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Dramatic Publishing

PORTRAIT OF A NUDE

by

LAURA SHAMAS



Dramatic Publishing

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Preface

Our response to art is subjective. Is our reaction to art really based on the work itself, or on the “politically correct” values of our times? *PORTRAIT OF A NUDE* traces the history of response to Francisco Goya’s masterpiece “Naked Maja” from the time of its inception in 1798 in Spain to the recent sexual harassment case surrounding it in 1991 at an American university. Each part of this play is based on a real event.

PORTRAIT OF A NUDE

A Play in Four Parts

For 3 Men and 2 Women in each segment

(May be performed with a minimum of 5 people—an ensemble cast may be reused in each segment—or a maximum of 20)

ACT ONE—PART ONE:

In Spain. 1798/1815.

GOYAthe artist, aging from 51-68
MARIAthe Duchess of Alba, age 35
INQUISITOR #1 an Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition
INQUISITOR #2 also of the Spanish Inquisition
CLERK a court official

PART TWO:

In France. 1865-67.

MANET the painter, 33
VICTORINE the model, 23
SUZANNE (Mme Manet) . the painter's wife, piano teacher, 35
ZOLA the writer, 25
BAUDELAIRE the poet, 44

ACT TWO—PART THREE:

In England. 1987-1990.

THE PRINCESS' AIDE played by a woman
SPANISH OFFICIAL . an emissary from the Cultural Branch
THE PRINCESS Her Royal Highness
SCHOOLBOY a young, British student
GUARD an overseer of the exhibit

PART FOUR:
In America. 1991.

PROFESSOR a female professor of music history, 30s
STUDENT #1 a male college student
STUDENT #2 another male college student
DEAN the dean of the university
MS. ARTIZ director of the campus Affirmative Action
program

This play is inspired by real events, and loosely based on them.

Area staging is used throughout. Locales should be suggested by minimal furniture, lights and sound. Suggestions for use of slides/artwork are noted throughout (available from art institutes/museums). Note: If slides are used, it's important they are on only for about thirty seconds, just long enough to make an initial impression. Slides may also help establish time and place shifts.

Suggested casting:

GOYA / ZOLA / GUARD / DEAN
MARIA / SUZANNE / PRINCESS / MS. ARTIZ
INQUISITOR #1 / BAUDELAIRE / SPANISH OFFICIAL /
STUDENT #2
INQUISITOR #2 / MANET / SCHOOLBOY / STUDENT #1
CLERK / VICTORINE / PRINCESS' AIDE / PROFESSOR

The Playwright believes the play is more compelling when performed with five actors in the twenty roles.

ACT ONE

PART ONE

SCENE: *It is 1798, in the countryside, outside of Madrid. At the villa of MARIA, the Duchess of Alba.*

AT RISE: *FRANCISCO JOSE DE GOYA, 51, mimes painting at an empty easel frame. MARIA, 35, lies on a couch, draped in a white, gauze-like dress.**

MARIA. Don't you ever want to do something dangerous?

GOYA (*intent on painting*). Maria.

MARIA. What?

GOYA. Keep the eyes up. You look wonderful.

MARIA. I'm bored.

GOYA. Not much longer.

MARIA. You always say that.

GOYA. It'll be worth it.

MARIA. Will it? Another portrait of a noble woman.

GOYA. No. I've captured something...in your face, your pose. You'll see.

MARIA. How many more days?

GOYA. Two.

MARIA. That means four. Or five. My household suffers.

GOYA. Let it. You're becoming immortal.

MARIA (*smiling*). Well, at least I'm lying down instead of standing forever, like last time. (*She stretches.*)

* Suggested slides: "Goya—Self-Portrait" and Goya's "Clothed Maja."

GOYA. The eyes, please.

MARIA. I wore so much lace in that portrait I felt like a curtain.

GOYA. We do such things. We're in search of the sublime.

MARIA. Ever the idealist.

GOYA. That's why you like me.

MARIA. I don't know why I like you. Perhaps only because you want to paint me.

