

FROM *LA VIUDA* TO *LETTERS FROM CUBA*: FAMILY CORRESPONDENCE IN MARÍA IRENE FORNÉS' THEATER

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ABSTRACT: María Irene Fornés (1930-2018) developed a theatrical career inextricably linked to Off-Off-Broadway for more than forty years. One of her most celebrated techniques for writing springs from the chance operation of opening a text, choosing a phrase, sentence or paragraph, and writing it on the blank page to act as inspiration. In fact, her theater abounds with pieces from many varied sources, multiple references as well as objects found in thrift shops. *La Viuda*, written in Spanish and published in Havana in 1961, was her first play. In 2000, the curtain falls on her theatrical career with the premiere of *Letters from Cuba*, her last published play. Texts from both the opening and closing landmarks of this most distinguished playwright draw inspiration from different sets of family correspondence. The coincidence in using personal letters as found objects allows for an analysis that will deal with the adaptation from private written texts to a theatrical medium as a signature feature of her theater, concentrating on how they trigger the conception of the play and how they also condition the performance. The article will analyze the adaptation of letters on the stage by considering both formal and thematic aspects, such as references to time and space, the theatrical actions displayed by different characters, the set and stage design, as well as the tone of each piece.

RESUMEN: María Irene Fornés (1930-2018) desarrolló su labor teatral durante más de cuarenta años ineludiblemente ligada a Off-Off-Broadway. Una de sus técnicas de escritura más célebres consiste

en la operación azarosa de abrir un texto, escoger una frase, oración o párrafo y copiarlo en la página en blanco como fuente de inspiración. De hecho, en sus obras teatrales abundan fuentes muy variadas, referencias múltiples y objetos encontrados en tiendas de segunda mano. *La Viuda*, escrita en español y publicada en La Habana en 1961, fue su primera obra teatral. En 2000, baja el telón de su carrera teatral con el debut de *Letters from Cuba*, su última obra publicada. Tanto al inicio como al final, esta eminente dramaturga recurre a dos colecciones distintas de correspondencia familiar como núcleo del texto, en cierto modo cerrando así el círculo. La coincidencia en el uso de cartas personales como objetos encontrados permite analizar la adaptación de textos privados al medio escénico como un rasgo distintivo de su teatro, abordando cómo las cartas desencadenan la concepción de la obra y cómo condicionan la representación. El artículo se centrará en su traslación a escena y, para ello, considerará aspectos formales y temáticos como el uso del tiempo y el espacio, la acción teatral de los personajes, el diseño escénico o el tono de cada una de las obras.

La Viuda (1961) and *Letters from Cuba* (2000) mark the beginning and the end of María Irene Fornés¹ playwriting career.² These two plays, written and published forty years apart, use family correspondence as the basis for their stage action, adapting the written text to performance language. The former was written before Fornés' long involvement with the alternative theater of New York City, while the latter is the ripe product of a director, playwright and teacher with a life-long, unrelenting commitment to the art of theater and all things theatrical. As an entrance into the world of dramatic writing,³ *La Viuda* shows some of the features that characterize Fornés' technique, such as the use of borrowed texts for the stage; the simple, stylized, abstract setting; or the manipulation of time that allows for

¹ I will use the original Spanish spelling of the playwright's name, keeping the tilde throughout the article. In the case of quotations, the published spelling will be maintained.

² I am indebted to the reviewers and editors for their careful reading and valuable comments and suggestions.

³ Fornés scholarship has generally assumed *Tango Palace* (1963) as her first play, excluding *La Viuda* from the list. The reasons for this neglect may have been that *La Viuda*, originally written in Spanish, has never been translated into English, it has never received a major theatrical production, and it was written and published outside the circle of Off-Off-Broadway, as a personal, individual endeavor of Fornés'. The choice of this play as the beginning of Fornés' career will hopefully contribute to rightfully incorporating it to her oeuvre.

the constant interaction of past and present onstage. As a distillation of the playwright's expertise, *Letters from Cuba* fuses time and space in pure fornesian style, shows Fornés' strong belief in the transformative power of art, and can be considered her testament for the stage.

