

# Directing *Evelyn Brown*

Alice Reagan

In the fall of 2018, Gwendolyn Alker invited me to partner with her in reviving *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* for the first time since its premiere in 1980 at Theater for a New City. Maria Irene Fornes is the most important writer in my directing career, the one I return to again and again for always bracing encounters with formalist experiments and hearts on fire. I immediately said yes.

As Alker describes in her essay on excavating this work, the text of the “play” is drawn primarily from short diary entries written by a domestic worker in early 1900s New Hampshire. Only incomplete versions of the original script remain, along with seventy or so rehearsal photos taken by Sylvia Plachy. Luckily, Fornes had passed a mostly complete script on to the theatre scholar Marc Robinson; we worked primarily from those pages and added some bits from other drafts. The text of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* is different from other Fornes plays—or any play—I have directed because it is full of drawings. The stage directions, when they appear, are meticulous. But when a stage direction would be too long and complicated, she drew a simple picture. The drawings became more important than the entries themselves in giving us a sense of how the play should unfold. Using the drawings, Plachy’s photos, and anecdotes from the original creative team in addition to the text, I felt I was walking in Fornes’s directing footsteps as we moved towards performance at La MaMa in spring 2023.

The dominant structure of the play is accumulation through repetition. The days pile up, the chores repeat: “wash dishes,” “tended baby some.” The account of these months of Evelyn’s life, written at the end of each day when she was often exhausted, doesn’t provide a neat theatrical crisis and denouement. Her “character objectives” remain stubbornly opaque, and whatever story develops does so in the viewer’s mind. While the force of the play is in its sameness, I was surprised to discover in rehearsal that each section has its own rules and affect. When first reading the pages, I feared the weight of repetition of Evelyn’s life would feel oppressive. But as we built each section in rehearsal, the scenes quickly differentiated

themselves into separate facets of Evelyn's experience. The prismatic nature of the play meant that almost no scene bled into the next. Transitions were sharp, scenes interrupted each other, and the play indeed moved forward on its own terms.

Two extraordinary actors, Ellen Lauren and Violeta Picayo, took on the roles of Evelyn and Evelyn Brown, respectively. The original scenic designer, Donald Eastman, designed the set based on his plans for the 1980 premiere. Gabriel Berry, who didn't work on the original *Evelyn Brown* but began collaborating with Fornes on her next production, *A Visit*, designed the clothing. New to the project were lighting designer Christina Watanabe and sound designer Jordan Bernstein, who both provided crucial texture to the show.

What follows is a breakdown of the different sections of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, and what we discovered with each one. I hope these reflections help to illuminate one team's methods of tackling what can seem an opaque script. *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* is more like a choreopoem, ringing notes of deep empathy for a life that is one of millions of lives past and present.

## PROLOGUE

Our play began without sound, lights up on Ellen Lauren, standing stock-still down center, facing the audience with a wide, dark piece of fabric stretched across her eyes. The vulnerable, blindfolded Evelyn was the most mysterious image in Fornes's script. We embraced the image and quoted the style of blindfold in Plachy's photos. We used the music indicated by the script, "Child Grove." The piece is two minutes and thirty-two seconds long and we let it play through in full. Just before tech, I asked Ellen to spin slowly twice clockwise, once the music established itself. On Ellen's second spin, lights rose on Violeta, until then hidden upstage in the dark. Violeta began in profile facing stage right, and when activated by the lights and Ellen's spinning, spun once counterclockwise. In this way, Evelyn summons Evelyn Brown to life: her inner voice, her younger self, a companion, a friend, perhaps a foe. I came to see Evelyn Brown as an aspect of Evelyn who quickly gains her own autonomy. The piece is a duet where power is constantly sliding between the two actors. Another gesture we added: after her second spin, Ellen slowly lifted her arms away from her body, palms up. She called this gesture "offering her life."

