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Imagining with Irene:
Openings for Performance in the Time of Pandemic

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Directing)

by

Juliana Alessandra Kleist-Méndez

Committee in charge:

Professor Vanessa Stalling, Chair
Professor Robert Castro
Professor Victoria Petrovich
Professor Jade Power-Sotomayor
Professor Shahrokh Yadegari

2021

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University of California San Diego

2021

DEDICATION

For abuela and Irene along with the generations of little girls who grew up to make the world in their image.

Para abuela e Irene y a todas las generaciones de niñas que han creado el mundo en su imagen.

EPIGRAPH

Break the wineglass and fall towards the glassblower's breath!

Rumi

Love is paying deep attention.

María Irene Fornés

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Imagining with Irene:
Openings for Performance in the Time of Pandemic

by

Juliana Alessandra Kleist-Méndez

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California San Diego, 2021

Professor Vanessa Stalling, Chair

This thesis aims to imagine with the great Cuban-American playwright María Irene Fornés. To do this, I perform an investigation of my virtual, live production Fornés' *Letters from Cuba* by revisiting images that remain. This production was produced in the Fall of 2020, at the height of the pandemic and political uncertainties. These digital ephemera are the trappings that remain from my first musings of the play, sketches from my notebook, stills from the media tests, notes from rehearsals, and varied scrawled moments. By putting myself in conversation again with these images, I return in order to move forward. I wade through these images and reflect on the discoveries they represent in order to ask, "how can imagining with Irene launch us

into the theatre of now?” How does her practice of living and theatre-making inform, guide, and instruct us on how to meet our current moment as artists?

Assembling and moving through this collected archive asks me to reflect on the ways Fornés invites us to reframe our relationship to our intimate self, the audience, innovation, and our imaginations, and even love itself. Ultimately, Fornés asks us to join her as brave visionaries to create the world in which we want our art to exist.

Part 1: Opening Overture

Some of my first memories are of digging in the back yard. Overturning earth and rhubarb stalks to find slugs. I love to get at the roots. To go deep, to understand what is underneath, what can possibly live in darkness.

I believe in my bones that it is my deep curiosity for the underworld that brought me, and kept me returning, to the work of María Irene Fornés. Like many of her fans, I came to her work through *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977). As an undergraduate, I had no idea what it meant. It was an enigmatic, poetic puzzle. But I knew something magical and seismic was happening. Fast forward to more than ten years and many pages of reading later, I now know Fornés was enacting “the parable of the stone” as Elinor Fuchs calls the act of looking at the opposite, seeking the underside (85). I believe that her search aims to reveal the totality of her characters, worms and all, as they reach for something just (or much) beyond themselves. This voracious curiosity, common among all her characters, stemmed from Fornés’ own quest for knowledge (Robinson, 7). To honor their inquiry, I would like to frame myself, my relationship with Fornés, my thesis production, and the central question of this research. I perform these acts of framing to invite you, dear reader, into conversation with who I am and what I believe I have to say.

My name is Juliana Alessandra Geneviève Kleist-Méndez Rodenas Consuegra Lima y Guerra. I am an Iowa-bred Cuban-American who is the embodied connection between Past and Future. My name makes flesh of the generations before. I carry DNA and spirit that have traveled from Germany, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Spain, and Portugal in waves of immigration. My father believes our family name came from a descendent of Heinrich von Kleist who sold their

title for passage to America. My mother loves to talk about how we are related to José Lezama Lima, the “Cuban Proust.” Stories run deep on both sides of my family. They converge in me.

When my name is fully spelled out, it is easy to miss the hyphen. But it is there, linking Kleist and Méndez together. For me, the hyphen has become an alchemical rune. A symbol with a secret power: it creates. It does more than just translate between two entities.¹ The hyphen is a disruptive catalyst that makes a new, undulating entity. The meaning of this new creation is in constant motion, arcing between, around, through, and beyond its two poles. The hyphen creates space of possibility, a place where parallel and present worlds coexist so that something I didn’t believe to be true can, in fact, be true. The hyphen in my name has become the directive for my life and art. I relish bringing discordant ideas and forgotten histories together to wrestle, negotiate, and engage with each other. As I look back, I realize that I became a theatre director because, for me, theatre is the ultimate cathedral of synthesis. It is the place where moments, elements, tempos, etc. can juxtapose in order to create an experience for the audience. My hyphen desires to be contagious, to activate, to disrupt through theatre. We are all multi-hyphenated beings made up of contradictory, paradoxical identities. The power of the hyphen lying dormant inside us. In my work, I resurrect, recycle, and synthesize stories so audiences can imagine other realities in order to awaken people to their power to create their future.

On Tuesday, October 30th 2018, María Irene Fornés passed away (Weber, n. page). It wasn’t until two days later, on November 1st, my 29th birthday, when I was sitting in Victoria Petrovich’s History of Design class, that I heard the news. My *abuela*, my maternal

¹ My hyphen is a process not a result. This approach was inspired by *Life on the Hyphen*, where Gustavo Pérez Firmat investigates the hyphen between Cuban-American as a “seesaw” that allows the two constructions to be in conversation with each other (6). This understanding of the hyphen as site of potential action opened my eyes to how the hyphen had the ability to possess power.

grandmother, had died six months earlier, and the feeling of having a root pulled out of my soul came rushing back. Up until that point, I had been deeply engaged with Fornés. She had been an essential part of my applications to graduate school. *Fefu and Her Friends* was the subject of my creative statement and, in all my directing interviews, except for one, I directed scenes from her plays. Her spirit had been a *madrina*, a creative god-mother, guiding me throughout the grueling application process. Sitting in the design studio in the UC San Diego Department of Theatre & Dance was the incarnation of my wildest dreams. And now, getting the news of her death made me feel like a light had gone out, and the world was somehow darker, scarier.

I begin with this memory of her passing as a first step towards framing my connection with *la maestra*, the teacher, María Irene Fornés. From Anne García-Romero, I borrow the use of “frame” as a lens to see through, a way of form-making.² Imagining with Irene and creating a fruitful, fluid relationship with her *is* active dramaturgy for me. Tremendous scholars like Marc Robinson, Scott Cummings, Anne García-Romero and many others have done the work of situating Fornés in her historical, cultural, and social contexts.³ My task in this thesis is to reflect on how imagining with Irene is move that goes beyond being in conversation with her work. Imagining with Irene is a frame that names my method for accessing knowledge from *how* Irene lived her life and made her art. For me, she holds the key to making theatre of the now.

María Irene Fornés and I have a relationship that is an intimate entangling, one that was born and continues to flourish in my imagination. I understand that I cannot grasp the totality that was, is, and continues to be Irene.⁴ I know her as a multi-hyphenated being: a Cuban-American,

² In her book, García-Romero constructs a “Fornés Frame” through which to understand her influences on other Latina playwrights.

³ Throughout this process I have kept two books on hand: *The Theater of Maria Irene Fornes* edited by Marc Robinson and *Maria Irene Fornes* by Scott Cummings. These two tomes have been endless sources of inspiration, supplying me with Fornés’ own words and historical context.

⁴ From this point on, I will refer to her as “Irene” for this is what she liked to be called.

Obie-Award Winning, lesbian, immigrant, daughter, avant-garde playwright, sister, and teacher with a penchant for the 1930's, and so much more. In the fecund ground of my mind, Irene creates a space of magic possibility. She guides me to embrace mystery and how to receive it: "A true work of art is a magic thing. To comprehend magic, we must be in a state of innocence, of credulity. If there is wisdom in the work it will come to us" (Fornés, "A Preface to *Tango Place*," 207). In *The Rest I Make Up*, a documentary about the last period of her life, Irene embodies this "state of innocence:" she makes love stories from boats passing on the water, she calls the camera her "belovéd," and she delights in her outfits: "I've got so much style, you think it's a mistake," she giggles (*The Rest I Make Up*). She moves through the world perpetually ready to receive creative impulse or "*messages that come*" as she calls them (Fornés, "I Write The Messages that Come," 213). Just as Irene learned to pay attention to the "messages" that became the seeds for her plays, I have learned to listen to the impulses that arrive as I read her scripts and delve deeper into her history.

