

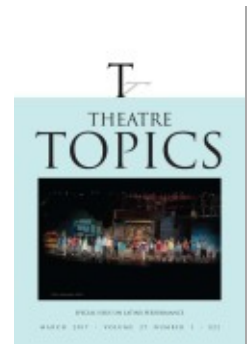


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Expanding the Chair: A Conversation on Fornés's Pedagogy in Action

Elaine Romero and Anne García-Romero

María Irene Fornés, award-winning playwright, director, and teacher, did not wait for a seat at the proverbial table. She created her own table and her own chair. She invited many to sit at her table of artistic and theatrical creation. In this note we ask: Who continues to sit in her chair? Can her chair expand as her legacy continues to grow? Fornés taught a generation of playwrights through her work at INTAR, as well as at workshops, universities, and arts organizations. She mentored the authors of this essay, Elaine Romero and Anne García-Romero, and both continue to be inspired by her pedagogy as they teach playwriting to new generations of students. What follows is a dialogue between these playwrights as they consider Fornés's mentorship and legacy, their experiences of her pedagogy, and Fornés's continued influence on Latinx and non-Latinx writers.

ELAINE ROMERO: In recent national meetings, through the Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC), you and I have taken part in a conversation among Latinx playwrights about María Irene Fornés. In a world where fellow Latinx mentors were few, Irene stepped forward to guide a generation or two of US playwrights. Her creative teaching methods have inspired us both in our work as playwrights and educators.

ANNE GARCÍA-ROMERO: Many of Irene's longtime students who teach are Latinx. How does this inform the legacy of handing down her methods to the next generation? Irene's relationship with her Cuban upbringing broadly informs her work. Navigating English and Spanish, US and Latin American worlds influenced Irene's teaching. Her methods navigate multiple physical, linguistic, and visual realities to access deep play material. Irene's students whose origin and language are rooted in Latinx culture might have a particular affinity for accessing her methods. Perhaps we can more fully comprehend how negotiating a bilingual, bicultural, Latinx identity informs Irene's teaching techniques.

ER: In reviewing Irene's influence, it's easy to focus solely on her vast impact on Latinx writers. Her legendary workshops at INTAR in New York and her truncated workshops, which she took on the road, gave her a resonant reach into our community like no other Latinx mentor before or since. Without her, would we exist as a community? Would we know one another? Would we care? Would we know we were artistic siblings if we had not known a common parent? Perhaps we will never know the answer to these questions.

AGR: However, as more time transpires between source and transmission, Irene's methods are in danger of dilution. Irene never wrote a book about her teaching, and she gave her final workshop in 2001. How are Irene's students passing on her legacy? How does the creative energy of Irene's teaching resist temporal drift? Many of us teach her methods in universities, colleges, and arts organizations. However, not all have tenured positions where they can consistently teach Irene's methods to the next generation.

ER: We do believe that Irene's pedagogy models the practice of radical inclusion. Tony Kushner once said of Irene, "her oeuvre is one of American drama's most important achievements." Paula

Vogel has called Irene one of her three gods. She places Irene in the company of Caryl Churchill and John Guare. Nilo Cruz proudly declares he comes “from the Irene Fornés school.” In conversations with national playwrights of varied ethnic backgrounds over the years, such as Julie Hébert, Karen Hartman, and Rebecca Gilman, I’ve discovered that Irene focused on instilling her subconscious-excavating techniques, not only in Latinx playwrights, but in an entire generation or two of American playwrights. Hébert wrote her first play under Irene at Padua Hills Playwrights Festival. Hartman studied with Irene at Yale. When I told Gilman that I had studied with Irene, she said, “We all did.”

In the same conversation Gilman described an exercise of Irene’s where the writers would draw the face of the writer next to them, and then pass the drawing to another person to use as a basis for a character. A year later I saw another one of Irene’s mentees passing on this same exercise in a completely different part of the country. The teaching of an Irene exercise can be something like the game of telephone. The instructions mutate with each aspiring mentor. In these exercises memory becomes the starting point for the creation of character. The students follow the trail of that character’s obsession to discover the story that springs from that character. There is an irony here. Like using the exercises for writing prompts, the exercises themselves find themselves restricted by the subjective memories of her students. Irene’s exercises live within us.

