

# Theater & Dance



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Recipes for New Year's Eve



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## Lynn Nottage's 'Las Meninas,' Patrick Barlow's '39 Steps' keep laughs coming



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By Nelson Pressley, Published: April 26, 2012

Why haven't Washington area theaters had more of a hand in making playwright Lynn Nottage a star? Arena Stage's production of "Ruined" earned top honors at the Helen Hayes Awards this week, but the script came blessed with the 2009 Pulitzer Prize. The perpetually challenged African Continuum Theatre managed a lovely production of "Intimate Apparel" several seasons ago, but for the most part, the District stood by while MacArthur "genius" grant winner Nottage (whose recent works include "Fabulation" and "By the Way, Meet Vera Stark") took off.

Such are the thoughts provoked by the crowd-pleasing rendition of Nottage's 2002 "Las Meninas" at Columbia's Rep Stage. This funny, gracefully written play unearths a scandalous bit of history from the court of Louis XIV — the suggestion that the devout Queen Marie-Therese bore a black child fathered by a black dwarf page named Nabo.

1 Comments

Eve Muson's production was a recent college show at the University of Maryland

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Baltimore County; Muson has added professional actors but kept her college leads, Katie Hileman as the queen and KeiLyn Durrel Jones as Nabo. The outrageously fit Jones crouches to play the dwarf (Muson's fluid staging makes this less distracting than you'd think), and his modest but wise turn as the unhappy man owned by the queen is winning.

Hileman is flat-out delightful as Marie-Therese, an unlovely Spaniard in the gorgeous French court. The young queen is domineering but lonely, and Hileman makes the pouts, outbursts and laments lively and instinctive — she belabors nothing. The rest of the cast is as fresh:

Drew Kopas brings an oiliness to the appetites of Louis, Tony Tsendeas wears his cynicism lightly as the court painter (the play's title evokes the Diego Velazquez painting), and Fatima Quander is eventually moving as the orphaned black girl recalling all this.

The centerpiece of Elena Zlotescu's design is a nifty two-way mirror angled over the back of the stage. Zlotescu did the frilly, white costumes and tall wigs, too, and the performers carry themselves like royalty accepting applause — or like actors who know they're in a good play.

### 'The 39 Steps'

A little west of Columbia, the [Olney Theatre Center](#) has a promising cast in the farcical prank that is "The 39 Steps." This hit play was adapted by Patrick Barlow from the John Buchan [novel](#) and the Alfred Hitchcock [film](#); the joke is that four actors play all the parts and try to keep up as the "wrong man" plot rips along.

How has this not turned into theatrical laughing gas? Clay Hopper's staging sputters in the intimate Mulitz-Gudelsky Theatre Lab. Self-consciousness is part of the setup — has to be, with actors swapping roles sometimes line by line — but, too often, the show displays its wit, fiddling with setup and payoff rather than winking and skipping ahead.

Even so, lots of bits keep the audience in stitches. Take Susan Lynskey and Jason Lott as Scots with accents thicker than winter fleece, or Lott and Evan Casey as elderly men slow-w-w-ly moving furniture. See Lynskey and Jeffries Thaiss (playing the man fleeing false murder charges) handcuffed but hiding it, and note the surprises lurking within the set's rigging and floor. There's shtick to spare, and the ensemble is appealing.

Yet the farce runs long (not counting a late start at the Wednesday matinee), is rarely truly tipsy, and hamming it up without keeping up leads to missteps among the "39."

### Las Meninas

by Lynn Nottage. Directed by Eve Muson. Lights, Dan Covey. With Susan Rome, Annie Grier, Kevin James Logan, Sean McComas, Jessie Poole, Louise Schlegel and Brady Whealton. About 2 hours 15 minutes. Through May 6 at Rep Stage, 10901 Little Patuxent Pkwy., Columbia. Call 443-518-1500 or visit [www.repstage.org](http://www.repstage.org).

### The 39 Steps

adapted by Patrick Barlow from the John Buchan novel and the Alfred Hitchcock film. Directed by Clay Hopper. Scenic design, Cristina Todesco; costumes, Pei Lee; lights, Nicholas Houfek; sound design, Alex Neumann; projections, JJ Kaczynski. About 2 hours 15 minutes. Through May 20 at the Olney Theatre Center, 2001 Olney-Sandy Spring Rd., Olney. Call 301-924-3400 or visit [olneytheatre.org](http://olneytheatre.org).

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