

By the Way, Meet Vera Stark
By Lynn Nottage
Directed by Tara Ahmadinejad

By the Way, Meet Vera Stark makes shrewd use of shifting frames to interrogate how we represent identity, specifically Black identity, in the media, shedding light on the complexity of navigating that quagmire from within. It focuses on a particular historical moment when Black actors were starting to be cast in film (playing stereotypical roles of enslaved people), and how that plays out over the next couple of decades. It shifts time periods in surprising ways, and speaks to the present day manifestations of the same issue.

The play portrays many different facets of Vera Stark's identity, so while the critics in the play may disagree about whether she was a subversive hero or a traitor to her race, she ultimately defies any single label. Vera Stark is a real, three-dimensional person, whose complexity will always exceed what historians and critics are able to name.

I approach this play with a focus on performance — differentiating modes of performance, and very crucially, how actors navigate between them. I've obsessed over the performance of identity, how it plays out in our day-to-day lives, and ways of experimenting with these notions on the stage — including the tactical use of stereotypes in performance. What I have found in recent years, is that audience members aren't always equipped to read tactical performances of stereotypes as such — and might interpret them as the perpetuation of stereotypes instead. Performing stereotypes in this way can be very dangerous — but it is an incredibly potent way to address the issues of representation and the impact they have on the communities whose bodies are colonized by dominant narratives.

What's so smart about this play is that it actually gives the audience key clues so that any "performance" has a clear motivation within the context of the story and within the characters' objectives, regardless of how uncomfortable it may be. Nottage sets the audience up to engage in this game, and the payoff is often hilarious and thrilling. Achieving these goals through performance, however, is challenging, and requires great precision to be able to convey a character's agency, their decision to wear a stereotype for their own reasons.

The performance strategies we will develop throughout the process will cut to the very core of the play's key theme— how much agency did someone like Vera Stark have? How much did she use what was available to her and subvert "from within," and how much was she behaving against her own will, because the circumstances were too overwhelming, as Carmen seems to suggest?

These questions around representation (who is representing, who is authoring that representation, and who is profiting from that representation) continue to resonate in contemporary culture, in theatre and beyond. And these crucial issues are fully baked into the play, allowing our team of actors to focus on realizing these wonderfully multi-dimensional characters, and the delicious humor happening on all different levels.