## AT CHARLIE'S

In a way, a second beginning. Ellen, now alone onstage, blindfold removed during the blackout and hidden away in an apron pocket. A simple drawing of a figure eight composed of straight lines appears at the top of this section and provides the floor pattern for the first eight diary entries. We spent hours trying to make sense of the fractions noted in the script, which were supposed to relate to how much of the figure-eight pattern Evelyn traced in between speaking each entry. Ellen settled

on an irregular pattern that was inspired by the fractions. She called this section “quilting,” maybe because the drawing is done with dotted lines that look like stitches. The stitches became steps, mincing and quick between each day. We fooled around with where on the floor pattern Ellen would speak. We started simply, then riffed by having her step, stop, retrace. The substance of the play is all there in the first eight days: the litany of dates, weather, chores, visits, and names of neighbors, family, and friends.

## BREADMAKING

Then, lights change, a third beginning. Evelyn, talking all the while, leaves the stage and returns immediately with a rectangular table, carried by herself and Evelyn Brown. The table is meticulously set up like a television cooking demonstration with kitchen implements, jars of flour and yeast, and potatoes. This is the most extended direct address scene in the play. Evelyn and Evelyn Brown connect with the audience as instructors to students, demonstrating how to make bread. We didn’t want to make this scene too self-conscious or a caricature of a cooking show, but it is instructional. We came up against fundamental questions about the actors’ relationship to each other. Do they ever speak or look at each other? Or are they on parallel tracks?

This section took the longest to craft, probably because of all the props and the challenge of mixing real ingredients into functional bread dough without giving the dough time to rise. After the monastic vocabulary of the first two sections, the play breaks open into a totally different way of engaging the audience. Evelyn and Evelyn Brown relish sprinkling flour through the air and pounding dough on the table. After watching a rehearsal, Donald Eastman encouraged us to have fun, and said the scene should be “charming, loopy, witty, giddy—like Irene.” We wondered why Fornes had put this scene so close to the top of the show. I was wary of using up precious reserves of audience patience by spending minutes picking up farflung gobs of dough and cleaning flour from every surface. But eventually, through repetition, the cleanup was streamlined, and the actors figured out how much flour and water were necessary to make a good dough. Ellen added a wonderful moment when Violeta says her first line (“Slice very thin”): a tremor of surprise goes through Ellen that Evelyn Brown *speaks*, and also reveals a peevishness that Evelyn Brown is muscling in on Evelyn’s territory as master bread maker.

## AT MRS. GORDON’S

I called this the meat-and-potatoes section of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*: five pages of diary entries with almost no stage directions. This section of the play most remembers Evelyn Brown to life. She in effect says, “I count, I exist.” We had to decide if the activity of speaking the entries was “experiencing” or “reporting.” We landed

somewhere in between, closer to reporting. I asked the actors to speak as if these events had happened recently, but not quite in the moment of saying them, with the delivery being one layer removed from experience. I hoped that choice would keep Evelyn and Evelyn Brown ciphers—not characters—and we would not understand exactly what they felt.

The process of making the physical score was one of building up, then taking away. The actors began by having a gesture for every diary entry, numbered one to twenty. We ran the moves by themselves several times. Then we added text, felt it was too busy, and methodically deleted half the moves. Still too busy, too programmed. We deleted more moves, changed the tempos of some, and made the moves that remained more behavioral instead of dance-like. When the actors got the moves inside their bodies, they began to play off each other more; the parallel tracks touched and intertwined. The actors came to think of this section as a game—I believe the rules changed night to night. Irene introduces sighs in this section. The sighing reveals the physical toll the day takes on Evelyn, letting the exertion and exhaustion leak out.

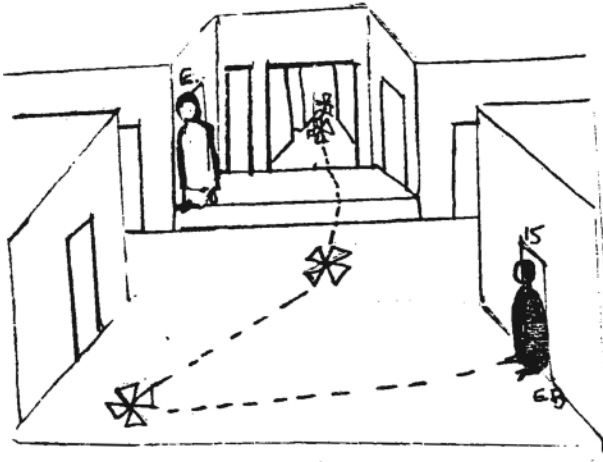
We decided early on to have two diaries onstage, as the script indicates, although Donald Eastman told us Irene didn't use diary props. "Irene said, '*They* are the diaries!'" We chose plain dark red books with lined pages (no writing), and flexible binding. The books made a satisfying slap on the table.

