Documentary Feature
US, 2018, 79 minutes, Color, English

www.wmm.com

THE REST I MAKE UP

A film by Michelle Memran

The visionary Cuban-American dramatist and educator Maria Irene Fornes spent her career constructing astonishing worlds onstage and teaching countless students how to connect with their imaginations. When she gradually stops writing due to dementia, an unexpected friendship with filmmaker Michelle Memran reignites her spontaneous creative spirit and triggers a decade-long collaboration that picks up where the pen left off.

The duo travels from New York to Havana, Miami to Seattle, exploring the playwright's remembered past and their shared present. Theater luminaries such as Edward Albee, Ellen Stewart, Lanford Wilson, and others weigh in on Fornes's important contributions. What began as an accidental collaboration becomes a story of love, creativity, and connection that persists even in the face of forgetting.

MoMA DOC FORTNIGHT 2018 Official Selection

35 MIAMI FILM FESTIVAL OFFICIAL SELECTION

WINNER Audience Award Best Documentary Frameline42 San Francisco International LGBTQ Film Festival

WINNER! Audience Award, Best Documentary: Frameline Film Festival 2018
WINNER! Jury Award for Best Documentary, Reeling: Chicago LGBTQ+ Int'l Film Festival
WINNER! AARP Silver Image Award, Reeling: Chicago LGBTQ+ Int'l Film Festival
WINNER! Jury Award for Best Documentary, OUTshine Film Festival
Special Mention, Queer Porto 4 - International Queer Film Festival

One of the "Best Movies of 2018"
Richard Brody, THE NEW YORKER

"A lyrical and lovingly made documentary."
THE NEW YORK TIMES

"Intimate and exhilarating...Fornes exerts a hypnotic force of stardom, while her offhanded yet urgent remarks resound with life-tested literary authority. "
THE NEW YORKER

"A story of spontaneity, creativity, genius and madness.
It showcases the life, inspiration and virtuosity of Fornes."
MIAMI HERALD

"A tender exploration of Fornes' life and the meaning of memory."
CONDÉ NAST'S THEM

"Fabulous. *The Rest I Make Up* is as inspiring as its subject."
SAN FRANCISCO BAY TIMES

"The film's overarching theme of life's ephemeral nature paired with the deep friendship and vital creativity that percolates between this young writer-turned-filmmaker and the iconic playwright offer a much-needed and refreshingly loving take on aging and illness."
ARTBURST MIAMI

"A touching portrait of an unheralded artist."
SCREEN SLATE

"Memran's documentary is as untraditional and unpredictable as the woman herself. In it, Memran manages to take us through Irene's extraordinary life, while capturing the essence of what made it extraordinary - all while transitioning into an impressive artist in her own right."
NBC NEWS LATINO

"An enduring portrait of an artist who defied expectations right until the end."
VOGUE

CREDITS

CREDITED CAST

Maria Irene Fornes
Michelle Memran

ADDITIONAL INTERVIEWS
Edward Albee
Brooke Berman
Constance Congdon
Migdalia Cruz
Oskar Eustis
Carlos Fornés
Rafael “Cuco” Fornés
Joseph Goodrich
John Guare
Lee Guilliatt
Morgan Jenness
Eduardo Machado
Jana Napoli
Carmen Nute
Ozzie Rodriguez
David Shenk
Harriet Sohmers-Zwerling
Ellen Stewart
Kelly Stuart
Paula Vogel
Lanford Wilson

PRODUCTION

Director
Michelle Memran

Executive Producers
piece by piece productions
Jennifer Fox

Producers
Michelle Memran
Katie Pearl
Shelby Siegel
Heather Winters

Editor
Melissa Neidich

Cinematographers
Roberto Guerra
Megan Hill
Michelle Memran
Katherine E. Scharhon

Composer
Max Avery Lichtenstein

Associate Producers
Stefanie Diaz
Alison Forbes
Nykia Herron

Creative Consultants
Gwendolyn Alker
Mollye Asher

POST-PRODUCTION

Post-Production Supervisors
Keaton Monger
Lennon Nersesian

Online Editor/Colorist
David Gauff

Post-Production Facility
Prime Focus Technologies

Post-Production Sound Facility
Splash Studios, NYC

Supervising Sound Editor
Peter Levin

Sound Editors
Barbara Parks
William Hsieh

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In 1999, as a young and aspiring writer, I asked the incomparable Cuban-American dramatist Maria Irene Fornes—Irene as she prefers to be called—to let me interview her for an *American Theatre* magazine article about the rancorous relationship between playwrights and the critics who review their work. Minutes into our meeting, Irene made it clear that she could care less about critics. *"I'm not making a play so it can be reviewed,"* she said. *"I'm making it because I have to. Who cares about whether they like it or not?"* Six hours later, most of my interview questions remained unanswered but our friendship had begun. *"I didn't decide to become a playwright,"* Irene once said. *"It decided itself. When something happens by accident, I trust it."*

Just as Irene didn't set out to become a playwright, I never set out to become a filmmaker—this film is the glorious accident of the time we spent together. Shortly after that first interview, I began visiting Irene frequently. As we hung out in her apartment or walked the streets of Greenwich Village, it became clear to me that Irene—then in her 70s—was suffering from dementia. Her career had halted. Irene told me that she had stopped writing and didn't know why. I told her I wanted to write a play but didn't know how.

One afternoon, in August 2003, we ventured to Brighton Beach with bathing suits and a never-used Hi8 camera my father had given me. I turned it on. *"Irene, does the camera make you uncomfortable?"* I asked, in a noisy beachside café. *"Don't you understand,"* Irene answered coyly into the lens, *"the*

camera to me is my beloved, the one who wants me always, and I give everything … I have … to a camera."

Irene's response to the camera and my response to filming her was a revelation for us both. So I kept bringing the camera with me, everywhere we went. Initially, the film was our way to keep the creative process alive in each of us, and the process—at least at the time—was very much the product. *"Little camera,"* Irene said*, "I tell you things I didn't even know I knew."* Today I am able to see clearly the reason I stayed committed to the project years after I stopped filming due to Irene's advancing dementia. The reason I kept working with the tapes, combing through hundreds of hours of footage, was because there was a story I had to tell. Eventually I met an editor—Melissa Neidich—who cared for the material as deeply as I did. Together we unearthed a story about the power of friendship and creativity, and what it means to remain an artist through all the vicissitudes of life.

That story is at the heart of this film. In telling it, I am able to right a significant wrong by introducing audiences to a gay, female theater artist who has been profoundly under-recognized. Irene changed the landscape of the American theater with her revolutionary writing methods, idiosyncratic plays, unmatchable creative spirit and inexhaustible work ethic. She was one of only a few prominent women who built the Off-Off Broadway theater movement, and while her male playwriting contemporaries such as Sam Shepard, Lanford Wilson and Edward Albee—who also got their start in the Off-Off Broadway movement—went on to be some of the best known and most produced writers of the American theater, Irene's plays are rarely produced outside of university settings. I am also glad that the film opens a window into Irene's lesbian identity, which she rarely talked about but never hid—particularly within her artistic and literary circles where her passionate and contentious relationship with Susan Sontag was well known.

With this film I was also driven to confront a prevailing attitude about aging and Alzheimer's disease that I passionately believe needs to change. In our society today there's a pervasive view that people lose their value as they lose their short-term memories, which enables our culture to confine multitudes of elders to a life of invisibility and isolation while they are still capable of meaningful relationships. *The Rest I Make Up* counters that assumption by inviting us to live for a while with an irrepressibly vital and generative playwright who—even in the face of eroding memory—is experiencing a remarkably creative period of her life.

The film's title, *The Rest I Make Up,* is taken from lyrics to one of Irene's songs in *Promenade*, a biting and whimsical musical written in collaboration with composer Al Carmines, first produced in 1965 at Judson Poets' Theater: *"I know everything. Half of it I really know, the rest I make up."* It is a testament to the way life can creatively increase even as it is cognitively disappearing, and to the way a teacher can continue to lead a student even as the student begins to lead the teacher. Over the past fifty years, there have been countless artists and writers who have worked with Irene or taken her legendary workshops. And each of them has an Irene story to tell. *The Rest I Make Up* is mine.

THE HIDDEN INFLUENCE OF MARIA IRENE FORNES ON THE THEATER WORLD, NYC AND BEYOND

Irene's early plays such as *Tango Palace* and *Promenade* catapulted her into the vanguard of the nascent Off-Off Broadway theater movement and a downtown DIY aesthetic that continues to thrive today. Often referred to as the American theater's "Mother Avant-Garde," Irene steadfastly refused to adhere to any rules or formulas in playwriting, choosing instead to follow her characters' lead in order to better get at her core question: What does it mean to be a human being? Theater luminaries like the Pulitzer Prize-winning writers Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*), Paula Vogel (*How I Learned to Drive)*, Lanford Wilson (*Talley's Folly)*, Sam Shepard (*Buried Child*) and Edward Albee *(A Delicate Balance)* credit Irene as an inspiration and influence. *"Her work has no precedents; it isn't derived from anything,"* Lanford Wilson once said of her, *"she's the most original of us all."* Paula Vogel contends: *"In the work of every American playwright at the end of the 20th century, there are only two stages: before she has read Maria Irene Fornes and after."* Tony Kushner concludes: *"Every time I listen to Fornes, or read or see one of her plays, I feel this: she breathes, has always breathed, a finer, purer, sharper air."* Vogel, Wilson, and Albee are featured in the film, speaking about Irene.

Arguably Irene's greatest influence has come through her legendary playwriting workshops, which she taught to aspiring writers across the globe. Locally in New York City, as the director of the INTAR Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Lab in the 1980s and early 90s, she mentored a generation of Latinx playwrights including Cherríe Moraga, Migdalia Cruz, Nilo Cruz, Caridad Svich, and Eduardo Machado. In 2005, while presenting Irene with the Theater Practitioner Award at TCG's conference in Seattle, Machado said: *"She told us that we were going to change the theater, that we were going to create a world where Latino writers in America had a voice, and she willed it into all of us. And none of us would be here without her. She is the architect of how we create theater, how we teach, and the way we lead our lives."* Although Irene is no longer writing and teaching, she continues to be a vital figure in both the Latinx theater community as well as American theater overall. Leaders from the Latinx Theatre Commons are in the process of establishing a Fornes Institute in order to propel her teaching legacy forward.

ABOUT MARIA IRENE FORNES

Maria Irene Fornes was a Cuban-American avant-garde playwright, director, and master teacher whose plays and playwriting classes influenced an entire generation of theater artists.

Irene was born in Cuba in 1930. The youngest of six children, she was raised by unconventional parents who infused their home with a bohemian appreciation of art, politics and intellectual inquiry. Her mother ran a school, and her father— without formal education and a wanderer at heart—worked off and on as a low level bureaucrat. Unable to afford steady rent, the family moved frequently. After her father died of a heart attack, a 15-year-old Irene came with her mother and one sister to the United States, eventually immigrating to New York City.

An autodidact for life, Irene had little formal education. She left school shortly after arriving in New York, instead pursuing her own creative interests and supporting herself with a number of factory and other routine jobs. In 1947, a folk dancing class at the New School for Social Research introduced her to the counter-culture community of Greenwich Village, which soon became her home. She began painting and studied with the abstract expressionist artist Hans Hofmann, whose “push-and-pull” theory affected her deeply—and became a significant influence on how she later approached writing and directing her own plays.