Fornés' plays are characterized by the fluidity of beginnings and endings, as well as winning and losing. Subjugated to the rules of the world, her characters enact games which, as in the typical "Game Over!" caption, are marked by two outcomes: either winning or losing. And precisely those opposite results are contained in the two plays. Whereas *La Viuda* corresponds to the end of a world and a life suspended in stagnation, *Letters from Cuba* shows the intoxicating possibilities for a new life in a different setting. Despite their distance, both plays epitomize the salient features of Fornés' playwriting. The coincidental use of letters as inspiration and as a resource for dramatic action is a typical fornesian technique that rests on the possibilities of chance and the found object. Specific issues to be addressed include: how letters are translated onto performance, what implications there are for writing and reading letters on stage, what kinds of actions are triggered by staging epistles, what the tone set by these correspondences entails, and what kind of theatrical evolution can be detected at both ends of Fornés' career to illustrate the paradigms of her dramaturgy. Drawing upon these inquiries, this article argues that considering personal correspondence as the found object is the key to delineate Fornés' signature style, showcased through the comparison and contrast of her beginning and end in the world of theater.

CHANCE AS INSPIRATION IN FORNÉS' THEATER

The Cuban-born playwright (1930-2018) developed a theatrical career inextricably linked to Off-Off-Broadway for roughly four decades. During this period, besides writing and directing plays, she devoted a great amount of time and effort to training other playwrights how to write. Among many other venues, she worked from 1978 to 1991 at INTAR and Padua Hills (Robinson 246; *The Fornés Institute*).⁴ Her distinguished role as a teacher for playwriting has left an unforgettable impression and has shaped the craft of renowned and

⁴ International Art Relations, a Hispanic theater, is located in New York; Padua in California.

established figures in the US stage and numerous lesser-known students who attended her workshops. As many of them have attested, she was intent on creating the adequate conditions for writing and encouraging the participants to search for truth inside themselves: “Her techniques are more about her integrity to the artistic impulse, about facing what is inside us without passing judgment on it or censoring it. Each exercise is a new channel to creativity, a new way to access the inaccessible” (Romero, 189-90). Fornés intended to write *The Anatomy of Inspiration*, a book on her method compiling exercises and activities she applied in the workshops (Svich 2). Unfortunately, it was never completed, but we can still trace and extract abundant information relating her technique through her own comments in different interviews and through the testimonials of many playwrights that took her classes, like Caridad Svich, Migdalia Cruz, Elaine Romero, Eduardo Machado or Anne García-Romero to name just a few (Fornés, “Maria Irene Fornés” 58-59; Delgado and Svich, *Conducting a Life* 146-245; Kushner, “Some Thoughts about Maria Irene Fornés” 131).

Although there are numerous invaluable recollections of her teachings, it is particularly important to highlight two contributions, urgently published in 2009, in an effort to record her legacy after Fornés was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. Caridad Svich gathered activities experienced by eleven students at different times and places; Gwendolyn Alker, in a different light, accounts for a second-hand interpretation of her method since she never attended her classes, and concentrates on its application in class, including the notion of the found object or the use of the archive (Svich; Alker). Fornés’ method often combined physical activity with meditation and introspection as a means to create the adequate conditions for writing. Elaine Romero, for instance, explains:

We were there to rotate our ankles and to shake our wrists (writers torture themselves in their chairs, she told us), to learn her process, to uncover the stories and characters that dwelled deeply in the unconscious through visualization, sense memory, and a walk into a refreshing three-dimensionality that eludes many playwrights. (189)

In Fornés own telling of how she started to write, we find a revealing anecdote that shows her approach, when she was trying to encourage her friend Susan Sontag to become a writer at the beginning of Sontag’s career:

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. (Fornes, "María Irene Fornes Discusses Forty Years in Theatre with María M. Delgado" 255-6)

