

Maria Irene Fornes Recites/Resites Women's Desires

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Maria Irene Fornes recite/resitue les désirs des femmes

Cet essai analyse la manière dont la pièce de Fefu and Her Friends de la dramaturge américaine Maria Fornes critique la représentation dramatique des femmes en posant un "gestus" féminin (dans le sens de Brecht) qui vise le contrat symbolique du théâtre là où il exige la femme souffrante, victime de la violence à la naissance de la tragédie. Ici Fornes met en scène une femme qui tue une autre femme dans un geste d'élimination des rôles et des représentations traditionnelles de la femme. Le personnage de Fefu en posant le geste, quitte le stade du miroir, rompt avec l'abjection, et se constitue comme sujet dans le Symbolique. Alors, les femmes pourront jouer(i)r.

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 ... like Orpheus ... as if a god once said "and if they shall recognize each other, the world will be blown apart." (15)

Fefu's prophetic utterance, thrown out as a challenge to her intimate gathering of women friends in her elegant New England country house, will be tested in Maria Irene Fornes' most celebrated play, *Fefu and Her Friends*, where each of the women will find themselves forced to experience the shattering impact which "recogniz(ing) each other" entails.

The stage set, which represents various rooms in Fefu's house in pre-feminist 1935, will become the site of the imaginary mother's body – a place where the women characters and their audiences must wander in and through on a journey in which they will try to re-cite their own "forgotten" or unnamed desires. Through their words and their actions they will name and hence begin to possess their own

experiences. The mother's body, forbidden to the female child by the Phallic Order, will be entered, explored, and finally reclaimed as a site of desire (Rubin 1975, 195). In the process, gender and sexuality will be freed from a strictly heterosexist definition and women will "recognize" that their liberation lies in learning to love one another. As they do so, Fefu and her friends will have to break through the barriers of the Imaginary and enter into a Symbolic Order of their own making – "[a] world blown apart."

Blowing the patriarchal world apart requires the brutal violence which Jill Dolan in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* considers to be the distinguishing and necessary social *gestus* of Fornes' work (180). Within a few minutes of the deceptively bourgeois illusionistic opening of the play in Fefu's living room, the audience's attention is drawn to "a double barrel shotgun [which] leans on the wall near the French doors" (7). Any attempts we may make to dismiss the threat that this anomalous object suggests are soon shattered by Fefu's opening line, "My husband married me to have a constant reminder of how loathsome women are" (7). She then further problematizes women's "interiority" in the grotesque symbol of the overturned stone:

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. (10)

Fefu soon delineates the parameters of the battleground dividing public male and private female space. Looking out onto the lawn, she sights her (never seen) husband Philip, points him out to her friends and then raises her shot gun and shoots at him through the open French doors. Her *gestus* (Brecht 98) of violent threat is a habitual one characterizing modern marriage: "There he goes. He's up. It's a game we play. I shoot and he falls. Whenever he hears the blast he falls ... He's all right. Look." (11). The inadequacy of the polite conversation about drinks and plumbing which follows underlines the ludicrousness of what has become her mode of sexual intercourse:

That's all right. I scare myself too, sometimes. But there's nothing wrong with being scared ... it makes you stronger. – It does me. – He won't put real bullets in the guns. – It suits our relationship ... the game, I mean. If I didn't shoot him with blanks, I might shoot him for real. Do you see the sense of it? (13)

Fefu's act is soon exposed as empty gesture – she has been given the phallic gun, but the bullets or blanks are still provided by her husband. She cannot go out to be with the men on the sunlit grounds and the men do not enter into the darkened women's domain. Looking out again across this great divide, she sights the problem as she watches the men checking out the new grass mower: "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" (15).

