

Fornes's Odd Couple: *Oscar and Bertha* at the Magic Theatre

Scott T. Cummings

Maria Irene Fornes calls her play, *Oscar and Bertha*, "an exaggerated close-up, in a way an almost microscopic view of an extremely basic emotional situation." The basic situation is sibling rivalry and the particular exaggeration here, which works to both comic and pathetic effect, is simply this: although Oscar and Bertha are adults, they behave like absolute children. Their mutual suspicion and animosity is so intense and so unchecked by the restraints of mature behavior that every interaction they have quickly devolves into verbal or physical combat. If their mother was around, they would be sent to their rooms.

After the typically long gestation period for a Fornes play, *Oscar and Bertha* premiered at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in March 1992, on a bill with the curtain-raiser *Drowning*, Fornes's contribution several years back to *Orchards*, the anthology of Chekhov short story adaptations commissioned by Anne Cattaneo for the Acting Company. Fornes first worked on *Oscar and Bertha* at the Guthrie Theatre Lab in 1987. In July 1989, the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival included a workshop production of the play presented outdoors in the courtyard of the Art and Design Center at Cal State Northridge. Padua Hills later published this version in an anthology. The Magic Theatre production represents a revision of the Padua Hills script and no doubt, there will be changes after that: Fornes never truly stops working on a play; she simply puts it aside to concentrate on something else. As always, Fornes has directed the play at every stage of its development, lending the text and its performance a seamless continuity which the playwright finds perfectly natural. "It doesn't occur to me to finish a play and hand it over to someone else to direct," she says in the Magic program. "That's like cooking a meal and then not eating it." This investigation of the "cooking" and "eating" of *Oscar and Bertha* at the Magic Theatre intends to make clear just how interdependent these processes are and why Fornes's plays can be unwieldy in the hands of a director unfamiliar with her *mise en scène*.

The play takes place in Oscar and Bertha's shared home. As designed by Sandra Woodall, it is at first glance a simple, symmetrical, unadorned space. The main playing area downstage represents a sitting area (left) with two salmon pink armchairs and an eating area (right) with a small table and simple wooden chairs.

Scott T. Cummings is a freelance dramaturg and theatre journalist. He is currently at work on a full-length study of the theatre of Maria Irene Fornes.

A narrow central corridor bisects the upstage area and ends at another hall which goes off left to the kitchen and off right to the outside world. In the rear wall, where the two hallways meet in a T, there is a set of French doors, which only open twice in the production. Both brother and sister have a room of their own onstage, a bedroom not much bigger than a walk-in closet, upstage left and right respectively, separated by the tiny hallway. The alcove-like bedrooms are raised almost a foot above the stage floor and self-enclosed except for doorways facing on the hall and window-like openings which look onto the main room. Each cut-out (approximately four feet tall and five feet wide) is curtained; a broad cushioned shelf at its base serves as the bed for each room. Whenever Oscar or Bertha want to shut the other one out, they simply reach up and jerk the curtain closed.

As living quarters go, Oscar and Bertha's are noticeably spare, raw, undecorated. Nothing hangs on the walls, the table surface is empty, no personal objects lie about. The room is not altogether plain. There are patterns in the side walls, gold curlicues on the lintels, a carved wooden arch leading into the hall, a barely visible cloud pattern on the extreme upstage wall, and different weaves to the blankets on the beds and the curtains over the openings, but these details are subtle and textural, not pictorial. They adhere to the room's architectural design, not to its habitational use.

Despite showing no signs of being actively occupied, the room proves to be a domestic battleground. In contemporary parlance, the warring siblings of the play would be labeled "dysfunctional" or "codependent," but Oscar and Bertha are "adult children" of a different color. The latest psycho-jargon is simply not appropriate for characters who inhabit a dramatic universe all their own, one which is realistic on its own terms but not at all a realistic reflection of a specific time and place. Historical events—the Gulf War, the presidential election, even something as general as inflation—do not impinge on the action or even color its narrative backdrop. In the world of *Oscar and Bertha*, there is a bank and a grocery store and even somewhere a hospital where the character Eve had shock therapy treatments, but it is not a "First National Bank" or an "A & P" or a "Veterans Hospital." It is a world without proper names, parallel but without direct link to our own, where places and objects and often people are known generically. Like the set, it is a world uncluttered by specificity.