The chance operation⁵ of opening a book, choosing a phrase, sentence or paragraph and writing it on the blank page is her trigger for inspiration. And this system can be traced not only in her theater and in her playwriting sessions, but also in her directing, considering that the final form of a play was to be achieved in the process of rehearsal and would even be liable to changes after the premiere. In fact, Fornés' own plays abound with pieces from many other texts and multiple references that are integrated in collage form. Random, accidental events become defining elements which extend also to other aspects of theater production and direction. For instance, *Fefu and her Friends* is a site-specific play which was written with the venue in mind; *The Danube* was inspired by a set of recordings of an English-Hungarian method found in a thrift store, just as the ironing board, axe and pitchfork that appear in *Mud*. No wonder different scholars have coined labels and phrases such as "a magpie mind" (Delgado and Svich, "How Does One Draw a Portrait of an Artist?" ix), "fondness for the found" (Cummings, *María Irene Fornes* 83-87), "Palimpsests" (Moroff), or the "Fornes Frame" (García-Romero) to reflect her constant searching for objects and texts and their application in theater productions. Borrowing words from all kinds of documents is absolutely congruent with her notion of playwriting and artistic creation. Coincidentally, family correspondence is the *objet trouvé* as

⁵ "Chance operation" is commonly associated to John Cage's "balance between the rational and the irrational by allowing random events to function within the context of a controlled system" (Jensen 97) in his compositional process. Fornés also shared Cage's artistic interest in the 1960s Happenings. However, the term here refers more generally to Fornés' reliance on random events such as finding inspiration by using a word from a book or using objects found in a thrift store in performance.

a source of inspiration in Fornés' first and last plays: *La Viuda* and *Letters from Cuba*.

THE FOUND OBJECT: LETTERS AS PERSONAL THEATER

Letters are part of what Sue-Ellen Case terms “personal theatre,” a mode which fits some of the most specific forms of female communication on the stage. Personal dialogue is “built on mutuality and intersubjectivity, eliminating any sense of formal distance or representation” because it “is not removed from life, so it operates not by mimesis but by enactment” (Case 47). Indeed, letters and diaries give the possibility of disclosing the intimate self, allowing for reflections and interactions not stiffened by the rigor and decorum of public speech, traditionally banned for women. This kind of private document commonly resorts to an informal style, without the hierarchical divisions and limitations imposed by a traditional form of playwriting and theater practice, so its adaptation to the stage language crosses from the private to the public sphere. Transforming letters or personal diaries into dramatic texts is not an uncommon feature for Fornés, who “is strongly drawn to the preliterate: to the authority of documents, of found materials such as letters of her great-grandfather’s cousin that inspired *The Widow*” (Sontag 44). *Evelyn Brown* is another case in point, being the only play by Fornés that is based exclusively on one document: the handwritten diary of a maid who lived in rural New England in 1909 (Cummings, *Maria Irene Fornes* 87). Letters also appear in *Abingdon Square* or *Sarita*, but in these cases, they do not belong to real sets of correspondence that the playwright uses as inspiration. In every play where diaries or letters appear on stage, the private act of writing or reading needs to be adapted to a public, communal experience; the playwright has to make a transition from the personal to the collective. And this act of transformation into a new mode demands significant changes so that the passing from the intimacy of a room to the shared space of a stage makes theatrical sense.

