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DIRECTING *FEFU AND HER FRIENDS*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

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in

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by

Brooke Lauren Jennings

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ABSTRACT
Brooke Lauren Jennings
Directing *Fefu and Her Friends*

Directing *Fefu and her Friends*, by Maria Irene Fornes, as an artist, an educator, and a woman, this piece opens the doorways to dynamic design that embodies generous hindsight to the flux of history as fact and myth. As an educator, Maria Irene Fornes brings forth the dramaturgical reinforcing of Emma Fry, Jill Dolan, and many others who preach art as a powerful educational tool for change. As a woman, this play taught me that I am not alone. I am blind, deaf, and afraid, but not alone. Thus, Looking to our Mother's and Grandmother's generations as evidence of how the status quo came to be, this production of *Fefu and Her Friends* gives young women and men today the tools to fight gender inequality, break antiquated gender myths, and redefine them for a new generation.

Directing *Fefu and Her Friends*: A Creative Thesis Project

Brooke Lauren Jennings

*“If I am a certain gender, will I still be regarded as part of the human? Will the ‘human’ expand to include me in its reach? If I desire in certain ways, will I be able to live?” – Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender**

Fefu and Her Friends, written by Maria Irene Fornes in 1977, is a play about eight women who come together in Fefu’s home in 1935, New England, to discuss and rehearse a fundraising event for their theater education project. Over the course of one day, the group of women separate and disperse into different parts of the home, asking audiences to also leave their seats, separate, and follow the scenes as each member chooses. With this, Fornes creates an individualized, non-linear, and highly theatrical journey for each audience member as she watches the play unfold in a different order than other spectators. Traveling through Fefu’s home, glimpses of the intimate relationships between the eight women are revealed flash as their struggles with gender, love, self-loathing, violence, sex, and death are brought to the forefront of the theater stage.

Upon reading *Fefu and Her Friends* several times for a few different undergraduate and graduate classes here at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I am in awe at how this play still rings eloquently true to my own experiences as an artist, an educator, a woman, and most importantly, as a human being. As an artist, this piece opens the doorways to new and dynamic design that embodies a beautiful hindsight to the influence and flux of history as fact and myth. As an educator, Maria Irene Fornes brings to light the dramaturgical reinforcing of Emma Fry and other

women who preach art as a powerful, educational tool. As a woman, this play taught me that I am not alone. I am blind, deaf, and afraid, but not alone.

Fefu and Her Friends, then, brings to the stage a rare image of women as protagonists, leaders, individuals, and most importantly, human beings, by looking back to our mother's and grandmother's generations as evidence of how the current structures of gender and representation came to be. This production of *Fefu and Her Friends*, then, is meant to give young women and men today the tools they need to break the antiquated myths that perpetuate gender roles and redefine them for our own generation through devices such as non-linear plot, active spectator and performer relationship, and diverse representation on stage, bring the feminine experiences of eight women into the expanse of universal humanity.

