

MARÍA IRENE FORNÉS'S  
**MUD**  
BY KELLEN HOXWORTH

In February 2014, I directed a production of María Irene Fornés's *Mud*. The winner of a 1984 Obie Award, *Mud* is a seminal work in Fornés's remarkable canon. The play centers on a found family: Mae, Lloyd, and Henry. In its most reductive form, the play can be summarized: Mae wants to learn. Lloyd wants Mae. Henry wants Lloyd's place. Such reductions, though, mask the intricacies of Fornés's writing, the deeply wrought emotion packed into taut, laconic language and striking stage images. In its fullness, it is a play about words and power, a play about family, and a play about longings, wants, and desires.

It was a pleasure to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the play through rehearsals with a brilliant student cast. Maia Kazin ('14), Levi Jennings ('16), and Victor Spielberg-Verdejo ('15) dedicated their considerable talents to harnessing the power of Fornés's words. Nightly, we gathered to rehearse—to re-hear—the play. Fascinated with language, Mae (Maia Kazin) asks, "What were these words?"

Together, we tried to answer this question and wrestled with Fornés's stubbornly slippery language, a language that meditates on the ways that we always say more or less than we intend, that always contains us even as it offers the promise of a way out. The performers mined their words for hidden significance, the things unsaid, and the tone that somehow communicates those omissions.

The silence between words, and the tone beneath them, motivated our process. We developed physical expressivity through a ritual warm-up that took actors through embodiments of the four elements: earth, water, fire, and air. In concert with these embodiments of material elements, the set evoked squalor, decay, and deprivation. With the collaboration of Angrette McCloskey (PhD Candidate, TAPS), Erik Sunderman, and Professor Michael Ramsaur, we created a physical environment imbued with textural and material durability. Untreated, distressed wood framed the doorway and fireplace. Rust wore through the dilapidated ironing board. And, essentially, the discomforting matter of dirt rested centerstage, wafting through the air as both dust and a constant musty aroma. The physical presences of such material brought out the mud underneath the play's strains of floating lyricism.

Through deep investment in embodiment and materiality, the performers and collaborators invested in this world beyond the surface of language, articulating the texture of the words through the grain of their voices and through the tangibility of matter. The last sound of the play—Henry's gasping, guttural sob—summed up the play in its enduring muddiness. The inarticulate resonates well beyond the end of this play, giving renewed value to Fornés's assertion, "In tone there is more meaning than in all the emotional conflicts in the world." This tone lingers. I thank the Department of Theater & Performance Studies and all of my collaborators for bringing such richness of tone to this production, and for sharing the opportunity to re-hear, re-embodiment, and re-present this wonderful piece of theater, and for allowing us to linger in its muddiness, for a time.

