

The Stage Language of Maria Irene Fornes

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Fornes, a Cuban native who has been writing plays in New York City since the early 1960s, is a major figure in the off-off-Broadway scene and the winner of several Obie awards. Her two volumes of published plays show careful attention to visual and verbal details.

At the age of 19, Fornes began painting, and in the mid-1950's she went to Europe to study her craft. While she was in Paris she saw a production of Becket's *Waiting for Godot*, a production that impressed her with its visual imagery and its power. When remembering the experience, she said:

I didn't know a word of French. I had not read the play in English. But what was happening in front of me had a profound impact without even understanding a word. Imagine a writer whose theatricality is so amazing and so important that you could see a play of his, not understanding one word, and be shook up. When I left that theater I felt that my life was changed, that I was seeing everything with a different clarity.

(Cummings 52)

Trained as a painter, Fornes is attracted to the visual procedures of the *mise-en-scene* (Worthen 169). With that experience in mind, Fornes tries, in all her experiments despite their variety, to explore the operations and processes of dramatic action. Her plays address the process of theater and, as Enoch Brater comments: "suspend the identification

between drama and its staging”(169). She creates a new theatricality, a new stage language, “a method of discourse that unites play, actor and space in an organic whole”(Marranca 32).

Fornes foregrounds the image over the word and pays attention to what can be made visible in the theater. In this way, she compels her spectators not to accept as truth but to question the interactions and relationships played out in the representational space (Dotan 106).

In her new theatrical language, Fornes makes visible those signs inscribed on the body, which distinguish the gender behavior of her characters, (how they are internalized, opposed, and changed). She provides a physical correlative of relations between genders. Brecht’s gestural technique, the method for creating a central gesture or ‘gest’, is employed by her to reveal the relations between the sexes. The gestic language means a repeated action or gesture that would act to define the character physically. Gestus engages the spectator in thought processes. The *Gestus*, as Brecht would have it, may occur through language as well as in gist or gesture (142). It serves to defamiliarize and disengage the audience from the play. Patrice Pavis has described *Gestus* as the “radical” displacement, or splitting, of the two elements:

... instead of fusing logos and gestuality in an illusion of reality, the *Gestus* radically cleaves the performance into two blocks: the shown (the said) and the showing (the staging) discourse no longer has the form of a homogeneous block; it threatens at any moment to break away from its

enunciator. Far from assuming the construction and the continuity of the action, it intervenes to stop the moment and to comment on what might have been acted on stage. *Gestus* thus displaces the dialectic between ideas and actions; the dialectic no longer operates within the system of these ideas and actions, but at the point of interaction of the enunciating gesture and the enunciated discourse.

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The plays of Maria Irene Fornes provide an impressive opportunity for illustrating the fact that expression in theater has to do with the sharing of verbal and gestic elements. Her characters are revealed through the gestic quality of her language; for it is discourse and not dialogues that demonstrates their situation. The distinction Brecht made between dialogue and discourse is perhaps one of the most significant contributions to the structural changes in dramatic form. While dialogue serves the plot in order to sustain illusion, discourse engages the spectator in thought processes. For Fornes, language is a method of discourse in which fragments of thought and unruly contradictions are part of the process of questioning preconceived ideas, conventions and emotional responses (Kiebuszinska 156-57). As Bonnie Marranca comments, "instead of the usual situation in which a character uses dialogue or action to explain what he or she is doing and why, [Fornes'] characters exist in the world by their very act of trying to understand it" (1984, 29).

Fornes refuses wholly to engage the language of her plays in the seamlessness of traditional narrative. Instead of revealing character and determining personality, her dialogue reveals the consistencies and inconsistencies in a character. Fornes uses dialogue to show both connections and gaps between characters. Words are powerful tools for probing the complexities of relationships; their power is often found in their ineffectiveness. In his study of dramatic dialogue Andrew Kennedy discusses the connection between language and relationships: "Wherever we find a dislocation in the personal encounter, we recognize some of the features of mannerist and parodic dialogue – a derangement of relationship as well as of language"(8).

Fornes' dialogue is focused, her sentences are short and simple, and her monologues are poetic. At the same time, the silences have their own effect in the thought process, becoming as poignant as the dialogue. Fornes attributes her distinctive language to her lack of English skills:

My vocabulary in English is very limited. When I read a newspaper or magazine article I'm constantly finding words that I don't know. I don't mean technical words. But words I don't use. So I look them up and then I forget what they mean. And it may be that because my knowledge of the language is limited. I always have to be sure of what I'm saying because I have nothing else. I can't say, "I'll put a fancy phrase in here and cover up." Because I don't know how to write a fancy phrase. So I have to think, "What does the character want to say? What is the

reality of what's happened? What is the need? What is it inside him that can be said to depict him? I think more of painting, of a character painting a picture, getting a picture clear.