GOYA. Just an appeal to your vanity?

MARIA. You're so attentive. I wonder how Josefa bears it. Especially now that my husband is dead. And you're always here.

GOYA. She knew she married an artist. I love what I do, I have to paint all the time. Besides, she's not so neglected. I'm a man of many skills.

MARIA. I'm sure.

GOYA. Some you'll never know.

MARIA. I wonder. *(She smiles and looks down.)*

GOYA *(cautioning)*. The eyes. *(A beat.)*

MARIA *(looking up)*. Don't you ever want to do something that's unexpected?

GOYA. I do. I paint.

MARIA. Something entirely taboo?

GOYA. There is nothing entirely taboo.

MARIA. Something completely exciting.

GOYA. Life is exciting.

MARIA. A commitment to a forbidden endeavor.

GOYA. I eat apples.

MARIA. Do you think I'm beautiful?

GOYA *(pausing)*. Yes.

MARIA. How beautiful?

GOYA. I paint you more than any other woman. What more do you need to know?

MARIA (*cooly*). Am I beautiful dressed as a Maja?

GOYA. Of course.

MARIA. Is there something I would be more beautiful in?

GOYA (*exasperated*). You selected this.

MARIA (*sighing*). Never mind.

GOYA (*resigning*). Let's stop for a moment. (*He puts down the brush.*)

MARIA (*rises from the couch*). It feels good to stand. Shall I get you something? (*She twirls about, dancing.*)

GOYA. No. I'm fine. (*He shakes out his arm. MARIA crosses to him and feels his arm.*)

MARIA (*flirting*). So strong.

GOYA. Just the arm of a painter.

MARIA. A great one.

GOYA (*smiling through exasperation*). You're fickle. Like a child.

MARIA. Did you get that? In your painting? (*She looks at the easel.*)

GOYA. Well?

MARIA. I do see mischief. In the eyes.

GOYA. So do I.

MARIA. And strength.

GOYA. A sort of cunning.

MARIA. You flatter me.

GOYA (*cleaning brush*). That's the point, isn't it?

MARIA. Come. Sit. I'll rub your back, old man. (*GOYA crosses to the chair. MARIA sits behind him and massages his shoulders.*)

GOYA. Ahhh. My favorite part of the sittings.

MARIA. Your back is tight.

GOYA. Genius is a strain.

MARIA. At least you will be remembered for it.

GOYA. I'm doing my best to make others remember you.

MARIA (*stops the massage*). Why? Why paint me so much?

GOYA. I do it to...(*Pauses, gasping.*) ...celebrate you.

MARIA (*again massaging*). Sometimes, Francisco, I wonder...when I look back...what will I have done? Just maintained my family's social station?

GOYA. What matters most to you?

MARIA. None of it. (*She ends the massage.*) It is not enough.

GOYA. You're good with horses.

MARIA (*gives him a look*). I want to make a contribution.

GOYA. You're charitable. And you have the greatest art collection in all of Spain.

MARIA. It was my husband's, not mine.

GOYA. You're quite charming. I'm sure you could aspire to anything within reason.

MARIA (*standing*). But you see, that's not true. I'm restricted. I am a prisoner of convention.

GOYA. The King adores you.

MARIA. As a convention of the court. I dress well. I am discreet. Sort of. It's all within boundaries.

GOYA. But everyone knows you have a wild streak—part of your charm.

MARIA. Yet you call me childish.

GOYA. You're restless like a child. (*Setting up the easel again.*) Jump around a bit and then let's start again. (*MARIA jumps up and down several times.*)

MARIA. One portrait can never capture a person. (*She flops down on the couch.*)

GOYA. That's not true. It depends on the subject. Here. (*He repositions her.*)

MARIA. How's the light?

GOYA. Still good.

MARIA. At least as a man you are completely free.

GOYA. No one is completely free.

MARIA. The King.

GOYA. The King is imprisoned by more convention and regulation than you can imagine.

MARIA. The Prime Minister?

GOYA (*coldly*). Let's not talk of Godoy.