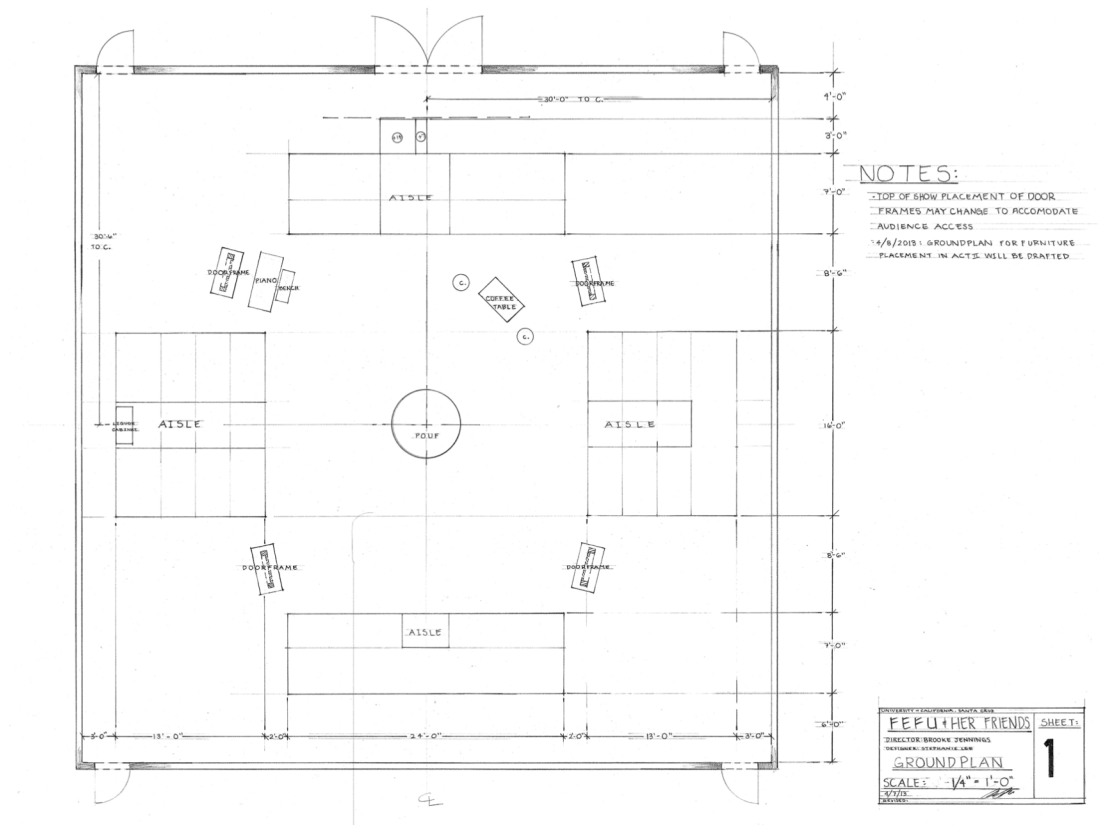
The Theatrical Design

The process of designing *Fefu and Her Friends* started as an exploration of Fornes' original design concept of a New England home in 1935. The home would have five separate rooms that the audience could walk through as the Part Two scenes performed simultaneously and in no particular order, allowing each audience member to experience the play on a deeply individual basis, contradictive to the Aristotelian model of linearity and communal catharsis. This deconstruction of traditional theatrical form allows for a perspective beyond the male structure of Aristotelian theater, bringing forth a perspective that is biologically female. From the feminist critics perspective, the multiple rising actions and climaxes that happen in any order over the course of one evening of theater epitomizes the female orgasm is onstage.

Thus, the form of *Fefu and her Friends* remains the main reason for its significance within modern theatrical and feminist communities, including the UCSC Theater Arts Department, as the curriculum also emphasizes the non-plot driven, female form as the main point of academic significance.

However, to the dismay of my scenic designer, Stephanie Lee, and myself, the Theater Arts department concluded that having another multiple-venue performance in the course of two consecutive quarters seemed unnecessarily difficult and unrealistic. Thus, Lee and I were posed with the challenge to excavate and explore a different kind of theatrical design for this show without a moving audience or multiple venues. Thus, how do we incorporate simultaneous action in one playing space? How do we fit four separate rooms in one space? How do we set up seating for audience members who will not move during the performance? How do we cross over the lethal trap of Aristotelian form in a play that is taught to be its polar opposite?