She and I also share a yearning; we are linked through a longing for an imaginary source. She came to New York in 1945 with her mother and sister after her father's death. The rest of her family stayed behind in Cuba, and survived the Revolution. While her experience as an immigrant and my experience as the descendent of immigrants are not the same, we both have had to craft imagined relationships with the island. I recognize the longing of her characters as her own desire to return home, to arrive in the future to a past that no longer exists.

Working in a world of Irene's creation has reshaped my relationship with innovation. As an influential avant-garde playwright, Irene pushed and redefined the boundaries of theatrical forms. During the time of the pandemic, when it felt like there was no stability, I found myself returning to this passage:

I feel that in my writing every time I write I'm inventing something. And I don't think you can ever feel that you're aging when every day your work is something that is new to you. In a sense, each time you're a baby who feels nervous about stepping on strange ground. You think you've lost it. You wonder, what is the place I'm in? You feel you will never be able to find your way back. You have that fear because you are always on new ground. You're always renewed, and young, and ignorant and afraid. But you also have the energy of feeling something is happening, and that gives you enormous courage. ("From 'Ages of the Avant-Garde,'" 244)

Irene celebrated being in a state of unknowing, of "being on new ground." It invigorated her. As I moved through the process of *Letters from Cuba*, I clung to Irene's delight. Her invitation asks me to have grace and release myself from the need to immediately problem solve, but welcomes me to sit in a state of receiving. This is the relationship she has cultivated with me: an osmotic exchange of nutrients and wisdom that continues to nourish my work in the theatrical medium we share.

All directors must imagine with a given script. They must fill the gaps to craft a wholistic vision rooted in the given circumstance, action, playwright's context, and their own unique interpretation. Yet, when I imagine with Irene, I move past just being in relationship with her work. I am in conversation with her way of making, living, and listening. In these (virtual) pages, I am guided by the question "how can imagining with Irene launch us into the theatre of now?" Our now, i.e., this pandemic moment, has been defined and dominated by digital: digital happy hours, digital classrooms, and, of course, digital performance. In an effort to understand what openings or spaces of possibility are created when a Fornésian approach meets a current moment, I will investigate my thesis production, and her last play she wrote: *Letters from Cuba*. The process of creating this virtual performance was a continual collision between Irene's world and the world of digital storytelling. My production of *Letters from Cuba* is a case study through which to investigate how imagining with Irene launches us into the theatre of now.

For me, the turn to *Letters from Cuba* was my love letter to the Theatre & Dance Department during a time of deep instability, when the world felt like it was on fire. It was an invitation for our community, forced into separation, to reach for each other through the act of creating a new world and new forms together. In the parallel universe without a pandemic, the season planning committee had accepted my pitch for *Fefu and her Friends*. When it became clear that producing this play would not be possible within the new pandemic production limitations, I turned to Irene's vast body of work. *Letters from Cuba* was the clear choice because, as I wrote in my updated pitch, "it is a play about seeking connection: the desire to touch, to hold. Desires that are especially tender at this moment, but ultimately are always present." We were all in a collective moment of grieving the loss of physical proximity. Proposing this play was my way to connect.

In *Letters from Cuba*, Irene asks us to imagine how, in a world where the parts of ourselves are torn apart, do we begin to make ourselves whole? She proposes that we must create! Yet, how do we create? How do you make anything when you cannot go on? We make by offering. We make by risking. We make by hoping that someone will embrace us. In the play an ocean separates two siblings who long to be in the same place: Fran, a dancer in New York, and her brother, Luis, in Cuba. Throughout the play, we see Luis send letter after letter sharing the events of his life. But Fran does not use words to respond; instead, through movement and conversations with her roommates, Marc and Joseph, she expresses her deep desire for her brother. Marc and Joseph are also artists whose journeys become entangled with Fran's. All three artists enjoy exchanging ideas, yet, as the play progresses, we see Marc fall in love with Joseph while Joseph falls in love with Fran. This love triangle concludes in the second to last scene as Joseph and Fran compose a poem together, with Marc nowhere to be seen.

The play moves back and forth from Cuba to New York City in twenty-two scenes. With each scene, Irene sculpts an “emotigraph.” Scott Cummings quotes scholar Bonnie Marranca to explain: “‘Emotigraphs’... are the building blocks of Fornes’s (sic) unique dramaturgy, juxtaposed one to the next without transition in a manner that asks the spectator to ‘bridge the gap’ or ‘connect the dots’ in order to complete the theatrical picture” (Cummings, xxi). Yet, the external world intrudes on each of these private worlds threatening to break the tenuous connection between characters. Jerry intrudes with a bureaucratic problem around parking tickets, a reminder that art still has to exist outside the walls of the places of creation where it is made in New York. This act of intrusion becomes life or death in Cuba, when Gerardo intrudes on Luis’ rooftop; in each interaction, Luis must choose “*patria o muerte*,” country or death (Fornés, *Letters from Cuba*, 26).⁵

The next generation plays the most important role in *Letters from Cuba*. Luis has a son Enrique, whose birth further delays Luis’ plans to leave Cuba. As we see Luis wrestle with the difficulties of surviving Cuba after the Revolution, Enrique provides levity and hope. It is Enrique’s desire to go to New York that provides a temporal and special opening for Fran and Luis to have a cosmic embrace in the same space and time at the end of the play.

In our production, we received special permission from the Fornés Estate to change the gender of Enrique so the role could be played by the only Cuban-American graduate actor in the department. This change created a space for *Enriqueta*’s last act of uniting her father and aunt to be a ritual of the divine feminine. This casting choice allowed me to frame the play as scenes from *Enriqueta*’s memory. Moments that she played out in order to ultimately bring her family

⁵ The translation of “country” is not quite right. It is closer to “fatherland.” The masculine Cuban *pater* that José Martí called upon during the fight against Spain. During the Revolution of ’59, Fidel Castro made this idea into a political slogan, aligned the revolution with the “*patria*.”

together. At first glance, *Letters from Cuba*'s scenes are emotographs of longing that resist giving us a logical through line. But their collection contains a hidden message of hope: Each of us have a secret power, the ability to create, manifest, shape, and mold the future. *Letters from Cuba* is a dance between past and present, that reminds us we will be the ones moving the world forward.

This production was also my love letter to Irene. It was to be the first time I had fully directed one of her works and it felt symbolic to begin with the last play she wrote. Her most "intimate, and personal play," *Letters from Cuba* is based Irene's letters she exchanged with her brother in Cuba (Cummings, 164). Initially, I had shied away from the play because it felt too close to my heart: a story about a family torn apart by exile and craving to be in the same place. Yet, in the time of Covid, it was precisely my personal connection to the text that felt like the reason to do the play. Irene also wrote the play in the moment when her dementia was beginning to affect her artmaking (*The Rest I Make Up*). Just as *Letters from Cuba* was my way to reach for my community in 2020, it had been Irene's way to reach for her family twenty years earlier.

This play also felt right for the wrestling with representation that is happening now at UC San Diego and in the American Theatre landscape. Part of my artistic project is expanding our perception of who can and should portray Latinx roles on stage. At the center of *Letters from Cuba*, is a Cuban family: a sister in New York and her brother with his child in Cuba. With only two Latinx graduate actors in the department, producing this play was an opportunity to broaden our vision of Latinx. A Latinx role does not have to be cast with a person who identifies as white or "white passing." With the support of Dr. Jade Power-Sotomayor and the text of Dr. Brian Herrera's article "But Do We Even Have the Actors for That?," I reminded the department that "Cuban" is not a race. Cubans are people of Spanish, African, Indigenous, Chinese, and

Arabic descent and thus a kaleidoscope of races. Casting some of our tremendously talented Black actors in some of these roles gave me an opportunity to present Afro-Cubanidad on stage.