Part one draws to a very non-climactic close as the rest of the women gather, each with her own agenda and none as yet ready to "recognize each other." Fefu turns the conventional belief of female fear of males upside down and proposes instead that women hide behind men to avoid making the more meaningful but terrifying contact with each other: "the danger is gone, but the price is the mind and the spirit ... High price. – I've never understood it. To give up the passion of friendship. Why?" (15)

Emblematizing their paralysed state is the figure of Julia, who arrives in her wheelchair, having been mysteriously shot in a hunting accident a year before. In fact, her crippled state is itself a *gestus* which registers the damage that male violence inflicts on its victims. Her action of unloading the slug from Fefu's gun also operates as a *gestus* of submission to the status-quo. In a countermove, the other women will, albeit clumsily, later reload it after she has gone off to rest.

Even before the end of part one we are aware that Fornes is using the most obviously clichéd situations to problematize any easy definitions of gender. The banal conversation of the guests is sharply juxtaposed to the constant undercurrent of violence which surfaces in Fefu's on-going deconstruction of both her own words and deeds. The *gestus* of polite conversation supposedly typically "female" is set against the *gestus* of suppressed rage it frequently masks. Part one sets up a dialectic between the dialogue and the space which Fornes will explore more fully in part two.

Thus, in part two, not only the women characters but the audience are placed in situations which challenge the traditional voyeurism of Western theatre. Divided into four parts, each taking place in a different area of the house, it requires the audience to leave the protection of the seating area and split into four smaller groups in order to follow the characters into the different rooms. To access these areas we must traverse a corridor and enter only through the designated doorways

as the floor plan for the play indicates. It is as if the rooms of the house have become the maze of the mother's body, the landscape of our dreams (Chodorow 1978, 127). Each of the areas holds one of her secrets – is a segment of her fragmented body: bedroom, kitchen, study and garden will each signpost different scraps of information. The journey thus simulates a passage into the Imaginary stage in its never ending search for the wholeness which the mother's body might provide (Lacan 1977, 83-97). Only permitted to stand along two sides of the room and prevented from seeing one another, each audience member becomes isolated from the others and must experience at close range the intimate conversations taking place between the characters. As *Theatre in Review* commented: "Like remembered photographs, it is haunting and disorienting to pass other groups moving into new rooms and to catch glimpses of empty spaces which we have previously visited" (267).

Thus we, as audience, lose our privileged position of enjoying the spectacle at a safely objectified distance. Here we are given the chance to renegotiate our own subject formation before the imposition of any Symbolic Order and to experience ourselves as both the same and different from others, rather than as simply different (Winnicott 1982, 13). The staging in part two permits the audience to re-enter into that crucial childhood transitional phase between boundarylessness and subject formation: a period which feminist psychoanalysts such as Jessica Benjamin have pinpointed as a crucial time when, rather than defining the self in terms of mutually exclusive gender differences, subjectivity could be developed as interrelational – by experiencing the self as both merged with and also independent from others (Waugh 85).

Entering this liminal space, we, as audience, will be inundated with the fragmentary conversations, scraps of writing, poetry selections, recounted dreams, and feverish hallucinations re-marking key moments in the muffling of women's voices throughout history. In the one exterior but still domesticated (croquet-playing) territory, "The Lawn," Emma and Fefu reverse Eve's expulsion from paradise, re-claiming women's right to take pleasure in their sexuality and re-writing the rules for entry into heaven as being dependent on one's devotion to lovemaking. Any false romanticism in this notion is quickly undercut by Fefu's terrifying description of sexuality as the hideously mangled black cat who keeps her in agonizing pain. Emma continues this discourse on the history of sexuality with her recitation

of that perfect expression of Renaissance humanism – Shakespeare's Sonnet 14. By addressing it to a dressed-up effigy of the now vanished Fefu, she de-voices its authority and ironizes its narcissistic romanticism which pretends to locate all knowledge, truth and beauty in the beloved's eyes (29). At the same time as this discourse on sexuality has been set in motion, three other interior and frequently mystifying encounters are also being witnessed by other audience members. Fefu's impeccably timed movement from one scene to the other punctuates each and further accentuates the dialectic between them.