In 1963 at age 33, with no formal theater training, Irene made her professional playwriting debut with *Tango Palace,* produced at the Actor’s Workshop in San Francisco and directed by Herbert Blau. From then on she dedicated herself to writing plays and educating herself about the theater. Back in New York she joined the playwrights unit of the Actors Studio, took a Method acting class, and participated

in a series of workshops with the Open Theatre. She eventually found a creative home at Judson Poets' Theater, where she became a leading figure in New York's burgeoning Off-Off Broadway theater movement. With each new play, Irene broke open conventions of theater-making, shocking and delighting audiences with bold, surprising work that continually redefined itself. In 1965, Irene won her first Obie (New York's Off-Broadway and Off-Off Broadway theater awards), for both her biting and hilarious musical *Promenade* and her loopy, satirical *The Successful Life of 3*. Irene went on to write over 40 plays, to win a total of nine Obie awards, and to mentor and inspire thousands of playwrights across the globe. In 1990, her epic play *What of the Night?* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Other major works include *Fefu and Her Friends*, *Mud*, *The Danube*, *The Conduct of Life, Sarita, Abingdon Square,* and *Letters from Cuba*. Off-Broadway's Signature Theatre devoted its entire 1999-2000 season to her work.

Though never married, Irene had numerous celebrated relationships, including one with the writer and social critic Susan Sontag. Perhaps her deepest relationship was with her mother Carmen, who traveled the world with Irene, attending rehearsals, productions, and workshops. They were living together in Irene's Greenwich Village apartment in the mid-1990's at the time of Carmen's death. Irene died on October 30, 2018 at the age of 88 in New York City.

CREW BIOS

MICHELLE MEMRAN DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Michelle Memran is a journalist, illustrator, and filmmaker. For nearly twenty years she's worked as a reporter, researcher, and editor in New York City. She's also written for numerous publications, including *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Brooklyn Rail, Vanity Fair* and *American Theatre* magazine. Her oil pastel portraits have been commissioned by *The New York Times Book Review*, as well as by various theatrical and film productions, including The Civilians' production of *The Ladies* written by Anne Washburn, and the independent film *Adrift in Manhattan*, starring Heather Graham.

The Rest I Make Up is Michelle's first film, for which she has received funding from the New York State Council on the Arts, the Frameline Completion Fund, the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, the JKW Foundation, and more than 600 individual donors.

While working on *The Rest I Make Up*, Michelle was awarded fellowships at The MacDowell Colony and Brown University, where she twice served as a visiting artist in the University's Theatre Arts & Performance Studies Department. Most recently, as part of Brown's Fitt Artist Residency in 2016, Michelle collaborated with theater director Katie Pearl on a new performance and film project that juxtaposed characters and scenes from the plays of Maria Irene Fornes with outtakes from the film's footage.

MELISSA NEIDICH EDITOR

Melissa Neidich is an award-winning documentary editor, working in the field for twenty years. Notable documentaries she has edited include: *Soul in the Hole*, which won an Independent Spirit Award; *Dark Days*, which also won an Independent Spirit Award and a Sundance Audience Award; and *Two Towns*

of Jasper, which screened at Sundance and went on to win several awards, including a Peabody and a Gotham. Her latest feature — *Out of the Clear Blue Sky* — opened to rave reviews.

PIECE BY PIECE PRODUCTIONS EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Executive Producer piece by piece productions is a not-for-profit organization that was started in 1999 by Wendy vanden Heuvel. Its mission is to produce film and theater that is socially, politically, and spiritually relevant to our times.

JENNIFER FOX EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Executive Producer Jennifer Fox is an internationally acclaimed director, producer, and camerawoman. She directed and produced *Beirut: The Last Home Movie* (Grand Prize Winner & Best Cinematography, Sundance Film Festival 1988; Grand Prize Best Film, Cinéma du Réel 1988; Frontline WGBH), the ten hour *An American Love Story* (Berlin Film Festival 1999, Sundance Film Festival 1999, Gracie Award 1999, Primetime PBS), the six-part, *Flying Confessions of a Free Woman* (IDFA 2008, Sundance Film Festival 2008; Sundance Channel), and the feature *My Reincarnation* (Emmy-nominated, IDFA Audience Award 2010; Premiere POV 2012). Her groundbreaking first fiction feature, *The Tale*, recently aired on HBO.

HEATHER WINTERS PRODUCER

Heather Winters is a film producer, director, writer and a two-time Sundance winning-executive producer. She executive-produced Morgan Spurlock's Academy Award-nominated and Sundance-winning documentary *Super Size Me*, and Anthony Haney-Jardine's Sundance-winning dramatic feature *Anywhere, U.S.A*. Heather executive produced AJ Schnack's documentary *Convention*, and is the co-writer and producer of the documentary *Class Act*. Her directorial debut, *TWO: The Story of Roman & Nyro*, released by Virgil Films and Morgan Spurlock Presents, premiered on Netflix in 2014 and garnered several awards, including the HBO Hometown Hero Award. Heather is the founder of White Dock and Studio-on-Hudson production companies and is a film consultant, producer's rep and guest professor of film at Sarah Lawrence College.

SHELBY SIEGEL PRODUCER

Shelby Siegel is an Emmy-award winning editor working in both narrative and documentary film. Being particularly drawn to documentaries that experiment with form and style, her past films include *Tarnation*, *Capturing the Friedmans*, *Helvetica*, and *Urbanized*. She's also consulted on several films, including the Oscar-nominated *Cutie and the Boxer*, and recently received Emmy and ACE awards for her editing on Andrew Jarecki's *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst*, a six-part documentary series for HBO.

KATIE PEARL PRODUCER

Katie Pearl is a nationally recognized theater director and playwright, especially known for her work with the Obie Award-winning PearlDamour, an interdisciplinary performance-making company she shares with playwright Lisa D'Amour. Recognition for PearlDamour includes two NEA Our Town grants, four MAP fund awards, and a 2009 Creative Capital artist award. As an Anschutz Fellow at Princeton University, Katie's teaching and research focused on the concept of the Artist-Citizen. As the 2017

Quinn Martin Guest Chair of Directing at the University of California at San Diego, Katie directed *What of the Night?* Maria Irene Fornes's Pulitzer Prize-nominated play.

MAX AVERY LICHTENSTEIN COMPOSER

Max is a New York-based film composer whose melodic sensibilities, understated arrangements and creative recording techniques infuse a special character into the movies his music accompanies. He has written scores and songs for critically acclaimed narrative features such as *The King*, *Jesus' Son*, and *Far From Heaven*. His scores can be heard in documentaries such as the Emmy-nominated feature *War Don Don* and the Academy Award-nominated short *Mondays at Racine*. Most recently, Max wrote the score for HBO's *Very Semi-Serious: A Partially Thorough Portrait of New Yorker Cartoonists*.

THE NEW YORKER

2018 IN REVIEW

THE BEST MOVIES OF 2018

By Richard Brody December 5, 2018

Illustration by Cari Vander Yacht

“**The Rest I Make Up**” (Michelle Memran)

An intimate documentary portrait of the playwright María Irene Fornés, whose bouts of memory loss prove to be the onset of Alzheimer’s disease.

THE NEW YORKER

An Extraordinary Documentary Portrait of a Playwright Facing Alzheimer's Disease

By Richard Brody
August 22, 2018

"The Rest I Make Up" distills fifteen years of connection between the filmmaker Michelle Memran and the playwright María Irene Fornés into an emotionally raw jaunt into the void.
Photograph by Michael Smith. Courtesy Women Make Movies

Artist-portrait documentaries have become art-house staples, because they have a ready-made fan base, but also because many filmmakers, like many artists, have an inherent inclination to ponder artists' lives and to lend their aesthetic enthusiasms an enduring form. Most of these films are as much about the filmmaker as about the subject—yet most of them have an arm's-length, encyclopedia-like impersonality. There's no danger of impersonality in "The Rest I Make Up," Michelle Memran's documentary portrait of the playwright María Irene Fornés (which screens August 23rd through the 29th, at *MOMA*). It's very much a four-handed film, made (as the credits say) both by Memran and by Fornés, and it's explicitly, inescapably about their collaboration. The resulting film is a profound, tragic, yet joyful vision of art. It's more than the portrait of an artist (or even of two); it's a revelation and exaltation of the artistic essence, of the very nature of an artist's life as an unending act of creation in itself.

“The Rest I Make Up” distills fifteen years of connection between the filmmaker and the playwright into a brisk, teeming, aesthetically rarefied and emotionally raw eighty-minute jaunt into the void. Memran and Fornés met (as the film itself details) nearly two decades ago, when the filmmaker, then twenty-five, interviewed the playwright, who was in her sixties. They stayed in touch, and Memran began to film Fornés, at Brighton Beach, with no particular project in mind. The filming, along with the friendship, continued and deepened, and it was anchored, as the movie makes clear from the start, by a mystery of clear medical origin. Memran had wanted to write a play; she sought advice from Fornés, who had herself stopped writing but didn’t know why. Fornés was, from the first days of filming, suffering from memory loss, and, in the course of filming, she is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease.

In their decade-plus of filming, Memran became a frequent, seemingly near-constant companion to Fornés. The filming continues in a doctor’s office, where Fornés (accompanied by her sister, Carmen Nute), fills out a form to explain the reason for her visit, and struggles to write it—the phrase first emerges as “loss of me,” which is, surprisingly, quite the opposite of what the movie displays. On the contrary, even as Fornés’s short-term memory falters, her immediate observations and interpretations remain powerfully insightful, emotionally charged, and vitally imaginative.

Memran films in Fornés’s West Village apartment and the nearby streets; at public events, such as a celebration at the theatre La MaMa with its founder, Ellen Stewart; on a trip to Fornés’s native Cuba to visit members of her family whom she hasn’t seen in decades (she came to the United States at the age of fifteen, in 1945); on a visit to Nute in Miami on the way back from Cuba. She presents a useful compendium of Fornés’s career as a playwright, in which other luminaries of the theatre (including Edward Albee, Paula Vogel, and Oskar Eustis) detail the enduring and crucial influence that Fornés has had, as playwright and teacher. Her work is described as a reflection of her embrace of the unconscious, her teaching is hailed for her application of Method-acting liberations to the playwright’s practice, and the movie puts her artistic process—and its inseparability from her own automatic, immediate, yet deeply rooted powers of mind—on glorious yet poignant display.

Above all, the movie embodies Fornés’s inherently and irrepressibly creative presence. The text alone, transcribed, would be a primer in live-wire poetic lucidity. As they leave Fornés’s apartment and enter the elevator, Memran is having a little trouble with the camera. Fornés asks how long she has been a cinematographer; Memran says, “Not that long.” Fornés jokes, “A couple of hours,” and continues: “I do not trust professionals; but people who have confidence in their artistic”—she gives a confident click with a hearty fist-pump—“instinctive knowledge, are all on my side of the artistic road.”

The collaboration lurches through a wide range of modes and tones. Fornés is clear about her uninhibited self-revelation in the film—and Memran shows herself to be well aware of the ethics of filming Fornés in a state of increasing disability. Fornés speaks of her specific intention, even desire, to present herself fully and frankly to the camera, saying, “I prefer not to hide anything,” explaining, “If you expose anything about you . . . you are a freer person,” and adding that she trusts Memran. Fornés is also entirely aware of her performative presence: “The camera, to me, is my beloved . . . and I give everything I have to a camera.”