Somewhere on my altar at home sits a picture of Irene and me together, hiking up a hill in Taxco, Mexico (fig. 1). It was 1997 and I’d borrowed money from my parents to travel there to be her student. It was something I’d wanted for a long time: a woman, a Latina mentor who knows something of what it means to live in two worlds. My writing, up to that point, had only known how to live in one place at one time. Irene was about to change all that. That day, Irene and I had taken a hike with a group of playwriting students, and the other students had run ahead to explore. And when the photographer, who was a hired hand, clicked the photo of me with Irene, the rest of the group saw the missed opportunity and wished they had lagged behind.

AGR: I also have a treasured photo of Irene and me. We were sitting in the patio of Plaza de la Raza in Los Angeles in the summer of 2001, at the Mark Taper Forum Latino Theatre Initiative Retreat. We’d just finished dinner. I’d been talking to her about my struggle to figure out my latest play, as well as how hard it was to be a playwright while earning my keep as a legal secretary in Los Angeles. Irene encouraged me to continue pursuing my playwriting and told me that she once was a secretary too. Her humor, mentorship, and kindness lifted my spirits. The photo was taken right after our conversation. We’re both smiling and her right hand is resting on the table, facing forward, slyly waving to the camera. She is almost beckoning us to continue to listen to her (fig. 2).

ER: In our photo together Irene uses a walking stick as I walk beside her. In my mind I’m attempting to keep up with her. This memory fuses what was true with what I had imagined. Irene’s exercises employ a playwright’s interior landscape and memory as a jumping off point for the writing. This photo encourages me to take the frame off the picture of my own memory. My reflection on her teaching leads me to question what might expand beyond what I recall. What if that old photograph had no frame? What would I see then? What if my memory had not been eroded by forgetfulness? What might I remember then? Is it possible to remember new things?

AGR: Memory is key in Irene’s pedagogy and legacy. She studied acting with Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio, and later utilized his sense memory and moment-to-moment work in her teaching. Her methods are handed down orally through memory and are at risk of being lost. Irene, now age 86 and in the late stages of Alzheimer’s disease, can no longer communicate verbally nor remember her teaching. Her legacy is not static nor linear, but is an energetic, interdisciplinary method being remembered and sustained by a community of predominantly Latinx theatre artists.

ER: I had a completely different relationship to my work and even myself before I met Irene. I was an artist who sought to control my plays. I believed that if I just planned properly, the play would bring me no surprises and say what I needed it to say. For that novice playwright, a play



FIG. 1. María Irene Fornés and Elaine Romero at the Latin America Writers' Workshop, Grutas de Cacahuamilpa National Park in Taxco, Mexico (1997).

was something to be beat into submission. In studying with Irene I learned that I did not need to know everything about the play in order to write it. I learned that my play would reveal itself to me. The play would demand its own rhythm and form. It would be through this unique set of demands that I would come to know my play and honor it.

I've learned to share this lesson with my students by saying, "would you look at a seed and say, 'you're going to grow up to be an ugly tree?'" The point is that we don't know what a play will be, so it is fruitless to try to judge it or know a play before its time. We have to sit with not knowing what the play is while wholly committing our bodies, minds, and souls to its creation. It's a journey into the unknown.

Irene's practice involves several modalities—yoga, movement, meditation, visualization, intuition, drawing, found objects, and writing. These take on a spiritual quality, as one comes



FIG. 2. María Irene Fornés and Anne García-Romero at the Mark Taper Forum Latino Theatre Initiative Retreat, Plaza de la Raza, Los Angeles (August 2001). (Photo: Jonathan Cenicerroz.)

to know both the play and oneself. To be in the presence of Irene and to face the blank page in her presence is to sit with not knowing. It's a bliss state. It is the source of all creativity. When we peacefully sit with not knowing, it comes to us. We know. We spring into action. We write. We move through the writing like a fluid world, not knowing what's ahead, and not reflecting on what's behind. It is in not knowing that we, finally, truly know.

AGR: Irene empowered us through her unique method for accessing creativity. She began her classes by leading us in a series of physical, yoga-like exercises, much like an actor warms up his or her body before a performance. This practice energizes my body and quiets my mind to be fully present during the writing process. However, I like how Irene did not utilize a formal sequence of traditional poses. She would keep us open to change, as she would improvise the physical, yoga warm-up each day.

