

The Sleep of Reason

By Lawrence Bommer

THE SLEEP OF REASON

Bailiwick Repertory

Francisco Goya's 14 "black paintings" open a window on a great painter's quiet agonies: the man who made them had been deaf for over three decades. Despite the aging painter's serious illness, from 1821 to 1823 he poured into these murals a silent torment, painting not just with brushes but with his thumbs, palette knife, even rags and sponges. Unlike Goya's early, fashionable works, which were created for clients, these literally monstrous depictions in white, black, and sepia constitute "a monologue as much as a memorial," as scholar Keizo Kanki puts it.

The bestial, uncompromising black paintings depict with expressionist intensity a catalog of horrors: damned monks, killer cats, the Fates as agents of evil, the primitive god Saturn devouring his son headfirst, Judith beheading Holofernes, two Spaniards ready to destroy each other with clubs, and a witches' Sabbath that exudes abject stupidity. Perhaps Goya's bitter adage—"The sleep of reason produces monsters," included in an etching—helps to explain the savage paintings and his own possible mental illness.

In 1970 the black paintings inspired celebrated Spanish playwright Antonio Buero-Vallejo, himself a victim of oppression during the Franco regime, to write *The Sleep of Reason*. Though Bailiwick Repertory's potent production, ingeniously staged by Cecilie D. Keenan, employs an eloquent translation by Marion Peter Holt, what registers most here is not the language: as physical as its source, this *Sleep of Reason* chillingly conveys the isolation that fueled Goya's art and the demons that haunt it.

In the pivotal month depicted, December of 1823, the 76-year-old Goya is threatened by more than the grotesque creatures he exorcised in his art. The reactionary king Ferdinand, bent on reprisal, threatens to arrest Goya for treason. Reactionaries have painted the epithet "heretic" on his door. Inside the villa is more agitation. Leocadia Zorrilla Weiss, Goya's 35-year-old mistress, implores him to flee to Bordeaux; jealous even at his age, he accuses her of fancying a local sergeant. He also demands that his daughter Rosarito, sent away for her protection, return to him. Help comes from Eugenio Arrieta, a devoted friend and liberal doctor, and Jose Duaso y Latro, an eccentric conservative church canon who offers shelter to Goya.

Buero employs a technique he calls "immersion": we hear only what Goya does. So whenever Goya enters a scene, the dialogue disappears, replaced by movement, facial

expressions, and signing--though we do hear Goya's voice (provided by an onstage actor, Rob Nagle) and the sounds Goya imagines he hears, a heartbeat, cats meowing, dogs baying. This minimalist, concentrated approach makes it an advantage for Goya to be played by an actor who is also deaf. Here it's Peter Cook--amazingly, the first deaf actor to take the part.

Cook's Goya is as complex as Goya's art--dignified and imperiled, raging at human folly yet determined to reunite his family for Christmas, deaf to the world but acutely connected to his even darker creations. (However, Buero's interpretations of the black paintings, which he has Goya voice, overexplain works that are essentially inexplicable.) Though Cook cries out at times, almost all his eloquence is in his anguished face and movements. The rest comes through Nagle, his unobtrusive yet well-tuned accompaniment perfectly keyed to Cook's every look.

With their outsize, silent-movie emotions, the hearing people surrounding Goya are almost caricatures, offering sharp contrasts to one another. Consuelo Allen, as the lonely, lascivious Leocadia, feelingly conveys the price a lover pays for devoting herself to a driven genius. Don Blair plays the king with cold-blooded calculation, and James Serpento and Kevin McCoy are suitably sympathetic as the courageous cleric and doctor.

Wearing nightmare masks (by Lynda White), the ensemble--playing cats, bats, horned creatures, and carnival revelers--look as if they've escaped unchanged from Goya's sketches and paintings (which we see here in projections by Stephen Mazurek). Accompanying their dance of death is Joe Cerqua's macabre music and sound design, so subliminal they seem extensions of Goya's deafness.
