

YOU'RE INVITED TO FEFU'S PARTY

BY ALLIE MOSS

María Irene Fornés's *Fefu and Her Friends* is an invitation. Eight friends are gathered in reunion, as director Pam MacKinnon describes, "to manifest the unimaginable." Their task feels familiar as we navigate the (hopefully) waning days of a pandemic and try to imagine a way forward that we cannot yet see. Like us, their gathering prompts a collision of past and present selves, requiring some reflection about how we have collectively changed before we press on with the evening. The characters' act of coming together is as much about being in an authentic relationship with each other as it is about anything else. And, as you gather with those around you in the theater today, you are invited to do the same.

Fefu is an invitation to an experience. You (yes, you specifically—the fourth wall is porous here) will be asked to leave your seat, go to four other spaces, sit next to several different people, observe intimate scenes between these women, and return to the auditorium, perhaps seated next to someone who has experienced the scenes in a different order. There is no right or wrong; you are in the same boat as the rest of the audience, and indeed most of the characters, in piecing together the complex relationships between these women. You are also an essential part of the creation of this experience. Perhaps you contributed a plant to the garden. But also, as you will see, the entire Strand building is Fefu's house, and you are a guest at this reunion. Your presence at this gathering, and your willingness

to go on the journey alongside the characters, is vital to the communal experience of this performance.

Fefu is also an invitation to relationship. Fornés's play features eight women who, without the presence of men onstage, are freed from some of the mandatory performance of gender. Women simply existing with each other is still a rarity on American stages and that Fornés managed it 40 years ago is a feat. (That said, you may have seen it before at A.C.T.; *Fefu and Her Friends* is the sixth play featuring all women characters in Pam MacKinnon's tenure as artistic director, in direct response to this erasure.) The relationships between the women in *Fefu* are deep and complex; they are simultaneously immediately recognizable and impossible to name. The malleable descriptor "friend" stretches to cover them all, doing the best it can while lacking the specificity to describe the depths and curvatures of each unique pairing. It is the relationships of this play that make it sing; they are the heartbeat at its center, and they are worth watching for their own sake. In an essay for *American Theatre* magazine, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas puts it beautifully: "Fornés's great achievement is that she recreates not a story exactly (though there is one), not a series of events in a plot (though there are plenty), but the emotional charge one feels in a house crowded with friends."

And finally, *Fefu* is an invitation to joy. Fornés demonstrates her mastery in that this play is *playful*; it bends

and reinvents the form in ways that surprise and delight. There is the pleasure of discovering inside jokes, there is curiosity of exploring of Fefu's house, there is the thrill of a water fight onstage. Cortiñas again: "We cannot understand Fornés's oeuvre without connecting to this foundational sense of joy. Any of the tragic endings Fornés wrote begin here, in this spirit of play." And indeed, joy at this gathering abounds, even in the face of darkness and uncertainty. The giddiness of reunion after a long time away is palpable and timely as we gather in the Strand for the first time in two years. It has proved uncontainable from the start of the process; at auditions, there were exuberant hallway reunions as actors who hadn't seen each other in years held each other's faces in their hands, brought together by Fornés's words. No doubt this joy will spill off the stage in performance, and you are invited to partake.

So please, come in. Accept the invitation to gather with your fellow audience members, with Fefu, and with her friends. Fornés said of this play, "I felt as I wrote [*Fefu*] that I was surrounded by friends. I felt very happy to have such good and interesting friends." May you feel surrounded by friends watching it as well.