La Viuda was written in Spanish and published in Havana in 1961. Forty years later, in 2000, the curtain falls on her theatrical career with the premiere of *Letters from Cuba*. Both landmark productions, marking the beginning and the end of the playwright’s outstanding career, make use of different sets of family correspondence as the trigger of both plays. *La Viuda* is based on the

letters “she brought with her from Cuba that were written to her great-grandfather from a cousin in Spain” (Cummings, *María Irene Fornés* 10). Fornés translated those letters for herself, because “she wanted to understand something about that whole world” (Betsko and Koenig 155) and later she decided to write a play in the original Spanish and send it to

a playwriting contest announced by new Cuban President Fidel Castro [...]. The play was presented in Spanish in New York, broadcast as a radio play by the University of Mexico, and published in 1961 in Havana in an anthology of contemporary Cuban plays. (Cummings, *María Irene Fornés* 10)

Angela Martín, the central character, dictates the letters addressed to her cousin David, claiming her rights as a widow, although she has long been separated from her husband. Spanning four years at the turn of the nineteenth century (1899-1902), in the context of the Cuban war of independence from Spain,⁶ the correspondence moves between Seville and Cuba. The act of Angela dictating the letters to an *escribano* (amanuensis) is the backbone of the play itself. She is a vindictive woman full of resentment who has been living apart from her irresponsible, squandering husband for many years, shortly after their son Salvador was born. While she moved to Seville to get away from the war,⁷ he remained in America, at times in Cuba, at times in New York, fighting or working as a journalist, as he engaged in a relationship with another woman, Felicia Pardo, creating a new family of six children. The events in her life have left her with a deep feeling of displacement, both literal and metaphorical, as a wronged woman living far from Cuba. Angela only becomes a widow at the end of the first act, in the year 1899.

In *Letters from Cuba*, Fornés resorts to the personal correspondence her mother Carmen and herself maintained for decades with her brother Rafael, also known as Cuco (Cummings, *María Irene Fornés* 165). The letters not only give the narrative its impetus but also acquire a highly theatrical nature themselves since they are read aloud on stage. The action of the play deals with the

⁶ In United States historiography it is known as the Spanish-American War.

⁷ The *Guerra de los Diez Años* (1868-1878) lasted for ten years and was the first Cuban struggle for independence from Spain. It inaugurated the revolutionary period that would lead to the creation of the Republic of Cuba on 20 May 1902 (“Guerra de los Diez Años”).

central character, Francisquita, known as Fran, a dancer who has left Cuba, and takes place in the New York apartment she shares with two US roommates, Joseph and Marc. Her interaction with these characters and her life in the city as much as the connection with Cuba through the letters from her beloved brother Luis are the two pillars on which the dramatic text and the theatrical experience are configured. The tone reflects the commonplace to situate the experience of migration on a personal level. The writing becomes an invitation to the correspondent into the most basic, intimate and familiar reality: the other may not be present, but letters can act as a bridge to share daily worries and desires.

WRITING AND READING LETTERS ON STAGE: FUSING TIME AND SPACE

One of the unavoidable changes in adapting correspondence for theater relates to the use of time in the play. Both sets of letters stretch over a long period of time in the lives of the characters, and they are used dramatically as the essence for action. *La Viuda* revolves around the dictation of Angela's letters in those four years at the turn of the century (1899-1902) when she becomes a widow and brings a lawsuit to be legally recognized as such. Moreover, this is complemented by the reading of letters from older times that have been kept in an enormous bureau with a vast number of drawers (Fornes, *La Viuda* 1). It is in this way that Angela's version of her story is unraveled for the audience. Occasionally, those letters are even enacted by the writers who penned them, appearing on stage through a constant ebb and flow of time. Flashbacks and flashforwards function like tidal waves lapping up and down the shore, creating a flow that compresses past and present time in a continuum.

The stagnation of Angela's life because of the failure of her marriage is highlighted through her obsession with reclaiming her rights as a widow:

I must immediately see Francisco de Arenal's death certificate. (*Pause*) I have a presentiment that they have dared erase my name from that sacred document, just as they have in his obituary. And in that which is my rightful position, a position that corresponds to me, only to me, they have written that despicable name. (Fornes, *La Viuda* 17)⁸

⁸ All Spanish to English translations from *La Viuda* are my own.

