

Production Response  
*Las Meninas* by Lynn Nottage

This play, which produced in a proscenium theatre, builds a stylized world of Louis XIV's court around two possible pieces of history: the romance between an African dwarf and Queen Marie Thérèse; and an image of an African nun from roughly the same period. In Nottage's play, the two events are linked, and the nun tells the story of her origins in that court to us, her fellow sisters in the nunnery, on the night of her vows.

High production values and consistently solid -- and even, at times, brilliant -- acting and directing made this a memorable and provocative evening in the theatre. Design elements certainly created an appropriately elitist context for the play's observations about the powerlessness of those oppressed, even the queen. The stage floor was painted with a circular, allegorical painting of gods in heaven that we'd expect to see on the ceilings or walls of baroque palaces and churches, placed in the middle of a gold field, placing us in a neoclassical, royal context. The upstage wall, angling toward us at the top, was a two-way mirror. When used as a mirror, it reflected the floor to continue its painting onto the "wall." When lit differently, though, we were allowed to see scenes upstage of the mirror -- usually scenes secondary to the play's main action, or demonstrative of some piece of narration from the nun -- and often taking advantage of the visual overlap of scrim and mirror. Simple furniture, and very little of it -- my notes say two chairs -- allowed for the actors and their costumes to visually dominate the venue.

Three other scenic elements should be noted: 1) an easel off on far stage right, where the secondary character of the court painter -- in simple grey middle-class waistcoat, breeches, and tricorne -- creates his portraits of the royalty. 2) A large golden cube is rolled in, first as the package in which the dwarf is sent to court, and later as his sleeping quarters. 3) A bed for the royal couple, who "enjoy" a very funny, very domestically terrible night together, each wanting what the other doesn't.

The costumes of Louis's court were pure white, and took the looks and appendages of baroque costuming and created a post-modern deconstruction of them. In that deconstruction, panniers were visible and not under skirts -- and with the King wearing panniers as well. Wigs were made from a plastic material, and excessively "ringleted." This continued the beautifully artificial look of the costumes, joining with the reflective mirror to make it clear that this is a world of artifice and reflectivity. It was clear that the 17<sup>th</sup> century was being evoked, but that a modern extrapolation was being made of it in order to match the playwright's interest in dealing with aspects of contemporary sexism and racism. One costume that stood out from the world of the court was Nabo, the African dwarf brought to the court to be the Queen's servant. His primary costume for public scenes was a bright red, and was accompanied in some scenes with a jester's hat. The nun, our narrator, was dressed in a simple black gown.

Louis's court was known for its dancing, and this production had beautiful choreography, most of which served to highlight the figure of --and the arrogance of -- the Sun King, as he danced lead as he did in history. And Louis's precision and decadence -- a focus for the arrogance of the court overall -- was well portrayed, when dancing and not dancing, by the actor who found believable affectations, physical and vocal, within the play's stylized baroque world. The courtiers in the ensemble echoed this neatly. In contrast was the hot-blooded Spanish voluptuousness of the Queen. The actress playing this role, who is one of our two our main touchstones throughout the play, developed the character's rather buffoonish nature in the play's first scenes with a great deal of physical comedy. Thus, when it became clear that some of this was the result of her mistreatment by the king -- made especially evidence when she rather blossomed under the attentions of Nabu -- that her character arc was highly satisfying and even virtuosic. The quality of king and queen were at least matched by the actor playing the dwarf. Not a dwarf, the actor -- with the director -- developed a convention to convey dwarfishness by walking with bent knees through most of the play. While this must have been difficult to maintain over the course of this two-hour show, the actor did so with no sense of self-consciousness about the walk. Indeed, the actor and the convention worked so well that one paid little attention to the actor's legs for

long stretches of time. And, while the play's other scenes had contextual appeal and were always staged well physically and vocally, the play's highlights were the comic and yet touching scenes between queen and dwarf. If there was a weaker member of the ensemble, it was the narrator, who wasn't able to convey the stakes of her situation. But in terms of both stage time and dramatic impact, the fascinating, duplicitous world of the court more than made up for this shortcoming.

As I glance over my response, I note that I have not noted African elements also involved in the play. Nabu talks to an ancestor, and one point dresses in mask and makeup as if in a native ritual. The ensemble, usually dancing to court music, dances -- in their stylized, deconstructed whites -- to rhythmic African music to aid Nabu's commentary on his life at his home. All of this adds a taste of the culture shock Nabu must have felt when hauled out of his gold box into the French court.

Finally, while I think my description is accurate, it conveys little of the sheer theatrical pleasure I had watching this play. Comic moments were well executed; political and social ironies provoked my mind and made me gasp a little internally; involving performances and beautifully conceived and executed design aspects and direction kept me in this very theatrical world throughout the evening, and my visual and aural memories of moments in the play are still very strong. I think our students would benefit a great deal from seeing this play take advantage of its period to comment, with great energy and commitment and ensemble and flair, on our times. I recommend it very strongly for invitation to the festival.