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Maria Irene Fornes, The Conduct of Life


Textual Overview

The Conduct of Life (1985) is one of Maria Irene Fornes’s most critically acclaimed plays. This work brings together issues of politics, gender, and sexuality to show how forms of national and domestic violence often exist in direct relationship to one another. The play centers on Orlando, a career military officer who interrogates and tortures prisoners at the command of an unseen fascist regime in an unspecified Latin American country. His goal is to steadily rise in military rank and obtain “maximum power.” In the opening scene, Orlando vows “to eliminate all obstacles,” including his wife and his own excessive “sexual passion.” Unapologetic, he graphically describes the torture he inflicts. Fornes’s purposefully disturbing dialogue illustrates the rapid pace at which Orlando becomes desensitized to the violence demanded by his military employment and his ensuing brutal treatment of the women in his home. Clearly obsessed with the power he gains from interrogation and torture, Orlando cannot separate the boundaries between military and domestic spaces. He kidnaps a homeless twelve-year-old girl named Nena and keeps her locked in the basement, where he methodically sexually abuses her. Fellow soldier and friend Alejo witnesses Orlando’s disturbing violent behaviors in both spaces. Yet, regardless of his revulsion to Orlando’s acts, he remains a passive bystander.

The housekeeper, Olimpia, also witnesses Orlando’s acts of violence toward both Nena and Leticia, Orlando’s wife. Like Alejo, neither Olimpia nor Leticia do anything to disrupt Orlando’s rule. Olimpia fears losing her job; Leticia resists losing the comforts of married life.
Though Olimpia cannot stop the abuse, she befriends Nena in an attempt to make her life more comfortable and human. Leticia initially defends Orlando despite her own experiences of his horrific emotional and physical abuse. She admits worrying about his nocturnal outbursts, which she believes are the result of his feeling haunted by the terrible things he does for the military. Though she learns of Orlando’s terrible kidnapping and torture of Nena, Leticia refuses to intervene; she instead strives toward an absurd sense of acceptance concerning Nena’s presence in her household. Yet nothing appeases Orlando. His violence and abuse culminate in his formal interrogation of Leticia. Unable to withstand this campaign of terror in her home, Leticia shoots him and immediately presses the gun into Nena’s hands. This closing image focuses on the three female characters and their daunting task of rebuilding life without Orlando in the political state that created him.

**Historical Context**

With her first play, *Tango Palace* (1963), Fornes garnered national recognition as an award-winning dramatist in American avant-garde theater. Throughout her career, Fornes has eschewed the use of categories such as feminist, lesbian, or Latina. While she writes about identity issues, she completely disavows identity politics. Her writing principally focuses on questions concerning the disintegration of society, as exemplified with earlier works such as *A Vietnamese Wedding* (which dealt with the Vietnam War [1967]), *The Danube* (nuclear disarmament [1982]), *Mud* (domestic abuse [1983]), and *Abingdon Square* (the repression of female sexuality [1985]). Consistently, her plays portray women in a wide variety of social roles, with female characters always placed at the very center of her theatrical universe.

Importantly, the 1980s marks an interesting shift in Fornes’s career concerning the critical reception of her plays, the thematic content of her work, and her evolving role as a teacher and dramatist. In this often-described “decade of the Hispanic,” Fornes cofounded the Hispanic Playwrights Lab at International Arts Relations (INTAR) in New York City and, from that space, wrote several plays the themes of which directly speak to Latino cultural and political concerns. *The Conduct of Life* (1985) is the first play Fornes wrote after founding the lab and was actually begun during one of its writing exercises. Notably, this work explores the kind of political crisis that gave rise to a new generation of Latin American immigrants.