If Oscar and Bertha live in undecorated spaces, they are themselves undecorated as characters. They lack a biography in any coherent sense. We know they had a mother because they argue over her maternal allegiance. Bertha had a dog. Oscar had a girlfriend named Babette. But despite the presence of a photograph album, the family history remains vague and, ultimately, unimportant to the experience of the play. Undeniably, these characters share a

past, but they exist in a present moment so immediate and self-contained as to seem to deny it.

Incidentally, this lack of exposition of either past or present circumstances is precisely what makes Fornes plays so utterly realistic and yet oddly surreal as well. In daily conversation when we say, "I have to stop at the bank on the way to the movie," most often our interlocutor knows *exactly* what bank and *exactly* what movie we are referring to, based on previous discussion or knowledge which derives from an established relationship. To say "I need to stop at the Wells Fargo Bank on the way to *Aliens 3* starring Sigourney Weaver" would be unnatural and bizarre. Characters in a Fornes play talk to each other in this same realistic way, but the continued withholding of explanatory detail for the audience's benefit rarefies the realism as the play progresses. It emphasizes the relationship between the characters in situ and the emotional immediacy of the situation while keeping that situation narratively unfamiliar, even a bit mysterious, to the audience. This emphasis on the moment asks for a particularly visceral type of acting, although not the tortured gut-wrenching variety often associated with third-rate Method acting. It's a matter of feeling, not of angst. The acting in the Magic Theatre production was strong across the board, although Dennis Ludlow (Oscar) and Patricia Mattick (Bertha) merit special kudos for their high profile, high energy performances. Their work amounted to an exemplary display of comic acting: physically precise, outsized, yet honest and unself-conscious.

Dennis Ludlow's Oscar is a mess of a human being. He wears rumpled crimson red pajamas and his hair is all disheveled. His speech is just as slovenly: erratically modulated, often labored and slurred, in a word, goofy. At moments it devolves into baby-like gurgles and squeals. He is housebound and spends most of his time in a wheelchair, although at moments he will crawl and even walk. Here again, the absence of narrative detail means we never learn why he uses a wheelchair, but whatever the cause, it seems to have brought mental as well as physical challenges. Oscar is, well, stupid. His major achievement in the play will be simply, mechanically, to make it *out the door* to go look for a job. Bertha is as sharp as Oscar is dull. Oscar sits around like a bump on a log; Bertha stands ramrod straight. Her eyes dart back and forth in her head like ricocheting BBs, revealing bundles of nervous energy beneath her stiff shell. Smartly dressed in a dark suit with a red blouse and a brooch, Patricia Mattick wears her hair piled up high in an imposing pompadour which adds to her stern presence. Her Bertha is tight-assed and loose-lipped, only she does not so much speak as bark or snarl or sometimes even purr. Whatever she says, she means business and most often that business is to put her brother in his place, which she does with gestapo-like militancy.

The chief object of Oscar and Bertha's rivalry is the character of Eve (played by Regina Saisi), a frail woman dressed all in black who has answered a want ad they have placed looking for a live-in housekeeper and caretaker. When they meet Eve, for brother and sister alike, it is lust at first sight. Much of the action of the play—which, like many Fornes plays, unfolds in a series of brief, often fragmentary scenes—presents their boisterous and competitive efforts to seduce Eve, or failing that, simply to use her to relieve themselves sexually. Sibling rivalry becomes sibling ribaldry.

The play begins with a scene in which Oscar interviews Eve for the job. He sits in his wheelchair, with a rolled up newspaper in his breast pocket, chewing his fingernails, fidgeting nervously, and leering at Eve. Eve sits in a chair shyly, with a black scarf on her head, a black shawl around her shoulders, and a newspaper folded in her lap, folded in on herself, a shrinking violet. She is pale and as the play wears on, she will grow sickly, maybe even gravely ill. She is quiet, a bit mousy in demeanor, but she has the full capacity to defend herself when necessary, as she soon demonstrates. No sooner has Oscar begun to question Eve than is he reaching over to her and pinching her breast like it was a bathtub squeeze toy, saying, "Do the girls in Franklyn have a pretty little tit. Like a bird. That goes pip pip." Each time he squeezes Eve's breast, he peeps like a tiny bird. At first, Eve is outwardly unruffled by this intrusive behavior, but then she grabs the newspaper from his pocket and clobbers him over the head. Oscar persists, chasing Eve around the room in his wheelchair with a slobbery lasciviousness, eventually cornering her and trying to jam his head up under her skirt until Bertha enters and commands Oscar to stop. Bertha grabs the newspaper from Eve and swats Oscar like he was a bad dog. Oscar grabs another newspaper and swats back, as does Eve, and for an extended moment, all three flail away, swatting each other indiscriminately, frenetically, like cartoon characters who have dissolved into a blur of comic motion.

