

Recovering *Evelyn Brown*

Gwendolyn Alker

In March 2019, a few days before the Covid lockdown, I was moderating a talkback in New York City for a production of Maria Irene Fornes's musical, *Promenade*, which we were remounting at New York University, just a few blocks away from the original location of the 1965 production at Judson Memorial Church. Having invited the Fornes scholar Marc Robinson to participate, I asked him if he had a copy of the script for *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, a play of Fornes's that I had been searching for, as no complete copy of the script seemed to exist. Robinson responded that Fornes had given him a copy of the script when he was preparing his edited volume, *The Theater of Maria Irene Fornes*, in the mid-1990s.¹ He later shared this document, which, unbeknownst to him, was the closest version to a complete script that I had encountered; handwritten emendations from earlier drafts were reflected in the typescript. Despite a few repetitions, the sequencing of the action was clear up until the last few scenes. The dialogue that was present in earlier drafts was complimented by approximately forty drawings of what appeared to be Fornes's effort to capture blocking from the original production.²

This script, discovered early in a five-year long process of recovering and remounting the piece, formed the basis for the first ever revival of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, directed by Alice Reagan, and featuring Ellen Lauren as Evelyn and Violeta Picayo as Evelyn Brown. It ran from May 19 to June 4, 2023 at La MaMa's Downstairs theatre in New York City. I served as the production dramaturg. As a scholar who has produced and taught Fornes's plays for the last two decades, I have been fascinated by *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, a performance piece that had garnered positive reviews but remained largely unknown. I was curious as to the lessons that a new production of *Evelyn Brown* would hold, both within Fornes's larger body of work and as a movement piece about women's labor. This dramaturgical essay—alongside the La MaMa script, an essay by Reagan, images from the 1980 and 2023 productions, all published in this issue of *PAJ*, as well as the facsimile of the Robinson script that is available online only—seeks to contextualize *Evelyn Brown* within the Fornes canon, unpack the discoveries, and share questions that remain from this process.

Evelyn Brown (A Diary) is a one-act play which, according to the original program, Maria Irene Fornes first “conceived and directed” in 1980 at the Theater for the New City (TNC). What we see is the work of two women, done with care and meticulous grace throughout sixty-five minutes of an increasingly non-verbal performance. For the audience, *Evelyn Brown* provides an opportunity to witness and understand some of the lesser known but seminal aspects of Fornes’s multifaceted career: as a theatre artist who liberally used found objects and readymades, as a visual artist whose early training as a painter infused much of her theatrical aesthetic, and as a director who was experimenting with novel ways to record non-verbal aspects of her artistry. The larger recovery work of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* prompted the question of whether one can reconstruct a definitive Fornes production for a play that was never finalized or published before her death in 2018. The La MaMa production provided a resounding “yes, and” to this question. The ambiguity that we encountered did not reduce the importance of restaging this play, nor should it for other lost works. As the recent Broadway revival of Lorraine Hansberry’s *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* also demonstrated, the restaging of incomplete or unfinished works have value both to deepen the reputations of important playwrights, as well as being stand-alone gems unto themselves.

Evelyn Brown (A Diary) opened in the spring of 1980, early in what can be called Fornes’s middle and most well-known period. It was never staged again during her lifetime. This premiere took place three years after her triumphant return to artistic production in 1977 with *Fefu and Her Friends* at the Relativity Media Lab, an event space in SoHo. It was after seven years of running New York Theatre Strategy (NYTS) from 1972–79, a group originally formed by six women playwrights—Fornes, Rochelle Owens, Rosalyn Drexler, Adrienne Kennedy, Julie Bovasso and Megan Terry—as the Women’s Theater Council, later becoming NYTS when they added the male playwrights Sam Shephard, Murray Mednick, Ed Bullins, among others in an effort to broaden their funding base. According to Donald Eastman, who was the set designer for both the 1980 and 2023 productions of *Evelyn Brown*, Fornes used the remaining money from NYTS’s coffers to fund the show. Fornes had recently shifted from playwriting and occasionally directing—early directing credits include *The Successful Life of 3* at the Firehouse Theatre in Minneapolis (1965) and *Molly’s Dream* with NYTS in 1973—to being adamant about writing and directing her shows. From *Fefu* onwards, she directed the first and often second productions of all her works. She was also on the cusp of her most prolific decade, which included *The Danube* (1983), *Mud* (1983), *Sarita* (1984), *The Conduct of Life* (1985), and others, most of which have a strong female protagonist, often with various scenes or monologues on women’s work, the central thematic for *Evelyn Brown*.