Even Fornés's occasional loss of focus prompts insights of piercing authority, as when, in her apartment, seeing Memran filming her, she asks, "Who is doing the writing?" Memran says, "You are," and Fornés says to the camera, "I'm using now Michelle's language; she calls talking to a camera writing." Albee characterizes Fornés's theatrical art as "taking stuff from the unconscious and letting that create form . . . she discovers what she's writing by writing it."

Fornés's idea of writing is existential, physical, inseparable (she says) from performance—and she delivers an extraordinary performance throughout "The Rest I Make Up," dancing, imitating the street-strutting styles of her Cuban youth, teasing Memran and the camera with incisive flashes of seductive delight. One of Fornés's former partners, Harriet Sohmers Zwerling, speaks of the extraordinary erotic power that Fornés exerted on her, decades ago, saying that she called Fornés "Doña Juana." Fornés speaks of her relationship with Susan Sontag, calling her "the love of my life"—yet even this discussion is prompted by a magnificent turn of spontaneous artistry.

The story comes up while they're sitting at a café table in Cuba. Fornés can't remember how she and Memran met; Memran asks her to make up a story about it. Fornés tells one, about an encounter in a Paris café, loses her way midstory, and then says, "It was not Michelle that I met in a café in Paris, it was Susan Sontag." Memran asks about Sontag; in her response, Fornés says, "Right now, my eyes are beginning to tear, and this is one hundred and fifty-five years later. . . . Why is someone the love of your life? It is a mystery, it is magic. It is as real as this table, but you cannot analyze it; because it *is*."

In her recollections and insistences, there's a powerful, if fragmentary, view of social history at work. Fornés recalls having been beautiful in her youth—and of having deliberately made herself look ugly in order to avoid the catcalls of men in Cuba, even when she was nine or ten. (She also asks Memran if such a thing as catcalling still happens and is dismayed to learn from Memran that it does.) Fornés is entirely lucid about the dangers faced by L.G.B.T.Q. people in Cuba, where it's impossible to live openly, and she intentionally remains vague about her personal life when speaking with her relatives there. Yet, the day after she and Memran returned from their two-week trip to Cuba, Fornés has no recollection of having been there.

While there, Fornés tells Memran, "The artist is a person who is made of two: one who goes in and another who goes out. The one who goes in enters through observation and, in some mysterious way, then transforms it to produce a thought, a poem." Soon thereafter, Fornés, visiting her sister Nute, in Miami, is encouraged to stay there because of her increasing difficulty living alone. She resists moving, because she needs to be in New York's theatrical community in order to write plays (she offers, throughout, a moving tribute to the city), and is surprised to learn from Memran that she hasn't, at the time, written a play in years. Yet Fornés has, nonetheless, written a movie, given a performance, spoken poetry, created—in collaboration with Memran—theatrical moments of exquisite cinematic power.

The New York Times

Review: In ‘The Rest I Make Up,’ a Playwright’s Life as Memories Ebb

María Irene Fornés, left, with Michelle Memran, the director of “The Rest I Make Up.” Credit Women Make Movies

By Ken Jaworowski
Aug. 22, 2018

Try as it might, sadness still can’t get the best of “The Rest I Make Up,” a lyrical and lovingly made documentary about the playwright María Irene Fornés, which recalls her career and follows her over several bittersweet years as Alzheimer’s steals her memories.

Born in 1930, Ms. Fornés came to the United States from Cuba as a teenager and made her way to New York. Self-taught, she went on to write dozens of avant-garde plays (one of them a Pulitzer Prize finalist) that garnered plenty of productions and awards. Her friends included Susan Sontag, who was, for a time, her lover.
Video

Edward Albee, Ellen Stewart and other theater notables reflect on Ms. Fornés’s work, and clips from her plays are shown along with old photographs and film footage. Those are valuable, but none are as rewarding as when the camera returns to Ms. Fornés, whose every utterance sounds poetic yet unpretentious, even as her disease progresses.

Michelle Memran, directing her first feature, has long been friends with Ms. Fornés and their affection is evident. Yet the cinematography — credited to Ms. Memran and three others — sometimes distracts with shaky camerawork and awkward angles; potentially interesting facts about the playwright are also left unexplored. This is a free-form glimpse of Ms. Fornés, not a strict account of her accomplishments.

Still, “The Rest I Make Up” remains a fine ode to the excitement that Off Off Broadway theater once generated, and a wistful look at an ailing artist as she contemplates her life. (A chance meeting between Ms. Fornés and the playwright John Guare, filmed on the street, is particularly poignant, as is a trip to visit her family in Havana.) Regrettably, the present brings difficulties for Ms. Fornés. But those seem outweighed by so many past joys.

NEW YORK POST

Meet the best playwright you've never heard of

By Raquel Laneri
August 16, 2018

María Irene Fornés Marcella Matarese Scuderi

María Irene Fornés wrote more than 40 plays and won nine Obie Awards, a Pulitzer nomination and the admiration of Edward Albee, who called her "the most intuitive playwright" he ever met. Known in 1960s and '70s New York City as Doña Juana for her seductive charm, she famously bedded Susan Sontag.

Yet the woman the Village Voice 30 years ago called "America's great unknown playwright" is still, well, unknown.

That's finally changing. Fornés, 88, is the subject of a new documentary, "The Rest I Make Up," playing Thursday through Aug. 29 at the Museum of Modern Art. The film, a decade-long collaboration between Fornés and director Michelle Memran, not only showcases Fornés' work, but also chronicles her struggle to find a creative voice in the grip of dementia.

"Irene refused to be pigeonholed, in her life and in her work," Memran tells The Post. "That's how she approached this movie. It was like she was writing for the camera. I would tell her, 'The lens is your pen.'"

Born in Havana, Cuba, in 1930, Fornés arrived in the US at 15 with her mother and one of her sisters. She worked in the Capezio shoe factory, learned English and studied art with abstract expressionist painter Hans Hofmann, but she didn't start writing until she was 31.

Sontag, her lover, had terrible writer's block, and Fornés — hoping to inspire her — opened a cookbook and began crafting a story using the first word of each sentence on the page. She finished her first play, "Tango Palace," that year.

"Her plays ranged in form from zany whimsical musicals to dark-nights-of-the-soul drama," Memran says. "But I think that may be why she's not well-known … People like boxes. They like labels."

Even after the onset of dementia, about 15 years ago, Fornés seemed to lose none of her charisma and wit. The film shows her sashaying down the street in imaginative get-ups, talking candidly about her past conquests and reuniting with her family in Cuba.

Since 2013, she's lived at the Upper West Side's Amsterdam Nursing Home. Friends still visit her, playing the music she loves and speaking to her in Spanish. They'll stage a marathon of her works at the Public Theater on Aug. 27 from noon to midnight.

"Irene is a major playwright in the pantheon with Beckett, Harold Pinter and Caryl Churchill," the event's director, JoAnne Akalaitis, tells The Post. "More theaters should be doing her plays. She remains a 'new voice.'"

THE NEW YORKER
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

MOVIES

The Rest I Make Up

MOMA, Aug. 23-29 Michelle Memran's intimate and exhilarating documentary portrait of the playwright María Irene Fornés unfolds the details of their decade-plus collaboration in ample, illuminating discussions between the two of them. Fornés, a crucial theatrical innovator since the nineteen-sixties, speaks of her unbridled self-revelation to the camera, which she calls "her beloved"—and it certainly loves her back. Fornés exerts a hypnotic force of stardom, while her offhanded yet urgent remarks resound with life-tested literary authority.

— *Richard Brody*

The New York Times

An Avant-Garde Theater Artist Gets Her Due

María Irene Fornés in 2000. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

By Andrew R. Chow
Aug. 23, 2018

María Irene Fornés never had a play that opened on Broadway. Few of her 40 full-length works are regularly presented on major professional stages. Yet as anonymous as she is in the wider culture, she is revered by many in the theater world.

“Irene is in the pantheon of the great writers like Beckett or Pinter or Caryl Churchill,” the director JoAnne Akalaitis, a former artistic director of the Public Theater, said in an interview. “She simply fell through the cracks.”

Her plays were often considered too avant-garde or challenging for mainstream audiences. But in the coming week, Ms. Fornés — who is 88 and suffering from dementia — will receive the full attention of two esteemed institutions.

At the Public Theater on Monday, Ms. Akalaitis will lead a 12-hour marathon of staged readings of her works, featuring actors like Michael Cerveris and Kathleen Chalfant. And at the Museum of Modern Art, a documentary by Michelle Memran about Ms. Fornés and her battle with memory loss runs through Aug. 29.

The playwright is not expected to attend either event. But a diverse contingent of artists, across disciplines and generations, spearheaded the tributes, saying they owe much of their own success to Ms. Fornés’s guidance and artistry. Here, eight of them describe what made her special.

The Polymath

Ms. Fornés was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1930 and immigrated to New York at 15 after her father died of a heart attack. She dabbled in writing, painting and dance, and immersed herself in the Greenwich Village counterculture of the ‘50s and ‘60s. (She even dated Susan Sontag for a spell.)

She began writing absurdist and biting plays at the Judson Poets’ Theater; she would not only direct her own productions but would lead many aspects of their creation.

“She did everything. She could design clothing and costumes. She painted and sewed,” Crystal Field, an actor and eventual co-founder of the Theater for the New City, said in an interview. “I wanted to be in anything and everything that she ever wrote.”

The Transgressor

Long before site-specific and immersive theater came into vogue in works like “Sleep No More” and “Then She Fell,” Ms. Fornés toyed with innovative presentations: In her 1977 work “Fefu and Her Friends” — created by the New York Theater Strategy, a now-defunct avant-garde organization that Ms. Fornés ran — actors appeared not just onstage but roamed in several locations, and the audience moved with them.

“It opened the door to thinking about theatrical space as a world beyond the stage,” Ms. Akalaitis said.

Her subject matter was equally radical. Her plays dealt with rape, torture, murder and poverty. As a director, she would rehearse scenes over and over again to push actors to their limits.

Sheila Dabney, an Obie-winning actress and a frequent collaborator, recalled being so affected by playing Joan of Arc in Ms. Fornés’s “A Matter of Faith” that she would hide under the stage after performances, shellshocked and speechless. “Instead of hitting anger in a surface kind of way, we’d explore it for a minute and twist on its ear and bend it back or open its jaws too wide,” she said.

Ms. Fornés would eventually coax the actress out from under the stage and bring her home.

The Mentor

Mr. Cerveris played the Glazier in her 1988 play “Abingdon Square” — decades before he would win Tony Awards for “Assassins” and “Fun Home.”

He remembered a moment during that production in which Ms. Fornés slyly revealed the motivation of one character who asked the character Mr. Cerveris played seemingly random questions: She didn’t want to hear his answers, but rather loved to see his teeth.

“It was one of my favorite directions I’ve ever heard anybody give anybody,” he said. “It gives so much specificity and wonder at the same time.”

While Ms. Fornés wrote at a breakneck pace — including “And What of the Night?” a 1990 Pulitzer Prize finalist — she turned her focus toward mentoring the next generation of writers. Award-winning playwrights that she taught included Tony Kushner, Paula Vogel, Sarah Ruhl and David Henry Hwang.

But many more of her students came from the Latino/Latina community through her work as a director and teacher at the INTAR Hispanic American Arts Center.

There, she led workshops that included yoga, meditation and visualization exercises. “Even when I write nowadays, I practice her technique,” said Nilo Cruz, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright. “I remember her voice: ‘Close your eyes and let a character come to you.’ ”

The Instigator

Ms. Fornés was notoriously tough on her most prized students. “She hated my plays,” Eduardo Machado, who would later walk in Ms. Fornés’ footsteps as the artistic director of INTAR, said. “She read my first play and crossed out all the lines and told me they weren’t any good.”