(Sarvan 63-64)

In Fornes' theatricality, there is no central conflict, no linear rising action, and no denouement. Relationships between the characters structure the play in short and pictorial scenes. She has freed characters from explaining themselves in a way that attempts to suggest interpretations of their actions. These characters reflect isolation that is inevitable in their repressive environment. They communicate their "impulses" in the gestic, self-narrated discourse of Brechtianism. They are characterized by theatrical rather than psychological or literary context. They are defined through the theater, through spectacle, and through the plot.

The use of *Gestus* is the central device in *Mud* and *The Conduct of Life*. In *Mud*, the visual signs that illustrate the shackles of ignorance and oppression from which Mae tries to free herself through learning emerge quite clearly from the stuttering discourse of Mae, Lloyd and Henry. In *The Conduct of Life*, Leticia, Olimpia, and Nena spin out monologues as if they were physical structures that might protect them from the forces of a larger drama (Moroff 14). Women in both plays struggle hard to assert themselves in language. Knowledge means a lot to them - to Mae; it is escape from the confines of her situation. To Olimpia, Leticia and Nena, it is the only path to the self (O'Malley 114). Learning, as Marranca comments, holds a special place in the work of Fornes, for knowledge struggled over is

a form of empowerment, a way of mastering one's life, a guide to value, the cultivation worldliness (1992, 25).

Mud, the three-character drama, has at its center the hopeless quest of a young woman named Mae who strives to learn her way out of the mud. Mae comes to understand herself through language and she also comes to the realization that "a free woman is one who has autonomy of thought"(Marranca 1984, 33). In seventeen scenes, separated by freezing-framed moments of eight seconds each, we witness the encounters of the three characters. Sometimes the scene is only an image, a few lines of dialogue or a close-up freeze frame with a strong pictorial composition (Kiebuszinska 155). Each scene reaches a visual climax, forcing the spectators to concentrate on the image that endures from the scene's progress.

In Fornes' *Mud* there is the language of the visual signs that illustrate the primitive and dirty world in which the lower depths characters – Mae, Lloyd, and Henry – live, and which is presented in the freezing-framed moments and the monochromatic quality of the play. Although the original reason for this freeze-frame was a practical one, since the outdoor staging at Padua Hills prevented the use of blackouts or curtains between scenes, (Betskoo and Koenig 161) the effect is a series of cinematic-style shots reflect the repetitive and violent lives of the characters themselves. Likewise, the light at dusk cast a gray tone over performance, giving it a drab color, which Fornes liked.

Each of the three characters has varying abilities with language: Lloyd is illiterate and barely past the level of survival beyond base instincts. He has no language of communication beyond an informational one. "I'm Lloyd. I have two pigs. My mother died. I was seven. My father left. He is dead. (*He gets three coins from his pocket*). This is money. It's mine. It's three nickels. I'm Lloyd"(15). The repetition of "I'm Lloyd" stresses the poverty of his language and the inability to extend his worldview far beyond himself. Mae is learning to read, only to be left with large gaps of confusion. Lloyd asks her what she learns at school, and she responds vaguely, "subjects," then she adds "different things" (17). Finally she narrows this down to arithmetic. Her definition of arithmetic reveals her limited understanding. First she describes it as "numbers" and then as "multiplication" (18). Through her desire to read and acquire knowledge, Mae realizes that knowledge is the beginning of will and power and personal freedom. Henry reads, but with limited understanding. He becomes crippled in an accident during the course of the play and must learn again to speak (Marranca 1984, 29).

The gestic quality of Mae's language emerges from her efforts to seek a way out of her imprisonment by learning how to read and write. Her household chores are many: to feed Lloyd (and Henry), to wash and press clothes, and to satisfy their bodily needs. "I work. See, I work. I'm working. I learned to work. I wake up and I work. Open my eyes and I work. I work"(19). Scene I establishes our identity with Mae, we are invited to share her point of view about Lloyd. In more than one place, he is described as an animal. He even admits that he "did it to [Betsy], the pig"(20). He also refuses to go to the clinic unless he takes

an ax with him. Sensing his own inferiority, Lloyd verbally abuses Mae. (*In one move he takes her hand, crosses his left leg, and puts her hand on his crotch*) (18). Visually, he wins. When language fails him, he shifts to the sure power of physicality. By the end of scene one, the audience pauses with a vision of Lloyd as an animal and of Mae as strong enough to liberate herself from her muddy life.