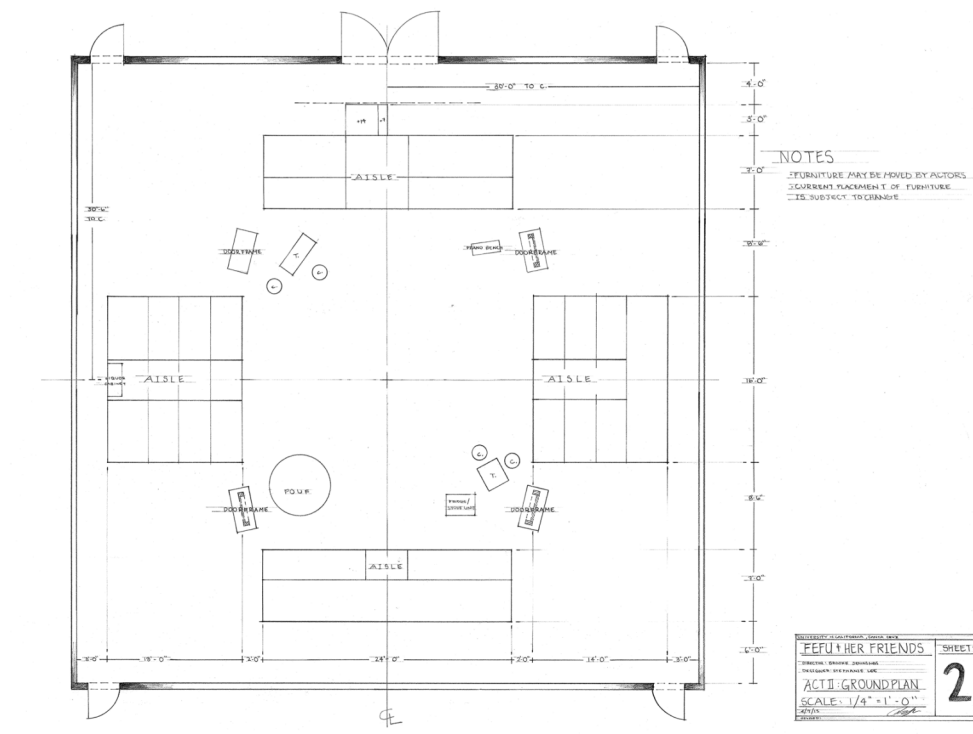
The first solution Lee and I managed was staging the show in the round. The round theater is a deeply interactive and lively form of staging for audience members and actors alike. An actor must move in the space, up aisle ways, and through the audiences due to the constant threat of sightlines and backs to audience members motivating and challenging her every movement. This dynamic option serves our purposes best in supporting the form and content of *Fefu and Her Friends* in the Experimental Theater, especially for Part One and Part Three.



(Figure 1)

However, dividing the space for Part Two to allow for some form of simultaneous action and non-linearity proved difficult, so we experimented with the highly theatrical use of vignettes, or still images formed by the actors to imply action happening in mid-conversation. If the scenes only perform one at a time, but the other scenes are silently visible to the audience, then an implied form of Fornes' original design is in effect. As one scene is talking, the other three scenes go through a series of vignettes behind the doors between each seating bank. These are strategically placed throughout the scenes, cued by dialogue and Fefu's journey through her home.

The vignettes are staged behind the study, kitchen, and garden door, illustrated below as the top left, top right, and bottom right corners of the Experimental Theater.