After so many years of having been deprived of her identity as a wife, she insists now on recovering her social and legal status in society. The character of Angela and that of her son Salvador are doubled at different times in their lives: Angela Martín at the age of 70 and Angela Buena at the age of 25; Salvador as a child and Salvador at 25 (the moment of his death). Moreover, the characters are performed by different actors so that they clearly indicate distinct moments in their pasts. In contrast, Padre Cravet and Don Modesto, two characters from Angela's previous life in Cuba, are played by the same actor, dressed exactly like Angela, with the only indication of their different roles being the change of a wig in front of the audience: "Father Cravet runs to center stage as if he had forgotten his role as Don Modesto. He is transformed into Don Modesto by putting on a wig in front of the audience. He now wears white hair" (Fornes, *La Viuda* 23). The scene foregrounds that hers is the only point of view available for the audience, and an unreliable one for that matter. Her memory being the only resource, past and present are visually blurred. Angela's movements also indicate the passing of time while waiting for news about her claim: "*Angela's movements between letters represent the synthesis of her thoughts and anxieties during long and agonizing waits*" (Fornes, *La Viuda* 15).

Playing with chronology as a means to encompass a whole life into the short span of performance is essential in *Letters from Cuba*. These letters crossing the Atlantic from the Caribbean to the New York shore become tangible instruments of the powerful links of two lives physically distant but emotionally tethered. They are written by Luis and most of them are read aloud by him while he is writing. We never listen to Fran's responses, so the main vision is that of the non-migrant: as it is always the case, we keep the letters we have received, not the ones we have sent, and this allows Fran and the audience to experience the daily life and concerns of the writer. The letters set the play in motion, help strengthen the family ties, and even provide access to a life lived together across a great divide. By periodically sharing the routine as well as the extraordinary changes one experiments, the experience of the correspondents is enriched; they are incorporated into the other's reality through the textual account. The short time of the performance spans a very long stretch of the two siblings' lives apart, combining Luis' letters about Cuba with the occurrences of the three characters living together in New York. All of them have an artistic penchant: Fran is a dancer, Joseph writes

poetry, and Marc is a designer. Poetry and different ruminations on love fit in with Luis' imagination and hold Fran's two different worlds together.

One particularly effective way to fuse time and space through the letters is the use of simultaneity. At a given moment in both plays, two characters read the same letter aloud with totally different effects. In Scene 7 of *Letters from Cuba*, the physical letter is dropped by Luis, Fran catches it on stage, and they read it at the same time: this moment signifies their happy communion and an unbreakable link thanks to the magic of communication. In the case of *La Viuda*, there is one single moment when Angela and her husband Paco pronounce his words in unison: "Your loyalty rests with your parents, not with me" (Fornes, *La Viuda* 21). His accusation becomes meaningful when compared with Angela's regret at having followed her mother's advice to leave the island and move to Spain. She bears a deep resentment for a stifled life: to the estrangement from her husband first, displacement is added afterwards. The technique of combining reading, writing, or dictating and mixing letters from different moments has the effect of compressing historical time to stage time.

SETTING THE SCENE: STAGE DESIGN AND TONE

Considering stage design, Cummings calls attention to Fornés' ability to create "a dramatic world as large as life itself within a small, spare, and often confining theatrical space" ("The Poetry of Space in a Box" 174), an apt description and a signature feature of her theater. Both *La Viuda* and *Letters from Cuba* are set in an interior space—the house where Angela lives in Seville and Fran's apartment in New York—but the atmosphere could not be more different. The heavy furniture and decoration of the Andalusian room, that "*immediately reveals Angela's strict character through her gestures and the state of order and sobriety in the space*" (Fornes, *La Viuda* 1), contrasts with the light, informal, ample space of the loft shared by the three friends in New York. There are two platforms in *La Viuda*: one of them for the chest full of drawers to the right, and the other one, stage left, "*several feet high with some steps to go down to the stage,*" used by the characters produced by Angela's imagination while dictating her letters in the second act (Fornes, *La Viuda* 19). The room is furnished with the bureau and a few more props. There is a clear distinction in the social position of Angela, represented by the imposing bureau, and the amanuensis who works for her, who will be assigned a humble

high stool and lectern “too small to be comfortably used as chair and desk” (Fornes, *La Viuda* 1).