In a Brechtian manner, Fornes interrupts identification with her characters, having the staging intervene at moments of realistic acceptance. The freezes at the end of each scene inhibit toward movement of the play and thus prevent the audience from being swept along with the plot. Bonnie Marranca explains their importance:

She leaves spaces on the stage unused. She makes the actors appreciate stillness as a theatrical idea, they are considerate toward other theatrical lives. And Fornes acknowledges their own space and time in the productions. In *Mud* the short scenes and blackouts emphasize this attitude toward reception. They leave room for the audience to enter for contemplative moments. The authorial voice does not demand power over the theatrical experience. It is not territorial.

(1984, 71-2)

It is the ability to use language that centers any particular character in this drama. While Mae carefully places herself center stage at the start of Scene II, Henry eventually replaces her, after her own failure to read the information on the pamphlet from the doctor in order to explain Lloyd's disease. She admits she can't read it: "I tried to read it and

it was too difficult. That's why I got Henry to read it because it was too difficult for me. It's advanced. I'm not advanced yet. I'm intermediate. I can read a lot of things but not this"(21-22). Henry makes Lloyd's illness especially vivid:

Prostatitis and Prostatosis. Acute and chronic bacterial infection of the prostate gland: symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment. Common symptoms of acute prostatitis and bacterial prostatosis are: febrile illness, back pains, perineal pain, irritative voiding, aching of the perineum, sexual pain, sexual impotency, painful ejaculation, and intermittent disureah, or bloody ejaculation.

(22)

From the delineation of Lloyd's symptoms, the image shifts to Mae's offering dinner to Henry.

Remaining is the image of Lloyd's white tongue, or even the image Mae evoked of Lloyd digging his own grave: "You better dig your own grave while you can, Lloyd," Mae says. At the end of this scene, another freeze is indicated. It lasts for eight seconds and reaches a visual climax, forcing the spectator to concentrate on the image that most endures from the scene's progress, the image that essentially outlasts the text, giving that image primacy over the text (Moroff 63). Toby Zinman writes: "The play becomes a photograph album, ironically using the art form most easily associated with realism to break the stage realism" (217).

Learning is central to the character of Mae. Mae comes to understand herself through language and also understands that language has a power that will prevent her from dying “*in the mud*”(19). She insists that she will die in a hospital, “*in white sheet,*” with “*clean feet*”(19). For Mae, the muddy, sticky and dirty realm in which she is sinking equals ignorance. Throughout the play her attempts to clean the dirt can be concentrated in the image of ironing the never-ending pile of men’s pants. As Jill Dolan mentions: “Mae’s ironing works in the play as a kind of *Gestus*, replete with the illustration of the gender specific nature of the social arrangements in that household (109).

Written texts seem to her to be part of the realm of beauty and knowledge into which Mae longs to escape. That’s why in scene 3, Mae becomes attracted to Henry, who is the embodiment of her ideals in life, and starts to seduce him. Henry represents everything that Mae yearns to. He opens up Mae’s world to identification through speech. She cries when Henry says grace: “For he satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness” because she says: “I am a hungry soul. I am a longing soul. I am an empty soul”(27). She cries with joy, as she becomes satisfied to hear words that speak so lovingly to her soul. Henry lifts her above the typical exchanges with Lloyd and shows her that language can be different from her initiation into the language of “arithmetic” as “numbers” or “multiplication.” He helps her to find the realm of language she has been seeking. As Deborah R. Geis comments: “For Mae, language – which she connects with spirituality – is central to subjectivity to the extent that it takes on an almost material quality as “food” for spiritual hunger, and yet its

power for her lies in its ability to let her transcend her earthbound existence” (1990, 300).

Learning for Mae is not an easy process because as she admits: “I don’t retain words. ... I find it hard to retain words I learn. It is hard for me to do the work at school.” The reason is that she has “no memory” (26). However, she rejoices with the knowledge that she gets. The gestic quality of Mae’s clumsiness in reading aloud a passage about the starfish allows the audience to feel the *physical* quality by which she tries to transform her world (Geis 1990, 26). In spite of the fact that the passage that she reads resembles the language of a biology textbook, she acquires an identity as she reads:

The starfish is an animal, not a fish. He is called a fish because he lives in the water. The starfish cannot live out of the water. If he is moist and in the shade he may be able to live out of the water for a day. Starfish eat old and dead sea animals. They keep the water clean. A starfish has five arms like a star. That is why it is called a starfish. Each of the arms of the starfish has an eye in the end. These eyes do not look like our eyes. A starfish’s eye cannot see. But they can tell if it is night or day. If a starfish loses an arm he can grow a new one. This takes about a year. A starfish can live five or ten years or perhaps more, no one really knows.