This was not my only overture to the Theatre & Dance Department. It was important to me that faculty, staff, along with graduate and undergraduate students felt they had the tools to engage with Irene. I had fallen in love her work, and believed that if more people understood how her poetry and innovation came from the *way* she approached living and art-making, they would feel empowered to read and produce her plays. From this seed, I collaborated with Dr. Jade Power-Sotomayor to co-convene a symposium in order to introduce my community to Irene. We designed the symposium honor and uplift her work not as untouchable, museum pieces but accessible if you understood Irene's context. I named the series "Imagining with Irene" to invite my community into relationship with a playwright who had so much to teach us.

Dr. Jade Power-Sotomayor and I designed a three-pronged approach to open different points of entry for our community to learn about with Irene's history, legacy, and humanity. The first day was dedicated to "Aesthetics and Inquiry," and featured a conversation with Dr. Brian Herrera, Dr. Anne Garcia Romero, Dr. Jorge Huerta, and Dr. Roy Pérez and was moderated by Dr. Jade Power-Sotomayor.⁶ This panel situated and expanded Irene's place in the context of the avant-garde and the history of Latinx playwrighting. The next day at our "In the Writer's Room" panel, moderated by Deborah Stein, our community heard from Irene's students who are recognized playwrights in their own right: Caridad Svich, Migdalia Cruz, and Luis Alfaro.⁷ In this conversation the audience kept their cameras on and asked questions about inspiration, process, and what they felt Irene had taught them. Finally, we ended with Irene's humanity. When we were designing the workshop, it was important to me this day be most tender of the

⁶ To view the recording of "Imagining with Irene Part I: Aesthetics and Inquiry" visit <https://vimeo.com/481355824>

⁷ To view the recording of "Imagining with Irene Part II: In the Writer's Room" visit <https://vimeo.com/481356122>

symposium. On the last day, “The Later Years,” we screened Michelle Memran’s documentary about Irene, *The Rest I Make Up*, followed by a conversation I hosted between the filmmaker and my community.⁸ This film unlocks Irene’s way of moving through the word. We had heard about her historical context and her impact on the next generation, but it was another thing entirely to *see* how Irene moved from moment to moment while in the process of losing her memory.

Carving out space and time for my community to step into relationship and imagine with Irene was the best way to invite them into her world, which was the world *Letters from Cuba*. Even though everyone was tired, over-exhausted from being on Zoom, and still grieving the loss of in-person performance, Irene inspired us all. Moving through her history, legacy, and humanity was an act of dramaturgy, process building, and inspired many to imagine new ways through the current digital time.

In this paper, I will once again imagine with Irene by revisiting what remains from my thesis production during the Fall of 2020. In this section, I have framed myself, Irene, and the project of this archive. In Part 2: An Archive of Discovery, you will see digital ephemera, the trappings which linger from my first musings of the play, sketches from my notebook, stills from media tests, notes from rehearsals, scrawled moments, and the occasional production still. By putting myself in conversation again with these images, I return in order to move forward. I wade through these images and reflect on the discoveries they represent. In Part 3: Portals to the Future, I will refine these discoveries to understand how imagining with Irene (i.e., being open to the moment of now) can launch us into the theatre of now. I reflect on the ways Irene invites us to reframe our relationship to our intimate self, the audience, innovation, and our imaginations.

⁸ To view the recording of “Imagining with Irene Part III: The Later Years” visit <https://vimeo.com/481356462>

Ultimately, Fornés asks us to join her as brave visionaries to create the world in which we want our art to exist.

Part 2: An Archive of Discovery

In this section, I illuminate my process of imagining with Irene by revisiting what remains from the virtual, live production of *Letters from Cuba*. This production was a meeting ground between Irene's text, approach to theatre making, and digital storytelling. What follows is a map of discoveries, an identification of portals and obstacles that our process moved through. My markers are images, pieces of process and performance that remain. These pieces of ephemera are snapshots of time and emotion; they are the steppingstones and representations of my journey; they are my own emotigraphs. By putting myself in conversation with them, I return in order to move forward, just as Irene would often do, to mine the places of possibility where Irene's method, text, spirit etc., inspired and moved the production process forward.

The images you will see are the result of a community of creators. The designers on the team were Elizabeth Barrett, Natalie Barshow, Harrison Foster, Andrew Lynch, Miranda Friel, Shelby Thach, and Salvador Zamora. Our glorious cast continually gave of themselves in rehearsal and performance: Natalia Quintero-Riestra, Jada Owens, Damien Coates, Corneilus Franklin, Cody Sloan, Jordan Smith, Ángel Miguel López, Ryan Martinez. And this production was supported, on the logistic side, by Emily Searles, Gillian Lelchuk, Liam Johansson, Christina Hansen, Steve Negrete, and, on the storytelling side, by Jon Reimer and Alexa Mark.

