



# Eve Muson on directing Lynn Nottage's *Las Meninas*

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April 18, 2012 By [John Barry](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

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How director/professor Eve Muson took a Nottage play  
from a college production to the professional stage

I remember, somewhere at the tail end of the Regional II version of the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival in 2010, being led into the Towson University Theatre Center one more time. I'd already seen more plays in one weekend than I usually see in two months, and, frankly, the weekend was shaping itself into a chaotic *mélange* of diamonds in the rough.

But the standout of the weekend was *Las Meninas* produced by University of Maryland Baltimore County. It's a weird, wacky, and elaborate piece by Lynn Nottage, verging on a musical, cramming everything – postmodern references, temporal and cultural dimensions, and brilliant language – into one two hour play, directed by Eve Muson. As an ACTF finalist, the production was invited to the Kennedy Center in 2011.

When I heard that Muson was going to direct *Las Meninas* at Rep Stage, I jumped at the chance to interview her.



Eve Muson

Muson is using the opportunity to take the production to the next step: a deeper, richer version of that earlier UMBC production. And several of the principle roles – those of Queen Marie (Katie Hileman) and Nabo Sensulagi (KeiLyn Jones) – will be played by students from the UMBC production. So audiences will have the double pleasure of watching a Rep Stage production, while also checking out some promising young actors still enrolled (or recently graduated from) the UMBC Theatre Program.

I talked to director Eve Muson over the phone, and asked her to describe the play and then talk about the experience of transitioning a college production – and a few of its student actors – into a professional setting.

### **So what's this play about?**

This is based on a possibly true historical footnote about the court of Louis XIV, in which Louis XIV's wife has an affair with a black African jester, and that the affair gave rise to a daughter who was rushed away to a convent, where she'll live her whole life. The story is told from the point of view of this young artist (TK) who is of obviously of black descent. We learn the story of her origins. We start the play when the African dwarf is presented to the queen in jest, and the relationship moves from this uneasy master-servant relationship to their friendship and ultimately their sexual union.



"Las Meninas" Painting by Diego Velázquez

### **The title is based on a painting by Diego Velázquez. Will people understand anything about the play by looking at the painting?**

Well, if you see the painting, you'll understand the connection. But if you haven't, it really doesn't matter. The Velázquez painting is of a court, full of beautiful people... and the little girl in the painting is of a Spanish queen as a little girl. When you look at her, you understand something about the central character.

### **The young girl in the painting seems a little bewildered, bored, hostile.**

The young woman doesn't really fit into the court of Louis XIV at all. She's not all that beautiful, she's not witty, and she doesn't speak French very well. All this is actually true of the historical Queen of France, Marie Therese. She's innocent. Her native language is Spanish. She doesn't really understand the atmosphere and the double entendres of Louis XIV's court. She's very very very very lonely. And so she accepts the friendship of this jester, who is also,

obviously, a complete outsider. He is extremely intelligent, clever, straightforward. She enjoys his honesty. But he's a little too honest, she explains, and is executed; she is thrown into exile by the king, and the daughter of the relationship, Louise-Marie, is thrown into a convent as a young child.

**It's an intense relationship developing out of a surreal, strange atmosphere of the painting.**

Right. And we see it from the point of view of the painter, who says that he sees everything, but no one ever notices him. For the entire first half of the play, he's working on a portrait of the king and the queen. He's witnessing the relationships develop.

And Nottage is telling us this story because she's asking us to consider the story of people we don't know the history of. The layers of this story include little historical hints, which are true. But the connections that develop are fictional.

**You did this play with UMBC at the American College Theatre Festival.**

I directed it in my capacity as a professor of theatre at UMBC. Just about a year ago, the students' version of the play went up at the Kennedy Center, which was of course a very big honor. Michael Stebbins, the artistic director at Rep Stage, saw our play go up there, He said he'd really like to put it up here at Rep Stage. It's a beautiful production, it deserves a wider audience. It was a very elaborate piece. You saw it.

**Yeah, I was there.**

So you know how elaborate the costumes were.