Yet *Evelyn Brown* is different than the plays that came before and after. Fornes’s only play whose dialogue came entirely from found texts, *Evelyn Brown* is mainly sourced

from the diary of the real-life Evelyn Brown, a housekeeper who lived from 1854 to 1934 in Melvin Village, a rural town near Wolfeboro, New Hampshire. The diary was a gift from Dan Wagoner and his partner, George Montgomery, who encountered it at an estate sale or thrift store and are acknowledged in the original program: "Thanks to Dan Wagoner for the gift of Evelyn Brown's diary, and to *So Sweet Labor* by Norton Juster and *Household Magazine* for the wonderful household hints." These three sources are present in most versions of the script in varying ways: the diary provided the main bulk of the content, with two additional scenes probably taken from *Household Magazine*. Juster's *So Sweet to Labor: Rural Women in America 1865–1895*, an edited collection of primary sources (and far less well-known than his novel *The Phantom Tollbooth*), provided inspiration but was not a source for any dialogue.

Evelyn Brown (A Diary), best experienced in performance, is challenging to comprehend when seen only on the page. The piece has no plot and, at most, only a subtle narrative. Dialogue consists mainly of daily entries from Brown's journal, beginning in January 1909, and extending for a few months (the length varying in different iterations of the script). In each, she shares the date, weather, and aspects of her daily life: chores or errands completed, with some notes on members of her community who visited, have taken ill or died. Brown's tone and content is devoid of emotional embellishments or moments of self-reflection. In this manner, it is reminiscent of Fornes's subsequent prose, which is economical and free of elaboration. She inserted two additional monologues, a recipe for breadmaking and a monologue about what "every kitchen needs," which provide a comedic touch and allow for a more penetrating view into the inner mind of Evelyn Brown. In the play as a whole, Fornes's interventions were curatorial, choreographic and spatial, not authorial. She spliced these additional found texts between entries from the diary, split the character into two women, labeled "Evelyn" and "Evelyn Brown," and created blocking that sometimes resembles dance choreography. Eventually, the blocking eclipses all the dialogue: Evelyn's voice moves to a recorded voiceover about two-thirds of the way through, and the final fifteen minutes, according to those who remember best, are conducted entirely in silence. In the Robinson script, these later scenes are described with minimal stage directions and an increasing number of drawings that Fornes made, according to Eastman, one evening when she was bored.

In *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, Fornes worked more as a director-designer, an aspect of her career that has been less well documented, partially due to her reputation as a playwright, in addition to the innately ephemeral nature of a director's vision and work. With the drawings in the Robinson script, Fornes records her work as a director, where gestures, transitions, and patterns build a varying type of vocabulary. Unfortunately, the latter parts of the script, in which the number of drawings increase, are the most incomplete parts of this script. There are repeated pages, such as a polka which was drawn twice, and it was often unclear how the actors should move from one image to the next. The last few pages include redundant drawings,