Although it may take audiences more time to acclimate themselves, this opening commotion establishes the quirky style of the entire play. From start to finish, Oscar and Bertha are at each other's throats, bragging, teasing, carping, kicking, hitting, choking, spitting, and generally lambasting each other with a ferocity that is strikingly honest. "Aww, buzz off"/"You buzz off" is their most frequent exchange. As opposed to Fornes plays from the 1980s like *Mud* or *The Conduct of Life* where the violence is deadly serious, in *Oscar and Bertha* it is inconsequential and purely comic. The play is a grotesque, a Punch-and-Judy show for actors instead of puppets, complete with pratfalls and shouting matches and slapsticks in the form of rolled-up newspapers. Its feisty and freewheeling spirit recalls Fornes's off-off Broadway work in the 1960s, such as *The Successful Life of 3* or *Promenade*.

Although the action of the play is fueled by competing oedipal energies, Fornes is more interested in sibling rivalry as an ontology than a psychology. For this reason, she draws Oscar and Bertha with the simplicity and verve and innocence of cartoon characters. They are animated in a way that frees them from the demands of psychological realism yet captures the emotional reality of their situation. Their egocentricity is so naive and child-like that they seem to lack ego in the sense of a performative self-image which both masks and moderates competing interior impulses, prohibitions, desires, needs, and defenses. They respond reflexively and without inhibition, heart to heart and head to head but without self-consciousness or guilt.

Their infantilism operates as an abstraction of their feelings as adults, and in this regard, their motives are pure. Regarding each other, they are pure animus, eyeing each other with murderous intent. Regarding Eve, they are pure libido, behaving like animals in heat, driven more by instinct than by passion, as they awkwardly jockey for position in an attempt to mount their prey. Oscar is a pathetic mauler. He lumbers and pounces with the subtlety and grace of a rhinoceros. At one point, Oscar is humping Eve with such self-absorbed vigor that he fails to notice that she has slipped out from under him and that he is merely pounding the mattress. Bertha, on the other hand, is a stealthy seducer. Early in the play she sneaks up behind Eve as she bends over the table to wipe it clean. She pushes her pelvis against Eve's gyrating buttocks in an attempt to reach a climax, but after the briefest moment's pleasure, Eve thrusts back good and hard, sending Bertha ricocheting off the walls, spinning and careening about the room, tumbling over the furniture.

Not only does the clown-like crudity of this sexual behavior prevent the play from becoming pornographic, or even erotic for that matter, it makes the depth and desperation of the characters's feelings undeniable. Clearly, Oscar and Bertha do not crave sex for its own sake but as the currency of (parental) attention, approval, favor. Despite her dour demeanor, as caretaker and provider, Eve is a surrogate parent, and to a lesser degree, so is the play's fourth character, Pike. In the middle of the play, Bertha straddles one of the pink armchairs and masturbates as she fantasizes about having a baby with Eve. "Eve, people can have children even when they haven't been married," Bertha says with calm assurance as she rubs against the back of the chair. "If a person does certain things with another—a child may be conceived." As Bertha nears a climax, Oscar wheels in and refuses to leave, despite her protests. "This is private! Get out! This is between Eve and me!" yells Bertha, before she collapses onto the floor and twitches in orgasmic spasm several times before coming to a rest. Oscar's competitive response is to lift his shirt and show a bright red circle around his left breast. "Lipstick marks. I have lipstick on my tit," he boasts,

claiming that he got them from Eve. Bertha examines his chest closely and concludes, "Those are dog lips. You put lipstick on a dog, then put his snout to your tit so it would leave an imprint. I know you. What dog did it?" This is comic pathos at its most sublime.