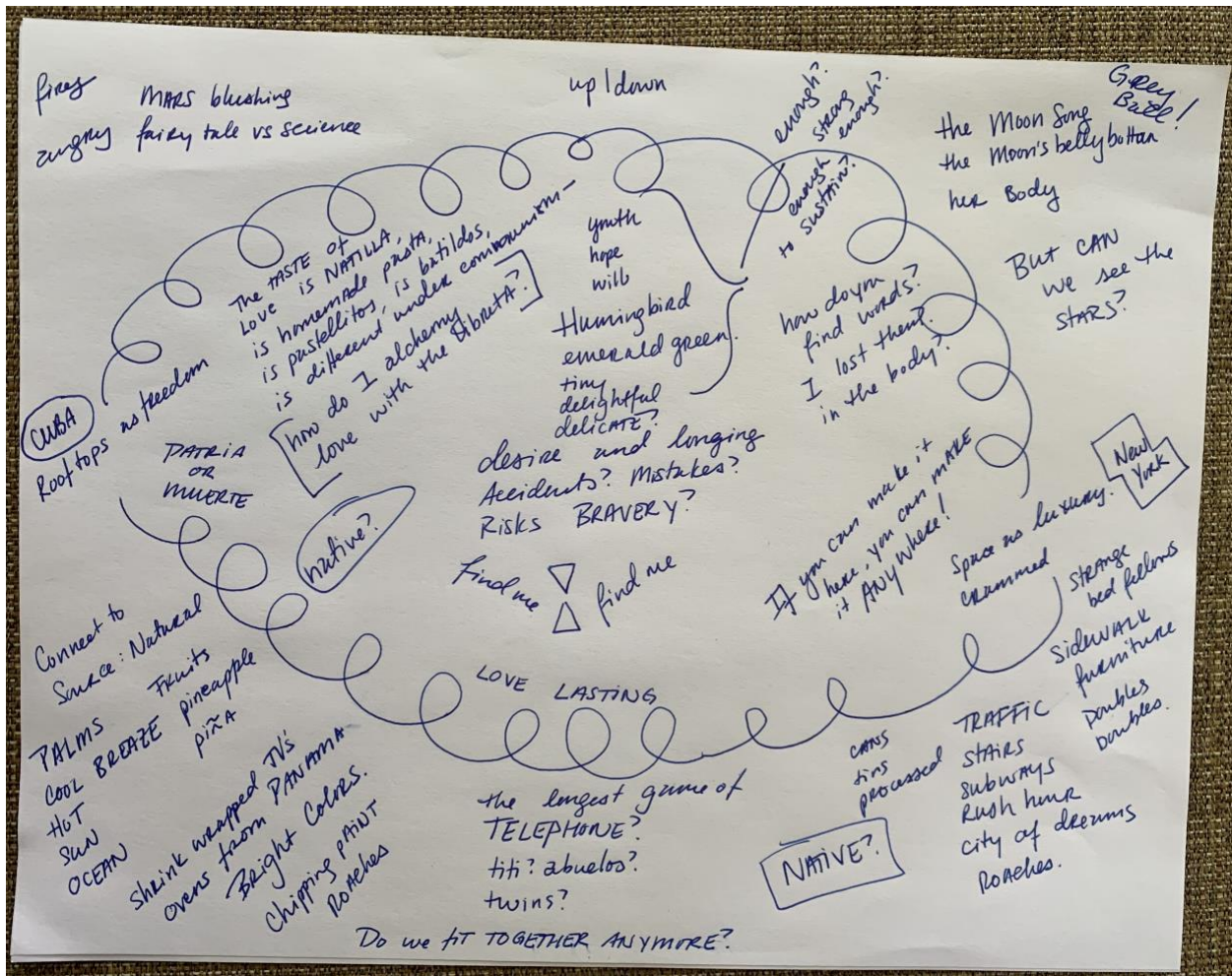


Image 1: “Letters from Cuba Subconscious Response” The post-ritual remains through which I was able to identify the form of the play: a series of calls into the abyss.

This image represents the first stone overturned in my production of *Letters from Cuba*.

When I see this image, I am transported back in time: on a sunny afternoon in July of 2020, I took out my script, a can of lime sparkling water, and went to sit out on my father’s outdoor swing in Iowa City, Iowa. I can hear the chittering birds as I begin a sacred ritual: first, I read the Elinor Fuchs’ “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play,” then I read *Letters from Cuba*, and finally I made a Subconscious Response.⁹

⁹ For future directors, the Subconscious Response is ritual that I perform each time I begin a production process. Robert Castro taught me this practice. First, carve out time to be fully present for a reading of Fuch’s article and your play. Then, make your response. Do Not Censor Yourself. As a final step, I recommend having a conversation

I remember how I put down my pen and scrunched my nose in disgust. In a huff, I snapped the image you see above (if you look closely, you can see the woven texture of the pillow) and sent a frustrated email off to Robert Castro. I was furious that I had made a chaotic, unorganized constellation of incomplete musings that did not appear to be speaking to each other, all held loosely together by this weird amorphous squiggle that was not at all aesthetically pleasing. I wrote that it reminded me of how, in space thrillers, someone sends out a distress signal that they hope will reach someone who can help in time. In our next meeting, he responded: “Isn’t that the play?”

As I return to this image with its wisps of ideas, I am grateful. This drawing revealed the form of the play to me: each of the twenty-two scenes are missives of longing. These are characters who are desperately trying to connect with each other even as the reality of their world is constantly shifting. Fran and Luis, siblings who have been separated, crave to be reunited. In this image, I also trace my own desire in phrases like “do we fit together anymore?” and the list under “the taste of love is...” Returning to this image also brings back all the ways I attempted to open myself to the creative ensemble throughout this process. I remember all the hope and good intentions of the artist who made this subconscious response.

with someone to present your Response. This moment of sharing will allow you to see the object you have made *as a director*, in a new light. You will be able to see form. This is the play talking to you.



Image 2: “OBS Zoom test: Natalie and the City” A screen grab from initial media explorations as the designers and I played with how to achieve live video see-through on Zoom

“I’ve been thinking...how does one write a poem?” This is the first line of *Letters from Cuba* (Fornés, 9). This image was taken in a moment of utter play, and it was the first time I saw the *how* of the play, *how* we were going to make theatre from the tools we had. This crystalline moment of recognition was a beacon amid the production constraints of our show: all members of the team (actors, designers, stage management, and director) were living through a pandemic, working remotely through video calls and across three time zones; the rehearsal calendar had been reduced to avoid Zoom fatigue; actors were tasked with being their own stagehands and technical crew. On top of all that, I wanted as much of the show as possible to be live. It was all new territory.

This image marks the second time the designers and I gathered to do a series of media tests. Elizabeth, our scenic and lead media designer, was showing how a program called OBS

(Open Broadcaster System)¹⁰ could be used in our production. Previously, we had learned that OBS could move the Zoom frames. But what made this session special is that Natalie (our costume designer) and Harry (our light designer) had prepared their homes with makeshift greenscreens (I believe Natalie’s was a green tablecloth) so their backgrounds could disappear. It was not until I saw Natalie’s eye with the city of Havana contained within in and spilling out of it, that I knew we were actually going to be able to have a production. This image is the moment I felt something “happening.” Irene was absolutely right: it does “give you enormous courage (“From ‘Ages of the Avant-Garde,’” 244).



Image 3: “New York: A Place in Four Frames” A production still from the second performance on Friday, November 20, 2020

This image with the three actors, each in their own frame, contained within the larger black frame of the Zoomsphere, holds within it an early key insight about how time and space

¹⁰ Open Broadcaster System is an open-source program that allows for multiple windows to be organized during a live stream.

function in the world of the play. Here we see the first scene of the play where Marc (left) and Joseph (right) have just had their conversation about poetry interrupted by a dancing Fran. The reality of actors zooming from three different locations was a constraint that gave form to the New York scenes. I decided to use multiple frames to show these three characters in the same apartment in order to ask the audience to imagine them together, and heighten the challenge they face when trying to communicate. These four frames help us see Marc, Joseph, and Fran as people who, even though they are in the same physical space, cannot seem to connect. Even with the problem of physical distance solved, communication is still not easy.

When I look at this image now, I see the first overture our production made to the audience that this would be a production where they would have to use their imaginations. I see the ways, inspired by Irene, I was leading them to embrace surprise.



Image 4: “Cuba: An Island of Memories Fighting Against Time” A production still from the second performance on Friday, November 20, 2020

The quality of time and space in Cuba is radically different. Luis' life is dominated by the Cuban Revolution. His letters are filled with an underlying conflict familiar to many on the island: to stay or not to stay? In one letter, he longs to walk with his sister through the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the image above, he articulates that there is much work to be done on the island. Yet it is not this back and forth that makes time operate differently in Cuba. It is that we see Enriqueta grow up over the course of Luis' correspondence. Watching her at different ages make Luis seem stuck, rooted to the island.

In an early design conversation with Natalie, after I had given her an extensive list of Cuban documentaries to watch, she proposed a radical idea: what if we watched Luis span Cuban history from the Revolution to now, while we saw a shorter time span in New York. When I look at this image, I remember how my body balked. I clenched. And then I remembered Irene, who proudly declares "I Write The Messages That Come" (213). I made the conscious choice to receive Natalie's proposal as a message, and as I began to map out different historical moments Luis was reacting to, it began to unlock the play.

