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[Review: 'Man of La Mancha,' Reprise at the Freud Playhouse](#)
 12:45 PM, February 16, 2009



Mention "Man of La Mancha" to anyone and chances are he or she will start booming out "The Impossible Dream" -- verse after relentless verse. This breakaway hit, which was trotted out by nearly every baritone who could get himself booked on a variety show in the '70s, has more or less eclipsed the classic 1965 musical from which it was spawned.

The song, however, is best appreciated in its dramatic context. And the great thing about [Reprise Theatre Company's](#) production, which opened Sunday at the Freud Playhouse, is the loving way it attends to the story and its defense of imagination and unrealizable dreams. When you have literary source material this good — and Dale Wasserman's book does a commendable job of framing and condensing Cervantes' epic novel "Don Quixote" — there's really no reason to waste it.

Directed by Michael Michetti, who last season staged Reprise's critically acclaimed production of "Li'l Abner," this revival of "Man of La Mancha" is so attractively arrayed that before offering up a few words of praise for the central performances of Brent Spiner, Julia Migenes and Lee Wilkof, let me pay homage to the sensational design team.

Tom Buderwitz's set, which provides just enough sense of the metallic dungeon Cervantes finds himself in, well situates us for the ensuing narrative journey of that comically beloved knight-errant who's forever tilting at windmills. Swift and inventive, the impressionistic physical environment lays the groundwork for Lap-Chi Chu's hypnotic lighting, Garry Lennon's effective costumes and Philip G. Allen's thrilling sound effects.

The temptation with big-name musicals is to overproduce them. And "La Mancha's" storied history, with its multiple Tonys and its original Broadway run of 2,328 performances, can make it easy to forget that the work opened in the ANTA Washington Square Theatre in Greenwich Village, a space that afforded the kind of intimacy the show depends on.

To put it another way, "La Mancha" supersized is "La Mancha" traduced. Recognizing this, Michetti doesn't engage in spectacle for spectacle's sake but rather treats the work for what it is — a music drama built on a romantic theme that's more autumnal than glitzy. Every guitar

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strum and orchestra blast, as well as every move in Kitty McNamee's subtle choreography, lends a storytelling hand.

Spiner plays the split role of Cervantes, the struggling Spanish author and tax collector who's thrown in jail for a trumped-up offense against the church, and his character Don Quixote, which is the alias Alonso Quijana adopts to transform his mundane life into something heroic. At first I questioned whether Spiner had sufficient magnetism for this undertaking. Having only heard Richard Kiley in the original cast recording, I couldn't help expecting Don Quixote to resemble either Raul Julia or Brian Stokes Mitchell, the musical's last two handsome Broadway headliners.

As it turns out, Spiner does indeed have the necessary charisma, though it's not of the heartthrob variety, which in any case isn't what's needed. With his somber eyes and professorial scruffiness, he is perfectly suited to inhabit the hard-up reality of this writer whose freedom has been unjustly taken and who wants above all to protect the manuscript of his magnum opus.



To win over his fellow prisoners (a merciless lot), Cervantes decides to enact the story with their assistance. If he can convince a jury of his jailed peers that the inspiring lesson of Don Quixote is worth preserving, perhaps he'll stand a chance of persuading the authorities controlling his fate.

Migenes, an opera singer renowned for her sizzling Carmen, portrays Aldonza, the low-born serving woman and sassy trollop whom Don Quixote tricks himself into believing is Lady Dulcinea, the woman of his dreams. (Valerie Perri performs this role in matinees.) Don't expect diva turns from Migenes, who seems more invested in her acting than in her singing here. Scampering around like a hissing alley cat with a vivid shock of tight red curls and a withering ironic laugh, she takes her part in this tragicomic parable of redemption — a crucial presence, though never a domineering one.

As Cervantes' manservant and Don Quixote's sidekick Sancho Panza, Wilkof brings his usual comic sharpness. Accompanying his master on his numerous fool's errands, this most famous second banana in all of literature is shown to be operating more out of affectionate loyalty than the mockery he occasionally indulges in.

The supporting cast is uniformly strong, and Maegan McConnell is in especially lovely voice as Antonia, who wishes her uncle would quit his humiliating Don Quixote delusion. She exquisitely leads off the number "I'm Only Thinking of Him," a light parody of self-interest posing as selfless concern that brightly shows off the collaborative harmony between Mitch Leigh's music and Joe Darion's lyrics.

The production, which runs close to an intermission-less two hours, has a few choppy moments as the Quixote drama gets into gear. The action shouldn't be slowed, but the ensemble hasn't yet found its footing in early transitions.

Let's not quibble, however, about Michetti's otherwise fluid staging, which rescues "Man of La Mancha" from its dinner theater doldrums. Believe it or not, even "The Impossible Dream" sounds un sentimentally fresh this time around.

--Charles McNulty

"Man of La Mancha," [Reprise Theatre Company](#), Freud Playhouse, UCLA, Westwood; 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays, through March 1; tickets: \$70-\$75, (310) 825-2101. Running time: 1 hour, 55 minutes.

Top photo: Brent Spiner, right, and Lee Wilkof in "Man of La Mancha." Bottom photo: Julia Migenes. Credit: Gary Friedman / Los Angeles Times.

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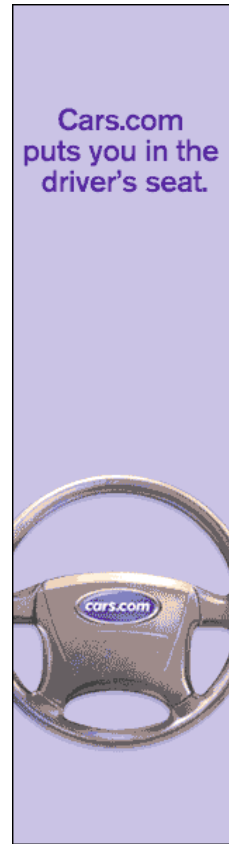
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