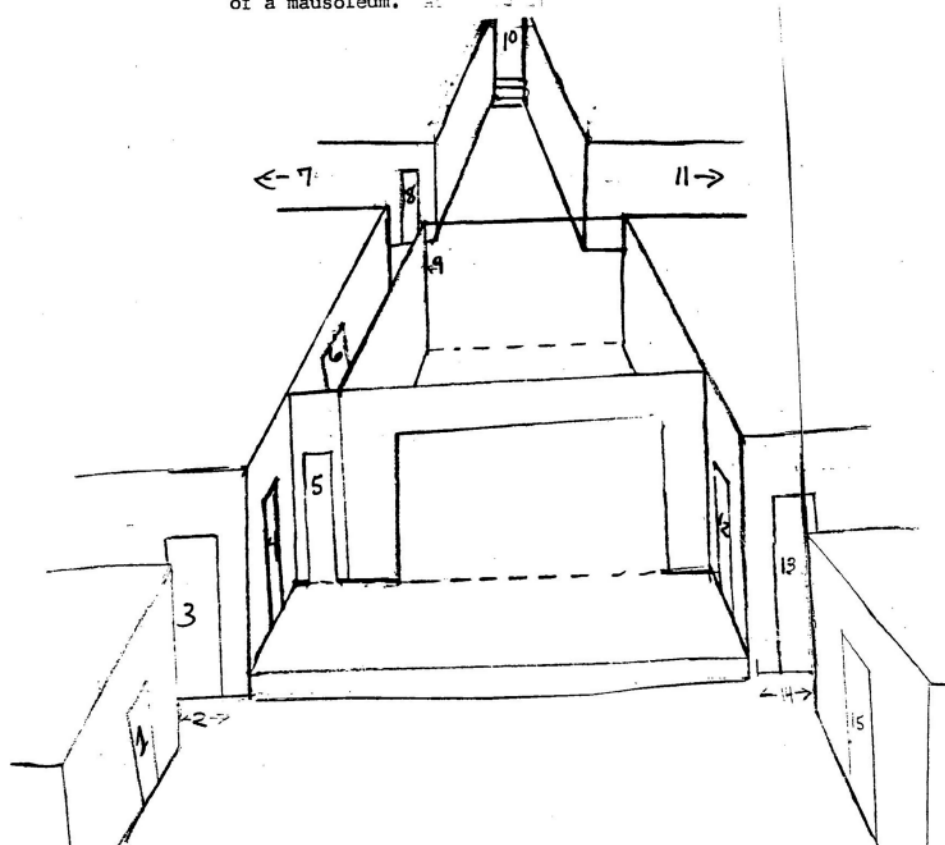
leaving the final moments of the show unclear. Ultimately, we had to reconstruct the last two scenes in the La MaMa production using multiple aspects of our project—interviews with cast and crew from the 1980 production, archival photos, and different copies of the script—to create an ending that was as definitive as possible.

In 2018, with my fellow Fornes scholar Scott Cummings, I invited the cast and crew of the original production to conduct an oral history of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*. We sought to understand how and why this piece had not been staged again, and to clarify if there was a way to put it back on its feet. This initial gathering took place at New York University on February 25, 2018. Joining me and Cummings were Donald Eastman, Fornes’s longtime scenic designer; Rebecca High, her assistant on *Evelyn Brown*; Aileen Passloff, a choreographer and dancer who had worked with Fornes at Judson and who had played the part of Evelyn Brown; Peter Littlefield, the original production stage manager; Bonnie Marranca, Fornes’s long-time editor and a reviewer of the original production. Margaret Harrington, who developed and played the part of Evelyn, was unable to join us, but entrusted Littlefield with her copy of the script and later gave two interviews that I conducted over Zoom. The conversations that began that day continued well into the future. In particular, Littlefield helped me unspool Fornes’s development as an artist around the time of *Evelyn Brown*. Eastman became a key artistic collaborator and went on to design sets for two subsequent iterations of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, first staged as part of the Princeton Atelier in the spring of 2021, and then for the La MaMa production in 2023.³ He was nominated for a Henry Hewes Award in design for the recent New York production.

Initially, we focused on the search for a finalized script—an effort that, to this day, remains fraught and, ultimately, unachievable. The scripts that were shared at the oral history gathering were in differing states of incompleteness. Early typescripts were little more than transcriptions of the diary, with no stage directions or drawings; later versions had more stage directions and fewer entries from the diary. Some of the images were reminiscent of the rough, line drawings that she had included in her script for *A Vietnamese Wedding* (1967), or *Dr. Kheal* (1968). Harking back to her earlier life as a painter, they are suggestive of Fornes’s turn to the role of playwright-director and her struggling to explain the complexities of the blocking in scenes lacking any dialogue. Once we found the Robinson script, one year on, we used these drawings like a treasure map. The actors and director looked for patterns of movement that could guide us through the incomplete sections, and in particular, the final scene.