ER: I became a yogi after studying with Irene. I think her efforts at her invented yoga inspired me. I began to relate Irene's methods to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, which say, "yoga ceases the churning of the mind, so that the true self might be revealed." I often think Irene taught me the cessation of my mental chatter.

AGR: I studied with Irene during my first month as a new playwriting student at the Yale School of Drama in 1992. I'd previously studied with her for two summers at the Padua Hills Playwrights Workshop in California in 1989 and 1990. In her workshops, capturing my visualized character in a drawing on paper, then transforming that into a scene, helped me to translate my interior creative world to an exterior reality. I started to trust the unexpected in my writing. I allowed myself to be surprised by an image or a turn of phrase coming out of my character's mouth. I began to embrace my own creative impulses more deeply with the knowledge that I could access an energetic realm of mystery, wisdom, and innovation in my writing.

ER: When I began to study with Irene I had written plays and had them produced. I was published. I had an MFA in playwriting from the University of California, Davis. I'd even had my first taste of national recognition, but something inexplicable seemed to be missing, like a sentence with a great beginning and a hefty ending, but a fuzzy, inauthentic middle.

Up to that point I'd worked hard to obey the rules. I understood those rules to be the Aristotelian dramatic structure laid out in the *Poetics*. I believed I had a handle on dramatic action and dramatic irony, but when Irene came into the room I learned to adopt that sense of not knowing. It was a concept I'd studied in philosophy—*tabula rasa*, a blank slate, a beginner's mind. The play cannot live unless the ego dies. Irene taught me to embrace the slate and to silence my mind chatter. I am forever grateful for her gift. Now I write plays without self-judgment. I aspire to teach others to do the same. I have now written over eighty-six plays and lived the life of a playwright in ways I could not have conceived of when I was a student.

AGR: For me, visualization is central to Irene's method. Once seated at our desks after a physical warm-up, Irene instructed us to close our eyes and visualize a character. She asked us to delve into our personal, creative subconscious, which could then lead us to generate compelling play material. She created many variations of these visualizations to locate new possibilities for the formation and development of character. Her visualization echoes Strasberg's moment-to-moment work, placing the writer in a creative present moment that necessitates rigorous attention and unfolds in a guided, yet present tense experience.

Next, drawing proves an important part of Irene's method. After the visualization she instructed us to draw pictures of our characters and locations. This aspect concretizes the inner vision into a tangible, artistic form. The student's level of drawing ability is not important. My drawings are often very rough and almost child-like. The valuable element here is the student's effort to capture and sketch the visualized image, which then provides an immediate, visible environment on the page that can draw us deeper into creativity.

Once a draft of the play is written Irene guided us through the revision process. In one exercise she had us construct small, three-dimensional set models out of cardboard and construction paper to fully envision the world of our plays. Then, utilizing cardboard figures created to scale to represent the characters, she instructed us to move the figures through the scenic environment while looking over each scene in their plays. This exercise allowed me to consider how my play could function in a theatrical space, which would then inspire the revision of my script.

ER: Irene taught me that mentorship is not about the opinion the mentor brings to the mentee's work. Mentorship circumvents traditional script analysis. In my experience with Irene, she did not evaluate my text or give me notes. Instead, her guidance led me to keep looking within myself for the answer. She never said this, but this is what I heard: "I am not your mentor. Your mentor is you."

AGR: When I first began teaching playwriting I struggled with translating Irene's methods to a class of undergraduate students. Irene commanded the room with her artistic authority. The performativity of Irene's method became one that I had to adapt to my own personal style. I often teach more conversationally, so I had to adopt a more directive, monologic approach while communicating her method. As for visualization, at first I was reluctant to ask my students to close their eyes. Early on I guided my students through creating character, but the results were often lacking in innovation and risk. When I began to ask my students to close their eyes and picture a character, the creativity of the resulting work took remarkable leaps forward. The characters were idiosyncratic, unusual, whimsical, and brave. Irene also participated in the exercise alongside her students, modeling the meditative commitment necessary for this work. So as my students close their eyes, I close my eyes. As I picture a character in my mind's eye, I guide my students to do the same. I lead the students, moment to moment, through picturing the character's face, hair, body, and clothing. When we all open our eyes we begin to draw a new reality on our pages. The characters emerge informed by the collective creative energy in the room.

