

# EDUCATIONAL DRAMATICS: THE INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITIES OF *FEFU AND HER FRIENDS*

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## PALABRAS CLAVE

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## ABSTRACT

*Fefu and Her Friends* has often been analysed as a paradigmatic feminist text. My proposal complements this reading by considering the play as an offshoot of Maria Irene Fornes' interest in education. The playwright has explained her belief that art is a powerful tool to access the individual's inner spirit. The salon event the characters are organizing points to the educational values of art but the provocative structure of the play itself also proposes a different role of the spectator which forces them to participate in the play in a non traditional position. By moving away from their places and by watching different scenes in random order, the audience becomes part of the salon and interacts with the actresses radically changing their traditional position in an instructive and interactive experience which could educate their sensitivity to that which is different.

## RESUMEN

*Fefu and Her Friends* se considera un paradigma del teatro feminista. La propuesta de este artículo no contradice dicha lectura sino que la complementa centrándose en el interés de María Irene Fornés en la educación. La dramaturga ha insistido en su creencia de que el arte es una poderosa herramienta para facilitar que los individuos entren en contacto con su propio espíritu interior. El salón que los personajes están organizando apunta a los valores educativos del arte. Además, la estructura rompedora de la obra propone una función distinta para el espectador al hacerle participar de un modo no tradicional. Al apartarle de la butaca y obligarle a ver distintas escenas en orden aleatorio, el público se introduce en el salón e interactúa

con las actrices. El resultado es una experiencia instructiva e interactiva cuyo fin es educar la sensibilidad hacia lo diferente.

## PROLOGUE: FORNES AND HER ROMANCE WITH THEATRE ... AND EDUCATION

Cuban-born American playwright Maria Irene Fornes (1930-) has had an ongoing, if somewhat obscured,<sup>1</sup> influence in American theatre for more than three decades, spanning from the 1960s to the present. Her theatrical involvement started in connection to the avant-garde of the Off-Off-Broadway scene and her plays have since been connected to the more experimental, non-commercial venues. Her personal background as a Latina provides a vision that resists assimilation to the mainstream. She has unfailingly given voice to difference by staging the plights of those in subordinate, secondary positions in a society which rarely entitles them to take centre stage, be it women, ethnic and cultural minorities or the poorest, most abused and powerless individuals.<sup>2</sup> Her choice of marginal protagonists parallels an original theatrical perspective which insists on focusing on the unusual and challenges audience expectations. The world of theatre has benefited twofold from her contribution: as a practitioner and as a teacher for other playwrights. She has not only created texts but has also acted as a producer, director and facilitator for the performance of her own and other playwrights' pieces. Fornes has experienced an extended romance with theatre ever since she attended a performance of a Beckett play in Paris when she was an art student in 1954 and did not dream at that time of ever becoming a playwright.

Her conception of theatre is very inclusive, almost holistic. For her, at the heart of it, there is a vocation, a call, an urge comparable to the task of any artist. Theatre demands a language of its own which will undoubtedly be enhanced by drawing from different realms of artistic pursue:

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.

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<sup>1</sup> Schuler (1990) compares Maria Irene Fornes to Sam Shepard, a fellow in the Off-Off-Broadway, avant-garde theatrical scene of the 1960s and 1970s. She points at several reasons for Fornes' lack of recognition and integration in the mainstream in contrast with Shepard's success and popularity.

<sup>2</sup> The women protagonists in *Fefe and Her Friends*, Sarita in *Sarita*, Mae in *Mud* and Nena in *The Conduct of Life* are just but a few examples of characters from a marginal, submitted position who people Fornes' plays

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 sounds 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 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 254-255).

The playwright's comment highlights an artistic view of theatre as an interdisciplinary activity, as a collage of different disciplines which are united in the creation of a unique, unified experience for those participating in it. As mentioned before, Fomes' interest in theatre has not only been restricted to playwriting but has also meant a deep involvement in training. Mainly, teaching Hispanic students in the INTAR project, whose mission statement reads:

INTAR, one of the United States' longest running Latino theater producing in English, works to:  
 Nurture the professional development of Latino theater artists.  
 Produce bold, innovative, artistically significant plays that reflect diverse perspectives.  
 Make accessible the diversity inherent in America's cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup>