Oscar and Bertha's outrageous behavior might be dismissed as ridiculous if it were not for Fornes's tremendous compassion for her characters, aptly described by Mari Coates in her review of the play for San Francisco *Sentinel*. "There is a fragility about her characters," Coates writes, "a sense that they are perilously close to breaking. Once this is established, she seems to push them over the edge and then embrace them, as if she were saying that our vulnerability is what is most valuable about us." *Oscar and Bertha* swerves from breaking point to breaking point. One such moment climaxes a typical scene of juvenile one-upmanship in which brother and sister brag about their sexual conquests. Oscar provides the topper when he claims to have had sex with their mother even before he was weaned:

She was my woman. I owned her. I was her baby love—she never nursed you . . . I drank the milk that was intended for you. I have your milk inside me. You never went near her. I lay in bed with her as she fed me. And we climaxed. Both of us. My baby penis was erect like a torpedo and I climaxed and so did she . . . You think she enjoyed herself with Daddy? Ha! His cock was big but dull. My little penis was cheerful. She came so deeply and so beautifully. And me. I turned to her and when my little penis touched her belly I came. She put her hand on my fat little butt and felt it pulsate with the throes of orgasm. She held me and she climaxed. We never kissed. Our love was pure.

This is so devastating that Bertha's immediate response is one of perverse denial. She drops to the floor on all fours and scurries about frantically, looking behind the furniture and calling "Here! *Doggy, doggy, doggy*. Here! *Doggy, doggy, doggy*." Thus does Fornes demonstrate her unstinting yet unsentimental compassion for her characters.

Although the play lacks a plot in any conventional sense, the action does move through a period of crisis in the middle towards a happy ending. Oscar and Bertha have unspecified financial problems which prompt them first to contact a bank for a loan and later to ask that Eve get a paying job to pay for her share of the food. The geometry of the sibling rivalry changes when halfway through the play, Pike (Patrick Morris), the man from the bank, becomes a regular visitor to the home. Bertha claims that she and Pike "did it" and calls him her

"boyfriend." When Pike and Bertha sit and visit, leafing through the family photograph album, Oscar curls up at Pike's feet, and later, climbs up into his lap.

Eventually, the situation grows dire. Eve gets so sick that she is hospitalized. Oscar must look for work. First he reads the want ads and finds little that he's qualified for. Nevertheless he doffs his hat (still wearing his pajamas) and makes several determined but unsuccessful efforts just to get offstage. Each time he is repelled by some cosmic comic force which sends him back into the room with increasingly worse injuries: a bashed hat and bandaged nose, an arm in a sling, a crippling limp and a crutch. This unabashed comic routine is similar to Beckett's existential vaudeville, *Act Without Words I*, or even the clown scene from Brecht's Baden *Lehrstück*, except that it is inscribed in a domestic emergency. On the fourth try Oscar does make it out the door and this is his ironic moment of glory because, of course, he does not in fact get a paying job.

When Eve gets better and returns home, the storm has been weathered. In the final scene, the four characters, relatively secure within the reconstituted family circle, sit at the table and play cards. "It's hell out there," says Eve. "Worse than here." Within moments, some unseen transgression provokes a fight. Quickly, all four pull out their rolled-up newspapers and whack each other indiscriminately and, it seems, with loving disaffection. The melee signals the happy return to normalcy (and to vitality, perhaps), as the sound of barking dogs is heard growing louder and louder and the up-center French doors magically open to reveal a cloudy horizon at sunset which, Magritte-like, matches exactly the pattern on the upstage walls. The effect is oddly triumphant, even majestic.

Carefully orchestrated moments such as this are what make *Oscar and Bertha* much more than a self-indulgent *Saturday Night Live* sketch lampooning family relations or even a daring episode of *The Honeymooners* in which Ralph and Alice Kramden articulate the taboo. Although, as characters, Oscar and Bertha are wildly free in their behavior, their anarchy is tightly controlled by the spatial and temporal rhythms of the play in production. Like Oscar himself, the rambunctious energy of *Oscar and Bertha* is housebound, confined to a domestic and interior space. It cannot go out and play. Both the directing and the design assume a parental (i.e. aesthetic) authority over the action that is nowhere to be seen in the world of the play.

The play is precisely directed by Fomes, intensely focused as a series of images which in their stillness and spareness and clarity seem to contradict the mania of the characters, to cut back against the grain of the comedy. This dynamic internal tension gives the experience of the play in the theater a complex, paradoxical texture that some audiences must find unfamiliar and even disconcerting. The characters are funny, but the play lacks the conventional

signals that it is permissible to laugh, thus compelling viewers to trust their own responses.