With the script in a state of incompleteness after the gathering in 2018, I focused the work on the myriad other influences that were formative for the 1980 production, including the set design (Eastman’s rough pine set was instrumental in creating a rural feel, and we used similar materials for the 2023 production); the space (TNC’s previous staging had been on a rake, creating a fishbowl-type perspective that we tried to maintain for the La MaMa production); the music, in

The set is a wooden temple suggestive in its lack of decor of a puritan place of worship. However, its shape is closer to the interior of a mausoleum.



Drawing by Maria Irene Fornes of the 1980 set from her original script of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*.

The text can be accessed with the online version of this PAJ issue. Copyright © Maria Irene Fornes, 1980.

All rights reserved.

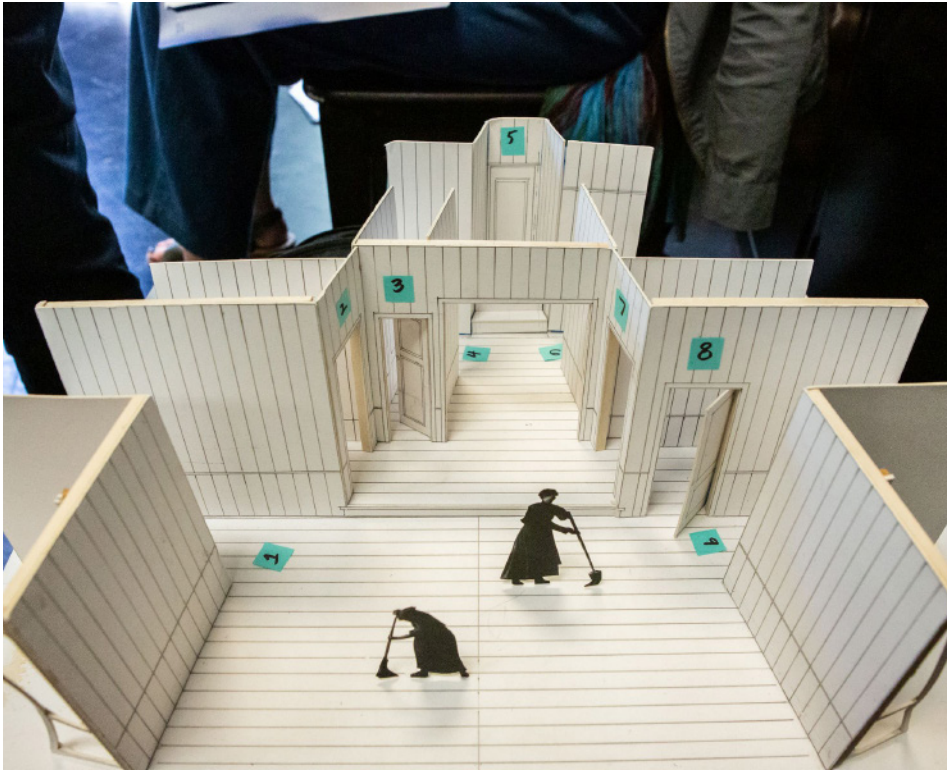
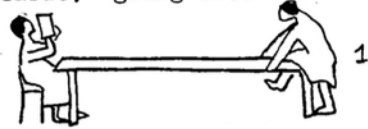


Photo of the model for Donald Eastman's set for the La MaMa production (2023). Photo: © Hunter Canning.

EVELYN BROWN

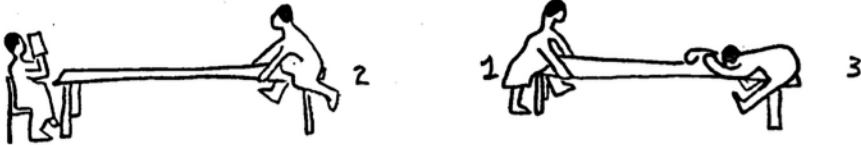
Had good luck, Got Supper and washed dishes.

