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STAGE

Las Meninas

A 17th-century scandal is brought vividly to life in Rep Stage's last production of the season



KeiLyn Durrel Jones as Nabo and Katie Hileman as Queen Marie-Therese in Rep Stage's Las Meninas.

By **Rachael Pacella**
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Las Meninas
 Through May 6 at Rep Stage

Lynn Nottage's *Las Meninas* takes a slice of the 17th-century French court—with all its riches, opulence, and self-involvement—and sets it in front of a modern audience. Director Eve Muson's unique production techniques and the development of genuinely deep characters then propel the audience further into a world where beauty, race, and status rule.

The play opens with Louise Marie-Therese (Fatima Quander), who serves as the narrator, looking back at the events of 1664 from a vantage point of 31 years later. She relates that France's Queen Marie-Therese (Katie Hileman), wife of King Louis XIV (Drew Kopas), once received a present. Louis and Marie live at a level of extravagance that is now nearly impossible to relate to. (In trying to compare other forms of luxury to her own, Marie says, "It's like a truffle without sugar, or a day without gambling.") Marie opens the crate to find a "little African boy" inside, the dwarf Nabo Sensugali (KeiLyn Durrel Jones). (The incident and what follows are reimaginings of a true story.)

Louis is notorious for having a number of mistresses, and several illegitimate children. Marie, the daughter of the King of Spain, was wed to Louis for diplomatic reasons. She is overweight and unattractive, hopelessly out of place in the French court. Louis constantly criticizes her speech and she is plagued by disapproving looks. While her husband is cruel, paying more attention to his attractive mistresses than to her, Marie finds Nabo kind and funny.

The two strike up a close friendship. Nabo proves both kind and wise, if somewhat sarcastic about his situation. Jones captures the role perfectly, balancing this mocking tone with a certain warmth. Jones also deserves credit for the physical stresses of his performance. A man of normal height, he walks around on his haunches throughout the performance. Eventually, and despite Nabo's better judgment, the two have sex. (In one of the production's most arresting moments, Nabo recounts the event while strapped into a giant blue dildo. It shoots confetti when he climaxes.)

Marie becomes pregnant, and the news eventually leaks to the gossipy court. The pregnancy is blamed on the king sharing food with the queen, or having one of his tears touch her. When the baby is born and it is dark-skinned, Nabo is blamed for "glancing" at the queen and corrupting her womb. The baby is then sent away to a convent, where the mother superior (Susan Rome) is bribed into keeping her identity secret. Rome plays the mother superior with all the sternness the role calls for, in marked contrast to her role as the king's mother, a confirmed gossip.

The set of the production is also remarkable. It is spare, though elegant: a large carpet adorned with cherubs,

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several luxurious chairs, a gilt bed. But the use of these minimal props is often ingenious. The box Nabo arrives in, for instance, converts into his sleeping quarters and ultimately becomes a crucifix. A floor-to-ceiling six-paned mirror backs the action and is repositioned throughout the play to subtly hint at geographic, temporal, and even moral divisions. When slanted forward under bright stage lights, it reflects the scenes that play out in front of it. But when the lights dim, the audience can see behind it. Toward the end of the play, an engrossing scene shows Marie reciting Hail Marys at the front of the stage while behind the hazy mirror, in dim blue lighting, dancers move to African beats.

The scene hints at the play’s consistent focus on disenfranchisement. Nabo’s hardships as a slave and a dwarf are frequently addressed, as is racial prejudice. “When did blackness become a sin?” one character wonders to herself. The subject of beauty also comes up repeatedly. Marie is not as beautiful as the other girls in the court, and it is clear she is only kept around to prevent a war with her father. Hileman shines in this role; her Marie is boisterous and loud-mouthed, but she is simultaneously deeply self-conscious, and one is convinced that she does indeed feel rejected.

From its creative costuming—classic period garb melded with abstract geometric shapes—to its stellar performances, Rep Stage’s production of *Las Meninas* is truly transporting.

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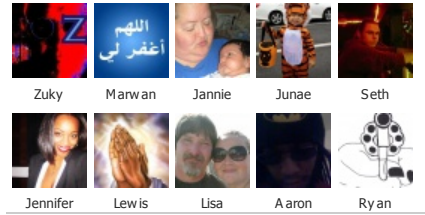


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