"In the Study," a former male preserve, Cindy and Christina dabble with "book-learning" as if they were eager children discovering its joys: one practices her French, the other reads out some sensational "unbelievable" facts. This time the conversation reverts to the recounting of Cindy's "terrible dream" (31) where she is assaulted by a policeman and humiliated by the male doctor she had confided in. Frozen in her dream, a terrified Cindy is empowered enough to call out from the protection of an upper level a request to her attacker to "restrain [him]self," but she is not able to do more than soundlessly mouth the real message, "respect me" (32). Women may have entered the male preserve of intellectual pursuit, but they are not safe enough to take any genuine possession of what they have learned.

The violence in the study prepares us for the entry into the innermost chamber – Julia's bedroom – where all the frayed nerve endings will intersect. We have entered the site which we traditionally associate with the most profound expression of sexual desire. But our voyeuristic detachment is undercut by the fact that we have to react with the solemnity of visitors at the side of a hospital bed.

Out of her sombre trance-like stance comes a crescendoing litany of female oppression. It is Julia, not Fefu (who significantly does not appear in the bedroom), whom Fornes in *Performing Arts Journal* refers to as "the seer, the visionary of the piece" (107). Speaking in a "still and luminous manner" (33), she belies her medical designation as an insane hysteric. Her words acquire the mesmerizing quality suitable for a sermon, full of ponderous repetitions and rhetorical embellishments. Ludicrously funny, her solo dis-embodied voice problematizes each pronouncement it makes.

The human being is of the masculine gender. The human being is a boy as a child and grown up he is a man. Everything on earth is for the human being, which is man. To nourish him. – There

are evil things on earth, and noxious things. Evil and noxious things are on earth for man also. For him to fight with, and conquer and turn its evil into good. So that it too can nourish him. – There are Evil Plants, Evil Animals, Evil Minerals, and Women are Evil. – Woman is not a human being. She is: 1 – A mystery. 2 – Another species. 3. – As yet undefined. 4 – Unpredictable: therefore wicked and gentle and evil and good which is evil. (35)

The scene in Julia's bedroom is not, as might have been expected, a glimpse of private passion, but rather one of acute suffering and torment. As she lies on her single hospital cot, she repeatedly guards her head from an expected blow, in an eloquently silent *gestus*. Her half coherent mumblings re-cite over and over again her fear of challenging male thinking, her internalized acceptance of habitual abuse.

(She moves her hand as if guarding from a blow.) She was. He said that I had to be punished before I was getting too smart. I'm not smart. I never was. Neither is Fefu smart. They are after her too. Well. She's still walking. *(She guards from a blow. Her eyes close.)* Wait! I'll say my prayers. I'm saying it ... *(Her head moves as if slapped.)* (34)

The intimacy created reinforces the sense of violation of privacy which the invitation to enter into the enclosed rooms has already raised. The safe voyeurism of the traditional audience is gone. The audience must register the actual claustrophobia of these women's lives and relationships. The most intense scene with Julia takes place at the furthest end of the corridor. The impact of Julia's hallucinatory state becomes even more unbearable because we are confined in the room with her. Instead of the coldness of pornography we witness the passion of the suffering it causes.

"In the Kitchen" the feverish pitch is lowered temporarily at least as the women work together to prepare food, wash dishes, and do "womanly things." Still, the main subject is the same sequence of repeated betrayal and failure we suffer in relationships. Just as the friends have been repeating the same conversations over and over again, women have continued to pursue relationships which leave them in fragments. As Paula grieves: "The mind leaves but the heart is still there. The heart has left but the body wants to stay. The body leaves but the things are still at the apartment ..." (38).

This fragmentation has effectively prevented women from making

any strong statements or achieving any sense of wholeness. Part II ends with a recognition scene in which Paula is able to “speak” of her love for Cecilia and finally the audience realises that she was referring to her in the earlier speech. The mother’s body has been reclaimed as a site of desire (Rubin 1975, 195). The liberating possibility of women siting their desire in other women is celebrated by Paula’s words.