(SHE puts her right leg over the table, going into position #1 like this:



Heard of the death of Mrs. Bert Horn, David Bennett, and others I do not know in Wolfeboro. Thursday 25th. Windy and cold. Got breakfast. Washed dishes with Mr. Porter's help. He and Nanny hung all the clothes to dry and she washed some of baby's clothes. Got dinner and Mrs G. wiped some of the dishes. Washed the floors. made a cheese, got supper, washed dishes,

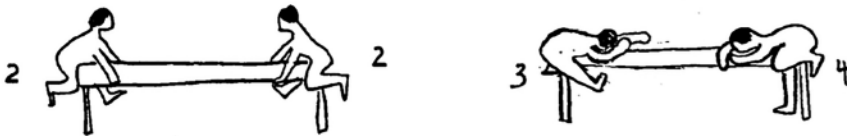
(SHE sighs and goes to position #2 for a count of two. Then SHE goes to position #3 at the same time as EVELYN goes to position #1 like this:



EVELYN

Folded clothes and tended baby some. Rec'd. letter from Plumie. Friday Continued cold. Doing the usual housework, with extra cooking, made a pan of ginger cookies also one of Sugar cookies, fried potatoes for dinner. This P.M. was taken with chills, Dosed up well, but feeling poorly to night. Wesley Ceneys's wife died this P.M.

(SHE sighs. THEY both go to position #2 and hold it for a count of two. Then they both move EVELYN goes to position #3 and EVELYN BROWN goes to position #4:



EVELYN BROWN

Saturday February 27th. Warmer. Got up and got breakfast and washed the dishes, but had about all I could do to sit up. Trimmed the lamps, and washed the floors. after dinner Mr. Porter brought me and baggage down to Charlie's.

Page 11 from the original script of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, drawings by Maria Irene Fornes.

Copyright © Maria Irene Fornes, 1980. All rights reserved.



Table dance. Ellen Lauren and Violeta Picayo (2023). Photo: © Steven Pisano.



Contact sheet with rehearsal shots showing Evelyn (Margaret Harrington) and Evelyn Brown (Aileen Passloff) performing the table dance (1980). Photo: © Sylvia Plachy.

particular a cassette of Douglas Ecker's *More Path Rent*; reviews (three in total exist, by Florence Falk, Bonnie Marranca, and Erika Munk); and photographic documentation. Sylvia Plachy, who took the press photos for the 1980 production published in *The Village Voice*, shared her contact sheets, which were instrumental in piecing together sequencing for a few of the scenes in the production. Continued research suggested that two of the most important influences for Fornes were her actors, Margaret Harrington and Aileen Passloff. This pair had been previously cast in the little-known piece *Washing*, which some view as an earlier iteration of *Evelyn Brown*. Harrington—an actor who, according to Littlefield, was Fornes's muse of this era—had played the visionary character of Julia in *Fefu and Her Friends* three years earlier and became instrumental in developing the role of Evelyn. Passloff, a choreographer and dancer whom Fornes had worked with during their days at the Judson Memorial Church in the 1960s, including the original production of *A Vietnamese Wedding*, originated Evelyn Brown. She provided both continuity and inspiration for Fornes as she emerged into a new stage of her artistic career.

In interviews, Harrington talks of Fornes visiting her at home in Staten Island and of reverently observing her making potato bread for her children from an old family recipe. The third scene of *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, where Evelyn and Evelyn Brown quote from "Mrs. Hiram Hill's recipe [sic] for domestic bread," can be seen as an allusion to Harrington's influence. Passloff, who died in November 2020, spoke of the particular care and reverence that Fornes had for Brown and the quality of the work demonstrated throughout the rehearsals. She described a trip that she took with Fornes, Harrington, and Rebecca High to New Hampshire to research Brown's birthplace and the methods of work that she described in her diary. There they met people who had known Evelyn, and some pages of a script held by Fornes's former agent, Morgan Jenness, contained faded negative strips of photos that included Brown's headstone, most likely found while on that trip. The original cast and crew speak of Fornes's casting choices to highlight the physical differences of the actors—Harrington, tall and lithe; Passloff, sturdy and earthbound—as a central choice to expand the singular protagonist of the diary. The fact that *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* is not a traditional theatre piece is attributable to Passloff's choreography that is sprinkled throughout it (notably when both actors climb onto a table while reading the diary) and also perhaps, albeit more subtly, to Wagoner (a renowned dancer and choreographer in his own right). Those who saw the original production, including Littlefield and Marranca, note that these actors were focused on achieving an understated presence. Harrington and Passloff inhabited their roles as Evelyn and Evelyn Brown less through character work, and more as women doing the actions that Evelyn Brown described in the diary.