It is; in fact, Mae's reading "with difficulty" following "the written words with the fingers of both hands" that makes her reading "inspired" (27).

The text that Mae reads is especially meaningful as an indication of Mae's sense of herself. She perceives herself as a text. But then with a single gesture, the visual tableau replaces the text. The stage directions read: "*Lloyd slaps the book off the table. Mae slaps Lloyd. They freeze*" (27). The final image of this scene is the futility of Mae's efforts to liberate herself. Mae's problem is that her search for herself has been an inward search characterized mostly by her efforts to use language to express her sense of self.

Dolan has argued that "Mae's entry into discourse" is in fact marked by Henry, who is able to move Mae with his language (109). Henry plays another important role since he provides her with an image of herself when he brings her a lipstick and a mirror. This moment, as Marranca mentions, is not related to a cosmetic action "but a recognition of a self in the act of knowing, an objectification, a critique of the self" (31). The lipstick and the mirror along with the self-demonstration of her gestic monologue allow Mae to reshape herself.

Throughout Act I we are continually drawn more into Mae's perspective. It becomes easy for us to identify with Mae and her cause. In a number of places, Lloyd is described as an animal; thus we are alienated from him. When Henry appears, we tend to identify with him as both an outsider to this world and more educated than Lloyd and Mae. Yet his presence causes tension in the house as he admits: "I feel I'm offending him [Lloyd]. And he is

offending me”(28). Mae becomes the mediator between the two men and the center of our perspective. Fornes said in an interview:

I feel that what is important about this play is that Mae is the central character. It says something about women's place in the world, not because she is good or a heroine, not because she is oppressed by men or because the men 'won't let her get away with it,' but simply because she is the *center* of that play. It is her mind that matters throughout the play, and the whole play exists because her little mind wants to see the light, not even to see it because she wants to be illuminated, but so she can reverse it.

(Betsko and Koenig 166)

Not only is Mae the center of the play, but also her textbook is in the center of both scene 6 “*she sits center and reads with difficulty*” (27) and scene 9 “*She places the textbook center and sits*” (29). As Deborah R. Geis commented: “to the extent that Mae refashions herself as a “text,” the parallel centrality is evocative, for this moment of *Gestus* embodies Mae's liberation from the representational limits within which she has been confined”(1990, 301).

In *Mud* power is a central issue. The power shifts between the three main characters, and their language reflects that shift. Henry and Lloyd become like two hermit crabs struggling for an empty shell. Imaged in the shell of a hermit crab, Mae is reduced to setting, to the stage for their struggle. Mae reads from her textbook the description of a hermit crab's territorial demands: “often he tries several

shells before he finds the one that fits. Sometimes he wants the shell of another hermit crab and then there is a fight”(29). The struggle concerns more than shelter, as the two men struggle for their position in Mae’s life. We are also reminded of her earlier speech describing herself: “I feel I am hollow ...and offensive”(24), with a desire to be filled. All three exchanges look, and the last scene of Act I ends with the men eyeing each other.

First, Henry wins in the struggle for power and he usurps Lloyd’s place in Mae’s bed. Yet, when Lloyd finds that Henry has replaced him, he begins to identify with Mae’s reading about the hermit crab who: “lives in empty shells that once belonged to other animals”(29). His motivation is clear; he wants to return back to his previous place in Mae’s bed. Unlike Henry, Lloyd understands that Mae’s “*inspired*” reading of the starfish text suggests a transformation beyond his ability of comprehension. In an attempt to decipher what happened to Mae’s personality, Lloyd takes her book and tries to trace the letters of “starfish” one by one. When Mae catches him reading in her book, “*he lowers his head and she is perplexed*”(36). She understands that he is trying to possess her again. So, “*she takes the book and holds it protectively,*” telling him: “Don’t mess my book” (36). This gesture of protecting her book announces her desire for holding on to her own text, (Kiebuszinska 160) as if the textbook “articulates her bodied subjectivity”(Geis 1990, 301).