But even her most aggressive teaching techniques were done in service of empowering her students to tell their own stories. “I love her very much because the person that gives you the ability to express yourself ends up being one of the most important people you encounter in your life,” Mr. Machado said.

The playwright Migdalia Cruz similarly experienced a breakthrough during an exercise in Ms. Fornés’s class, in which she unearthed a traumatic memory from her childhood in the South Bronx of someone being raped and thrown off a building to their death.

“I remember thinking, this can’t possibly be what playwriting is. That’s not what Columbia taught me,” she recalled. “But when I read it aloud, Irene said, ‘Finally. You’ve found your voice.’ It was life-affirming because I realized I have all this history I need inside me.”

The Lifelong Learner

Maria Irene Fornés, left, and Michelle Memran, as seen in Ms. Memran’s documentary film, “The Rest I Make Up.”
Credit: Women Make Movies

Memory loss cut into Ms. Fornés’ productivity in the early 2000s, a period poignantly captured in Ms. Memran’s documentary, “The Rest I Make Up.”

But despite her struggles, she threw herself into creating the documentary, a form that neither she nor Ms. Memran had ever worked with before.

“She was always giving me permission that it’s O.K. to not know what I’m doing,” Ms. Memran said. “Irene was open to the accidents and to her imagination. She trusted that, so I learned to trust that in myself.”

The Miami Herald

2018 MIAMI FILM FESTIVAL

Miami Film Festival opens Friday with 'Tully' starring Charlize Theron

BY ENA COLUMBIÉ
Special to El Nuevo Herald

The 35th annual Miami Film Festival launches Friday, featuring more than 100 movies — many of them world premieres — and about 200 actors and movie makers, including Samu Fuentes, Mateo Gil, Djimon Hounsou, Isabelle Huppert, Ron Livingston, Jason Reitman and Carlos Saura as special guests.

"Tully," directed by Reitman with Oscar-winner Charlize Theron ("Monster") and Livingston, will open the festival. Both Reitman and Livington are set to appear opening night at The Olympia theater in downtown Miami.

There will be awards and tributes to leading film figures such as Huppert, star of the movie "Elle," and Spanish director Saura.

The Miami Film Festival, presented by Miami Dade College, is among the most important events for IberoAmerican movies in the United States and the only one with such a high profile.

The festival also provides presentations and premieres of movies and documentaries, and offers educational opportunities through seminars, conferences and chats.

Among the scheduled events is the world premier of "Las Leyes de la Termodinámica" ("The Laws of Thermodynamics") by Spanish director Gil, and the North American premiere of "Dolphin Man," about free diver Jacques Mayol and his work with dolphins at the Miami Seaquarium in the 1950s.

Also scheduled at the festival, which runs through March 18 at various theaters throughout South Florida: the Cuban film "Sergio y Serguei" by director Ernesto Daranas, which has been praised as adding a link to the chain that includes "Apollo 13" (directed by Ron Howard, 1995), "Gravity" (Alfonso Cuaron, 2013) and "The Martian" (Ridley Scott, 2015).

One of the festival's jewels this year will be the surprising documentary "The Rest I Make Up," directed by journalist, artist and movie maker Michelle Memran, an investigative reporter in New York for nearly 20 years, mostly for Vanity Fair magazine. She also has written about theater for Newsweek, The New York Times, The Brooklyn Rail and American Theater.

Mackenzie Davis and Charlize Theron in a scene from 'Tully' (2018), a film directed by Jason Reitman that opens the Miami Film Festival.

MARCELLA MATAR

Above and right, playwright Maria Irene Fornés, the star of 'The Rest I Make Up' (2018), a documentary by Michelle Memran.

"The Rest I Make Up" is about Cuban-American playwright Maria Irene Fornes, considered the grand teacher of U.S. theater and mentor to thousands of writers, among them Nilo Cruz, the only Latin American to win a Pulitzer for theater.

Winner of nine Obie prizes for theater artists and author of more than 40 works, Fornes was a Pulitzer finalist in 1990 and is ranked among star playwrights such as Tony Kushner, Caryl Churchill, Paula Vogel, Lanford Wilson and Edward Albee.

Her first play helped break the laws of classical theater — guided solely by intuition and one question that she asked herself over and over: What does it mean to be a human being?

The documentary begins in 1999, when Memran asks to interview Fornes for the magazine American Theater. That leads to an unstoppable friendship and eventually the film. Editor Melissa Neidich later joined the project.

It is a story about the friendship between the two women, united despite the enormous difference in ages and despite dementia. It is a story of spontaneity, creativity, genius and madness. "The Rest I Make Up" is also a tribute to the conscience, beyond its limits.

Delicately handled and precise in cuts and editing, even if the film had been done without words and its magnificent music selection, it would still be splendid because of the force of the moving images and the photography, a virtual tribute to the early days of filmmaking.

It showcases the life, inspiration and virtuosity of Fornes and leaves us with the unforgettable lesson that there's much more to rummage through in the human mind even after it is no longer sharp, after the "coherent reasoning" decides to take a break to make way for genius and surprise.

"The Rest I Make Up" will be screened 4 p.m. Saturday at the Tower Theater, 1508 SW Eighth St. in Little Havana.

ARTFORUM

AND WHAT OF THE NIGHT?

September 18, 2018 • Helen Shaw on Maria Irene Fornes

Audience participants perform in Maria Irene Fornes's *A Vietnamese Wedding* on August 27 at the Public Theater. Photo: Johnny Moreno.

SHE HAS A BEAUTIFUL CAT FACE—incredible feline cheekbones and a smile that reveals strangely changing teeth, sometimes fierce and snaggled and gold, sometimes smooth. She flirts with the camera as she sits at an outdoor café somewhere. The footage is casual. A voice asks, "Irene, does the camera make you uncomfortable?" She laughs.

No! I love it!
Don't you understand?
The camera to me is my beloved
The one who understands me
The one who wants me always
and I give everything I have to the camera

If you've ever been cornered by a Maria Irene Fornes[1] obsessive, you've heard her described as "the greatest playwright you've never heard of." These obsessives are often other artists or academics: testimonials from other writers abound—Edward Albee, Tony Kushner, Paula Vogel—all refer to this Cuban-American emigré as a treasure of American literature; the great critic Marc Robinson argues in *The Other American Drama* that she (along with Adrienne Kennedy and Gertrude Stein) should be considered canonical, rather than the usual list of *Salesman*-loving white fellows.

Perhaps you *have* heard of her—in her thirty-year career Fornes has been internationally famous and won dozens of awards (nine Obies and a Pulitzer nomination). But it's more likely you haven't. Theatrical notoriety

dies faster than mayflies, and unlike the other writers who sprang out of the Off-Off Broadway moment, she never found Broadway or Hollywood success. After the Off-Off Broadway Big Bang in the ’60s, the brilliant guys like Sam Shepardand Edward Albee found their ways uptown, but the brilliant women like Fornes and Kennedy stayed down in the Village, where there was less money, smaller audiences, darker venues. If people fall in love with her work now, it tends to be thanks to the academicization of the field, which turned a whole generation of theater makers into professors, who spend their classes passing their idols on.

Maria Irene Fornes, ca. 1940s. Photo courtesy of Maria Irene Fornes.

She is skipping down a Village street, keeping just ahead of the camera. She floats along in her jacket and loose pants, which totally engulf her tiny figure. She’s in her seventies; she looks five.

You move away from me I move away from you
My love for you is secret and it has to stay that way
I just improvised a song, isn’t it divine?
Melody…words…follow me, kid…

Some of those Fornes-drunk makers and academics came together in late August at the Public Theater to create a twelve-hour celebration, a marathon of readings, songs, scenes, and basic stagings of her wildly, chaotically catholic work. It was a who’s who kind of day. David Greenspan performed the Ionesco-ish lecture-play *Dr. Kheal*, which is full of foolishness and wisdom like “You name a dog and it comes; you name a truth and it vanishes.” Bill Camp, Orlando Pabotoy, and Kathleen Chalfant performed the Beckett-meets-Bosch *Tango Palace*, in which a fabulous prop-happy demiurge (Camp) hectors his creation (Pabotoy) into revolution. Nicole Lewis played Molly in an abbreviated version of *Molly’s Dream*, in which Michael Cerveris was a zonked cowboy kicking his heels in a surreal bar; after lunch, a supergroup including Chalfant, Ellen McLaughlin, Joan McIntosh, and Carmelita Tropicanaread the mysterious *Fefu and Her Friends*, stumbling over its still mysterious complexity. In a day of wonderful pieces, the blazing comet was a near-perfect rendition of the bleakly funny love-and-violence triangle *Mud*, directed by JoAnne Akalaitis with Camp, Wendy vanden Heuvel (a staggering actress with Sam Shepard’s cowboy mouth), and Pabotoy. At the end of each scene, the actors and narrator (Karen Kandel) froze in place. It seemed to actually stop time—at one point, I worried I had had a stroke.

Fornes is most known for this jungles-of-Madagascar quality, where there are a thousand species you think seem familiar but don’t have a name for. She wrote musicals; a melodrama, a comedy about dying from the thought of violence, an autobiographical epistolary play, a frightening one-act about torture and sexual slavery. Seen all together, though, you could see continuities and commonalities. As a teacher, Fornes introduced game-structure techniques for playwrights, borrowing them from the Judson Church pioneers and finding a way to share her deep well of inspiration with students. The secret: making contact by any means with the imagination, since it is abundant, fertile, ever-flourishing. Unsurprisingly, therefore, her great love of learning and teaching

shines out of many of the plays. Also—passion in her plays is nearly always swift; there's often a suitcase; some of her lightest and most hopeful plays end in ecstatic death.

In a book-lined apartment, her ex-lover Harriet Sohmers Zwirling says, "Everybody always fell in love with her, she was an arch flirt…I always called her Doña Juana!" She shows us a page where Irene wrote a poem to her, and she cries as she reads it.

I would like to die with you
because you will die singing
and you speak Spanish

At 11:30, Nathan Koci, the musical director, looked up from his piano before launching into another number from the 1965 Fornes masterpiece *Promenade* (music by Judson Church reverend and luminary Al Carmines). "Who's been here all day?" he asked. More than forty hands went up. It's hard to get a taste of Fornes and then leave, it turns out.

The day was organized in tandem with the Museum of Modern Art's run of *The Rest I Make Up*, Michelle Memran's exquisite film about her friendship with Fornes. She too got a taste and could not give her up—after Memran interviewed Fornes for an article in the late '90s the pair began a twenty-year friendship. In 2003, Memran began to film their time together. Her tender document was made for and about a woman who couldn't understand why she no longer wrote plays, the diary of a friendship between an admiring younger woman who remembers everything about Fornes and the genius herself, who had started to forget. Dementia steals more and more of her as the film goes on. The camera follows her to a doctor's office. "How do you spell 'loss'?" Fornes says—this from the woman who inspired the likes of Lanford Wilson and Eduardo Machado.

Lying in bed, she looks frail and elegant. She hasn't written a play in many years, but her identity as a playwright is her tether to New York, to the people who recognize her on the street, to her sense of herself.

My profession is not to have a good memory
That is not what I am hired to do
you know)
(commanding) Bring in the woman with the memory!

Michelle Memran, *The Rest I Make Up*, 2018, color, sound, 79 minutes.

