

# Review For 'Fefu and Her Friends,' the curtain rises at Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House



Caro Zeller, left, and Tunde Skovran in "Fefu and Her Friends," the Maria Irene Fornes play at Frank Lloyd Wright's historic Hollyhock House in Barnsdall Park. (Daniel Szandtner)

By **Margaret Gray**

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**I** once went with a friend to a play performed in a downtown L.A. hotel room. A guide led us from the lobby into a vintage elevator and then through a warren of passages to an unmarked door, where we were pushed into pitch-darkness and arranged cheek-by-jowl with strangers along a wall. "You know, if you want to do a play, they have theaters designed for that purpose," my friend was tempted to point out.

Artists have often complained about the limits of the proscenium stage: It distances the audience from the action; it stifles innovation. On the other hand, tiered seating and house lights have their uses, and site-specific productions often work better in theory than in practice. Rarely do a play and a location set each other off so beautifully that conventional audience expectations — physical comfort, personal space, even a story line — seem beside the point.

Circle X Theatre Company and JUST Toys' production of "Fefu and Her Friends" at Hollyhock House in Barnsdall Park is one of these felicitous pairings. Audience members must don protective booties before

entering the historic landmark, designed in the early 1900s by Frank Lloyd Wright as a fortress-like Mayan revival style residence and arts complex for heiress Aline Barnsdall. (The commission was never completed, and Barnsdall donated the building and land to the city of Los Angeles in 1927.) Inside, women dressed as maids pack the guests — limited to 20 per performance — onto narrow folding chairs and camp stools along the edges of the splendid living room, which overlooks the Hollywood sign.

The play, written in 1977 by the avant-garde Cuban American writer María Irene Fornés, is challenging to produce and to watch. But somehow director Kate Jopson, composer Daniel Szabo, choreographer Zsafia Nemes and a dazzling cast create an experience that feels less like seeing a show than traveling through space and time, unencumbered by the laws of physics.

“Fefu and Her Friends” is not, as its title might suggest, a children’s program hosted by a lamb puppet. Set in the 1930s at the house of an eccentric socialite known as Fefu (for Stephany), it follows women who have gathered to rehearse a performance for an upcoming educational benefit. Although markedly less abstract than Fornés’ earlier works — it plays with conventions of naturalistic theater, like having a loaded gun onstage — “Fefu” is slippery in style and meaning.

In the first part of the play, the exuberant, odd Fefu (Tunde Skovran) greets her seven guests as they arrive in gorgeous 1930s fashions (designed by Melanie Watnick). In the second part, audience members are divided according to randomly chosen “talismans” (I got a bird’s foot, painted gold) and asked to carry their chairs into four different areas, where the women are spending the afternoon in a round-robin of intimate scenes that repeat four times, like clockwork, as the audience groups rotate.

Fefu and Emma (Caro Zeller) frolic on the lawn, sharing quirky epiphanies and secret sorrows. Cindy (Guerin Piercy) and Christina (Talia Davis) lounge in a grassy courtyard, analyzing Christina’s impressions of Fefu and Cindy’s frightening dream. Julia (Julia Ubrankovics), who has been paralyzed by a freak hunting accident, lies in the library and hallucinates about being tortured by misogynistic “judges,” until cheery Sue (Claudia Zielke) pops in with a bowl of soup. In the dining room, Paula (Kacie Rogers) has a strained confrontation with a former lover, Cecilia (Christina Uhebe).

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In the third part, everybody comes together again on the lawn for the performance, which devolves into a water fight before concluding abruptly in a baffling tragedy.

The play has an unusual blend of tones: Harsh, stilted, even ugly surrealism keeps interrupting the characters’ lighthearted heart-to-hearts and girlish horseplay. Jolson enhances this effect by having two musicians on the scene, playing Szabo’s jarring compositions on the upright bass and the trombone. If “Fefu” could be said to have a theme, it can be found in this dissonance, the contrast between the lovely surfaces of femininity and the horrors they conceal.

To be a woman, “Fefu” suggests, is to be in a constant state of danger— from men, of course, but also from other women and even from her own mind and body. The future of feminism may hinge less on motivation or organization than on sheer courage. Yet for a production with such a dark message, this immersive “Fefu” is thoroughly entertaining. I removed my booties above the glittering city feeling more connected to Fornés, Los Angeles history and even womankind.



## ‘Fefu and Her Friends’

Where: Hollyhock House, Barnsdall Art Park, 4800 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles

When: 8 p.m. Friday-Sunday; ends Sunday.

Tickets: Sold out (was \$60)

Information: [circlextheatre.org/fefu/](http://circlextheatre.org/fefu/)

Running time: 2 hours

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