Mae's attempts to turn language into something that holds beauty and meaning, which can also be considered as attempts to escape, are terminated after Henry's fall that distorts his ability to speak. Not only does he betray her expectation – the catalyst for her inspiration – but also he steals her own money. Disenchanted with the ugliness surrounding her, Mae tells Lloyd: "Kill him if you want. He can't talk straight anymore" (34). In Act II the lines between the characters are no longer clearly defined. Henry, paralyzed, is reduced to a mere sexual body and becomes much more like the earlier Lloyd. He begs Mae to make love to him: "I still feel desire. – I am sexual. — I have not lost my sexuality. – ... I feel the same desires. I feel the same needs" (37). He sounds like Lloyd in scene one when he says: "I'll fuck you till you're blue in the face" (17).

Henry's muteness changes Mae's perception about him. Her desire for his supposed intelligence has had a command over her all along that prevented her from probing his true self and led her instead to see what she has wanted to see. When she knows for sure that she is "outside the register of language," (Dolan 109), she can no longer sustain the illusion of an intelligent and valuable relationship between herself and Henry.

In her desperation, Mae (*looks up to the sky*) asking: "(Can't I have a decent life?)(38). Lloyd and Henry's protest that they love her does not stop her from packing her stuff in a box. She is on the brink of escape because, as she said: "I got rotten luck. I work too hard and the two of you keep sucking my blood. I'm going to look for a better place to be"(39). She carefully articulates her awareness that she has no self to be achieved in their presence. As Lloyd

shouts and Henry makes a plaintive sound, Mae leaves and Lloyd runs after her carrying his rifle. Offstage, Lloyd shoots Mae twice and reappears carrying her back onto the stage, "*drenched in blood and unconscious*" (40), assuring Henry: "*she's not leaving*"(40). They killed her spiritually and physically. Mae's death in and of itself is only an image that literalizes the death-in-life that has been her reality.

Mae's final speech resounds triumphantly. "Like a starfish," she says: "I live in the dark and my eyes see only a faint light. It is faint and yet it consumes me. I long for it. I thirst for it. I would die for it. Lloyd, I am dying"(40). According to her, she has achieved her self-perception. She has become the spiritually single entity she longed to be. As Geis explains: "Mae's death occurs before she is fully able to find the realm of language she has been seeking"(1990, 301); however, her coming into language at her death is resonant and poetic. Her linguistic achievements work for her in this brief and shining moment of her death.

Mae's closing gestus represents the culmination of Mae's escape; which is made possible through her efforts to appropriate the language. Perhaps, as Bonnine Marranca argues, "it does not matter to the play that Mae is murdered because the main point has already been made: Mae is free because she can understand the concept of freedom"(33).

The Conduct of Life gives us another chance for illustrating the nature of the gestic language in Fornes' plays. In this play also what is visible takes precedence over the other elements that determine the character. The play is set in an unnamed Latin American country. It

concerns a trio of women who are in a subservient position in the house of a Latin American army officer, Orlando (Austin 82). Nena is a sex slave whom he keeps in the basement. Olimpia, the housekeeper, eventually discovers Nena and comes to her help. Leticia, his wife, finally shoots him and hands the gun to Nena. The play images the reverberating effects of Latin American political violence where oppressors become like cogs in an endless and merciless cycle. In this nightmarish atmosphere, Leticia, Nena, and Olimpia must try hard to establish their identity. They use the language as a means to say that they do exist.

The set, which consists of a mere series of platforms that represent various rooms in the house, echoes the levels of power and control evident in the play (Wolf 28). More significantly, though, the set becomes a powerful habit of vision for the spectators. The absence of walls allows the spectators to witness the frequent exchanges of power in the house. The play's violence is grounded in what Griselda Pollock defines as "dis-identificatory practices" (158). As in *Mud*, the scenes are disrupted by extremely short rape scenes. Employing alienation-effect, Fornes draws spectators' sympathies only to disrupt the emotion with other scenes.

While it is easy to see the three women as Orlando's victims, Fornes points out that this is not the case. "All those women are strong" (Savran 67). That's what Fornes clarified to the director of Los Angeles production of *The Conduct of Life*, who wanted to portray the women as being oppressed. Each is strong in her own way: Olimpia has the courage to defy Leticia and later Orlando. Leticia manages

to escape from Orlando by killing him. Even Nena is strong enough to care for her grandfather.

As in *Mud*, Fornes uses the gestic role of the language to show the attempts of women to define a place in the world by creating a language, a language which as it emerges in the context of a theatrical event – seems to be part of a “work (or self) in progress”(Geis 1966, 240). Unlike *Mud*, the play contains spoken monologues by a male character. Orlando’s monologues are different from the women’s.