There is an obvious, uncompromising and unfailing interest in difference and diversity, which I contend is one of the pervasive ideas present in Fomes' plays. Her commitment to the world of education and to the belief that instruction is an essential project to improve any individual's potential and sensitivity surfaces in her plays time and again. In fact, the playwright's dedication to teaching has been widely documented (Delgado and Svitch; Robinson; Savran). One of the recurring notions detailed by former students and by Fomes herself is the search for an inner voice by exploring alternative channels to come into contact with and arouse one's creativity. That is why she modelled her classes with yoga and meditation exercises as an introduction followed by a combination of seemingly random activities in an effort to reach the unconscious (Savran 58). In a tribute to her, the playwright Octavio Solís concludes:

I am these many times indebted,  
 And would many times over be thrall'd in her instruction,  
 For the sake of knowing once again,  
 That the stories orbit not outside of me  
 But circulate like blood within

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<sup>3</sup> This statement comes from the webpage of the INTAR theatre, reference included in the works cited section.

And, like blood, feed the heart with air and cadence and feeling

If all these debts I've paid to her  
 In thanks and in the quality of my craft,  
 If the slate is clean between us,  
 Still  
 Thrice in arrears I remain to her  
 For being muse, teacher, *curandera* to my inner heart (178)

The constant presence of learning, teaching and giving instruction in Fornes' plays has already been mentioned by Susan Sontag in a preface first published in 1986:

Character is revealed through catechism. People requiring of giving instruction is a standard situation in Fornes' plays. The desire to be initiated, to be taught, is depicted as an essential, and essentially pathetic, longing. (Fornes' elaborate sympathy for the labor of thought is the endearing observation of someone who is almost entirely self-taught) (Sontag 44).

*Fefu and Her Friends* (1977) is one of her best-known plays. Available in publication, it is frequently anthologised and included in drama and theatre bibliographies and syllabi, it has received much academic attention and it is often performed in universities, regional theatres and commercial venues. The educational goal as a central motif is my proposal to read the text. It is essential to stress that education is linked to creativity, as a trigger for searching one's inner impulses. It has to do with opening up and tearing down walls instead of building barriers to suffocate the instinct. My analysis will focus on the presence of this driving force at several levels, organised for the purpose of this article according to content and form (not only regarding character, dialogue or theme, but also with reference to space and time both inside and outside the performance). The objective, then, is to describe different instructional perspectives and their overall effect on the reader/spectator. The premise I take is an explicit declaration which appears in the text and is uttered by one of the female characters, Cecilia:

That is, I feel, the concern of the educator—to teach how to be sensitive to the differences in ourselves as well as outside ourselves, not to supervise the memorization of facts. [...] Otherwise the unusual in us will perish. As we grow we feel we are strange and fear any thought that is not shared with everyone (III, 44).<sup>4</sup>

#### **CONTENT: EDUCATING THROUGH DRAMATICS (THE SALON, THE TEACHERS AND THEIR LESSONS)**

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<sup>4</sup> All the references to the play will include the act and the page.

A group of women gather in Fefu's country house to prepare an event for a salon, an activity which provides "space for people, especially women, to increase personal knowledge through a collective process of sharing ideas ... Through creating an atmosphere of learning for those barred from higher education, salons historically encouraged debate, dialogue and the showcasing of artistic talent".<sup>5</sup> Salons flourished in European aristocratic circles first to be taken up later by wealthy bourgeois and they did frequently serve as an opportunity for promoting artistic and intellectual pursuits although they were more often than not restricted to an elite. María Irene Fornés has introduced the idea of the salon as an exclusively female activity, thus setting the play in motion and justifying the absence of male characters. Although the play never shows the salon itself but just a preliminary meeting, I would like to emphasize that it replicates many of the features typical of the salon, incorporating them to the performance space. The dramaturgy of the salon is not formally a theatrical one; instead attendants and organisers are on the same level in order to engage informally in a social dialogue and the audience is composed by guests, not payers; moreover, there is no playwright as such and no characters either and the connection between speakers and listeners is fluid and interactive (Case 46-47). The event discussed in the play is designed by the hostess (Fefu inside the play, Fornes outside) but the participants (the rest of the characters and the audience) can act as coproducers, introducing changes and modifying the event (the performance). This kind of gathering is the basis of personal theatre, characterised by the use of a private, domestic space and by the development of a specific form of personal dialogue (letters and conversation) "built on mutuality and intersubjectivity, eliminating any sense of formal distance or representation [...] This is the dialogue of present time, caught up in the movement of history and development without the secure fourth wall of formal closure" (Case 46).