You abandoned me and I kept going. But after a while I didn’t know how to. I didn’t know how to go on. I know why when I was with you. To give you pleasure. So we could laugh together. So we could rejoice together. To bring beauty into the world. (39)

In part three, the fragmented audience which reassembles for the rehearsal of the educational conference agenda is no longer the “same” audience as in part one. Preparation for this exciting women’s event can no longer be considered the most important reason for this get-together. The “blah blah blah blah. And so on and so on. And so on and so on” (45) used to summarize the “boring” parts of the speeches as well as the constant interruptions of the rehearsal valorize the intimate moments of emotional honesty, the so-called idle chit-chat which we have been hearing throughout parts one and two. As Cecilia puts it, the real danger in the system is that it:

can function with such bias that it could take any situation and translate it into one formula. That is, I think, the main reason for stupidity or even madness, not being able to tell the differences between things. (43)

A Symbolic Order which has neglected to represent the “different” gender has created Julia’s prison house of oppression and oblivion. The big speech that Emma finally gives is a recitation from the prologue of *Educational Dramatics*, the work of an early twentieth century acting teacher, Emma Sheridan Frye. This re-voicing of a muffled female voice links past to future in a quaintly joyous affirmation.

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! Don’t let its glorious light pass you by! Come! The day has come! (48)

Altogether the three parts of the play cover the chronological passage of time from noon to early evening, but during the afternoon we also watch life going on simultaneously. Thus synchronic time intersects

with chronological time, freeze-framing its habitual patterns, the stifling sameness of different women's lives. Offsetting this claustrophobia is the rhythm the women's energy creates, which begins to flow through the house as soon as the women gather to share their experiences. It culminates in the boisterous water fight where the women, who have begun to "recognize one another," splash dish water all over each other and the house in a cleansing baptism which, as the stage directions permit, "*may drown the words*" (50). But the strong death-wish countering this spontaneity now tops it and brings it to an abrupt halt. It is in this pool of silence that the battered Julia will make her speech submitting to the death she feels is threatening her at all times. Thus the whole theatrical space has become inundated with the women's desires and begins to reverberate with the meanings the words have been fumbling for. Fefu, as the main occupant of the house, gets her answer, and buoyed up by the positive energy generated by the women inside the house, chooses to go out onto the lawn, empowered to shoot to kill.

The final action of the play in which Fefu seems to shoot Julia is charged with the now recognizable Fornesian *gestic* mark of brutal violence. Although *gestic* in that it repeats the shooting which has characterized male-female relationships to date, it also breaks their habitual pattern because Fefu is now able to act as her own agent. At the moment of the shooting, Julia repeats her earlier *gests* of ritual suffering as well, only this time there is blood: "*Julia puts her hand to her forehead. Her hand goes down slowly. There is blood on her forehead. Her head falls back*" (61). When Fefu enters holding a dead rabbit in her arms, she tells Julia that she has caught it and killed it. An ambiguous and highly symbolic act, Fefu's shooting of Julia can be read as an act of liberation where she chooses to kill that part of herself and all women who refuse to abandon their fear of men and to join in the fight against them:

Julia: They are too strong.

Fefu: No, they are not. I just have to learn how to fight them.
(*Julia looks at Fefu.*) Don't look at me. (*Fefu covers Julia's eyes with her hands.*) I lose my courage when you look at me ...

Fight with me.

Julia: I have no fight left. (60)

By "killing" Julia, Fefu breaks out of the mirror stage and enters into the Symbolic Order. The image that Fefu sees in Julia is herself and all

women as defeated by patriarchy and held in permanent abjection. But she has acquired the knowledge that she cannot break out of the state of internalized oppression until she shatters such negative reflections. In shattering the mirror, Fefu is able to free all those other reflections which Julia has blocked. Reflections which recognize women as having their own desires and the potential to create a new social order by following the educational goals they have set for themselves in this "coming together."

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