frame* following the conclusion presents a heart-rending scene depicting García-Romero’s visit to the physically fragile Fornes in an assisted living center in New York. The image of the student and her mentor/teacher connecting through their native tongue (Spanish), gesture, memory, music, and “hand-dancing” sears in the readers’ memory as perhaps a last one about Fornes. She passed away on 30 October 2018. I would suggest that after seeing Fornes in the center García-Romero gains *facultad* about the power and function of art—and in particular theatrical art: “In her residence room she taught me to use language, gesture, memory, and music to profoundly engage with another. Fornes continues to teach all of us that always the artistic spirit endures” (192).

As a resource about Fornes’s theatrical art and playwriting method, about her legacy to generations of Latina/o dramatists, *The Fornes Frame* will prove invaluable for a wide audience including theatre studies scholars, students, and teachers of drama and theatre as well as Latina/o and Chicana/o studies scholarship.

University of Debrecen

#### Work Cited

Robinson, Marc. *The Other American Drama*. Cambridge: CUP, 1994. Print.