## TABLE DANCE

This was the easiest section to block because the drawings are right there in the script, showing every shape. However, the drawings are crude and sometimes the same posture looks different in varied iterations. We compared the drawings to Plachy's contact sheets, which she shot during one rehearsal. Given all this information, and what we discovered in the room, we made choices for each move. The movement vocabulary is abstract, but the seeds for every form are simple and daily: each shape derives from a woman exhausted, bending or leaning on a table. We experimented with different tempos, from legato and melting to sharp and quick. We landed with sharp and quick, which was a counterpoint to the postures of exhaustion. Lighting designer Christina Watanabe lit this sequence with a single instrument above the table, completely changing how the stage looked: the walls of the room faded from the picture, and it was as if the women were in an existential vacuum, working away alone, but twinned.

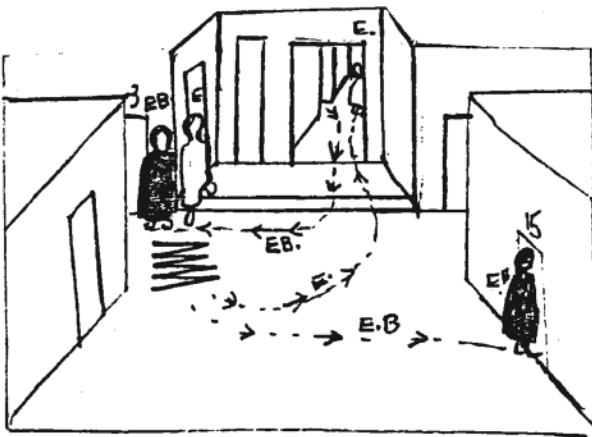
## EVERY KITCHEN NEEDS A BOX

This monologue for Evelyn is a little gift in the middle of the piece, we think lifted from an early twentieth-century homemaker's magazine. The language carries itself along, but what is the actor doing? Ellen devised an activity for herself: looking for



(SHE exits 9-7.)

(EVELYN BROWN re-enters 7-9 and walks down as follows:



(EVELYN BROWN stands left of door 3.

EVELYN stands by her side.

THEY do eight three-count step of polka.

EVELYN BROWN exits door 15.

EVELYN walks up and exits 11.

Page 16 from the original script of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, drawings by Maria Irene Fornes.

Copyright © Maria Irene Fornes, 1980.



Evelyn Brown (Aileen Passloff) and Evelyn (Margaret Harrington) sweeping and mopping (1980).  
Photo: © Sylvia Plachy.



Evelyn (Ellen Lauren) and Evelyn Brown (Violeta Picayo) in Maria Irene Fornes's *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, directed by Alice Reagan. Photo: © Steven Pisano.

Evelyn Brown. While she spoke, she peeked behind doors, exited hallways, crossed upstage behind the set, and reappeared suddenly, which usually got a laugh. While Ellen spoke directly to the audience, her mind was busy seeking out her twin. Christina followed all of Ellen's wanderings with cues that brightened up the stage or dimmed sections. This was the heaviest section of lighting cues in the show. It was as if we were watching light bulbs spark with Evelyn's thoughts. Maybe she's in here? In here?

## POLKA

The polka wasn't a polka, several original participants reported. Irene just called it that. The music indicated in the Robinson script is "Buffalo Gals," which we felt was too familiar to a 2023 audience and might seem silly. Sound designer Jordan Bernstein found a contemporary piece that had the same upbeat spirit, "Sugar Hill" by Mary Z. Cox. Notes from other, undated script pages state the choreography moves as "circling, stamp stamp, paddle turn, skittle sideways, slap foot." The actors made up their own two-minute dance with those notes as inspiration. Following a drawing, the women began standing side by side up right, then danced down a diagonal to center stage, then split off into solo jams, with foot-slapping and whooping down left and down right. This is the loosest, most fun scene in the show. It doesn't last long.