The topic chosen is education, with an emphasis on opening up the minds and acting as fertilizer of the imagination. It is a vision of education which despises the limitations of traditional learning, seen as barren and sterile, and privileges creativity. The meeting has been called to discuss the organization, namely the order of appearance of the different lecturers and the dramatics of the act. According to Case, this form of interaction provides an alternative to traditional theatre, "it operates not by mimesis but by reenactment. It is an engaged dialogue, rooted in everyday life, rather than a mimetic dialogue" (46). The collaboration of these eight women represents an inner space of feminine consciousness, in stark contrast with the outside, which is the territory of the three unseen men: Phillip, Fefu's husband, her brother Tom and the gardener (Fuchs 85). It is Fefu, the host, who acts as a provocative teacher and leader. She talks about the repulsion and the fascination

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<sup>5</sup> Taken from the web page of *Fefu and Her Friends*, performed at Oscar G. Brocket Theatre of the University of Texas in October 2007.

represented by a stone which is turned upside down to see the worms as a metaphor for our lives:

You see, that which is exposed to the exterior ... is smooth and dry and clean. That which is not ... underneath, is slimy and filled with fungus and crawling with worms. It is another life that is parallel to the one we manifest. It's there. The way worms are underneath the stone. If you don't recognize it ... (*Whispering.*) it eats you. That is my opinion. Well, who is ready for lunch? (I, 10).

Her shocking remarks provoke a reaction on her audience, particularly on Christina, who cannot make up her mind as to whether she likes Fefu, feeling admiration and at the same time a sense of fear. She does not know if Fefu is "careful with life" (II, 31). If we liken Fefu's comments to a classroom technique to trigger a response from the students (her friends inside the play, the audience outside) and stimulate the debate, however, it is highly effective and Fefu is certainly successful in giving her friends food for discussion and thought as well as stirring feelings of unease. She sets the mind of her listeners in the need to look not only at a superficial reality but also at the hidden, inner, ugly part as a way to prevent being destroyed by it. Her initial comment: "women are loathsome" (I, 8) is extended to explain the differences between men and women:

I still like men better than women.—I envy them. I like being like a man. Thinking like a man. Feeling like a man.—They are well together. Women are not. Look at them. They are checking the new grass mower. ... Out in the fresh air and the sun, while we sit here in the dark. ... Men have natural strength. Women have to find their strength, and when they do find it, it comes forth with bitterness and it's erratic. ... Women are restless with each other. They are like live wires ... either chattering to keep themselves from making contact, or else, if they don't chatter, they avert their eyes (I, 15).

Fefu is playful, dynamic, active and can talk about a wide variety of topics; Emma and Julia learn that she has recently participated in another similar event where she spoke about Voltairine de Cleyre, and Paula, who attended the speech, found it "very stimulating" (I, 20). Fefu will be the first speaker in the salon and will discuss the "stifling conditions of primary school education" (III, 45). She seems to be especially suited to that topic as an embodiment of an alternative, more open and creative education. She has a personality strikingly different from the feminine, passive type. Interestingly enough, she refuses to be labelled as an educator and prefers to be called a "... a do gooder, a girl scout" (III, 45). Actually, her method of instructing others is by showing through action and by shocking statements which will provoke passionate responses. Fefu performs more typically masculine activities such as plumbing or hunting. She moves in and out of the house and will kill the rabbit that provokes the perplexing and tragic effect on Julia. However, her

dangerous game of shooting the shotgun at her husband is a symbol of their tortured relationship. Behind her outward resolute manner, good natured personality, she is subject to a dependency on Phillip and a living example of how contradictory and reductive it is to perceive human life through a lens of binary oppositions. This opposition is most clearly delineated in the female/male dichotomy as two separate worlds with conflicting absolute values assigned to each of them: men are the measure of good, whereas “women are loathsome” (I, 8).

The other topics planned for the event are “Art as a Tool for Learning”, by Paula, and a text from *Educational Dramatics*<sup>6</sup> by Emma Sheridan Fry, delivered by Emma. María Irene Fornés has recurrently collected bits and pieces and adopted excerpts from writings by other authors in her plays; be it printed material, personal diaries or letters. In the case of *Educational Dramatics*, which takes a central position in *Fefu and Her Friends*, it is a book she found and wanted to include in the play:

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. 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 (Delgado 259-260).