What is worse: forgetting or being forgotten? The film answers one way, the marathon answered another. The film is full of the poetry Fornes could no longer write down, and it is *full* of poetry—it rolls out of her effortlessly, the genie's unending hoard. But because it's ultimately a portrait of a person and not her work, it's also unbearably sad. So much is gone beyond retrieving. Albee, who offers a testimonial, has since died. Memran and Fornes visit her beloved and much-missed family in Cuba; she jokes with her brother and nephew; she dances joyfully on a beach. A week later in Miami she can't remember that they went. At a party at the Drama Book Shop, she goes over to embrace the founder of La MaMa, a silver-haired Ellen Stewart, who died in 2011. "Just seeing makes you makes me feel so connected," Fornes says, a little worry in her voice. "This is a party for the Off-Off Broadway?" Stewart, also worried: "Evidently."

In the shadow of this great sorrow, the marathon and its focus on the theater was a relief. There's a bulwark of work there, and it has not been lost. A chorus of young students sang songs from *Promenade* ("I know everything; Half of it I really know, the rest I make up! The rest I make up!"), and it felt like true revival in both senses of the word. And the last thing our hosts said to us at the marathon was to remind us that Maria Irene Fornes is still alive. She's in hospice in Amsterdam House, and if you're in New York, and you want to go and visit her—to play her some music, to hold her hand—it would be a great kindness. Because despite being a blazing torch for the American theater, Fornes herself is sinking into the deep waters at the end of the world. When she was still in the middle depths, she was able to signal to those of us swimming closer to the surface. But now, they told us, she's gone deeper down.

Good bye to the camera
Good bye, camera
Good bye, Michelle
Good bye, everyone
Good bye, beautiful country.

NOTES

1. During her long career, Fornes did not use diacritical marks in her name, so I am following her policy, and that of her biographer/documentarian Michelle Memran.

— Helen Shaw

NEWS

NEWS

One of our best American playwrights, María Irene Fornés is featured in new documentary

by Carmen Pelaez / Feb.13.2018 / 2:41 PM ET

Maria Irene Fornes in the 1970s Photo by and courtesy of Marcella Matarese Scuderi

María Irene Fornés, is probably the greatest living Cuban-American playwright you've never heard of. A pillar of the 1960's NYC Off-Off Broadway avant garde, the 87-year-old is a nine-time Obie award winner, finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and beloved teacher to some of contemporary theater's most exciting voices, including Migdalia Cruz, Paula Vogel and Nilo Cruz.

A lion of a woman, beloved and respected by her peers including drama greats Edward Albee, John Guare and Arthur Miller, all of her plays, which she has also directed, have one thing in common: they're able to truly capture the impulse and ecstasy of the human condition. Whether it's looking at the daily life of a South American general and his banal brutality in The Conduct of Life or spending a day with ladies who lunch as they plan a charity event that ends in murder in Fefu and Her Friends, her work has always pushed theater forward.

A play by Fornés grabs audiences by the jugular and doesn't let go for days.

Even though her work is influential beyond measure, without a defining style, her plays aren't as well known in the popular cannon. Fornés remains the playwright's playwright and the connoisseur's theater maker, a figure who is sought out.

When journalist Michelle Memran first asked Fornés for an interview, she was a curious writer and a sincere admirer. Fornés, struggling with memory loss, unable to teach or write plays in a formal sense, had some time on her hands, so she agreed to meet. One six-hour lunch and fifteen years of documenting their

relationship later, Memran's documentary, The Rest I Make Up, is as untraditional and unpredictable as the woman herself.

In it, Memran manages to take us through Irene's extraordinary life, while capturing the essence of what made it extraordinary —all while transitioning into an impressive artist in her own right.

Fornés said, "To me, writing plays is not about earning a living. It's about earning a life." Memran shows us just how she has.

Just ahead of its world premiere at MoMA's 2018 Doc Fortnight, Memran spoke to NBC News about Fornés and her groundbreaking film. Here's a condensed version of our interview.

What drew you to María Irene Fornés?

I had read her in college; I wanted to be a playwright but it never panned out. I read The Conduct of Life and loved it; I had never read anything like it.

When I moved to NY, I was writing a piece about playwrights responding to critics and I spoke to fifty playwrights for the piece. Irene was my favorite playwright, the one I was most intimidated by; I called her and she agreed to meet me.

She really didn't have anything to say about critics, she could really care less what they said. She really just wanted to be in the paper. It was very clear that a friendship was formed that day.

When did you decide to make a documentary about her?

The idea wasn't that I was a filmmaker and we were going to make this film. We made it up as we went along; she taught me to be comfortable in that. The camera would be on the ground, sometimes her mic would come flying off and fall off her and we'd have a great moment that wouldn't have audio. It was a challenge to edit, but a joy to make.

I kind of think of the movie as a play in its own way. If you want to learn about her plays, watching her is more valuable than using lines from her plays.

She is such the consummate NYC theater maker. Did you feel like traveling with Irene to Cuba gave you a better sense of her?

A whole world opened up. You can see in the film how drastically she changes, how embodied she is in Cuba. We were put right back into who she was when she was fifteen. She was dancing in the street, everyone was attracted to her, she was this force.

I really got a sense of her theater, the idea of the found objects she would use as the starting point for her plays, the idea of making do and her going back and talking about growing up in Cuba during the Depression and thrift stores and how the idea of buying anything new was not part of her because there was also a story if something was second hand.

There was also this sense of being really alive when were were in Cuba. We were on rooftops with actors; Irene was reenacting scenes with her brother from the last play she wrote in a formal way, Letters from Cuba. I felt like her skin came alive, the colors she was wearing were different, she was filled.

What surprised you about her family and Cuba?

Meeting her brother, who was this amazing cartoonist in Havana starting in the 1930's and their being reunited, talking about their mother who loved American movies and their father who was this incredible bohemian who would read to Irene.

She said, "I wouldn't have been much of a writer had he not been much of a talker," because she didn't read a lot because she was dyslexic. She had these very unconventional parents. There wasn't much in the movie about them, but I learned so much about her ability to be so present; it's really grounded in growing up in that environment. And practically everyone in her family is artistic in some way.

Maria Irene Fornes and filmmaker Michelle Memran in Havana, Cuba, 2004

What did she teach you that you would want to pass on to other artists?

You need to be continually surprised. For Irene, you needed to be in a perpetual state of discovery for it to be excitable to you and for it to be translatable to an audience.

In The Conduct of Life there's a monologue about how Nena wants to conduct each day of her life. That monologue was actually an accident, that was on a different page, it's juxtaposed with a moment of rage. Those things are not supposed to go together in the script, but someone had flipped a page. And so that kind of thing would happen all the time in the filming of our film.

She's talking about memory and then says, 'Ha!' Every moment was a discovery moment, every moment a surprise.

In the making of this film there were so many accidents happening and there was Irene in my head saying, 'I don't trust deliberateness. If something happens by accident I trust it.'

When you encounter any type of artistic project you don't set out to make a portrait. You see what you have and make the portrait from that. Being open to the accidents and being open to your own imagination and being able to trust that, that's the big thing I took from her.

This documentary is very poetic, and extremely intimate. Considering this is your first piece, how do you think you managed such a tricky balance?

It was a perfect melding of the the amateur and the moment. It wouldn't have happened if I'd shown up on her doorstep with a crew. She reveals so much to me, and that wouldn't have happened with a camera crew. It's a totally different feel when you're up close to her.

Maria Irene Fornes taking a break from rehearsalPhoto by and courtesy of Marcella Matarese Scuderi

Her memory loss made her completely in the moment and kept her really excited about this creative process. Had she not had dementia and been working and writing and creating like she had most of her life, she wouldn't have had time to trust this 20-year-old journalist. We were both excited that we found each other.

It was very moving to see the tenderness with which you dealt with her memory loss.

As her memory was going she was retreating more and more to her childhood, back to the things that were important to her, and as we were editing the film it was more about following Irene's memories and following her lead. The things she talked about were Cuba, her childhood, her parents, Off off Broadway and the creative process — and being in the creative process even when she felt she was out of it.

Do you still keep in touch with her?

I see her frequently. She's in very late stage Alzheimers. But she responds to touch, to music, to Cuban music, people speaking Spanish to her. I'm still very involved in her life.

Doc Fortnight 2018, MoMA's annual international festival of nonfiction film, returns for its 17th year with 12 days of documentary filmmaking, from February 15-26

ARTBURST

FILM FOLLOWS THE FACE OF THE ‘MOTHER OF AVANT-GARDE THEATER’

Posted By Mia Leonin
March 13, 2018 at 6:02 PM

“America’s Greatest and Least Known Playwright.”This is how the Cuban-American playwright Maria Irene Fornes is referred to several times throughout Michelle Memran’s documentary “The Rest I Make Up,” which makes its Florida debut this Saturday as part of Miami-Dade College’s Miami Film Festival.

Fornes has been called the “Mother of Avant-Garde Theater.” Theater giants like Edward Albee lauded her creative genius. Tony Kushner waxes poetic. “Every time I listen to Fornes, or read or see one of her plays, I feel this: She breathes, has always breathed, a finer, purer, sharper air.” Garnering nine Obie Awards and nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, this prolific playwright is also legendary as an innovative, generous teacher. She nurtured the talents of an entire generation of playwrights who have gone on to have rich, fertile careers, among them Nilo Cruz, Eduardo Machado, and Caridad Svich.

As a journalist, Michelle Memran first met Irene Fornes in 1999 when she interviewed her for *American Theatre* magazine. A friendship blossomed and over the next 10 years Memran carried around a hand-held video camera and captured Fornes, who by the early 2000s was no longer writing due to dementia and memory loss.

Based in New York City, the two women embarked on several journeys together and naturally, the film captures the prerequisite street scenes of Greenwich Village, Miami Beach, Havana — and that city's iconic sea wall, el Malecon. These moments where the camera pulls back, combined with clips from archival footage and photographs, reveal the breadth of Fornes' bohemian life and formidable career, but nothing in Fornes' biography as a Cuban immigrant, artist, lesbian, teacher, and maverick can overshadow the woman herself.

Memran, untrained as a filmmaker, seems to know this and instinctively films "The Rest I Make Up"with the eye of a photographer, often holding the camera just inches from Fornes' face for long, lingering moments. At any and every age, Fornes' dark brown eyes, high, sculpted cheekbones, and beguiling smile own the camera. Her screen presence is brilliant, witty, and mercurial, possessing the regal bearing of a ballerina one moment and the whimsical elasticity of Charlie Chaplin the next. Fornes' ability to be fully in the moment and Merman's sensitivity and appreciation of that rare art is this documentary's crowning achievement.

Memran's film does not romanticize or avoid the profound sadness surrounding Fornes' memory loss and progressively debilitating Alzheimer's. In one particularly poignant scene, the two have just returned to the U.S. after an emotional two-week sojourn in Havana. When Memran asks how she's feeling post Cuba, Fornes has no recollection of having travelled to Cuba. Fornes' eyes darken. Her face grows uneasy, but the moment passes and is soon replaced by another. The film's overarching theme of life's ephemeral nature paired with the deep friendship and vital creativity that percolates between this young writer-turned-filmmaker and the iconic playwright offer a much-needed and refreshingly loving take on aging and illness.

"The Rest I Make Up" commemorates a very special person's life, but more importantly, it honors life.