## EVELYN BROWN SOLO/EVELYN'S VOICE

Christina returned the stage to blackness, as in the table dance, with shafts of light from hallways isolating Evelyn Brown in her chair that she moved around the stage with precision, matching the drawings in the script. I discovered notations from an earlier script that read "EB shake," "EB grimace," and "EB come down from grimace," which we used here. Violeta developed a suite of creepy grimaces, that she had to hold for longer than must have been comfortable. Watching the frozen muscles in her face twitch was fascinating and disturbing. This section felt sinister.

Ellen called this section the 1970s art performance piece. To me it recalls Lucinda Childs in Robert Wilson's work. Irene very well could have been quoting masters of this form: austere, blank actors performing extreme actions for a long time without affect or "motivation." The script indicates that Evelyn Brown is the only actor onstage for many minutes, as Evelyn's voice is heard on tape. We decided to have Ellen speak live into a microphone offstage instead, until she entered, when we switched to a recording. Ellen recorded these diary entries with very little color in her cadences. That felt right, depriving the days of variation.

Evelyn eventually enters the space and walks around the perimeter of the room twice. Ellen came up with the idea to do this blindfolded. She counted steps to avoid a collision with the set. The callback to the Prologue was satisfying and added

to the mystery and danger. This long section ends when Violeta moved her chair down center, stands on it, and opens her mouth wide in a silent scream. Watching this in rehearsal, Ellen asked if there was an aperture opening wide enough to accept a sound cue, a note from the outside world? I suggested to Jordan that we try the sound of tectonic plates dragging across each other as the land mass that would become known as “New Hampshire” was formed. Or the sound of glaciers pushing down from the north, driving land inch by inch in its path. Jordan brought in grinding, bass grumblng gestures. I was thinking of how a body ages, is built up and worn down.

## TABLE SETTING

The various texts that Gwendolyn found are all inconclusive as to how the play ends. We knew there was a massive table setting scene, with either five or seven tables. We knew it would take place in total silence. We weren’t sure how long it should be. We knew we needed to open the upstage center door that had been closed the entire show. This scene began with the very real-world sound of Ellen pushing the mop bucket onstage with its deliberately squeaky wheels, while Violeta followed with a broom. After sweeping and mopping the whole stage, the actors commenced bringing on silverware, plates, and all the tables, one by one. The system was roughly like musical chairs. The actors would set a table, then pull items from it to set another table. There was never enough silverware or plates to set all the tables. We had a total of five tables; one was tiny. A “finished” table was marked by placing a plain white tureen at the center. The women devised many rules about entrances, exits, how much they could accomplish on one trip to the stage, and more rules I never knew. Audience members told me they tried to understand the system, but eventually just gave up and watched, absorbed.

After about twelve minutes, Violeta went to the up-center door, and finally opened it. Jordan played a wind sound cue. Christina cast a lovely lavender light behind the door, a flat expanse of color. From the audience, it was impossible to see how far back the opening went. The women paused, stared out the door for ten seconds or so, then Violeta shut it. They returned to setting tables. Lights down on the women still moving around a table.

## A FINAL NOTE ON SUFFERING

It was not easy to make a play with such baggage. It would be fair to say that we suffered in rehearsal because of that. We operated at the nexus of what we knew about the 1980 performance, the pages in front of us with their often-cryptic drawings, and the fact that the play must exist, ultimately and only, in the bodies of the two actors making it now. Evelyn Brown labored; Ellen and Violeta labored too: they pounded dough, swept, mopped, sweated, got dirty. While Evelyn worked for her employers, the actors worked in front of, and for, the audience. The difference



between the space of the diary and the space of the stage is that the audience was invited to participate as observers at every moment, to suffer along with the performers. I'm never interested in punishing an audience—I'm grateful they're there. But there is an endurance requirement in watching *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* that can't be winked or wished away. The production required that the audience submit to the grind of time, to breathe along with the actors as they completed tasks in the time it takes—no more, and certainly no less. Silence and attention are a form of respect, leading to a true communion between audience and actors. In performance, I could feel a beautiful echo of respect for Evelyn, and respect for acting. The actors astounded me with their stamina and patience. When there were moments of lightness or ease, we all delighted. Don't forget to look for the light.

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