In the process of making decisions about the order of speakers, the women sit down in a semicircle with their backs to the audience, as if they were, in fact, primary school students in front of a teacher. Paula, a self-contained, timid character, does enjoy infusing her speech with dramatic effect and mimicking Emma’s more theatrical approach: “*In imitation of Emma she brings her hands together and opens her arms as she moves her head back and speaks*” (III, 45). She follows Emma’s prompts regarding breathing and bowing for applause: “*(Coming up from the bow)* Oh, I liked that” (III, 46). She is experiencing the benefits of being a student in a theatre class with the help of Emma as instructor. Her rehearsal and preparation show the audience the effectiveness of training for public speaking and acting. Her choice of a topic reveals Fornés’ philosophy regarding teaching:

The play is there as a lesson, because I feel that art ultimately is a teacher. You go to a museum to look at a painting and that painting teaches you something. You may not look at Cezanne and say “I know now what I have to do”. But it gives you something.

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<sup>6</sup> All references to this book have been taken verbatim from the play itself.

a charge of some understanding, some knowledge that you have in your heart. And if art doesn't do that, I am not interested in it (Savran 56).

Emma, the most accomplished actor in the group, will deliver her whole speech as in a final rehearsal, with a long robe that trails on the floor, a dramatic pose and “*interpretive gestures and movements that cover the stage arena*” (III, 46). Her text is not original, it has been taken from the book by her namesake Emma Sheridan Fry. The intense opening line: “Environment knocks at the gateway of the senses” (III, 46), sets up a mood which builds on the idea that an impulse, Divine Urge, is constantly trying to reach inside us in conflict with deafening and stifling forces such as society, school or civilization. The objective of education would then be to break the frontiers that stop our creativity and our possibilities to come into contact with real life forces, concluding in a triumphant cry conceived to awake consciences and to bring them to action:

Let us awaken life dormant! Let us, boldly, seizing the star of our intent, lift it as the lantern of our necessity, and let it shine over the darkness of our compliance. Come! The light shines. Come! It brightens our way. Come! Don't let its glorious light pass you by! Come! The day has come! (III, 47-48).

In the second act, the women form smaller groupings where they talk about their obsessions ... their dark, damp sides which are not usually exposed. In the garden, Emma discusses genitals and Fefu confesses her suffering, her constant pain. In the study, where Christina is actually practising French by repeating sentences (a traditional method for foreign languages, insisting again on learning), Cindy details a nightmare which ends with the relief of escape. In the kitchen, Paula details her theory on love affairs to Sue and confronts Cecilia, her former lover, about their relationship. Julia's hallucination in the bedroom is the most obscure abyss, the darkest side of the stone with no possible logical explanation. All these conversations deal with personal aspects, allowing them to bring forth their inside, which is not a common resource in traditional teaching. Unconventional theories of education have always tried to focalize not so much on the acquisition of knowledge, the collection of facts and memorization but on the full development of the individual capacities to give students the possibility of living in freedom, searching for truth and valuing collaboration instead of competition. These women opening up their inner selves to each other are enacting the healing function of talking and sharing in front of the audience.

As in any syllabus in a regular class, there are topics to be covered. That is the function of Isadora Duncan, Voltairine de Cleyre and Emma Sheridan Fry; three references to real women who dared to fight constrictions and open up new spaces in their respective fields: artistic expression, politics and education. They function as role models and as a different alternative canon for women. Julia mentions Isadora



Duncan, famous for her dance innovations on stage, by voicing two clashing visions: a misogynistic one which equates female art with madness and Julia's own personal response to it, an affirmative one to be sure:

Ballet dancers are exceptions. They can run and lift their legs because they have no entrails. Isadora Duncan had entrails, that's why she should not have danced. But she danced and for this reason she became crazy. (*Her voice is back to normal.*) She wasn't crazy (II, 34).

It should be noted that Voltairine de Cleyre, the topic of Fefu's previous lecture, was an American political activist, anarchist and feminist who equated marriage with slavery for women. For her, marriage laws make "every married woman what she is, a bonded slave, who takes her master's name, her master's bread, her master's commands, and serves her master's passions." (De Cleyre 228). Finally, Emma Sheridan Fry (whom we have referred to previously) taught acting to children at the Educational Alliance on the lower East Side of New York; her efforts "showed the potential of a creative, educational approach to dramatics" (Tukesbury 341).

Apart from the selection of real women as a part of the informal syllabus of the salon, there is another common element for pedagogical purposes: the use of documents to discuss, analyse and build on. It is a convention of academic teaching which appears as a resource in *Fefu and Her Friends*. In fact, there are two transcriptions from authorities to sanction the instructive quality of the text: Shakespeare's XIV sonnet and part of the prologue to *Educational Dramatics* (1917). The former deals with the idea that knowledge does not come from outside experience but by looking into the eyes of the loved one, maybe through empathy and interaction, which is what this female group is doing in front of us, their audience. The latter, as we have mentioned above, is an alternative to traditional teaching and a stimulus for creativity explaining the educational possibilities of drama.