ER: Irene's unique brand of mentorship leaves an indelible impression, like a fragrance that lingers once someone has left the room. Her techniques insist the writers develop an intimate relationship with themselves. With Irene, she has just walked you through your own circles of hell. You're Dante; she's Virgil. The experience reminds me of my early play, winner of the Chicano/Latino Literary Prize, *Walking Home*. In order for the protagonist Maria to complete her journey, Woman in the Sand (her Virgil) must die. Maria must transform her past into something else to save her present; and she must do this wholly alone. In the play as in life, the memory of such guidance lingers still. As her student and as a mentor I've learned that writing from these deep places requires a dark night of the soul every time. It's asking the student to circle back to the quietness of their own soul that makes her so beloved. I believe this is why so many students claim Irene.

AGR: Irene's method is not a formula, recipe, or code for writing plays. She radically departs from schools of playwriting that focus on teaching principles, such as developing a premise, deciding upon a point of attack, generating rising action, building toward the climax, and then resolving that action with a dénouement. Irene has helped me to develop my individual voice over and above any cultural, political, or artistic agenda. Her exercises have guided me to visualize my theatrical creations in great detail, allowing me to deeply connect to the physical and emotional life of my characters.

ER: For me, to learn from, and to teach from, a place of Irene is to move in a world of what exists beyond one's grasp. It is to dance with the unattainable and to believe it can be touched. In the world of Irene not everything can be explained. The unique access to oneself and the removal of the expectation of results stands in opposition to what so many believe about the teaching of writing. What is it to mentor a playwright so the playwright get out of her own way? Too many cobwebs clog the psyche. Irene's methods begin to erase those.

AGR: I value how Irene's method includes incorporating prompts in the midst of a writing exercise to jumpstart creativity. As my students write in silence I utilize Irene's method of interjecting a location, a line of dialogue, an object, and a gesture. I write these on the board or speak them aloud, and let the writers know they can use these items in their scene if they feel stuck or if they want additional inspiration. A location may pull the characters into a new environment. A line of dialogue can push the language of a scene in a different direction. An object might push the character to behave unexpectedly. A gesture could pull the character toward greater connection to the physical life of a scene. This aspect of Irene's method has shown me the importance of creative flexibility and dexterity in adapting to unexpected ideas, thoughts, or impulses as a means to delve more deeply into the creative process.

ER: Here is how Irene's fragrance lingers. She resides within my subconscious, an integral part of my own lucid dream. I can invoke her presence willfully. In the particular memory captured in the limited framed photograph of reality from Taxco, Irene walks ahead of me—because she is always ahead of me, always steps before me. That's where mentors walk. Steps ahead, leaving footprints for us to fill or vacate.

I'm reminded of my obsession with the philosophy of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* as an undergraduate literature major. My anxiety of influence featured me, a young impressionable writer, under the influence of a controlling older writer who would try to shape me into an exact replica of my mentor. I can imagine few greater insults than to having one's work referred to as derivative.

Truth be told, I both feared and longed for more mentorship when I met Irene. Little did I know, at the time, that Irene did not aim to replicate her writing style in me or any of her students. That's why those notes were nowhere to be found. She did not seek to influence us to become her. Through her teaching, and her teaching of access to the self, her pedagogy spoke to the core of my anxiety-of-influence anxiety: it was about reaching away from her and further into me. As in all exemplary teaching, Irene's pedagogy is about the student, not the teacher.

We are not replicas of Irene, yet we all feel a sense of ownership. Like a parent with too large a brood, Irene is not our mentor alone. I did not spend the most time with her. If hours with Irene were Native American DNA, I could not claim blood quantum. I do claim Irene unlocked something sacred in me, and as a result I've received the rare gift of being able to unlock it in others. It's an indirect mentorship. It assumes great writing emerges not from talent, but from access to oneself. That access unleashes honesty on the page. I believe this is why first plays are so often lauded. We forgive a host of beginner's errors in lieu of a raw theatrical expression that indicts our own humanity.

