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MAY 3, 2012

Rep Stage closes season with intriguing 'Las Meninas'

I'm not sure what is more intriguing about "Las Meninas," the 2002 Lynn Nottage play on the boards of Rep Stage -- the strange plot itself, or the fact that it might all be grounded in fact.

Seizing on some hard facts and tantalizing gossip from the time, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Nottage spins a tale of Louis XIV and his Spanish-born queen, Marie-Therese. When the neglected, frustrated queen receives an off-beat gift -- an African dwarf named Nabo -- things get curiously and curiously.



Adding to the fascination is the presence of a nun, Louise Marie-Therese, who serves as ..

a guide through the courtly doings in the play. Her connection to what happened between the queen and the dwarf provides a key element in the drama. (You can Google your way to more info on this character, aka the Black Nun of Moret.)

"Las Meninas" feels a bit padded in places and runs out of theatrical steam in others, but it makes its points about privilege, sex and race in a mostly telling, often wonderfully provocative way. There is considerable humor along the way, too, some of it visual and unabashedly vulgar.

The Rep Stage production, fluidly directed by Eve Muson, gains considerably from Elena Zlotescu's transparent set and fanciful costumes, which produce a symphony in fancy white. Dan Covey's expert lighting provides the finishing visual touch.

The performance by Katie Hileman, as the queen, is a little stiff and studied at times, but the net result is effective nonetheless. KeiLyn Durrel Jones, who has to spend a lot of time in a severely stooped position to suggest Nabo's height, creates a rather endearing portrayal of the queen's clever plaything.

Drew Kopas does a colorful job as the king. As Louise Marie-Therese, Fatima Quander tends to stick to one volume and tone of delivery, but she summons a good deal of expressive power for the closing portion of the play.

Susan Rome shines in a dual assignment as the Queen Mother and Mother Superior. Tony Tsendeas likewise does accomplished work in a pair of supporting roles. A frilly, foppish group of courtiers fills out the staging of this imaginative, multi-layered play.

Performances continue through Sunday.

In a nice coincidence of timing, a production of "Ruined," the piece that earned Nottage her Pulitzer in 2009, opens this week at the Fells Point Corner Theatre.

About Tim Smith

Born and raised in Washington, D.C., I couldn't help but develop a keen interest in politics, but music, theater and visual art also proved great attractions. Music became my main focus after high school. I thought about being a cocktail pianist, but I hated taking requests, so I studied music history instead, earning a B.A. in that field from Eisenhower College (Seneca Falls, N.Y.) and an M.A. from Occidental College (Los Angeles). I then landed in journalism. After freelancing for the Washington Post and others, I was classical music critic for the Sun-Sentinel in South Florida, where I also contributed to NPR. I've written for the New York Times, BBC Music Magazine and other publications, and I'm a longtime contributor to Opera News. My book, The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to Classical Music (Perigee, 2002), can be found on the most discerning remainder racks.

I joined the Baltimore Sun as classical music critic in 2000 and, in 2009, also became theater critic, giving me the opportunity to annoy a whole new audience. In 2010, my original Clef Notes blog expanded to encompass a theatrical component -- how could I resist calling it Drama Queens? I hope you'll find both sides of this blog coin worth exploring and reacting to; your own comments are always welcome and valued (well, most of them, at least).

Think of this as your open-all-hours, cyber green room, where there's always a performer or performance to discuss, some news to digest, or maybe just a little good gossip to share.

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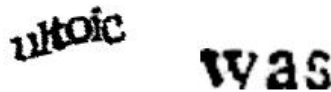
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