'The Rest I Make Up,' a documentary by Michelle Memran and Irene Fornes debuts at the Miami Film Festival, Saturday, March 10 at 4:00 pm, Tower Theater, 1508 SW 8th St., Little Havana. Ticket info atwww.miamifilmfestival.com *or 844 565 6433.*

THE SMART GIRLS' GUIDE TO THEATRICALITY.
THE INTERVAL

The Gaze of María Irene Fornés: Michelle Memran on Her Documentary "The Rest I Make Up"

February 13, 2018

Written by Victoria Myers | Photography by Jessica Nash | Photographs courtesy of Michelle Memran

A collection of personal photographs of Michelle Memran with María Irene Fornés

On February 16th, *The Rest I Make Up*, a documentary about the playwright María Irene Fornés will have its premiere at the Museum of Modern Art's Doc Fortnight Festival. It's the first documentary about Fornés, a playwright who was instrumental in forming Off-Off-Broadway theatre and America's avant-garde theatre movement. And who, like many women who broke ground, has not gotten the same public recognition as the men who were in her orbit. But her influence has remained alive through her work and the young people who frequently read it in college. One such young person was the director of *The Rest I Make Up*, Michelle Memran. After a meeting in the late 90s when Michelle was in her 20s, a friendship between the two began that led them to start making the film, which uses footage over their more than a decade working together. We recently spoke with Michelle, who was occasionally joined by Katie Pearl, a producer on the film, about the process of making the film, her relationship with Fornés, and the playwright's legacy.

How did your interest in María Irene Fornés begin?

In college, I was taking a playwriting class—I was a journalism major—and we read one of her plays, *The Conduct of Life*. It was unlike any other play I've ever read, and it just blew me away. So I started reading all of her plays then. After college, I started writing about theatre, and ended up pitching

a piece on the relationship between playwrights and critics, and playwrights retaliating against critics. [In 1999] I called Irene up, completely intimidated by her. I didn't think she was going to be listed in the phone book, and she was. And she picked up the phone, and she was like, "Oh sure, I'll meet you for an interview." So basically my interest in her was because of *The Conduct of Life* and reading that play in college. I probably would've gone into writing about theatre anyway, but reading such a rich play definitely led to it.

What were your impressions of her on the first meeting?
The only impression I had of her up until that point was a photo. It's the photo that's used of her on everything. It's a photo of her when she was probably in her 50s, and looking very formidable and a little scary. So this was the image that I had going in to meet her. We met on the corner of Waverly and 6th, and she looked completely different. She had the gray bob and the red glasses and was entirely open. She was so delighted to meet me. I had heard that she had a disdain for journalists, so I was thrilled that she was thrilled and we sat down at Baluchi's for a six hours long interview and we didn't really talk about critics at all because she couldn't care less. She was just like, "I was just happy to see my name in the paper." But a friendship was formed that day when we met.

How did you go from that to deciding to make the film?
So we had that lunch. A while later, the article came out—it took me a while, I interviewed like 50 playwrights—but whenever I was in the West Village, I would just call her up and we would go out for lunch, or we'd go to thrift stores, or we'd go to flea markets. She loved going to thrift stores and flea markets. Or just go through Washington Square Park together. And over time, it became clear that she wasn't writing and she didn't know why. She wasn't being asked to teach, and she didn't know why. And she had all this time for me. Whenever I'd call, she'd be there. So I was like, "This is odd. The woman who's traveled the world and is incredibly industrious, always working, all of a sudden has all this time."

And then, one day I was in her apartment. It might have been the first time I actually went into her apartment. I noticed there was mold in the fridge, and there were signs of neglect. They were red flags for me. So I called up her agent, Morgan Jenness, and I said, "I'm a friend of Irene's and I'm concerned that she might have some form of dementia or something going on with her. And do you know if this is true and who's taking care of her," and all this stuff. So Morgan said, "We believe this is the case. Irene won't go to a doctor, but we've been trying to get the community to rally around her." I started showing up with food and just coming on my lunch breaks and hanging out. It was so much fun to be with her.

Then one day, we went to Brighton Beach, and I had this old High 8 camera that my dad had gotten me. I had never actually used it. We were with another playwright, and we were on the beach, and the second we turned it on, Irene just lit up in a way that it was like she was performing the monologue of her life. I said, “Irene, does the camera make you uncomfortable?” And she said something like, “Oh, my darling, the camera to me is my beloved. The one who wants me always. And I give everything I have to a camera.” So I called Morgan back and I was like, “Oh my God, this is an amazing way to keep creating.”

It was also at a time where I was a little lost in my career. I didn’t really know what my career was. And so we both were at a crossroads. I was in my mid-20s and Irene was in her 70s. So Morgan said, “I love it. Whatever kind of project you want to do, just do it.” So I borrowed a better camera, and I would just show up with a camera at her house. It wasn’t like we were making a movie, it was just like we were hanging out with a camera. So that’s how it started. And then I started interviewing people, not necessarily as a way for the film, but more so as a way to say, “Hey, this is what’s happening with Irene, do you want to be involved with the community that’s helping to take care of her?”

At what point did it actually turn into a film that you knew you were going to release to the public, or with that goal in mind?
Several months after we began filming, someone found out about the film and wanted to help us. We got a grant. I basically showed the footage on a little camcorder of Irene and they were like, “Oh my God, that’s so Irene, that’s so Irene.” So we got this grant, and we were trying to decide what to do with it. At the time, it was very clear that she was in decline in New York, and her family from Miami and Cuba were very active in calling, sending letters—her brother from Cuba was writing letters, probably like one a week that she would get.

I just said, “Well, we should take this grant and try to take her home.” She kept talking about Cuba and how much she missed Cuba. So that was the point where I hired a cinematographer, Roberto Guerra, an amazing Peruvian cinematographer who would come with us. He basically worked for nothing—he loved Irene and wanted to be a part of it. I got an assistant who had been to Cuba before several times. So that’s when we were making something other than just the camera on the floor and the mic on her back and me not knowing what I’m doing.

Since it started more as a way of doing something for her and for other people to talk about her without necessarily the end goal being a film, once that changed, did you start to think about some

of the footage differently? When you stopped being there just as a friend and started being there as a professional?
I never became a professional so it was never an issue. I was always there as a friend. The quality of the film doesn't change, our intimacy doesn't change throughout the whole thing even though I enter [the film]. You see me because we have a cinematographer, someone else taking the film. You see me and Irene together in Cuba for the first time. In the New York sections, you only see Irene, because I'm behind the camera. But that intimacy doesn't change, because there's enough of me alone with Irene and the camera in Cuba and then onto Miami and Seattle. Product was never a thing we had in mind ever, which is probably why it took so long for us to actually make it. We weren't like, "Here's an outline, this is the story, this is going to be great for the film." It was like, "We're following Irene's lead." So that was a very different way of constructing something. It was like how she would construct one of her plays, which is different.

A collection of index cards with quotes by Fornés used in the film.

Do you feel like the fact that she was a writer was partly what allowed you to work that way? That there was a different understanding of the creative process?
Oh, definitely. I mean, I think she would say that she would go through these periods where she would just write and write and write and write and write, and then she would get into her editing mode and be very strict and be very brutal with herself and cross lines out left and right. And that's what we did. The whole process when we were filming, Irene was in the discovery mode. We were just shooting and shooting and shooting and shooting. I don't think I ever had a formal, sit-down interview with Irene. I had sit-down interviews with other people and interviews that ended up in the film with her colleagues or other playwrights and directors. But I never said, "Irene, let's sit down and have an interview." I think that's because of the way she worked. She was like, "We're just going to keep going until you feel like you're ready." And it ended up that I kept going for a really long time.

Do you feel that the way that she worked also affected the process in the sense of thinking of life as something you use for the creative process, or even in terms of the boundaries of who owns the story?
I think there was a real awareness, while we were making the film, of Irene actively participating and knowing that we're making a film. And also in the edit, of maintaining her dignity, that was very clear: when she stops responding to the camera, that we were going to be done. That the film was over.

[Katie Pearl enters]
Katie: When Irene writes a play, she follows the lead of the characters, and doesn't plan. And in the filming process, Michelle often talks about how she follows Irene's lead, and follows where her memories go, and where her interest goes, and where her delight takes them. Irene wasn't involved in the editing process, but one thing you talk about discovering is anytime you and Melissa Neidich, who's the editor, tried to impose something like, "Oh, this'll be great for the structure of the film," it never worked. And they had to go back to a completely associative way of continuing to follow Irene's thoughts. I feel like that's a really strong parallel between how Irene worked as a writer, and how you learned from her, and then also honored her in the film. The film is so her because of the logic and the methodology that she used in her writing life.

Michelle: And that's why it's a film by me and Irene. She's credited as it being a film by her, as well. Unless we were following where Irene was taking us, we went astray.

There's that Joan Didion documentary that came out a few months ago that her nephew made, but the film keeps more of a distance and has to navigate those boundaries. But it sounds like you just had a totally different way of working.
Nobody makes documentaries like we made this documentary. This isn't a biopic. It really has a lot to do with memory and creativity and relationship. Irene is just so compelling to watch as a character. It's a film about this woman who happens to have dementia, but it's a side note. The way that it manifests in Irene is this complete ability to be in the present moment. And that's why I was so drawn to her, because there's nothing better than hanging out with your favorite playwright and being completely in this five minutes, and then that five minutes, and then the next five minutes. There's so much in that five minutes that we overlook, but that she didn't.

Besides how long it took and navigating the structure, what was the most challenging aspect of making the film?
The biggest challenge for me was whether or not I was going to be in it, and how much I was going to be in it. It was such a collaboration that I didn't want to be in it at first. But we did a bunch of trailers and things where I wasn't, but then we realized that the heart of the story is this relationship between a mentor and a student, in many ways, because I was also thinking that I wanted to write plays. And so to figure out how and where and when to place me in the story was the biggest challenge. I don't think I could've done it in my 20s or as we were making the film, because I didn't see it. And then, over the years, things have happened in Irene's life, and things have happened in my life, and we're working with an amazing editor who found these great ways to insert me into the narrative. It had to take as long as it took. I realize that now, but at the time I was like, "Why can't we finish this film? What is going on, am I ever going to finish the film?"

[At the beginning] I see this very young, enchanted, adventurous, lost young woman, and by the end of finishing the film, I see that I've become the artist that I wanted to be when I started. I'm a secondary character. I'm there to help you see Irene more clearly, and to help you see that relationships are possible to be formed during the onset of this illness, where many people think that if you can't form new memories, then you can't form new relationships. And that's not the case.

What other ways do you feel like you grew or changed as a person over the course of making the film and your relationship with her?
I changed so much. Irene, it took her several years to write *Fefu and Her Friends*. She started with scraps and scenes, and then stopped working on it for like seven years so she could produce. So she stopped, started producing other plays, then came back to this play, *Fefu*, and then it was just like she was pulling scenes out of bags and found this great space and started writing for the space. I feel like that was a similar trajectory when I started the film. In the middle of it, I spent a semester at NYU film school. I thought, "Okay, now that we're making a film, I should be a filmmaker, and I should know what that is." What I learned from Irene is the second you label something, you lose it.

I think that what I learned throughout the whole process was that you need to trust in the accidents, and trust that the story will get told if it needs to get told. And I learned to let go a lot. Once I followed Irene's lead, I was able to see that it didn't matter that it was taking this long, and it didn't matter that we didn't actually know where we were going, but that I had trust that we would get there, somewhere, even if that might not be where we thought we were going to end up.