Irene's pedagogy trusts that the student's innate guidance transcends anything that can be taught with words. In Irene's workshops I entered new worlds through her cue to begin drawing before writing. The roots of Irene as a visual artist, the charge to draw something that does not have to be good or particularly representational (perhaps it's better if it's not), become the breadcrumbs that lead each student to her own inner well of words.

AGR: I agree. I'm also continually struck by how Irene's training as a painter influenced her writing and pedagogy. In the early 1950s she studied with abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann in his New York City studio and for one summer at his school in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Hofmann's push-pull approach informed Irene's conception of character and theatrical space. His principle highlights a dialogue between opposing forces. Irene truly helped us guide the energies of our characters from visualization to manifestation on the page. Her work with Hofmann and Strasberg transformed her work, just as she continues to influence our creative worlds.

ER: At the LTC national convening in Boston in 2013, Luis Alfaro proclaimed during one of our intensive listening circles: "I sit in the chair of María Irene Fornés." It was fascinating to hear those words in a room populated with writers who had studied with Irene. What does it mean to sit in Irene's chair? How do we move over and make room for the next person and still claim a place for ourselves?

In the four years since the Boston convening I've been pondering the magnitude of Irene's chair. I've been struggling with articulating what Irene means to me. How do I share what she means to me without somebody else hearing that I think she is more important to me than she is to them? If Irene stands with me when I teach her exercises and my own, how might I approximate expressing what she has taught me—that elusive access to myself, the unguarded path to me that circumvents thought.

AGR: We need to continue to do more to preserve her pedagogy. Irene's improvisatory and embodied method defies traditional modes of documentation. How are we archiving her pedagogical legacy? How are we, her other former students, and all our students pulling together her methodology and pushing it toward the future? I'm part of a new effort led by the Fornés Institute, an initiative of the LTC that preserves and archives Fornés's legacy as a theatre artist and teacher through workshops, convenings, and advocacy. I also recently helped launch the Fornés Playwriting Workshop, sponsored by the University of Notre Dame—a summer intensive taught by Migdalia Cruz, one of Irene's longtime students. Yet, only a few scholars have written about her teaching. We are a vast and diverse community of playwrights hugely inspired by Irene, and her legacy is largely dependent upon our ongoing efforts so future generations will have the opportunity to benefit from Irene's transformative pedagogy.

ER: We sit in Irene's chair. We are not alone. Irene's chair is full of playwrights, Latinx and non-Latinx. If medieval philosophers asked "How many angels sit on the head of a pin?," a generation of US playwrights might ask "How many playwrights sit in Irene's chair?" Irene's chair is the head of the pin—indefinable, a universe infinitely expanding and contracting. I think about the gravity of occupying Irene's chair. How can I share my thoughts about her chair with our greater community? My memories with Irene flood my musing.

Irene's chair is the torch on the altar of our theatre community, like an eternal flame, ceasing the churning of our collective mind, revealing our true selves in the glow. As we sit in the chair of María Irene Fornés, so do others. We sit together. We sit with not knowing. And we're okay. May the flame in the chair of María Irene Fornés burn for generations, full of all of us and none of us at the same time. May Irene's chair always hold a space for the next playwright. May it be so. We have had the rare and extreme benefit of witnessing the expanse of Irene's creative tendrils, over time. May we continue to bear witness to the unparalleled immensity of her legacy as testament to the power of Latinx playwriting pedagogy.

Award-winning playwright *Elaine Romero* has had her plays presented at the Alley Theatre, Working Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Kitchen Dog Theater, and Kennedy Center, and across the United States and abroad. Her commissions include Ford's Theatre (*Modern Slave*), Goodman Theatre/Goodman Playwrights' Unit (*A Work of Art*), Arizona Theatre Company (*Title IX*, NEA), and NNPN/Kitchen Dog Theater (*Ponzi*, Edgerton). Her publishers include Samuel French, Playscripts, and Vintage. Her "U.S. at War Trilogy" plays, *Graveyard of Empires* and *A Work of Art*, premiered in Chicago in 2015. Her Arizona/Mexican border trilogy includes *Wetback*, *Mother of Exiles*, and *Title IX*. A resident playwright at Chicago Dramatists and a certified yoga teacher, she is an assistant professor in the University of Arizona's School of Theatre, Film, and Television.

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