**I wondered how you managed to move everything in and out of Towson University on one night.**

We had a really superb technical director.

**So now you're doing it with professional actors.**

We were able to revisit a whole number of things that we wanted to improve. In this show, we have actors who are more age appropriate. On the other hand, Michael Stebbins and I agreed that some of the roles – played by students in the college production – were played so well that he was able to hire KeiLyn Jones, who played Nabo, and Katie Hileman, who played the queen. And a number of the courtiers we were also able to bring from UMBC.

They'll be holding their own with professionals, and they've been proven as hard working, diligent, and professional as I'd imagined they would be. So the show should be even better than what you saw. I think Michael was right when he said it deserved a wider audience, and I think the Howard County audience will really like it.

**You direct a lot at UMBC theatre school, and you direct professional productions. And you've done both with the same production. What do you enjoy most about directing college students?**

Well, UMBC is a small department, and I frequently teach students as freshmen and, later, as graduating seniors. You really get to see students change and progress. So you're not just teaching a kid once, and then you never see him again. For me, it's very exciting to watch them start out as very dependent almost post-adolescent kids, and gradually become independent thinkers. Our goal is to create independent theatre artists, independent thinkers. Who have the tools to think.



Katie Hileman as the Queen and Fatima Quander as the nun (Photo: Stan Barouh)

**You have one actress playing the Queen who is still a student.**

Katie Hileman as queen. As a freshman, she started out a very unformed and quite self-conscious actor. I took her through – and she took me through – and now I get to direct her in this production, as a professional actor. She knows how to do her job. How to approach every single scene, with very little poking and prodding and moving her along. So to me that's very exciting. I love working with university kids because every day they're different.

**You're taking them on a big leap here.**

I have four actors in this production at Rep Stage who are currently enrolled in the program, and three who are recent graduates. The professional experience is a lot more intense. So a few of these students have just finished their first week as professionals. It just occurred to me what a difference that is. For professionals, it's 38 hours a week over you know 3 ½ weeks. At UMBC, we rehearse three or four hours a day at the most, over eight or nine weeks.

So, yeah, it's a big leap, but the work becomes a lot more interesting, physically and emotionally. They don't flag and don't get exhausted. That's the thing about younger actors, they can do it over and over again without complaining. It's been a big week for them, and they're very excited. Of course, they're also super duper familiar with the show. And they came in with a lot of confidence. They've performed at the Kennedy Center, which is a big deal.

**College theatre and professional theatre are usually kept at arm's length. But here you're transitioning pretty smoothly from one level to the next.**

But this is the joy of a relationship between a university and a professional company. You can really work out things at the university, you have a lot of time. Then you go to a theatre with it, and you can focus on details and make it richer. I've only had that experience a couple of times. It's very artistically gratifying, because you go into the professional arena knowing so much already.

**Who are some of the professional actors?**

They're all from our region. Drew Kopas is the king. He's worked at the Olney and Everyman. Susan Rome is playing the mother superior, she's played a lot at Theater J. Tony Tsendeas is playing the painter (Velazquez), he's done a lot at Baltimore Shakespeare Festival. Fatima Quander is the nun, she played the daughter Benita in *Raisin in the Sun* at Everyman.

**You've directed *Las Meninas* twice now. What did you find the second time that you didn't the first time around?**

My understanding of the play deepened, First of all, it's wonderful having age appropriate actors who are seasoned professionals. As the queen mother, as the doctor, as the mother superior, you know, the power that those actors bring to parts like that change those themes a lot.

Certain things in the relationship between Navo and Marie-Therese, for instance, get glossed over in a college production, but in a professional production, we get to work out on a moment by moment basis. The emotional temperature changes a little. The movement on stage becomes much more detailed and much more interesting. It's a fuller, more rich experience. Of course, Rep Stage is very different, too, because we're in a studio black box. This is really up close and personal. And that's how I like to direct.

*Las Meninas* runs thru May 6, 2012 at Rep Stage, Horowitz Center, 10901 Little Patuxent Parkway Columbia, MD.

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