His are a means to justify his actions. His first speech shows determination to achieve control over himself and others: “Thirty years and I’m still a lieutenant. In two years I’ll receive a promotion or I’ll leave the military.” He continues: “Man must have an ideal, mine is to achieve maximum power. That is my destiny” (68), indicating an ominous control over his career, as well as his over his language. Both his logic and aspirations appear solid. Though he admits that he cannot achieve a promotion “on [his] own merit,” that he will not let Leticia get in the way of his own success, and that he will “eliminate all obstacles”(68), he does so in the context of evident self-knowledge and also in the context of admitting both his strengths and weaknesses. Orlando admits that he cannot control his sexuality: “My sexuality drive is detrimental to my ideals. I must no longer be overwhelmed by sexual passion or I’ll be degraded beyond all hope of recovery”(68). Here there is an irony. As Geis comments: “The more Orlando tries to control his actions by setting them forth in language and then expecting his body (i.e., his “sexual passion”) to follow suit, the more obvious it becomes to the audience that Orlando’s own words betray

him"(1990, 302). He tries to find justification for his actions; he brutally uses the body of Nena and justifies it as "out of love" (82). He speaks to her much as he does to justify his political regime: "What I do to you is out of love. Out of want. It's not what you think. I wish you didn't have to be hurt. I don't do it out of hatred. It's not out of rage"(82). Even the death of one of the prisoners whom he tortured he attributed to "fear, not from anything I did to him" (79). He tries to hide in words his real actions. Orlando's actions are based in a fundamental drive for power and an almost inhuman indifference to any needs but his own (Schuller 226). As Olimpia describes him: "Like an alligator, big mouth and no brains. Lots of teeth but no brains. All tongue"(79).

Although the play opens on Orlando, which may encourage the audience to consider him to be the protagonist, the significance of his role fades as the significance of the women's roles is clarified.

Olimpia's monologue makes her stand up for herself and establish her own power. In her monologue in Scene 4, which is the longest in the play, Olimpia renders her daily routine for Leticia in an almost excruciating detail.

I don't stop from the time I wake up in the morning to the time I go to sleep. You can't interrupt me whenever you want, not if you want me to get to the end of my work. I wake up at 5:30, I wash. I put on my clothes and make my bed. I go to the kitchen. I get the milk and the bread from outside and I put them on the counter. I

open the icebox. I put one bottle in and take the butter out. I leave the other bottle on the counter. I shut the refrigerator door. I take the pan that I use for water and put water in it. I know how much. I put the pan on the stove, light the stove, cover it. I take the top of the milk and pour it in the milk pan except for a little. (*Indicating with her finger.*) Like this. For the cat. ... I come here, get the tablecloth and I lay it on the table. I shout "Breakfast." I go upstairs To make your bed and clean your bathroom. I come down here to meet you and figure out what you want for lunch and dinner then, I start the day.

(71)

The gestic quality of Olimpia's speech emerges from her desire of turning her mundane actions: "I wake ...I wash ...I put...I go .I get ..." into discourse. She depends upon her discourse to establish her identity. For her this is the only way to say that she even exists – hence her monologue's repeated invocation of the actual and grammatical subject, the "I" (Belsey 59). Olimpia's speech, which does not spare any minute detail of her menial work, is a cry for attention. Although like many other women, Olimpia's existence is made up of tasks that go unnoticed, she manages to control the decision made by her boss when she insists that she needs a steam pot.

Olimpia has her own power over the household, a power that she asserts verbally. When she and Leticia argue over what they are going to have for lunch, Olimpia answers using one word.

Olimpia: Boiled plantains

Leticia: Make something I like.

Olimpia: Avocados. (*Leticia gives a look of resentment to Olimpia.*)

Leticia: why can't you make something I like.

Olimpia: Avocados.

(72)

Olimpia's response underscores her power in this area. Her repetitions of the word "Avocados" indicate her confidence in controlling the situation. As Linda Kintz comments:

Olimpia the servant engages in an active passive resistance to her female employer by strategically infiltrating the dialogue in which household orders are being discussed, occupying that dialogue, twisting it, attacking its syntax, until finally she proves to be controlling the decisions made by her boss

(86)

Not only does she win over Leticia in the linguistic battle, but also she fights with

Orlando, hits him, even threatens to kill him. She is the only character who stands up to

Orlando as she turns his vocabulary of violence and torture back on him. In graphic detail, she tells Orlando how she will torture him:

I'm going to open you up and cut your entrails and feed them to the snakes. (*She tries to strangle him.*) I'm going to tear your heart out and feed it to the dogs! I'm going to cut your head open and have the

cats eat your brain! (*Reaching for his fly.*)
I'm going to cut your peepee and hang it on
a tree and feed it to the birds!