In *Letters from Cuba*, the set, designed by Donald Eastman, Fornés’ long-time collaborator, for the 2000 Signature Season production, allows for simultaneous action by placing Luis’ Cuban home on the rooftop of Fran’s New York apartment, center stage thanks to an elevated platform: “The dominant part of the set is an apartment in New York [...]. Above the apartment is “Cuba.” Cuba is a rooftop represented by a two-foot high wall extending across the stage above the apartment [...]. It is also possible to cross over the wall and walk onto the ceiling over the alcove in the New York apartment” (Fornes, “Letters from Cuba” 9). Both locations share the same space, and there is no need for set changes in the performance (just as is the case in *La Viuda*). This device allows for fluidity, constant communication, and the characters’ movement from one space to the other in front of the audience. The design underlines a poetic notion of space that characterizes Fornés’ work as a playwright and director. The staging literally bridges the distance between the two worlds, simultaneously present throughout the performance. In fact, it allows for moments of real contact between Fran and Luis as when they dance together or embrace in the final scene (Fornes, “Letters from Cuba” 30, 34).

The two set designs show Fornés’ ability to make the most of very simple, spare stages and to integrate seamlessly “dramaturgy, directing, and design, an artistic unity that stems from her role as director of her own plays and from her continuing collaboration with a team of designers” (Cummings, “Poetry” 174). When talking about space, we need to pinpoint the intricate connection of the set with the interior representation of the character:

In Fornes’s drama, psyche is spatial. A cartographer of the human spirit, Fornes creates character as an emotional and cognitive territory and charts that “space of being” over the course of the play. This means that setting and design function in strategic and tactical ways in her work as both the visual frame around character and an extension of character. (Cummings, “Poetry”, 174-75)

It is in this light that we can also analyze several props scattered around the room in *La Viuda*, in particular two of them which help characterize Angela. If the chest is a reflection of Angela’s rigor and resentment, it also makes visible her loss of control as the play

advances. In her first appearance, hanging from her waist, she carries a keychain with a different key for each of the numerous drawers where she keeps the letters received, a keychain “*that gives the impression of a rosary loaded with small medals*” (Fornes, *La Viuda* 1). She chooses without hesitation the exact key for each of the drawers she constantly opens and closes. Her impatience and anguish will be evident when she fails in choosing the correct ones (11). Her deep distress is thus visualized by her actions: from her control when choosing each key for the drawer containing the letter she picks, to her subsequent mistakes accompanied by hesitation and confusion. The keychain is complemented by a conspicuous black hat box holding the black hat that signifies Angela’s widowhood.

The somber tone of *La Viuda* corresponds to the kind of conflict the protagonist experiences. There is a telling speech in the first act that comprises her feelings of despair:

I have never been able to morally adapt myself to Spain. There is nothing here that inspires me. I have always thought this was temporary. If only I could return to the days when we planned to find shelter from the war, I would not have seconded my mother’s decision to travel such long distance from home. And thirty years have passed since I arrived in this country. (Fornes, *La Viuda* 13)

Years have passed since her arrival with her mother and child, years of feeling displaced, and her resentment has very likely been fueled by the isolation and estrangement in a place she always considered transitory. At the end of her life, Angela’s frustration at the failure of her marriage escalates to outrage when she learns that Paco’s mistress has been publicly recognized in Cuba as his wife in his obituary. She writes reproachful letters to her cousin David, accusing him of not keeping her informed. At the same time, intent upon defending her honor, she contacts a lawyer to legally claim her rights as a widow.