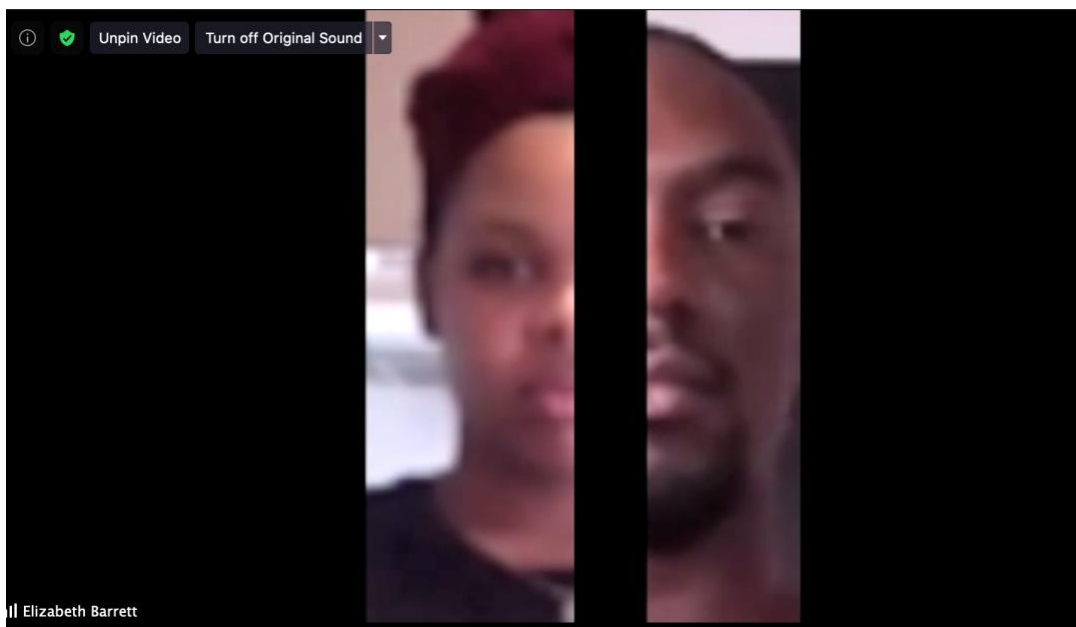


Image 5: "Piercing Through All Forms of Distance" A screenshot from OBS testing with actors on October 10th, 2020

Returning to this image reminds me of the way in which I put into practice asking the actors to Imagine with Irene. On this day in rehearsal, we discussed *The Rest I Make Up*, which I had asked the actors to watch as a way to introduce them to Irene's way of moving through the world (an exercise that proved very fruitful for the designers and that we were planning for the UCSD community as a whole in the symposium). This image brings back snippets of the conversation we had around the film: how we had all been inspired to be intimate with our imaginations, how we create the world and the multiple times within it, and how we don't need to know the meaning of something to find meaning in it.

After our conversation, we moved into experimentation. (When we were designing the flow of rehearsal, this felt like what Irene would have wanted.) Elizabeth had joined us, and our task was to explore the possibilities of Zoom frames motion through OBS with actors. I invited them to remember Irene's relationship to the camera as we flowed through different ideas of how their frames could move, get smaller, or get larger. Returning to this image not only marks the ways we played and tested in the rehearsal room, but also, the ways in which our technological experimentation came out of the way Irene lived her life. I have included this image because it contains within it my unbridled optimism in the production, the first indication that I would be choreographing Zoom squares along with people.

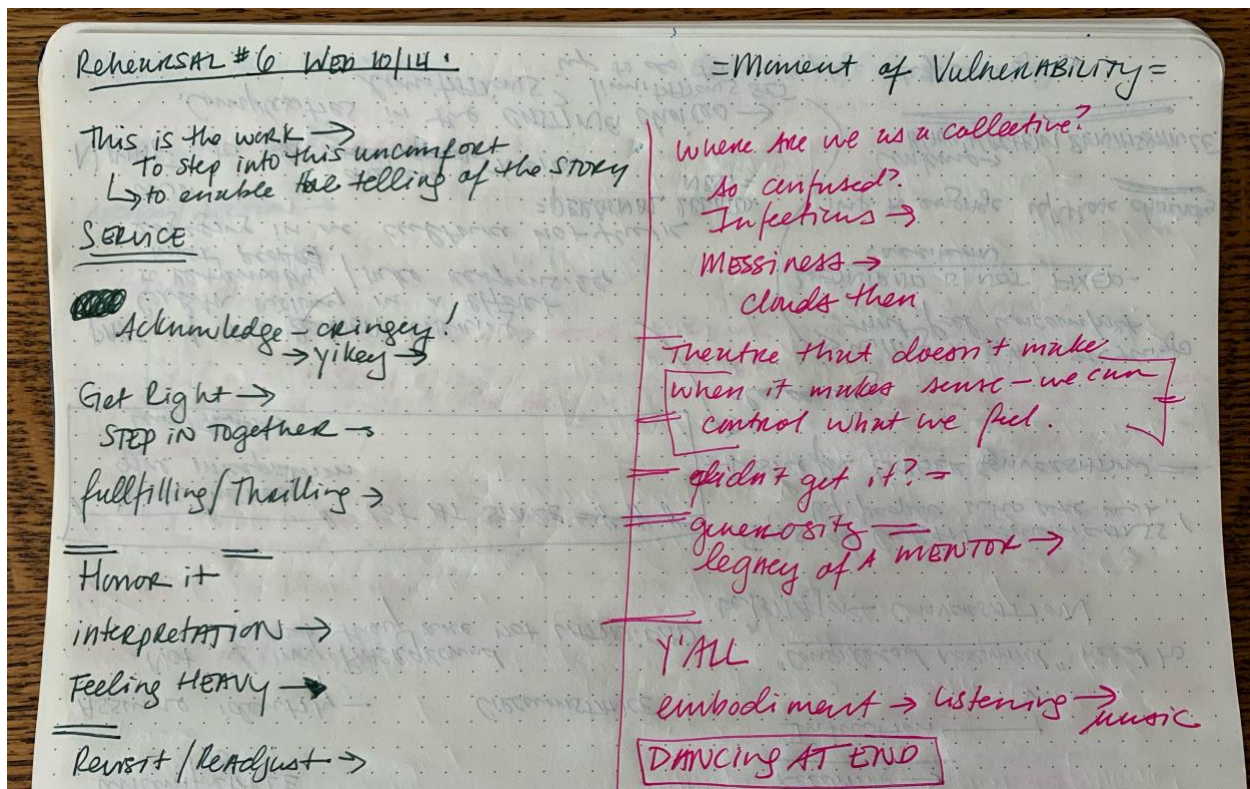


Image 6: “A Moment of Vulnerability” These are my notes to guide me through leading the cast through a conversation October 14th, 2020

This image is a course-correction. Returning to it is deeply emotional for me. I snap this photo after having read the notes of our collective dramaturgy and tablework together. A well of emotion rises up. It spills over.

One of the Latinx actors came to me and shared that they didn't feel it had been acknowledged how non-Latinx actors were playing Latinx roles. The actor felt like it had been deemed “normal” and craved a larger conversation. This image reminds me how I called Dr. Jade Power-Sotomayor, almost in tears to strategize how to address the concern with the full group. I had been so focused on ensuring that the non-Latinx actors playing those roles felt like they had agency to step in, that I had not discussed it.

My body remembers the fear I held during both conversations (that I was asking them to do something they didn't want to do, that I was being disrespectful, that I was failing). I was

trying so hard to be perfect in my letting go of perfectionism. Seeing the notes I made to myself to invite them into vulnerability, to invite them into failure, requires me to forgive myself. To acknowledge that I did the best I could. I steady my breathing. I remember.

This image holds multiple ways to move forward: “Acknowledge;” “Step in Together;” “Honor it;” and “Revisit/Readjust.” This last offering feels like Irene was sending me a message: to continually revisit and readjust as you find your way towards the future. I title this “A Moment of Vulnerability,” a note I wrote at the top to remind myself the moment I was inviting them into.