Most of Fornes's earlier plays have been written as a series of short, fragmentary, often cryptic scenes, a style now much more widely and less expertly practiced than when Fornes took it up. Each scene functions photographically, offering a dramatic snapshot of the state of things at a particular moment or stage of events. Marked by a blackout or some other break which clearly frames the scene, each unit stands as its own separate entity, its own distinct image. In *The Danube*, a play set in Budapest and constructed around a metaphorical holocaust, most of the scenes are introduced by a sound tape which announces a different Hungarian language lesson (for example, "Unit Ten. Basic Sentences. Paul Green visits Mr. Sandor. They discuss the weather."). Fornes's *Mud*, another play about an unusual ménage à trois, asks for a freeze at the end of each scene, stipulating "these freezes will last eight seconds which will create the effect of a still photograph." These plays progress more as a series of self-enclosed scenic integers than as a coherent narrative propelled by cause and effect.

Fornes has always taken an experimental approach to her playwriting, and the particular experiment in *Oscar and Bertha* pertains to how the scenes are strung together onstage. As opposed to earlier work like *Mud* or *The Danube*, Fornes blurs the edges between scenes, in both her writing and her directing. The script doesn't indicate the beginning or end of a scene; it simply says, "There is a shift of light." And in Fornes' production at the Magic Theatre, that shift of light was occasionally so minimal as to be unnoticeable. Fornes presents the scenes not as disjointed fragments of a mysterious whole but as segments of a continuing arc. There are gaps in narrative time, but the physical action onstage is continuous, except for one major blackout in the middle of the play. The repositioning of actors and the setting of props necessary for the next segment is staged "in character" and at the same pace and rhythm as the scenes themselves. This blurring effect insists all the more that the audience engage the work as a series of images, only now they are *moving* images, flowing into each other almost indistinguishably.

If the dramaturgy of *Oscar and Bertha* eschews the scene as a framing device for units of image and action, the design approach to the play more than compensates by providing frames within frames within frames. Sandra Woodall's simple, attractive, and symmetrical set operates as a series of concentric rectangles, from the all-encompassing proscenium arch to the French doors upstage center which frame the spot where the two corridors meet. Each of the off-white outer walls, which includes a large square section indented deep enough

to catch light and cast a shadow, helps to frame the action in the eating area or the sitting area.

By far the most theatrical scenic frames are the curtained openings which look into the two small bedrooms in such a way as to make them virtual dioramas. The possibility of partially closing the heavy bedroom curtain, creating yet another, smaller frame, and of lighting these cubicles independently of the downstage areas is used again and again to stunning effect, as when Oscar lies on his bed upstage left bragging of his sexual prowess, with his hands up behind his head, the curtain closed up to his waist and the lights up bright, while Bertha sits downstage right at the table in half light, full back to the audience, listening and trying not to listen. The combined sense of isolation and intimacy makes for a quietly thrilling, haunting effect, one suggestive of some of Edward Hopper's portraits of urban loneliness. In *Nighthawks At The Diner*, for example, the bright fluorescent light inside the diner makes it both a sanctuary and a place of defeat against the surrounding dark and empty city streets. Fornes uses this same compositional dynamic within the domestic environment of Oscar and Bertha. When they're not at each others throats, they seem worlds apart.

Significantly, there are no visible sources of light onstage in *Oscar and Bertha*, scenic or practical. No table lamps, no wall switches, no candles. All the light comes from outside the framed fictive space of the play, objectifying it as it illuminates, shifts the focus, colors the mood. This distancing effect is enhanced by the various frames provided by the set and, further, by the shuttering in of the Magic Theatre's already small proscenium arch. The playing surface for *Oscar and Bertha* is raised nearly a foot off the Magic's stage floor and the set has built-in borders and a teaser which narrow and focus the field of view. This gives the subliminal impression of peering into a puppet booth or a dollhouse with an outer wall removed or, to go even further, into a microscope. What goes on inside this frame is oddly miniaturized and magnified at the same time.

In this and other ways, dramaturgy, directing, and design in *Oscar and Bertha* unify in a unique way that might be called 'theatrical microscopy.' Fornes's proscenium arch functions not as a voyeuristic keyhole for peeping at the private lives of the troubled and the traumatized but as an aesthetic lens which allows us to observe phenomena invisible to the naked eye. Dramatic specimens swim about in a neutral domestic medium and are examined and experienced primarily as things unto themselves, as sentient creatures independent of the narrative context from which they have been plucked. Characters are distilled to their essence which is almost always a passion, a suffering of feeling, here a comic suffering. In this way, Fornes's theater is a laboratory which serves

her effort to present some of the most poignant and painful aspects of being human in an abstract, almost pure, form.