There's a moment that is on the cutting room floor. I mentioned my name and Irene said something and I said, "You don't even know who I am." And she goes, "I may not know who you are, but I know what you are." She was like, "You're an artist." And we were joking around, but she saw something in me at the time that I didn't see in myself. Over the process of making this film, I have become an artist in that way. I made something.

When I was reading about Irene, one of the things that I found is that a lot of people think that she didn't get the credit that she deserved in terms of her contribution to the downtown theatre scene.
Totally.

Why do you think that was?
I don't have any definitive answer but I certainly have my theories. She never played by the rules—in fact, she said she didn't even know they existed. She didn't compromise her vision for the sake of commerce. Many of her plays are not immediately accessible on the first read. She was not writing for a regional theatre world, and a season planned around a subscriber base could make artistic directors hesitant to produce her work, which can be violent, sexual, farcical—and is always fearless. Her plays are not written to please. Her storytelling does not roll out the way regional theatre audiences have been taught to expect. Her work existed on the margins, in terms of mainstream productions, but is still taught in and produced by colleges around the world. People say she is a playwright's playwright, as most dramatists today know—and revere—her work, and many have actually taken her legendary workshops. Her plays are passed on by her students to their students, and there's been a recent stream of productions and a revived interest in her work. A 40th-anniversary edition of *Fefu and Her Friends* was just published by PAJ and *American Theatre* has done a number of pieces on Irene in the past two years. And then there's this film, which introduces the world to Irene as a remarkable personality and visionary artist, which we're hoping will lead to more people reading and producing her plays and making the Fornés name more present in the public eye.

What do you hope this film does for her legacy and what do you hope audiences get out of it?
One of the major points of the film is that it introduces people to her work and to her as a person, and that it can be used as a tool and as a resource for people studying her work and also performing her plays. I think it can function as a master class. But I also think, beyond the theatre, it's really a film about creativity and that it doesn't go anywhere. It stays with you. And the hope is that Irene stays with you when you leave the theatre.

If you want to know about Irene Fornés, there's so little that's out there, and things that are really erroneous, like the Wikipedia page. This is a real opportunity to have her in the room with you, and to learn about her life. But in a very particular way, because you're only learning what she's choosing to tell you, because we're not inserting anything extra in. I really think as we were making it, as we were finishing the edit, it was very clear that this was for her legacy, and we were making it for people to have an intimate connection with someone that they find as elusive as I did before I first met her on that corner of Waverly and 6th.

[After the interview Michelle sent the following about Irene's condition today]
Irene currently lives at Amsterdam Nursing Home at 112th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. She is 87 years old and is living with late stage dementia. She has her good days and her bad days, like the rest of us, and we still have our visits, which involve lots of Cuban music and hand holding and reciting parts of the film to her. She rarely speaks anymore but is receptive to touch and music and friendly faces. Visitors are always welcome and encouraged, and I'm happy to meet anyone there who'd like to spend some time with "La Maestra."

PLAYBILL®

7 Things You Never Knew About America's 'Greatest and Least Known Dramatist'

BY RUTHIE FIERBERG
FEB 16, 2018

Playwright María Irene Fornés—an influence on Paula Vogel, Edward Albee, and more—gets the documentary treatment.

María Irene Fornés is one of the most influential voices in the theatre, and yet you may not know her name. Having written (and directed) over 40 plays, Fornés was at the forefront of the Off-Off-Broadway experimental theatre movement of the 1960s. Often known as "Mother Avant-Garde," Fornés was also a nine-time Obie winner and a 1990 Pulitzer Prize finalist for her *And What of the Night?*. She has left her mark on some of the most formidable playwrights in American history, including Pulitzer Prize finalist **John Guare** and winners **Edward Albee** and **Paula Vogel** (**"If it hadn't been for Fornes' *The Danube*, there'd be no *Baltimore Waltz*," Vogel says.**) Born in Cuba May 14, 1930, Fornés is now the subject of Michelle Memran's documentary *The Rest I Make Up,* which premieres February 16 at the Museum of Modern Art's Doc Fortnight Festival.

Here, we shed light on some of the most fascinating facts of the living playwright's life and historic contributions:

1. Fornés "learned by osmosis."
According to scholar Scott Cummings, Fornés attended three-and-a-half years of school at Escuela Publican No. 12 in Havana, Cuba. After that she learned through experience, travel, and exposure to culture through museums and movies. "She learned, in effect," he said, "by osmosis."

2. Her father shaped her outside-the-box way of thinking.
Fornés' father, Carlos, studied Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti and passed along the teachings to his six children. According to **Harriet Sohmers Zwerling, a former lover of Fornés**, "She said that if her father hadn't been much of a thinker, she wouldn't have been much of a writer."

3. Fornés is dyslexic and not as much of a reader as her dad.
Her inspiration came from "spoken conversations, overheard dialogue, found objects, and her own unfettered imagination, more so than books—though she would sometimes use passages from books when she was stuck in a play, opening to a random excerpt. (Some of these actually ended up in her plays, which involved characters opening books and reading passages aloud.)"

4. She got her start in writing by accident.
As told in Cummings' book, Fornés and writer Susan Sontag were together one evening and Sontag complained about her struggles with a novel she was writing. Fornés decided they would not go out but

stay in and write. “As if to prove how simple it was, Fornés sat down to write as well. With no experience and no idea how to start, she opened up a cookbook at random and started a short story using the first word of each sentence on the page,” he wrote. Fornés claims: “I might never have thought of writing if I hadn’t pretended I was going to show Susan how easy it was.”

5. Letters also inspired her work
One of Fornés’ earliest attempts at playwriting was translating letters written to her great-grandfather from a Spanish cousin. She did turn those letters into a “play” known as *La Viuda*, though many consider this more of a precursor to her dramatic writing than her first work.

6. She did find success with letters from another family member.
Her eldest brother, Rafael, was the only sibling to stay in Cuba. His letters to his sister (addressed “Querida Marinca” for her nickname) became the basis for the play *Letters From Cuba*.

7. For all her accomplishments in theatre, Fornés began as a painter.
When Zwerling and Fornés became a couple in 1954, they traveled to Provincetown where Fornés studied painting with Hans Hofmann. The writer credits Hofmann with teaching her the “‘push and pull’ of color. She said his use of color and the dynamic of what one color does in relation to another had a huge effect on her writing.”

them.

Photo by Michael Smith

themstory: Susan Sontag Loved Her, Yet Time Has Overlooked This Brilliant Queer Playwright

BY HUGH RYAN
FEBRUARY 26, 2018

If a queer Cuban-American woman wrote forty plays, was a finalist for the Pulitzer, and won nine Off-Broadway Obie Awards, over a career that spanned some forty years, you'd know her name, wouldn't you?

Probably not.

What if that woman was also Susan Sontag's lover, the "most intuitive playwright" Edward Albee had ever met, and the subject of an upcoming **documentary** premiering at MoMA's Doc Fortnight Festival today?

Still not ringing any bells?

Perhaps that's why a 1986 cover of *The Village Voice* called Maria Irene Fornes "America's Great Unknown Playwright." Born in Cuba in 1930, Fornes had no formal education in theater, and only an elementary school education overall. She moved to New York City at the age of fifteen with her family. While working at the Capezio dance shoe factory, she learned English and became a translator. Around this time, she also studied abstract art with the famous German Abstract Expressionist painter, Hans Hofmann (whose students also included Lee Krasner and Ray Eames, among others).

But it wasn't until she moved to Paris in 1954 — where she saw a French production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (and began dating Susan Sontag) — that Fornes realized she had a passion for creating theatrical works. Upon moving back to the United States, she would enter into a **mutually inspiring relationship with Susan Sontag**, but it would still be a few years before she produced her first play, 1961's *The Widow*. From that point on, she would create at least one new play every year or two until the year 2000. I say create, rather than write,

because according to everyone who worked with her, Fornes was intimately involved with every aspect of her productions, and frequently directed her works herself.

Photo by Photo courtesy of Michelle Memran

As both a playwright and a writing teacher, Fornes' methods were improvisational and unique. Each play she wrote was a beast all its own – a sign of her far-ranging mind and refusal to be pigeonholed, according to the documentary's director, **Michelle Memran**. Memran met Fornes in 1999, while working as a freelance journalist. In college, Memran said, she had read Fornes' *The Conduct of Life* (a play which *The Hollywood Reporter* once **described** as a "challenging feminist critique of annihilating machismo") and fallen in love. "Each scene was a revelation – the visceral writing, the exquisite detail, and authenticity of each character, each moment," Memran says over email. She desperately wanted to know, "Who was this genius playwright I'd never heard of?" Luckily, when Memran moved to New York, Fornes was in the phone book. From their very first meeting, the two hit it off.

In the early aughts, Memran and Fornes would meet regularly in the West Village for coffee and conversation. Over the years, Fornes revealed that she was no longer being asked to write, direct, or even teach playwriting, which was shocking considering that according to Oskar Eustis,the Artistic Director of the acclaimed Public Theater, "Nobody has had the influence on American playwriting as a teacher that Irene has."

What had changed? Memran suspects the answer lies in the "the mold and pile-up of dishes in her fridge" – the visual, visceral suggestions of a mind that had begun to wander farther and farther afield. Indeed, around 2005, Fornes was diagnosed with the early stages of dementia. Some might have seen this as a cruel trick of fate; time stealing the memories of a playwright who was already so little remembered. But Memran saw that Fornes was as creative and intellectually passionate as she had ever been, she was simply lacking an outlet. Then, one afternoon in 2003, Memran brought along a Hi-8 camera while the pair was hanging out at Brooklyn's Brighton Beach. "When I turned it on, Irene lit up and immediately amplified her insatiable wit and charisma," Memran remembers. "The second she called the camera 'my beloved,' a creative process began for us both."

The result of that process is ***The Rest I Make Up***, a tender exploration of Fornes' life and the meaning of memory. The film cannot bring back Fornes' own memories (in fact, over the course of it, we see her forget more and more, asking occasionally who Memran is and how long they've known each other). But it can begin the important process of restoring Fornes' to *our* memories.

As for Fornes herself, Memran says that she is living in a nursing home in upper Manhattan, where she has "her good days and her bad days, like the rest of us." Although she is rarely verbal, Fornes is responsive to "touch and music and friendly faces," and Memran is "happy to meet anyone who'd like to spend some time with 'La Maestra.'"

For those who can't make it to Manhattan, thankfully, there are still Fornes' plays, many of which are still in print. Memran believes that "reading one of them is not going to give people the quintessential 'Fornes' experience," because there is no *real* quintessential Fornes – at least not on the page. But taken as a body, they capture the growth and change of an incredible artist over a formidable career. Dementia may have taken Fornes' own memories, but collectively, by reading and remounting her work, we can keep the memory of Fornes alive and active.

Photo by Roberto Guerra

Hugh Ryan *is the author of the forthcoming book* When Brooklyn Was Queer *(St. Martin's Press, March 2019), and co-curator of the upcoming exhibition* **On the (Queer) Waterfront** *at the Brooklyn Historical Society.*

SAN FRANCISCO BAY TIMES
LGBTQ News & Calendar for the Bay Area

Seventeen Highlights from the First Week of Frameline 42

By Gary M. Kramer–

It's time once again for the orgy of queer cinema that is Frameline! Running June 14–24, the festival offers viewers more than 100 shorts, features, and documentaries that are by, for and about LGBT filmmakers and subjects. Knowing what to watch can be overwhelming. Here are seventeen highlights from the first week of the festival.