### **THE CASES STUDY: JULIA AND SURREALISM**

The play evolves around the character of Julia, who deserves an analysis of her own, as if it were a case study (or a case to study). The distressed, tortured Julia sitting on a wheelchair contrasts with Fefu's recollections of her when "She was afraid of nothing ... Have you ever met anyone like that? ... She knew so much. She was so young and yet knew so much ... How did she learn all that?" (I, 18). These impressionistic brush strokes given to us from the outside through the eyes of her friend, give way to a surrealist vision and the possibility for us, as audience, to peep into her hallucinations and inner obsessions. Julia's accident is surrounded by mystery and magic, it defies explanation ... just as her previous knowledge is

unexplained, it was a gift which was taken away. We have to find an approach other than that of logic and rational thinking to consider her.

Surrealism aims “to create something more real than reality itself, something of greater significance, that is, than a mere copy of what we see” (Gombrich 470-471). The Surrealists proclaimed that “art can never be produced by wide-awake reason. They might admit that reason can give us science but would say that only unreason can give us art” (Gombrich 471). The search for a way of expression which could allow the artist’s fancy and strange dream to surface connects with the idea of the divine urge exposed in educational dramatics. Hallucinations situate Julia in a state of consciousness similar to those of dreams or nightmares, which cannot easily be explained in everyday terms. She talks about torture, being cruelly judged but keeping her smile because of the love they felt for her. As in other female figures before her, her sin had to do with knowledge: “He said that I had to be punished because I was getting too smart” (II, 34). To continue existing, patriarchy cannot allow women to challenge the secondary position where they are confined. Julia in her tortured vision recants and repents, praying about the superiority of men and the evil in women and concludes with a recipe for conversion: “They say when I believe the prayer I will forget the judges. And when I forget the judges I will believe the prayer. They say both happen at once. And all women have done it. Why can’t I?” (II, 35). Fefu’s insistence on Julia’s fighting and not surrendering when she is feeling she has run out of strength builds a climax to the final scene. Her forehead bleeding upon Fefu’s shooting of the rabbit is a variation on the accident with the hunter and the deer, which provoked Julia’s malaise. In the previous one, the deer had to die for her to live, now with the dead rabbit, can Julia continue living?

Fomes is clearly forcing us to a deeper, different form of knowledge, one which moves away from rationality and stresses creativity, one which concerns the unconscious and incorporates emotions, suggestions and impressions as adequate channel to grasp reality. This episode in the play takes on many of the tenets of surrealism, understood not as a set of formal rules but as an attitude of the spirit towards reality and life. Formal experimentation served as the basis for the surrealist poet and artist to show inner truth without obstacles (De Micheli 171). In André Breton’s words, the objective of surrealism would be to find that truth:

Everything leads us to think that there is a certain point of the spirit where life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, what can be communicated and that which cannot be explained, the high and the low are no longer perceived as contradictory. It would be useless to search for a surrealist agenda other than the hope of determining that point (Breton 96).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Translated from Spanish by the author.

Therefore, more than explaining the character and its function, we should look at it as we do a surrealist painting, not to signify one thing but to focus our attention on the many possible meanings of each colour and form (Gombrich 472). The connection between sign and reality is not a Saussurean one; signifier and signified function by suggestion, by emotion, by connotation, by opening up multiple possibilities which cannot be closed into a single, correct interpretation. We have to resist our bias to decipher meaning in a univocal, distinct way and embrace the beauty of indeterminacy and polyphony. As audience, we are forced to appreciate the different, the other, the diverse, the alternative. When faced with the hallucinations, the trance experienced and performed by Julia, we should remember the lack of logic defended by surrealism as the only possible way to reach into the most hidden, unexplored depths of the human being. By plunging into this remote abyss, we are given the possibility to find the truth beyond rationality, to value forms of knowledge which spring from other sources. It is an impulse for freedom, a gateway to our inner needs which contrasts sharply with traditional forms of learning.