(80)

Despite her servant status, Olimpia's exchange with Orlando shows that she is not powerless. To her: "One day I'm going to kill you when you 're asleep!" Orlando responds: "I'm getting rid of you too!" (80). Orlando's response is less than purely masterful response. Ultimately she becomes more powerful than him.

Leticia, like Mae, wants to assert herself in language. She has dreams of a new and a better life. Her target is to prove her own value. She tells Alejo, another lieutenant commander and Orlando and Leticia's friend: "I want to study. I want to study so I am not an ignorant person. I want to go to the university. I want to be knowledgeable. I'm tired of being ignored" (70). In essence, she wants to be a self-assured woman who "speaks in a group and have others listen" (70). She is denied this right when she attempts to enter the forbidden territory of speaking about the political condition of their country to Orlando and Alejo. She said: "We 're blind. We can 't see beyond an arm 's reach. ... We take care of our pocket, but not of our country. ... We don 't think we have a country" (75). They interrupt her and do not give her the chance even to speak her own mind.

Again like Mae, Leticia becomes frustrated when she fails in memorizing a passage about foreign investments. She responds only with anger and violence to Olimpia when the later pretends to be able to read in order to help her; "*slapping the book off Olimpia's hand*) (76). Her anger and

fury can be justified as a result of her failure to enter the realm of discourse. Her only outlet is her friend Mona, who is physically absent but imperative for Leticia's self-expression. Mona is the receiver of Leticia's monologues. She is her audience. In scene 6, Leticia, in the telephone, describes to Mona Orlando's mood changes, but does not speculate on the nature of his work – torturing political prisoners. As Leticia is hanging up the telephone, Orlando and Alejo enter the scene. In his conversation with his friend, Orlando completes for us, as readers or spectators, the other side of the discourse not heard. Mona's silence is filled by Orlando's story of two horses mating:

He made loud sounds not high-pitched like a horse. He sounded like a whale. He was pouring liquid from everywhere, his mouth, his nose, his eyes. He was not a horse but a sexual organ. -- Helpless. A viscera. -- Screaming. Making strange sounds. He collapsed on top of her.

(74)

Indirectly, Orlando confirms the violent subtext of his wife's unanswered questions. In scene 12, Leticia speaks to Mona only "*in her mind*" (81). She tells her audience that Orlando is keeping someone in their home but she does not dare look. To an imaginative question, she answers: "No, there's nothing I can do. I can't do anything" (81). Here Leticia is divided between contradictory emotions; she is jealous, angry, and afraid. However, she is still in self-denial. By the end of the scene, she overcomes her fear and jealousy, and decides to discover what is hidden in the cellar. (*She opens the door to the cellar and starts to go down*) (81).

Nena is the most brutally victimized and dehumanized woman in the play. Orlando kidnapped her, brutalized her in the name of love and sexuality and repeatedly raped. When she first appears on the stage is “tearful and frightened” (70). She is “motionless” (73). Orlando controls her to the extent that she cannot speak, only “whimpers” (76). When she does speak, it is only to take back what she has said. Orlando accuses her of calling him a snake. When she denies it, he seizes her and she quickly lies: “No I didn’t. I was kidding. – I swear I was kidding” (70). She tries to find in language a haven that will rescue her from him.

She is passive and her scenes are more physical than verbal. Many of the scenes between Orlando and Nena are in partial silence. Scene III depicts soundless physical violence. We watch an elaborate chase between Orlando and Nena in the dark warehouse. A rape scene follows this. Fornes’ stage directions are very specific: “He grabs her and pushes her against the wall. He pushes his pelvis against her. He moves to the chair dragging her with him. She crawls to the left”(70). Scene V is also literally soundless. Nena is “staring into space. He looks at her for a while, then walks to the chair and sits facing right staring into space” (73). Though the scene is never fully explained, I can assume that a glimpse into Orlando’s world is enough to know that whatever he does must be horrendous.

When Nena finally speaks with Olimpia’s encouragement, she defines herself as a worker: “I used to clean beans when I was in the home. And also string beans. I also pressed clothes” and also as a caretaker of her grandfather: “I can take care of him” (83). She tells

Olimpia that her grandfather was old and sick and taking care of him meant cleaning the big cardboard box that was their house in the homeless camp. She even let him sleep on top of her to stay warm and she poked holes in the bottom of the box so his pee would run out. She did everything possible to make the box tidy and clean. We can find here a huge gulf between what is seen from Nena as a helpless victim and what is heard from her as a strong figure, who can work and take care both of herself and her grandfather. This is an alienating moment, which disrupts the realist effect.