Sponsored by the *San Francisco Bay Times,* Michelle Memran's fabulous documentary, ***The Rest I Make Up*** (June 16, 11 am, Victoria), is a sincere portrait of the "great unknown playwright" María Irene Fornés, who was part of the Off-Off-Broadway movement in the 1960s. A creative force of nature, Irene (as she is called) has won nine Obie awards for her plays, and gained the admiration of her peers, including Edward Albee and John Guare. She was also Susan Sontag's lover. However, too few people know about her or her work. Memran's film is not just a necessary corrective, but a portrait of the nearly forgotten artist at a time when the playwright herself is struggling with memory loss. Memran interviews a flirtatious Fornés—who delightfully asks as many questions as she answers—as well as fellow playwrights, and her family members. One of the most interesting sequences has Fornés returning to her homeland of Cuba (she left at age 15), to see her brother and his family for what may be the last time. And while there is a sadness in seeing Fornés' memory decline, particularly in a revealing interview in Miami, *The Rest I Make Up* is as inspiring as its subject.

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"The Camera is My Beloved": Michelle Memran Creates Documentary Art with María Irene Fornés

The Rest I Make Up is a poetic rumination by filmmaker Michelle Memran about playwright María Irene Fornés, now in her late 80s and living with late-stage Alzheimer's. The film is a visual and literary love letter to its subject. I talked with Michelle in late February 2018, about a week after the film's world premiere screening at MOMA.

Martha: You are a journalist who edged your way into documentary filmmaking with *The Rest I Make Up*. I'd like to talk about how you put it together. You originally met María Irene Fornés as a journalist conducting an interview?

Michelle: This was in 1999. She didn't love journalists and she really didn't care about what we were talking about in the interview. She didn't answer any of the questions that I had about critics, the subject of the piece I was writing. "Oh critics, let's talk about something else, let's talk about me." She once told me when the early reviews came out about her plays, she didn't care. In the early days she would just like to see her name in the paper. "My name's in the paper, I'm a part of this community now," you know?

[When] Irene began to write plays…she didn't know what she was doing, which allowed her to experiment, and gave her this freedom. It was the perfect master class in filmmaking because I didn't know what I was doing.

Martha: You include in the film the story of your relationship with Irene in an exchange when she asks you, genuinely and playfully, "When did we meet?" And at one point you say, "You weren't writing, and you didn't know why. I wanted to write a play and I didn't know how."

Michelle: She met with me at a time where she wasn't actively writing and teaching and had a lot of time. The film includes film of a trip we took to Brighton Beach. That's the first footage I shot. I had a camera as a gift from my Dad from some years before that I'd maybe turned on once and I just brought it along. The beginning of the film project was that moment when I asked, "Does the camera make you uncomfortable?" and she replied, "The camera is my beloved."

Before that Brighton Beach day trip, I had been spending a lot of time with Irene. I would go visit her in the West Village on my lunch breaks from my work as a fact checker at *Vanity Fair*. At that point I kind of knew that her memory was not great, but she hadn't been to a doctor and was not formally diagnosed.

Martha: The camera seemed to provide another way to engage and create, and rooted you both in the present, moment to moment.

Michelle: What interested her was the moment. When the camera came on, there's nothing more spontaneous, just whatever was on her mind, putting it out there. It was effortless for her. I called her agent Morgan Jenness and told her how Irene really responded to the camera. "What if we do some kind of film project? What if we just bring the camera around with us?" I had no experience in film. I loved taking pictures, and I was a visual artist, I did some drawing. But I had never done a film project.

Martha: But you had this camera given to you by your father and you jumped in.

Michelle: It was a Hi8 camera. He was always getting me electronic stuff. He knew that I had a visual sense. Eventually, I got a better camera, a mini DV camera from an old roommate of mine who wasn't using it. I think those tapes from Brighton Beach were the only ones that were shot on Hi8.

I would go visit Irene, and bring food and the camera, and sometimes some beer. That was basically how it all began. We didn't know what we were doing.

There are scenes in the film where I don't know how to get the light right, I don't know how to do this, I don't know how to do that, but it was perfect. The story of how Irene began to write plays is she didn't know what she was doing, which allowed her to experiment, and gave her this freedom. It was the perfect master class in filmmaking because we were making it up as we went along. I don't think if I'd come with a big crew she would have ever let me in the door.

Martha: This film is not a linear story of a life, but something else. Talk about the fluid sense of time you establish.

Michelle: Irene doesn't really know what time it is, so it didn't matter to me, and the filming went on over a long period of time. I was visiting Irene a lot, and she was lamenting the loss of teaching gigs: she wasn't getting called to teach and she didn't know why. She didn't know what was happening to her. "I'm not writing, it's not bothering me, but I don't know why I'm not writing," she would say. "I don't think it's the memory. I just don't feel like writing." We'd go out on the street and she would notice 10,000 things, and be so in the moment, so creative every second. It just exudes from her pores.

Martha: The documentary includes marvelous sequences of Irene talking about herself, and many with others who reflect on her influence in their lives and their art. It seems important to have all those reflections about her. Were these interviews something you planned from the beginning?

Michelle: The way that the interviews began, I was filming with Irene and she's telling me about everyone, names like Al Carmines and Larry Kornfeld and *Promenade* and Alice Playten. I would write down all these names and say, "We should go find them." Part of me wanted to interview people so that I could get them involved in her life again. That was my impetus at the beginning, which totally transformed over time.

After one of the early interviews with Larry Kornfeld, I received a call from him and his wife Margaret. "We've talked to somebody about the film, and she would like to help you." That somebody turned out to be Wendy vanden Heuvel and piece by piece productions. I showed her outtakes on a flip camera of Irene being Irene, and she saw something in that footage that I don't think anyone else would have seen at that moment.

We got a grant that flipped our mindset to: we're making a film. I started interviewing more people. I reached out to playwright Caridad Svich who gave me a list of people who were in her book *Conducting a Life: Reflections on the Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes*. I started writing to people and everyone was excited about being interviewed.

People like Edward Albee responded immediately and said, "Come out to Montauk, I'd love to talk about Irene." And then there were some things that happened serendipitously. I ran into Lanford Wilson after filming a Q and A and captured him talking about Irene, and I ran into John Guare and Connie Congdon with Irene on the street.

The beginning of the film project was that moment when I asked, 'Does the camera make you uncomfortable?' and she replied, 'The camera is my beloved.

Fornes outside her NYC apartment, 2004.

Martha: As you were walking along the street she talked about Judson Poets' Theater. The timing of that moment in the film is really potent. We've seen her grappling with memory loss, but she remembered Judson and she knew exactly where it was.

Michelle: And Irene always knew who I was in a certain sense. There was never any question that we were very close and that we were working on something together. People ask, *does she know who you are?* I say, she knows *what* I am. She may not know *who* I am, but she knows that there's love, and that there's warmth. There was always that connection between us. It still exists but not in the sense of name recognition or even face recognition any more. It's more: let me touch your hand.

Martha: What was your process in turning the footage into a film? Did you bring other people in?

Michelle: It was just a complete joy to make with her, and it was a nightmare to edit. We just kept shooting without any intention. That's what documentary is, but I had never done it before. We have so much footage from all these years. How do we end it and what do we do with it and how do we even structure it?

I first hired editor Shelby Siegel, who ended up as a very close friend and a producer and consultant on the film. At the time we were asking: *what is the story?*
I ended up going to NYU film school for a semester, just to make this one film—I didn't have the same ambition that everyone else around me had to make narratives. We got another grant and I took a leave. I hired other editors along the way, then I put it aside for a few years.

We did a fifteen-minute excerpt in 2008 that I gave to Migdalia Cruz who would show it when she was teaching because she always felt it was helpful to have Irene in the room. She showed it at a conference in 2012 or so, which led to an email from Erik Ehn. "I just watched this piece on Irene Fornés and why isn't

this film finished and what can I do to help you?" He brought me to Brown in 2013 for two months as a visiting scholar with housing.

I did another residency at McDowell and came to terms with the fact that there was no way I would ever be able to edit this alone. We got money to hire editor Melissa Neidich, whose mother had Alzheimer's, so she had a real understanding of the sensitivity of the material.

Martha: How did you land on the discursive, dreamlike structure for the finished film?

Michelle: We realized that it's not going to work unless it's coming from Irene, unless she's taking us through her memories and through her life. She would have a memory and I'd say, *okay, we have to go find the footage to fill in that memory*. She mentions Susan Sontag so we would need a moment with Susan Sontag. She was guiding us and telling us. She didn't want to talk about her plays. Irene really didn't remember the details about her plays anymore, but she was talking about off off Broadway and Cuba all the time.

Martha: The role of song and dance in the film is marvelous. There's a joyous editing choice of having her lovely light spirit dancing at the beginning and dancing at the end.

Michelle: She had a real sense of musicality in her work and in her life that came out naturally. It was all so spontaneous, on the street, singing or dancing in Cuba and on beaches. She really loved musicals, loved going to the theatre. She didn't always love what she saw, but she loved the experience of being in the theatre. She says that the reason they came to the US was that her mother loved American movies. Our film's title, *The Rest I Make Up*, is taken from lyrics to one of Irene's songs in *Promenade*: "I know everything. Half of it I really know, the rest I make up."

Martha: How active was Irene in the editing the piece?

Michelle: Irene started the editing process with us. She would watch the footage and sit with us. In Miami when I was going through footage, I would sit with her and her sister Carmen. We'd watch moments and I'd ask, "What do you think, this one or this one?"
As she was watching the footage she'd say, "That's me! Look at me!" She knew how incredible she was. "I want more me!" she would say. "Enough of people talking. I want more me!"

When she stopped responding to the camera, that's the end of shooting the film. Because that's the collaboration. I had no interest in documenting something that she might not be aware of, or being a fly on the wall in a scene where she doesn't know the camera's there. That would have been a betrayal to our collaboration. The idea was not to document Irene's decline in any way but is to document her vitality and

her spirit and how much like her plays she actually is, in so many ways. Maintaining a sense of her dignity was always at the forefront in the editing process. To have it be a film for which Irene would be in the front row giving herself a standing ovation was the goal.

Fornes, 2010. Photo by Michelle Memran.

Martha: Describe some of your reactions during the MOMA screening.

Michelle: With a play, you have no idea how all the elements are going to come together on opening night. Are the actors going to be on point? Are the lights going to work? When you do a film that you've been working on for fifteen years, you think you know what you've made. The premiere event felt like we were at a play. It didn't feel like a movie premiere, it felt like we were in a community of people that knew Irene, were fans of hers, or just knew me.

The laughter was really surprising to me. She's hilarious, and there are funny moments, but people were laughing at things that I didn't think they would be laughing at. People laughed at her response to her memory loss. I don't think that people really anticipated that Irene was going to be so frank and candid about what was happening to her in the moment.

There's a great quote that she has about one of her own plays, that humanity is much more moving when people aren't crying over themselves. Irene doesn't for a moment pity herself. She has moments where she's really thoughtful about what's happening to her, and sad, and they quickly turn into something else, which is a lot like her theatre. Before you can even digest that moment, you're onto another moment where it's completely flipped on its head.

As a filmmaker, you spend a lot of time in a little room with hundreds and hundreds of hours of footage, and you don't know what you're going to do with it, and finally you do something with it, and you don't know how people are going to respond. It was a relief—there were no glitches in the film, the power didn't go out, there was no missing footage. When the end credits came on, I just felt this dissolving from my shoulders: *oh wow, the film is done*.