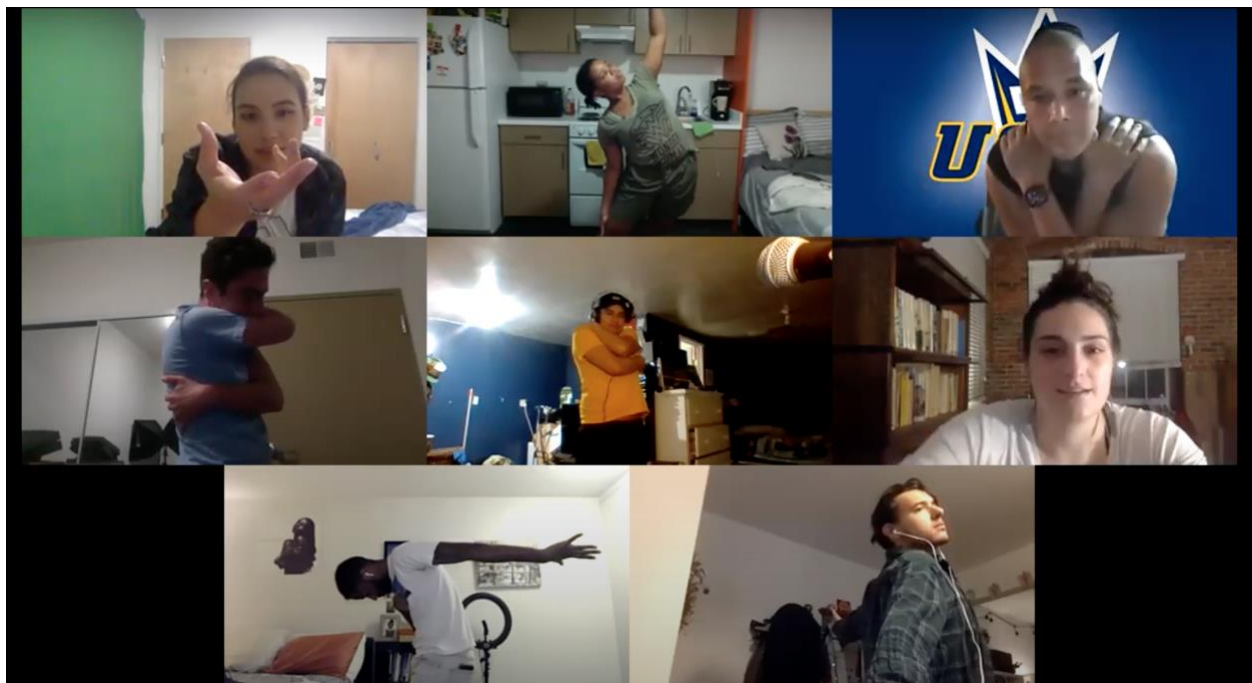


Image 7: “Expansion and Contraction, or Gestures of the Belovéd” A screenshot from gestural exploration in rehearsal on October 28th, 2020

This image is a moment of tenderness in a sea of unsteadiness. It is a still from the finale of an exercise where I asked them to make duets of gestures of expansion and contraction. I hoped that by building on gestures they had previously generated, it would be a way to invite our new cast member, Damien Coates, into our work on his first day taking over the role of Luis. Here is a company that is moving through upheaval: one of their ensemble members left, on top

of all the fluctuations that were happening outside rehearsal. This image marks a collective moment of “new ground” for our production.

It is precisely Damien and the rest of the company’s dedication to these gestures that reminds me of the lesson I continue to learn over and over again as a director. A week later, after incorporating Damien into his scenes, we did a stumble through, and it became clear that some of the actors still did not have a sense of their objectives and stakes. This image, taken two weeks before opening reminds me that a director creates action through conflict but it is dependent on the actors’ understanding the given circumstances.¹¹ Since this photo was taken, I feel so much more confident in how to marry my action analysis with my sense of movement in order to create action that leaps from the circumstances of the play.



Image 8: “A Certain Distance” A moment of magic for Fran as she receives a message from Luis in a production still from the second performance on Friday, November 20, 2020

¹¹ After long conversations with the design team, actors, and faculty, we decided to push back the opening of the show one week. Instead of having two live weekends of performance, the actors opened and closed *Letters from Cuba* in the same weekend. The second performance was recorded and streamed the following week.

Every time I return to this image, I am in awe: of Jada’s (Fran) movement, of Harry’s lighting set up, of the live projections. Turning back to this image, I hear Damien’s voice reciting Luis’ lines about love: “It floats, even if its weight is heavier than air. It takes shape at a distance from the beloved. When it reaches the beloved, it touches him lightly. Then, it retreats and remains at a certain distance, modestly and silently” (Fornés, *Letters from Cuba*, 22). This image has stayed with me long after other memories of the production have faded. For me, this image remains because Irene is telling us something about love. About how satisfying deep attention can be. About the tender humility we need to approach the other. Returning to it, I am reminded how important it was that each character have their own expression of magic. As I watch Luis’ letter transcend space and time to affect Fran, a thought floats into my head: that Irene is aligning the creative spirit with love. For Irene, both waiting for “the messages that come” and expressing yourself through art, are acts of receiving and giving love.



Image 9: “A Certain Distance Continued” Actors share virtual space through technology in a production still from the second performance on Friday, November 20, 2020

I searched long and hard for the right image to follow Image 8. If the last image is a powerful example of how tech can uplift a moment through bold, loud gestures, this image exemplifies how subtle, innovative uses of tech can craft impactful, delicate moments.

Throughout the play, Luis and Fran write back and forth to each other without sharing the same space: Cuba is the space above the New York apartment. Yet, in this scene, the 17th of the play, Irene’s stage directions ask that “*American Big Band music plays. LUIS climbs down the rope ladder and enters the New York apartment through the hallway door*” (*Letters from Cuba*, 30). Luis enters into Fran’s space to say goodbye after he has chosen *patria* (country) over *muerte* (death) in the last scene. Here Elizabeth used OBS to layer their frames on top of each other, increasing Luis’ transparency, an effect that we used to bring the two timelines together for a moment. Fran returns to her apartment after having run errands with a face mask. We understand that we are in the present. Not some distant past. For me, this is the power of this image, the work is always speaking to this moment.

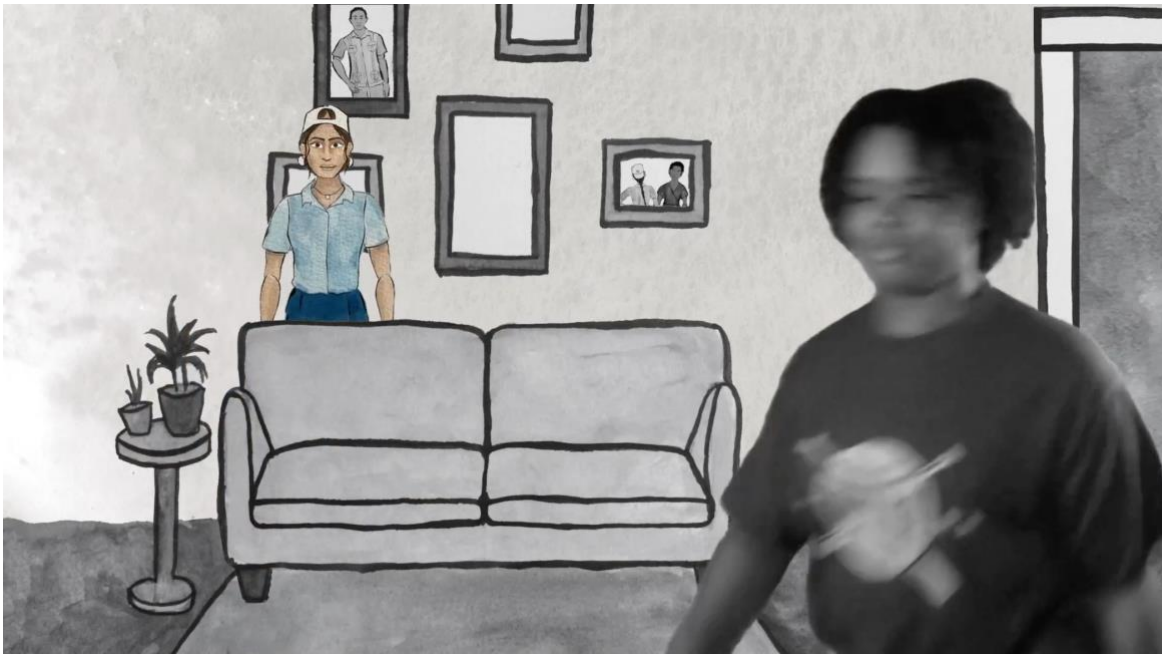


Image 10: “The Next Generation Continues the Tradition” Animation layered with footage in a production still from the second performance on Friday, November 20, 2020