Evelyn Brown (A Diary) also marked the first step in Fornes's building of an ongoing relationship with a triad of designers: Anne Militello on lighting; Gabriel Berry for costume design; and Donald Eastman. His first show with Fornes was *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*. They were introduced to each other by Littlefield, who knew

Eastman from the opera community. Fornes and Eastman became fast friends and colleagues, and their collaboration continued up to her last play, *Letters from Cuba*, for the Signature Theatre in 2000. Eastman later introduced Fornes to Militello and Berry, who graciously designed costumes for our revival of *Evelyn Brown*.

Eastman's collaboration in recovering *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* was illuminating. It became clear through conversations at the oral history gathering and through the two ensuing set builds that Eastman brought a sense of joy, as well as his perfectionist tendencies, to the process. These were traits that he shared with Fornes. He modeled how to be in the present moment—paying particular attention to the space—even as he created two different sets, first at Princeton and then at La MaMa. After the first workshop, it became clear that the script necessitated a close adherence to the original set design in order to understand the movement of the actors and the blocking as a whole. The original set had eleven doors, which Eastman found while dumpster-diving in Manhattan with George Bartenieff, co-founder of TNC, then loaded into a van and transferred to the theater. Our 2023 set was not at the same scale; as both the smaller size of the theatre and financial constraints were inescapable. But, as one can see in the accompanying images, Eastman's design for the Downstairs theatre at La MaMa remained in the spirit of the original set, with myriad entrances and exits and a singular door upstage center that was only opened in a climactic moment towards the end of the piece. In that final scene, the culmination of the play began to feel as if we were going down a rabbit hole, into a realm of French farce, where the many entrances and exits humorously built a steady and rewarding dramatic tension. Eastman's set was beautiful and simple at the same time, true to Irene's original invocation at the opening of the script of the space as a "wooden temple suggestive . . . of a puritan place of worship."

The La MaMa script published here in *PAJ* is a faithful rendering of the 2023 performance and differs from the Robinson script in numerous ways. Certain aspects of the performance were clarified through interviews, archival research, and continual discussions with Eastman. Other aspects of the published script were edited to achieve clarity, such as added scene breaks and titles. The Robinson script contained only two clearly labeled scenes (at the beginning of the play), despite a clear feeling of differentiation when staged. Other inconsistencies in the Robinson script were useful in performance and were thus maintained to preserve the tone and content of Brown's diary. For example, the Robinson script contained wide variability in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Various words were capitalized, perhaps a remnant of capitalizing nouns that was more commonplace in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was suggestive of the fact that Brown, a fifty-five year-old woman in 1909 who would have been educated in the 1860s, was a resident of a rural location where English was slow to standardize. In performance, capitalized words began to act as a type of emphasis that suggested her interests: Baby, Office, Supper, Snow, Sciatica. Time was often capitalized in ways that were also potentially significant: "PM" or "O'clock." Accordingly,

time became one of the organizing principles of the production. Sometimes capitalized words suggested a moment of slowing down, or an implied comma, such as with this entry from February 11th: "EVELYN: Thursday 11 Fair Doing housework as usual this forenoon." As such, I have left many capitals and the imprecise punctuation in the final script, published here, when they seem to indicate a choice on Brown's part.

