

For:  
The Admissions Tutor  
*MA in Theatre Directing*  
**Rose Bruford College**  
Applicant: Dmitry Tolonen

Maria Irene Fornes : "The Conduct of Life" (PAJ, N.Y. , 1986)  
Scenes 11 to 13: notes on a possible staging

Fornes goes to exceeding lengths to describe action and visual aspects in the stage directions, while deliberately leaving exposition out. It is hard to not re-write her plays when you are going to direct them.

I think this is probably one of her points as a playwright - to make each artist responsible for their own voice coming out. This was one thing she always stressed to her then INTAR trainees. Otherwise, what would be the point in doing her plays; carrying out one of them would be like making a film script based on Dostoevsky – he virtually gives you everything.

The theme I opt to concentrate on in these scenes – the gentle balance between subjective identity and injustice in the world – is something immediate that can usefully transpose the vague setting of the play into a specific context.

The play is set in "A Latin American country. The present." though it indicates the 1940s through costume (the play was written in 1984). While keeping the context of the USA (this is revealed later in the play) and gender politics, I'd move this play into the contemporary film industry undergoing significant changes.

More specifically, I'd use the references to the 40s through the old servant character to bring up issues of ethnicity and Hollywood in the 1940s. This is because, as a nurse figure, she can embody themes of the genesis of representation in film/ on the stage via Eastern European émigrés and sexuality of the Hispanic community in the US.

Furthermore, a reference later to an "America" will serve as an ironic device to dissect the hyper-reality of the contemporary world: which is more real, the image of our countries in our heads, or the fabric of our daily reality?

The scenes I have chosen from the play offer, in miniature, a glimpse of the abundance residing in the text. All the active parts are involved in this set of scenes. In connection with the characters (the crisis between the main heterosexual couple especially) and their lack of exposition, the set represents gradually deepening mental states (interiors).

The set should be kept conceptually unchanged, i.e. private interiors where the outside world is dragged in and dissected, only here I want to provide a mirror device – most of down stage left will be transformed into a studio set with only a mattress and a chair.

The back wall of the studio will double as a semicircular Hollywood mansion staircase, to which the stage left doors open. The measurements in the scene directions will have to be modified to facilitate proper

dimensions for the rising levels – living, dining rooms etc. The warehouse and staircase will be joined by a row of balustrades.

In making a new performance environment, what interested me was infusing this ‘personal interiors’ theme (psychological) with a notion of publicity (sociological) and performativity (how we act our lives today, influenced by performances we remember; by our parents, movie icons and fictional characters).

Alejo represents the lack of honest communication in the ranks – here in the ranks of the film industry – he is a producer. We don’t know if he knows about the teenager, or if he will not publicly admit being like Orlando. In scene 11 he acts ‘virtuous’ and disappointed towards Orlando.

Nena is a sacrificial character partially like Nina in *The Seagull*. Responsibility is forced on her at the end, as she’s the most human, and violated, of the characters. Her acting is very restrained. As with musical compositions, Nena is the key of the piece, the key we finish in.

Orlando’s ‘animal’ male-hood is under threat in scene 11 by the female characters and a civilised, institutionalised maleness (Alejo’s morality) and in scene 13 he starts to reveal this elemental make-up: what he really is talking about is in one word: creativity – which is why he needs to rape Nena. He is a director-come-producer.

Olivia is understanding and mother-like though at the end of her tether. Whatever she says, the others are still men with the power to overthrow her – apart from the fact that she has obviously lived through far more than they have.

Leticia is guided by guilt through scene 12. Though she is acting the victim, she is portrayed as having lost her identity (femininity) in contrast to Olimpia. Fornes makes this more an issue of class, where I would like to emphasise culture/ethnicity/ age.

The overall colour patterns are to compliment the angle at which the top audience would see the cast. Lights should suggest a cool and glass like mood – back and centre stage, light blue down lights with front of house whites to downstage (for the cellar etc.)

Stark white-only spots, isolated, in dark with purple and blue backlights to give depth interrupt these. (for monologue parts like scene 12 – Leticia). The third and most general pattern is by medium straws and amber washes to convey the general interiors in the mansion and to be used for characterising movement there.

It would be ideal to show these scenes in a space where one can utilise low balconies to make the performers seem like pawns from above and at an angle. The balconies can cover all sides of the stage – even the upstage end – because the performers will be facing all directions and are often isolated so there will be no real confusion about source of delivery.

Like in a lot of Chekhov, which Fornes ‘formulates’, the strongest theme is about the loss of identity and linked to this the confusion of one’s own genesis. There is a desire to self-destruct but first, through fear, to inflict upon others pain and confidence in ones own power.