Image 11: “I Love a Piano Finale” Synthesis of music, song, and style in a production still from the second performance on Friday, November 20, 2020

I present these images together so that they may be in conversation with each other. For me, they are the representation of the ways Irene invites us to hold things in juxtaposition. These images are overlapping realities. Another instance where Irene is reminding us that, even though things appear to be on different frequencies, they really share a common space. In Image 10, “The Next Generation Continues the Tradition,” Enriqueta is writing a letter for the first time in the play to her aunt. I believe that this is because Luis has died and she has had to take over letter writing. Inspired by the stage directions where she “*enters New York through the doggie door and begins little dance that ends with a big finish,*” (Fornés, *Letters from Cuba*, 30), I knew that the visual language wanted to be completely surprising and utterly Enriqueta’s. Her colorful animated figure emerges from the picture frame but is interrupted by Fran’s entrance. Enriqueta’s animated world begins in black and white, the language her father used to write his sister, but, as she writes about Cuba, she transforms the world around her into color in order to give her aunt the gifts of her memories.

By placing Image 11 in conversation with Image 10, the progression of Enriqueta's creative power becomes visible. These images show the unlimited power of a boundless imagination. When I see these images side by side, I remember the acts of deep collaboration: Andrew Lynch's original arrangement had to support Natalia Quintero-Riestra's voice, and Miranda Friel had to make her backgrounds move with Elizabeth Barret's assets, and, finally, Natalie Barshow's fine eye had to ensure that the editing supported the storytelling we discussed. I gaze at this image proud of creative power behind it and uplifting it.

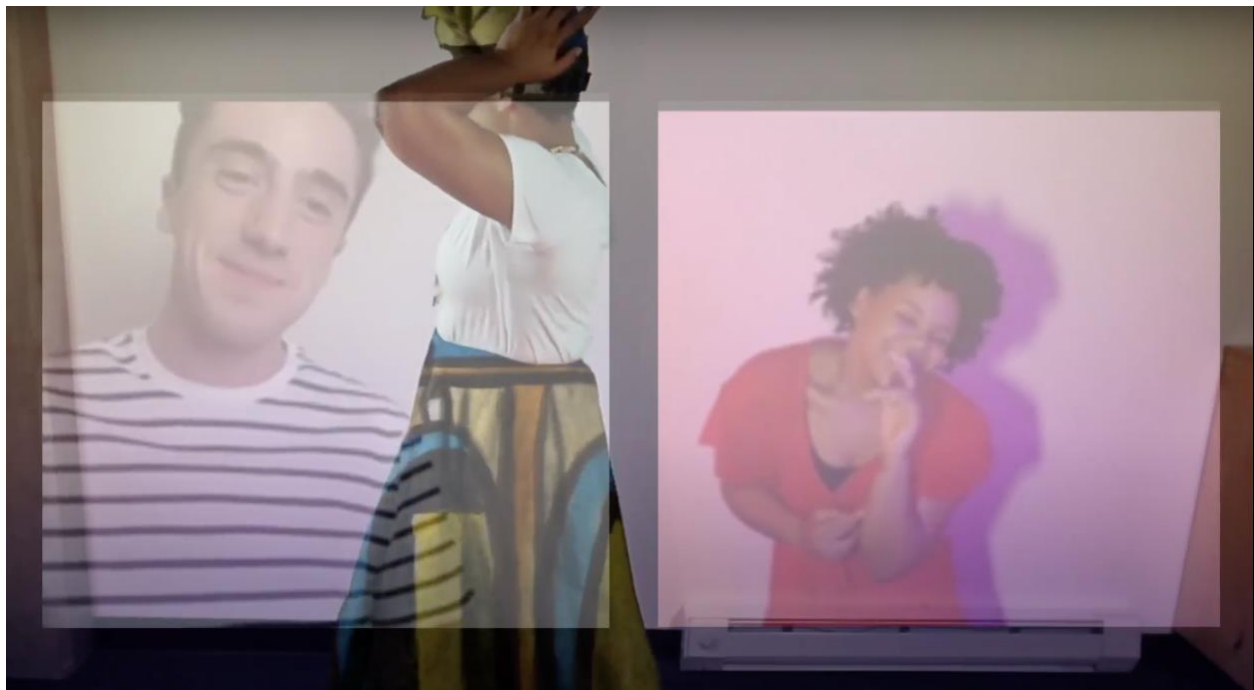


Image 12: “Magic in Motion” ritual, impulse, costumes, and technology combine to create a portal linking disparate geographies in a production still from the second performance on Friday, November 20, 2020

Initially, I had the impulse to include this image as a launching point to discuss a discovery around costumes and technology. In my analysis of the play and conversations with Vanessa Stalling, I realized that Fran does not respond to Luis with written words; she responds through movement. As I went deeper, I discovered that she uses her dance to enact portals to

reach her brother. If Fran was Afro-Cubana, might she have synthesized Martha Graham’s modern dance and a history of Santería? When I brought this idea to our costume designer, Natalie Barshow, she proposed dressing Fran in the blue of Yemaya, the Orisha of the Sea. This way we could see the sanctity of intention to reach her brother and, if we pre-recorded the movement, could use the skirt and headdress as a bluescreen to project images of the island as her power grew throughout the play. When I saw tests of this effect, I thought it was astoundingly magical.

Landing on this image after moving through the previous eleven, it strikes me that in this second to last scene, as Joseph and Fran co-compose a poem through movement/poetry, Irene is offering us the creative act as a ritual way to move through sorrow, as a way to connect, a location to which we can always return. This still is the realization of the last lines of the scene; it is “A freeze in motion/ A constant rediscovery./ Of a single moment” (Fornés, *Letters from Cuba*, 33).