Regarding performance, and as a complement to the function of the props mentioned before, the play provides an accurate description of the character of Angela with just a few cues. The movement of her hand in the air to describe each punctuation she dictates, with different gestures for a comma or a full-stop, indicate her controlling attitude (Fornes, *La Viuda* 11). But her control is questioned by the amanuensis from the beginning: when she asks for something to be changed or erased, he does not follow her commands, and continues writing without paying attention to her (Fornes, *La*

Viuda 12). At the end of the first scene, when her legal right has been recognized, Angela puts on the black hat of a widow. But this triumph is not enough, and she demands a copy of the verdict to be sent to eight or nine thousand people in Cuba, so that her honor is restored, and her humiliation repaired. All the rest of the characters mock and scorn her putting on the black widow hat, and the curtain falls while she, in a paroxysm, increases to fifteen thousand the number of memos to be circulated.

In stark contrast, *Letters from Cuba* is a tender play filled with art and poetry. Fran disseminates the idea of the artistic in everyday life and links art to a spiritual ethos, showing the audience “the role that beauty plays in the political, redemptive, transformational power of art” (Kushner, “One of the Greats” xxxiii). Insisting on a construction of the play that rests on poetry and not on logic, that resorts to feeling instead of reason, Cummings states:

Typically, it is composed of brief, fragmentary scenes, twenty-one in all, many of them typical Fornes emotographs that invoke a meticulously composed stage image, imbue it with feeling, sustain for a minute or two, and then dissolve into the next crystalline moment of being. In performance, the piece lasts barely an hour. Her strategy is lyrical and not narrative. (*María Irene Fornes* 166)

Letters from Cuba convincingly vindicates the power of art to transcend, to heal, to overcome the harshness of separation, the pain of leaving your home behind and settling in a new, alien place. Letters are used as a connection, a bond beyond frontiers, a possibility of sharing their lives despite distance. Art, magic and love are exemplified as the most potent and healing agents to transcend migration, fighting forced separation and envisioning union through words, imagination, and love: “Nothing holds it together except for the feeling it expresses: a powerful yearning for love, for home and family, and for aesthetic beauty” (Cummings, *María Irene Fornes* 166).

CONCLUSION

La Viuda and *Letters from Cuba* compress historical time and expand significant moments to adapt years of letters to performance time; the simple stage design makes use of platforms to allow for the physical interaction of characters distant in time and space. Angela

dictates letters, giving orders to have her status as a widow recognized as her imagination and memory reconstruct key events in the past, as she tries to come to terms with her suspended life. Fran interacts with Joseph and Marc and reads the letters that Luis writes in Cuba, letters that bind two lives that are separated only geographically. *La Viuda's* essence is a polemic, a conflict, whereas *Letters from Cuba's* rests on emotion and lyricism. Despite the contrast between the harsh, heavy, dark atmosphere of Angela's play and the luminous, light, loving tone of Luis and Fran's interaction, there are striking similarities due to the use of the family letters as the found object and pretext that set both plays in motion. These two pieces, her only two plays based entirely on family correspondence, signify the beginning and the end of a life in the theater, as they represent the opposite conclusions of the "Game Over!" expression. The loss in Angela's cancelled life is opposed to Fran's successful, exhilarating life in the city; a world that is dying contrasts with a new world full of promising possibilities. They serve as models for key preoccupations present in Fornés' theater such as chance as inspiration, or the use of the stage to compress time and allow for simultaneous action in distant locations. Despite their temporal distance, personal letters and their adaptation for the stage showcase Fornés' idiosyncratic conception of theater and performance. Moreover, they perfectly exemplify Wetzsteon's apt description of Fornés' dramaturgy:

For despite that ever-changing style, that continuing formal exploration, the crucial elements in Fornes's vision have remained unalterable. From the first, her writing has involved a process of distillation, stripping away the behavioral and psychological conventions that pass for realism, and seeking instead a kind of hyperrealism (whether it appears in the guise of exuberant fantasy or severe documentation). And from the first, her plays have been formally shaped by an intuitive search not merely for a new theatrical vocabulary but for a new theatrical grammar. There is, then, a Fornes signature after all—emotional complexity conveyed through ruthless simplicity, moral concern conveyed through a wholly dramatic imagination. (27-8)

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