MARIA. But he is your patron.

GOYA. He is not free. He's a prisoner of his own greed. He calls himself "The Prince of Peace"—his idea of an official title. Watch. Spain will fall because of Godoy. One day I will paint him as the ass he is, instead of the great ruler he pretends to be. But that is my place, to reveal the truth on canvas.

MARIA. Then there's you. Obviously, you're free.

GOYA. I have Josefa.

MARIA. She's hardly a jailer.

GOYA. No. But in all relations, there are limits.

MARIA. Pessimist.

GOYA. No. I'm a realist. Now, be still.

MARIA. Yes. Do concentrate. (*GOYA paints again for a moment.*)

GOYA. The eyes. Focus over my shoulder. (*MARIA looks directly at him. GOYA, exasperated:*) What are you doing?

MARIA. Rebellious.

GOYA (*dropping brush*). Now what?

MARIA. I'm strangely depressed by this whole conversation.

GOYA. Me, too. And all I want is your happiness.

MARIA (*standing*). This session is over. I can't lie this way anymore.

GOYA. What is it you want? You've never interrupted before.

MARIA. There comes a point.

GOYA. You're in one of your moods.

MARIA. This isn't a mood. This is expressive. Capture it, would you?

GOYA. I'm trying.

MARIA (*pointing to his work*). It's not in this portrait. This is a smiling woman draped on a divan. There is no power here. There is nothing unique here.

GOYA. You're cruel.

MARIA. I'm not against your technique. I'm against the notion of these stale portraits. Locked. Rigid. Uniform.

GOYA. I've never painted a woman in this pose.

MARIA. I know what I'll do...I'm going to take off my clothes. And I want you to paint me like that, as I really am. Free. (*GOYA, speechless, stares at her, for a beat. She starts to untie her sash.*)

GOYA. Stop, because...(*Grasping.*) you'll freeze. That's right. You'll be cold. Pneumonia. It's out of the question.

MARIA. It's what I want.

GOYA. Keep your clothes on. (*She stops undressing and smiles at him.*)

MARIA. I want to be painted nude.

GOYA. You've lost your mind. I have never painted a full-scale, smiling, female nude. No one in Spain has. We'd be thrown out of the country if I did.

MARIA. Velasquez did it with those two Venus poses.

GOYA. Not the same. A woman's naked back isn't as dangerous as a woman's naked front. Trust me. Our sessions cause enough gossip. And now you want to risk more, just so I can paint you naked. Imagine the Prime Minister chances upon us one day, since he likes to visit you unannounced. "Señor Godoy, my Lord, my Liege, it's not what it seems. I'm simply liberating the Duchess of Alba, a new service we lowly artists perform by request."

MARIA. We'd hear his horses.

GOYA. I'd be banished.

MARIA. It's art.

GOYA. Is it? You're a woman of a certain stature. You're no chambermaid. It's simply not done.

MARIA. What does my position have to do with it?

GOYA. Maria. Noble women are subjects for portraits only. You are aware of the stigma. Aristocrats pose with clothes on—in landscape settings.

MARIA. I'm too well-stationed to be considered artistic enough to be nude. More and more restrictions.

GOYA. You'd jeopardize your family's reputation? The Alba name? For what? A look at your flesh?

MARIA. I would like to see myself so preserved. It would cheer me. For when I'm no longer handsome. Perhaps you'd even like a copy for your private collection.

GOYA. No. This is absurd. I won't do it.

MARIA. I'd pay you. It can be exactly the same pose, as before. Only without the dress. You can just start over. Fresh canvas. Finish this one later.

GOYA. No. (*He gathers his things.*)

MARIA. Why not?

GOYA. I won't risk my position for this.

MARIA. It can be our secret...You're scared. (*She crosses to him.*)

GOYA. What?

MARIA. You're scared to see me naked for so long. Of what you'll feel.

GOYA. You flatter yourself so much you don't need a painter around.

MARIA. That's it. You're afraid of the power of the attraction. Of your attraction to me.