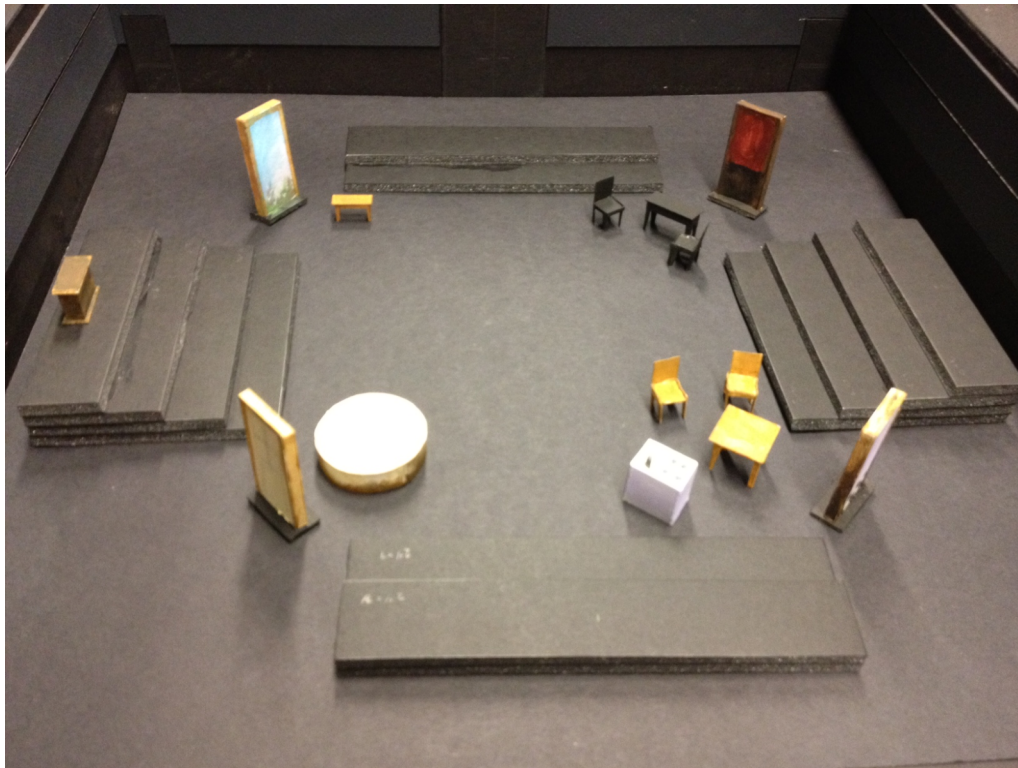


(Figure 2)

However, there are major sightlines for the vignettes depending on where one sits, thus, to enhance the actions and presence of the vignettes, actors also incorporate sound with each image. The sounds are found in their own scenes, but differ slightly with each scene, as each actor explores the different motivations her character possesses for each delivery. For example, Paula and Sue perform the same actions of sitting close, rolling away from each other, and snapping up, but the expressive sounds they use move from laughter, to grunts, to sighs of relief, depending on which scene is the main focus. Their actions reflect their blocking consistently, but the change in expressive sounds allows for a reflection and excavation of time by each actor. This creates a strong sense of simultaneity and non-linearity for not just the

actors, but also audience members, whose experiences and relationships to each scene is heavily dictated by the individual seat she or he occupies.

Successfully finding new and dynamic solutions for the problems of non-linearity and individualized spectator experiences in a single space without a moving audience, the next step now is finding the bodies to fill this world.



(Figure 3)

Casting

The beauty of Fornes' work is the possibility for individual audience members to connect with at least one of the characters in *Fefu and Her Friends* because of the numerous differences between each woman. Each character comes from different economic, cultural, sexual, health, and educational backgrounds, but they all still

convene under the same pretense of rehearsing for their fundraiser despite these differences. Each woman offers a distinct perspective on life, that when grouped with several other distinct women on stage, Fornes orchestrates a feeling of universality for the human experience, and thus, the feminine experience becomes a participant in that humanity. Exploring this expanding sense of humanity further, the need for more diverse and non-traditional casting beyond wealthy, white women becomes imperative for a 21st century production. This cast speaks to that necessity, with multiple ethnicities, body types, and genders onstage that allows for sincere and earnest exploration of the differences within the feminine experience.

However, Fornes does specifically state that all the characters in this play are “women.” From a biological stand point, to cast eight people with the requisite of a vagina seemed unnecessarily exclusive, as if the definition of “woman” is based within in biology. Therefore, in an attempt to further explore the performativity of gender onstage, Andrew Garcia is cast as the character of Sue. Andrew then takes on an ambiguous gender impersonation. Sue’s costume silhouette appears masculine, with pants, suspenders, boater hat, and cardigan, but in the modern context of today, women also have the ability to wear this outfit without strong backlash. Her palette, however, is similar to the other characters that adhere more to femininity with the use of pastels and soft fabrics that are not traditional to the western ideals of masculinity and, for example, would not be appropriate for fixing the lawnmower with Phillip and the other men in the garden. Sue’s role in the play then shifts between masculine and feminine. She is the treasurer for their fundraiser, a role typically set aside for men or

husbands, but she is also the only character audiences see cooking, a role traditionally set for women or housewives in American culture, especially in the 1930's. Sue's liminality between gender roles as stated in Fornes' text is then physically apparent through the cross gender casting of Andrew.