### **SPACE AND TIME: EDUCATING THE AUDIENCE**

In *Fefu and her Friends*, education extends to the staging itself and the role of the audience. It is paradigmatic of what Ellen Stewart refers to as a “site-specific work” (Stewart 3); referring to the influence the venue had in shaping the play. It was first performed in a rented loft with several partitions available for use. It is divided into several scenes simultaneously enacted in four different settings (study, bedroom, kitchen and lawn), framed by two scenes in the living-room. The space of the performance is multiple but it is also unchanged. Instead of the traditional theatre where the stage is the place of change, where sets are transformed and curtains go down to indicate a new setting or time, here the different spaces remain the same while the audience has to move from room to room. Even though they are still audience and they do not take part in the performance, their comfortable sitting position is transformed. One of the distinguishing features of theatre is the use of movement and space as signifying elements. In this case the audience’s expectations are challenged by forcing them to move, as if they were active participants in the process of production and not only reception. The experience of moving around mimics the kinesics characteristic of actors on stage and it also evokes the fluid position of attendants in a salon, all of them at the same level. This triggers a sense of alertness which can be extended to the interpretation of the play. The audience do not only watch, they also act. Meaning is constructed by participating to some extent and the experience is more dynamic and complete than usual. Could this be a learning experience? Does it produce more active skills as an audience? Is it another

turn of the screw in the notion of the Brechtian distancing effect, by, in fact, bringing them closer to the drama?

Regarding structure, then, there is a puzzling effect of estrangement which resembles Brechtian technique; however, here the distancing does not come from the interpellation of the characters directly to the audience or the characters' self-conscious metatheatrical comments breaking the fourth wall. It appeals directly to the audience and to their roles as spectators, the fourth wall tenuously fading by the movement from room to room and the set-up of those rooms where players and onlookers are on the same level, even very close to each other, conscious of their bodies and the actresses' bodies. By building on the informality, the fluidity and the elimination of hierarchical position, the dramaturgy designed by Fornes incorporates elements typical of the salon form.

There is also a surprising use of time. Since the middle sections of the play are simultaneous, the actors have to repeat them four times with different spectators. Repetition affects the performers (which can also be interpreted as a rehearsal practice, since there is not one single and definitive performance) but it also means that there is not one single, correct, and chronological way to grasp the events. It is cyclical time breaking a synchronic time line. Repetition is privileged rather than the more conventional idea of a story with a beginning and an end. The experiences of the four groups are simultaneous but also discontinuous. Again, Fornes is introducing a different perspective which questions linear, rational thinking in an attempt to unsettle the audience and force them to engage more actively in questioning reality and in searching for individual, personal responses.

Furthermore, the framed structure (first and last part in one room and the second part with four groups moving from room to room) parallels a common division of teaching (at least in higher education) between lectures for the whole body of students and practical sessions repeated with smaller sets. In fact, it has a striking similarity to a class, where the audience become students. For the introduction and conclusion, there is a lecture format, for the middle section the participants are "led to" (4) different classrooms after having been split up into more manageable units, with a seminar or lab format.

## **CONCLUSION: IT'S EDUCATIONAL!**

Although the author has explained that her experiments with form result in a rejection by the audience (Betsko and Koenig 164-165), Schuler has convincingly argued that the content too is responsible for her remaining on the fringe. For the scholar, the concentration on female characters and the use of violence show a gloomy picture of the patriarchal order which many spectators are not willing to assume. I indeed believe that the shocking form of the play can have a direct, aggressive effect on the viewer, whose position is challenged; nonetheless, the

provocative content is also partially responsible for any negative reactions. It is difficult to pinpoint the plot, the story lacks a sense of direction in the traditional sense, there is no apparent development but a series of disconnected, surprising comments and chitchat, there are no purposeful, explained actions and we cannot disclose Julia's mystery. The content and the structure both work together to echo each other, multiplying the educational effect as a set of Chinese boxes. The play does not only show a different way of teaching and learning but it also applies the method by using the audience as guinea pigs. The idea of the salon as a domestic space for women to interact with the possibility for improving their education and showing their artistic talent, the teachers, the educational topic of the lectures the characters have chosen, the use of authorities, quoting other texts, the analysis of Julia with a different perspective and the experimental use of space and time all point to the instructional project of Maria Irene Fornes. It is a form of education which aims to open the gateways which block our sensitivity and to celebrate the different, the unusual, the diverse, the other. To be able to see beyond appearance, to question traditional notions of learning and teaching. Fornes, the playwright, has fused the non traditional teaching techniques of Fornes, the educator, in an effort to show us how to read, watch, learn and change. In the trail of the authority of Emma Sheridan Fry's notion of educational dramatics, the experience of attending a performance of *Fefu and Her Friends* is in itself a class about increasing our sensitivity to that which is different.

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