Some errors in spelling, such as "rein," "recipy," "Wolfboro," and "cemetry," are suggestive of Brown's level of education or the fact that she was writing only for herself. I have also left these as they were in the Robinson script. Brown's was a personal diary after all, not edited for public consumption. Rebecca High spoke to the challenge she and Fornes faced as they decoded Brown's cramped cursive. She also spoke of Fornes's fascination during their decoding work, which took some months to complete. What was clear from the Robinson script and earlier drafts was that Fornes typed up an exact replica of the diary that is now lost, even with its imperfections. Ultimately, Fornes left Evelyn Brown as the true author, listing herself in the program as having "conceived and directed" the play, and placing Evelyn Brown's photograph—dressed in her Sunday best, with a steely and steady gaze—above her own byline.

A central challenge of the project was the complete certainty with which the actors and production crew remembered their experience of the original production, even as their versions contradicted each other's or the written scripts. Various differences remain in these stories, such as whether they made real bread on stage, if Evelyn or Evelyn Brown spoke a line (or even if Evelyn Brown spoke at all), or how many tables there were in the final scenes. In our first interview, Harrington recited from memory a moment of the play when Evelyn finally settles into her own cottage: "The first night in my own home. And all alone."⁴ For Harrington, this was the climax of the play, when Evelyn Brown acquires her own cottage. Yet I have never seen these lines written down in any version of the script. We even tried inserting them at various points in *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, both at the end of the existing dialogue and within the silence towards the end of the play. None of them worked dramaturgically. The best I can surmise is that the original production remained in flux through (and perhaps after) the run at TNC, as the cast and crew retained a strong and truthful relationship to the material they helped create.

Reviving *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* offered a rare mix of complexity for a vital piece of experimental theatre. The overall dramaturgical development birthed a performance that was in keeping with the spirit and aesthetic of Fornes—one that held Evelyn Brown, and her world of work, with great tenderness and respect. Recovered before and during the Covid shutdown, and subsequently produced in a post-Covid climate, it spoke to a time when many of us retreated into our private spaces, in solitude or with our families—a fact that many remarked on after having seen the production. Indeed, it was clear to me as production dramaturg that coming out of the

pandemic was precisely the right time to recover *Evelyn Brown*. With the closing of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and the pausing of The Public Theater's Under the Radar Festival, producing entities for avant-garde and Off-Off-Broadway theatre are increasingly rare. Among the many rewards of recovering *Evelyn Brown* was offering a play about a historical figure, from the mind of Irene Fornes in the early 1980s, to a contemporary audience. The play demonstrated how Fornes was developing her aesthetic not merely as a playwright, but as a world-builder who took the intimate words of Evelyn Brown into the public life of the theatre. The lesson for the audience, built deep into the structure of *Evelyn Brown*, is that they must lean in and pay attention to small, grace-filled moments in our daily lives, like Evelyn Brown's sweeping, bread-making, and even the simple accounting of the day's chores, as theatre. Theatre is and always will be about making short-lived objects and experiences in the present moment. To imagine or reconstitute theatre as anything else is to defy the central lessons of impermanence and beauty that it teaches us again and again.

NOTES

1. *The Theater of Maria Irene Fornes*, a PAJ book, was published in 1999 by Johns Hopkins University Press.

2. This script, which I will refer to as the "Robinson script" throughout my essay, is included as a digital resource on the PAJ website, complete with Fornes's drawings.

3. Eastman and Littlefield's insights were shared at talkbacks I curated and moderated for the La MaMa production. Two talkbacks are available digitally. The first, a conversation with actors and director, can be found on the *Evelyn Brown* show page at La MaMa, "Evelyn Brown (A Diary)," accessed October 20, 2023, <https://www.lamama.org/shows/evelyn-brown-a-diary-2023>. The second, a conversation with Littlefield and Eastman alongside Fornes's long-time costume designer Gabriel Berry, is currently available at HowlRound, "Conversation with the Original María Irene Fornés Design Team," June 7, 2023, <https://howlround.com/happenings/conversation-original-maria-irene-fornes-design-team>.

4. Margaret Harrington, interview by Gwendolyn Alker, November 10, 2021.

GWENDOLYN ALKER is an Associate Arts Professor of Theatre Studies at the Department of Drama, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. She has published widely on Fornes and has served as dramaturg for various Fornes events including JoAnne Akalaitis's *Maria Irene Fornes Marathon* at The Public Theater and *The Rest I Make Up*, a documentary film by Michelle Memran.