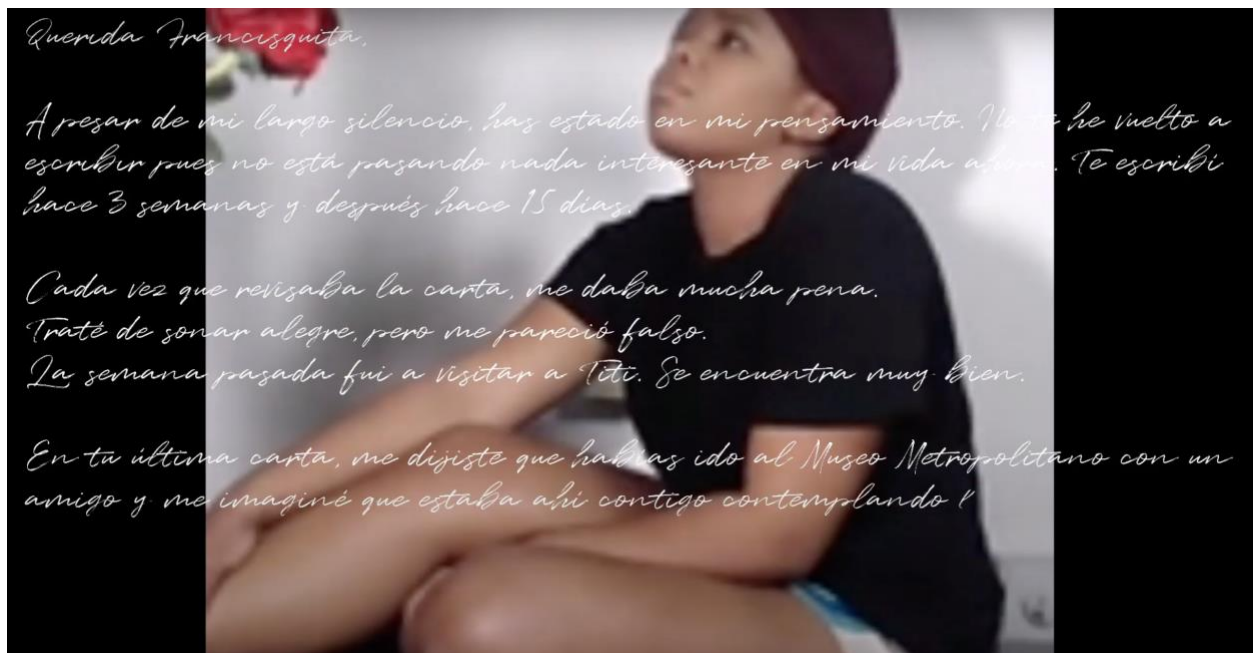


Image 13: “The Performance Accident Reveals” different performance timing led to this thrilling overlay during a live transition in a production still from the second performance on Friday, November 20, 2020

Coming back to this image fills me with so much delight! A difference between rehearsal and performance timing lead to this exquisite overlay. The cue which brought in Fran’s feed was not designed to remove the letter, and so, when Luis had read his letter quickly and the scene change was triggered, the text lingered on Fran’s frame before her scene with Marc and Joseph. As I write this, I imagine Irene smiling and reminding me: “When something happens by accident, I trust that the play is making its own point” (“I Write the Messages that Come, 218). *Letters from Cuba* was certainly making its “own point:” live performance will always find ways to surprise and show its true form in the process.



Image 14: “The Creation of a New Reality” the final ritual of the place in a still from the second performance on Friday, November 20, 2020

Our final image, on this walk through of discoveries, is the last event of the play. It brings tears to my eyes to imagine Irene directing the final moment when Fran and Luis finally embrace. But, how was our team going to make a moment of embrace if actors could not be in

the same place? The answer lay in Enriqueta's creative power. If the whole play was her ritual of reconnection, then she could transform Fran and Luis in order to reunite them.

This image *is* the poetic action of the play: I see a young woman break the patterns of history and create a new reality. I end on this image because the power of the hyphen is in its most exalted position. As I look at this image, another message arrives: this is the person you direct for. The inner and outer child who needs to hear the gospel of their secret power.

Part 3: Portals to the Future

We are exiting our journey through the archive of images sourced from my thesis production of *Letters from Cuba* by María Irene Fornés. To be sure, there are an array of other trials and discoveries that happened during the process. Yet, these fourteen touchstones are the discoveries that I walk away with. They are the images that stay with me and whisper their answers to our guiding question: “how can imagining with Irene launch us into the theatre of now?”

Imagining with Irene is not a merely a fanciful exercise, it is method for making theatre in the current moment: it is a way to be in, and with, the theatre of now. It is not just the discoveries that happen when we analyze her history and body of work, it is a process through which she opens space for theatre of now to be any number of possibilities. When we allow ourselves to be inspired by how Irene lived her life and made her art, we have the tools to create the theatre of now: a synthesis of new and resurrected forms. The act of imagining with Irene has asked me to cultivate a deeper relationship with my intimate self, the shaky ground of innovation, juxtaposition and surprise, my imagination, and pushed me to redefine the role of

love in theatre. In this section, I reflect on the tools that Irene has given me to tackle any text in the future.

The theatre of now requires an artist's full Self. "The possibility of being creative depends on not being shy with one's intimate self and not being fearful for one's personal standing" (Fornés, "Creative Danger," 233). Here Irene warns us against fear and urges us to get to know the disparate parts of ourselves so that we can share them. Imagining with Irene requires continually overturning stones in our own psyches. I am not suggesting that we should use rehearsal rooms as therapy sessions, but that this methodology asks us to practice getting *intimate* with our own individual, "intimate self." True creativity comes from our ability to share our impulses. We cannot share what we have not learned to hear. When I was outlining this section, I had thought to first speak about how Irene encourages us to recalibrate our relationship to the audience in a digital landscape. As I write this, I realize that sharing myself: from impulses, to identities, and everything in between with the team of designers and cast, will ripple through the production and forge a deep connection with the audience no matter if they are sitting a few feet or hundreds of miles away from the performer.

Irene's approach to making urges us to adopt a vigorous curiosity towards innovation. The theatre of now demands a joyful willingness to not just *be* on new ground but to *bask* in it. To be intentional, to be wrong, to do it over again, to revisit and readjust until the form, the moment, and (dare I say), the future, reveals itself. If we can get comfortable with being on the cusp of our comfort zones, we will be continually ready to be making and re-forming the theatre of now.

The theatre of now must juxtapose and surprise. I define surprise as any moment the rules of the world are radically shifted or broken. This could be as simple as an abrupt change in

tempo or as seismic as switching to animation. Surprise aims to keep an audience active; it teaches them to be on the lookout for how the world could be entirely different in an instant. Juxtaposition is crucial to applying Irene's methodology to the theatre of now. It is the effect on the audience when two incongruous and seemingly incompatible images, tones, gestures etc. share time and space. Their coexistence creates a conversation that yields a new meaning. When used in combination, surprise and juxtaposition wield the power of the hyphen: they synthesize. First, they are gifts for the audience to practice agency by crafting *their own links* between moments or images. And second, as they create their individual bridges of meaning, they build their ability to hold a multiplicity of realities at once. Irene calls us to use these tools to remind the audience that they have the secret ability: the power to hyphenate the world around them. That is, in fact, what reality is, "Opposites, contradictions compressed so that you don't know where one stops and the other begins" (Fornés, *Promenade and Other Plays*, 134).

The theatre of the now cannot happen without being in a state of readiness to hear the messages that come. If we want to make form-bending, innovative, original art, we must open ourselves to be impacted. To do this, we must first cultivate deep, fertile relationships with our imaginations. We must follow the threads and wisps of thought as they float into our mind. We must drink in inspirations that ignite imagined worlds in our heads. We must marvel at phenomena we find fascinating. Imagining and dreaming allow us to see possibilities. Then, we must practice waiting and listening for the messages that come. For Irene, this readiness must be a state of radical empathy: a state of readiness to be transformed by the other. Irene believed that "love is paying deep attention" (*The Rest I Make Up*). When she asks us to sit and listen, watch, and wait, she is inviting to sit in love. For her, love is not something to be received, it is

something we must give. To make the theatre of now, Irene proposes that we love, paying deep attention without judgement, in order to receive.

For me, this directive is what makes Irene's way of living and making work revolutionary and necessary. Her practice is not just useful to direct her own work, but essential for creating the next forms of storytelling. By attempting to be open (and love) in the way she did, I open myself to the things that need to be made known to me. This is how we create the theatre of now. By imagining with Irene, we can manifest a theatre of now that awakens audiences to embrace their secret power to hyphenate and reimagine the world around them. We are the ones who will be moving the world forward.

As I graduate and prepare to move on to the next part of my life, I am deeply grateful that I was able to spend so much time with my *madrina, la maestra* Irene. *Letters from Cuba* was the exact play I needed to be working on throughout the pandemic. I have overturned so many stones: I didn't know I would write a thesis about love as an ingredient for innovation, nor did I think I would direct a digital production, but, looking back, I would not have changed a thing. As I bring this thesis to a close, I envision Irene humming along to Buena Vista Social Club's *Dos Gardenias* coming through my speakers, chortling with pleasure when we spot a hummingbird out the window, and saying "we had a good time, didn't we? Shall we revise?"

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