Olimpia and Nena's discussion help Nena to open up and to express her worst pain. She finally finds the courage to give an account of Orlando's sexual abuse of her:

And he took me to a place. And he hurt
me. I fought with him but I stopped fighting
-- because I couldn't fight anymore and he
did things to me. And he locked me in, and
sometimes he brought me food and sometimes
he didn't, and he did things to me. And he
beat me. And he hung me on the wall. And
I got sick.

(84)

The many repetitions of "And" intensify her horror when remembering the graphic details of Orlando's abuse.

And he puts his hand on me and he recites
poetry. He touches himself and he touches
his stomach and his breasts and his behind.
He puts his fingers in my parts and he keeps
reciting. Then he turns me on my stomach

and puts himself inside me. And he says I belong to him.

(84)

Stage directions indicate that "*there is a pause.*" This is the first pause since Nena started her narrative. She pauses at this moment when she articulated the worst threat, the threat of a complete loss of her self.

Then she gives the speech from which the title of the play is taken: "

I want to conduct each day of my life in the best possible way. I should value the things I have. And I should value all those who are near me. And I should value the kindness that others bestow upon me. And if someone should treat me unkindly, I should not blind myself with rage, but I should see them and receive them, since may be they are in worse pain than me.

(84-85)

This passage complicates our reading of the play. It is not clear whether this speech comes from Nena's own pity of the vicious circle in which the victimizers live and which turn them into victims or she just repeats a role that she learns by rote. Worthen comments on the speech as a symbol of her learned helplessness:

Rather than taking a resistant, revolutionary posture, Nena accepts a Christian humility, an attitude that simply enforces her own objectification, her continued abuse. ...

[She] finally adopts a morality that grotesquely completes her subjection to ... [Orlando] and to the social order that empowers him.

(174)

The gap between what is heard from her and what the audience knows of her brutalization by Orlando is so great that Nena must disconnect herself from her body and from the pain, which Orlando inflicts upon her (Geis 1990, 306). It is clear the extent with which Nena's self image is affected by Orlando's idea about her. She thinks that she deserves punishment because as he tells her, she's "dirty" (85). Denied all means of survival and lacking all control over her life and her body, Nena clings desperately to her language, because it is the only thing she has got, hoping that language will work for her.

Leticia does the same thing to waylay Orlando's violence towards her. Under his torture, she narrates that she has a lover, though the lover's existence is never verified in the play. Seizing her and using additional verbal aggression, he forces her to admit that she approached her lover: "He did! How!" Punctuating his question with an exclamation mark and not with a question mark refers to the fact that in Orlando's world there is no room for conversation. He imposes a certain narrative on her that will answer his questions.

Failing to reach the realm of discourse she always yearned to and being verbally and psychologically abused by her husband, Leticia cannot take her husband's physical aggression any longer. Grabbing her by the hair more than one time, pulling her hard, and putting his hand inside her

blouse, she screams and then, "*she goes to the telephone table, opens the drawer, takes a gun and shoots Orlando. Orlando falls dead... Leticia ... puts the revolver in Nena's hand and steps away from her.*" Leticia asks: "Please ..." and "Nena *in a state of terror and numb acceptance. She looks at the gun. Then, up. The lights fade*"(88).

The meaning of this gesture is highly ambiguous: the audience has to decide whether Leticia is the ultimately the victim, asking Nena to shoot her, or the victimizer, asking Nena to take the blame for Orlando's death. The ending is left open for multiple interpretations. Gayle Austin argues that Leticia and Nena are doubles and suggests that Leticia may be asking Nena to kill her. She sees the ending as an illustration of the bonding of the women through recognition of their subjugated roles (84). Dolan, on the other hand, argued that Leticia is forcing Nena to accept the blame for the shooting and thus that the moment is part of a larger social *Gestus* of historized violence (108). Following the Brechtian legacy, Fornes keeps the closure unclosed.

Not only does Fornes allow her audience a great deal of freedom in drawing the conclusion, but also allows her characters the freedom to express themselves as full human beings. Fornes' main emphasis is on the unique subjectivity of the characters for whom language is purely gestural. As she said: "What I want language to be is a very careful expression of the characters, but a very careful expression so that they or the words don't get carried away and become their own expression. ... I want to catch the process of the forming of thought into words" (Cummings 55).

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