However, the question of believability comes to the surface. Can a man's performance of a woman be considered authentic and enlightening, or does it miss the point of celebrating the female perspective? In *Undoing Gender*, Butler states that:

When one performance of gender is considered real and another false, or when one presentation of gender is considered authentic, and the other fake, then we can conclude that a certain ontology of gender is conditioning these judgments... that is also put into crisis by the performance of gender in such a way that these judgments are undermined or become impossible to make.

(Butler, 214)

The spectator's need for Sue's gender to exist in the physical body of a woman undermines the potential for the "authentic" female experience to live outside of biologically defined gender and, thus, naturalizes gender judgments, rather than denaturalize them. Therefore, exploring Sue's feminine experience as represented through a male body allows for a potential to see Sue's experience as not intrinsically female, but apart of the large conversation of human experience.

The Rehearsal Process

With the environment established and the actors cast, the rehearsal process then works towards connecting and playing with the relationship of body and space to

construct a world whose rules apply to everyone, perhaps even including the audience. To help build this relationship, I looked towards Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's *Viewpoints* and Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* to create a world that does not mirror our own, but reflexively bounces back a heightened reality through shifting relationships between bodies and space as behavioral and expressive, dramatic and playful. Moving away from a naturalist framework and into a magical realist environment, audiences see everything on stage as intentionally constructed within a theatrical framework that builds, deconstructs, and reflects upon itself, striving for equality and refinement. However, before the actors can explore the physical space, a trust within actors' own bodies and each other's bodies must be established.

For that reason, Boal's "Pushing against each other," "Minimum Surface Contact," "Lifting someone out of a chair," "The Greek Exercise," and "Sticky paper" exercises prove to be the most helpful in introducing unconventional body contact, strength, and trust between the actors and myself as director. The most prominent example of the execution of these traits is found in "The Greek Exercise," where a volunteer stands in the middle of the circle, "starts a movement and everyone else must use their bodies to help her complete this movement" (Boal, 64). As our volunteer moves, all of her limbs leave the ground and her fellow actors, who intuit her moves without words, listen to her body in order to support each of her movements and actions. "The most important thing is to avoid manipulating the protagonist actor – it is for her to decide her movements, not for them to move her

around” (66). Thus, this exercise instills trust between the actors and gives each actor the chance to play protagonist. Exploring what it means to have agency on stage, each actor exhibits unique impulses and motivations that everyone must readily respond to, laying the foundation for different movements and motivations within not just each actor, but each character, and how the other characters then react to these impulses. With mutual trust and experience to be both subject and supporting force instilled, the actors are ready to move into viewpoint work.

Beginning with the basics of Viewpoint work, actors explore the individual viewpoints of tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition, spatial relationship, topography, shape, gesture, and architecture. The most helpful exercise was “Exercise 11: Architecture.” The actors move around the space, choose a piece of architecture, and “perform a repeated action with (or off of) it. Ask another person to join. Let the two develop their movement in the given setting... Ask for another volunteer. Repeat” (Bogart, 59). This helps create motivation for shape and gesture that is not “literal and obvious, [but] encourage[s] [actors] to move without knowing why, to perform action without knowing what it is” (59), leading to creative power, discovery, “imagination and spontaneity”(59), in the actors relationship with each other and the environment.

As viewpoints become instilled in the muscle memory of the actors, a sense of kinesthetic response becomes readily available, transitioning then into action and speaking. Combining the text with the physical expressions and gestures built within each of the characters, their relationships with each other, and the environment,

acutely theatrical blocking takes shape on stage. Relying heavily on constant motion due to the arena-styled playing space, moments of stillness become notable. Thus, the actors attempt to attribute those moments of stillness with poignant lines that express their individual trains of thought or bring focus to the statements or actions of other characters. For example, the long moment of stillness between Cindy, Christina, and Julia in Part One when Julia “*goes to the gun, takes it and smells the mouth of the barrel... Julia looks blank and motionless*” (Fornes, 22). The long moment of stillness after the commotion of all eight women in the living room creates an extreme discomfort between the characters and audience members as Julia’s illness becomes more visibly apparent.

With a well-established environment as the foundation for the blocked actions and dialogues of each character, the relationships between each other and the space take shape and thrive. The final relationship to explore, then, is with the audience.

Spectator-Actor-Character Relationship

With the seating banks arranged for theater in the round, the escapism of the fourth wall disintegrates as audiences face each other across the stage, watching each other watch the performance. Confronted with the constant reminder of watching and being watched, audience members are forced to evaluate their role as spectator from passive to active. Audience members then shift from passive spectators shrouded in the darkness of the house, and instead put in the active position of spectator with the opportunity for performativity, and thus, interaction within and among the actors

themselves. This is exhibited most readily in Emma's Part Three speech and Julia's Part Two monologue.

During the rehearsal-within-a-play section of Part Three, Emma, wearing a dramatic gown with bold hues that blend together like watercolor, takes to the stage as if presenting the final product. The lights shift, she "*takes a dramatic pose*" (Fornes, 46), and begins speaking. The intense imagery of "knocks," "shatters," "struggles," and "batters," at the beginning of her speech reveals a world that is not lived, but survived, amplifying the risk of her words and the engagement of her audience. As she passionately moves through her speech, lifted on to the pouf and moving up and down the aisles of the seating banks, she makes grand statements involving the repetition of the pronoun "you." She states, "Maybe you are not deaf... Perhaps signals reach you. Maybe you stir..." (47), while making direct eye contact with spectators, as she walks towards the seating bank, into the aisle, and then out again, visiting each seating bank with her eyes and presence. Taking a few pauses to signal her colleagues and audience members to applaud, Emma establishes the spectators' role as active. Removing the forth wall entirely, Emma, played by Sharon Shao, watches the audience watch her and responds accordingly, demanding applause, eye contact, and engagement. With the other characters in the scene also watching and responding to Emma, the spectators happily share the role of peer, friend, and colleague in the absence of voyeurism.

However, in Julia's Part Two monologue, it is difficult for spectators to hold onto the role of peer, friend, or colleague as Julia relives the ritualized objectification

and dehumanization of women in opposition to men through the form of confession and prayer. The role of the audience begins as confidante, as Julia reveals the violence as apparently coming from a source outside herself and spectators with the repetition of “they,” naming the assailants as “the judges,” and asking the audience, “You didn’t know the judges?” (33). The audience shifts from confidante to voyeur as Julia’s body becomes sexualized and abused, drawing out the male gaze. As Julia begins to say her prayer, she lifts up her body with the use of her legs for the first time, removes her bra, revealing her breasts, while reciting, “everything on earth is for the human being, which is man. To nourish him” (35). The violence sets in as Julia begins to relive her rape as an invisible force chokes her, punches her, drags her off the bed, and into the act as she recites how “woman is not a human being”(35). She screams, heightened with a bright flash of light into darkness. Lights come up again as Julia, attempts to stand and repeatedly falls, discovering that her legs no longer work. Crawling back into her wheelchair, she recites, “why it is difficult for [women] to return to the human world. Their sexual feelings remain with them until they die... and [women] are sent to hell where through suffering they may shed those feelings and return to earth as man” (35). The prayer ends with Julia in her wheelchair once again, asking the audience one final question, “Why can’t I?” (35).

While “the spectator still has the possibility of pleasurable identification” (Dolan, 114), because Julia’s assailant is physically absent, and therefore allows spectators to fill in this void with their own voyeuristic gaze towards Julia’s sexualized and abused body. However, due to the lack of a forth wall between Julia

and spectator, as established in her interactions with audience members at the top of the scene, the gaze travels:

...through a triangular structure of actor/subject-character-spectator. Looking at the character [Julia], the spectator is constantly intercepted by the actor/subject [Amitis Rossoukh], and the latter, heeding no fourth wall, is theoretically free to look back. The difference, then, between this triangle and the familiar Oedipal one is that no one side signifies authority, knowledge, or the law. (114)

Free to gaze back at the audience, Julia/Amitis watches the spectator watching her, comments on the “convention of the theatrical gaze” (115), holds spectators accountable for the objectification of Julia/Amitis, and allows reflection and discussion on the actions Julia/Amitis chooses to share with spectators, affirming that “each action must contain the trace of the action it represses, thus the meaning of each action contains difference” (115). Through this triangle, the spectator remains critically aware of the actions onstage and, thus, holds the role of close confidante and colleague for the women of *Fefu and Her Friends*.

Conclusion

Directing *Fefu and Her Friends* in the Experimental Theater at UCSC pushed, pulled, and wrenched at my artistic and emotional foundations that, naively, I considered to be more durable than not. With in the original goal of excavating universal answers in this play to justify and understand my experiences as a woman and the pitfalls of femininity, as the process took shape, I began to realize how futile

that search is. This incredible piece of theater does not and cannot answer for the universal female experience because that experience does not exist. As gender is socially constructed, imposed “answers” to the definition of female, woman, and femininity comes from an unseen source outside of the feminine experience that dictates what women can be, should be, and will be. Thus, instead of looking for answers that are already enforced upon feminine experiences, we must search for the questions. What exists, then, in Fefu’s home is a didactic environment for exploring these questions critically and without apology amongst active spectators, designers, and performers alike. Through the use of non-linear plot, diverse representation, and a active dialogue of gaze between actors, spectators, and characters in an established theatrical world, this production of *Fefu and Her Friends* dives head first into the gender issues that have persisted over generations with the specificity of our own modern diverse narrative as an instrument to change and expand perceptions of gender into the universal human experience. While this plunge into the depths is all together terrifying, this experience fortifies and impels the human necessity to excavate questions about gender and representation, even in the face of blindness.

Annotated Bibliography

Boal, Augusto. *Games for Actors and Non-actors*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.

Offering an acutely in-depth account of the principle's and practices of Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, this detailed handbook is a prime example of how theater is a transforming and liberating method for revolution. Expelling the assumptions of theater as exclusive to actors, Boal's inspiring work acts an introduction into theater, its practices, and executions as universal. His acting exercises surrounding unusual physical contact, economy of movement, and trust between actors served most useful in my own practical work in and out of rehearsals.

Bogart, Anne, and Tina Landau. *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005. Print.

A technique to hone improvisation, spontaneity, and intuition among actors, this incredible compilation of movement principles through time and space acts as an important foundation for creating ensemble work on and off stage. This book served as our dictionary for movement as actors trained in the language of viewpoints to more effectively communicate ideas into stage images through individual bodies, group collaborations, and relationships to architecture.

Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Constituting a reconsideration of Butler's earlier work, *Gender Trouble*, this book takes a reflective look at gender performativity. Framing gender as a persistent technique for human survival, Butler examines the doings of gender and the undoings of personhood, with specific concern for transgender and transsexuality in relation to queer and feminist theory. Her incredible insight into the performativity of drag and transgender identity served as the framework for the cross gender casting in *Fefu and Her Friends* as an exploration into "New Gender Politics."

Dolan, Jill. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research, 1988. Print.

A pivotal work in feminist critique of representation, this serves an important foundational piece for feminist theatrical literature. Acting as a historical exploration of woman's representation on stage, Dolan claims the position of material feminist critic with clarity and fairness to other arguments and views, making this an incredibly insightful and prominent piece of feminist literature.

This served as the cornerstone for the actor-character-spectator relationship in *Fefu and Her Friends* as active and critically aware in a space that lacked a forth wall and thrived on interaction.

Fornes, Maria Irene. *Fefu and Her Friends: A Play*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1990. Print.

Attributed as one of the most influential feminist plays of modern theater, due to its nonlinear structure and all female cast, *Fefu and Her Friends* highlights the female experience through form and content as eight women confront and embrace themes of sex, violence, morality, love, friendship, and death over the course of one day in Fefu's home. This beautiful and insightful work of theater served as the script for this production.

