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Regional

Man of La Mancha

(Freud Playhouse at UCLA; 562 seats; \$75 top)

By BOB VERINI

A Reprise Theater Company presentation of a musical in one act with book by Dale Wasserman, based on "Don Quixote" by Miguel de Cervantes and "I, Don Quixote" by Wasserman.

Miguel de Cervantes/
Quixote - Brent Spiner
Aldonza/
Dulcinea - Julia Migenes/Valerie Perri
Manservant/
Sancho Panza - Lee Wilkof



Brent Spiner stars in the title role at the Reprise staging of Dale Wasserman musical 'Man of La Mancha' at UCLA's Freud Playhouse.

While other voices tout mindless, candy-colored tuners as the order of the day in our parlous times, Reprise begs to differ, offering up a "Man of La Mancha" to make the idealistic argument for seeing the world "not as it is, but as it should be." A dream cast brings out all the material's humor without stinting on emotional commitment. If there's any justice, tickets to the Freud Playhouse should be the hottest in town for a too-limited run.

Michael Michetti's splendid direction helps to restore the reputation of an intense, brooding musical drama, once considered right up there with "Cabaret" as a mid-'60s transitional milestone before a surfeit of community theater productions (and elevator renditions of "The Impossible Dream") lent it kitschy barnacles difficult to scrape off. It's a thoughtful, respectful restoration typical of Michetti, who's rapidly becoming a municipal treasure.

He eschews radical reinterpretation of Dale Wasserman's impromptu dungeon performance by a down-and-out Cervantes (Brent Spiner), who pleads with fellow inmates to spare his "Don Quixote" manuscript from the flames as he awaits Inquisition interrogation. With homespun neighbor Sancho (Lee Wilkof), the scribe enacts the journey down dusty Spanish roads seeking adventure, perceiving inns as castles and windmills as evil giants.

Running with the notion of assorted cutthroats finding their own measure of hope in the "beknighted" Quixote saga, Michetti fully integrates the ensemble into the play-within-a-play. They're given individual introductions, through dialogue taken from Wasserman's original 1959 "I, Don Quixote" teleplay (with permission obtained before Wasserman's death in December); a dull Moorish robbery sequence is blessedly cut to make room for the new material.

Now familiar to us as individuals, the inmates are utterly rapt throughout, not just moving set pieces but clapping, cheering and beating time on the wooden floor. Their participation brings a moody touch of zarzuela to the sidelines, reinforced by Kathy McNamee's subtly flamenco-influenced choreography.

Every cast member has credits as long as your arm, so the absence of a single weak link is no surprise. What startles is the greater impact of the tale on the audience, as a result of seeing its impact on the absorbed onlookers. Lumps in throat during the finale are practically guaranteed.

The principals could hardly be bettered. Spiner is less self-consciously regal than other Quixotes within memory, but for that reason he's more real and affecting than most; we're never allowed to forget his personal stake in enacting this narrative. And it takes an actor-singer of Spiner's caliber to make us hear the now-clinged lyrics of "The Impossible Dream" with new ears.

Julia Migenes executes the character arc of Aldonza with all the authentic heat of a world-famous Carmen (which, of course, Migenes is). At first exuding the lazy boredom of one who's seen it all, she slowly blossoms into a woman of spirit and grace, though her sensuality never recedes

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spirit and grace, though her sensuality never recedes.

Migenes (spelled by Valerie Perri at matinees) grows most of her numbers in chest, her brilliantly acted "Aldonza" one of the evening's highlights. The plangent appearance of her soprano in "What Does He Want of Me?" and the "Dulcinea" reprise is rendered even more thrilling.

And Lee Wilkof evokes tears of gratitude -- beyond those of laughter -- for his consummate ease and comic technique as a fully realized Sancho Panza. Every joke lands, and a brief exchange with a passing barber ([John Kassir](#)) becomes a memorable burlesque turn. [George Ball's](#) governor/innkeeper, [Robert Mammana's](#) padre and [Wendy Worthington's](#) housekeeper are notable in support.

The show looks great, its only questionable element the entrance gangplank running downstage left to upstage right, as if the Inquisition were running a cruise ship. [Tom Buderwitz](#) otherwise effectively suggests dungeon dank along with [Philip Allen's](#) spooky sound design and [Lap-Chi Chu's](#) ice-cold lighting, which shifts to extraordinary warmth for the Quixote scenes. [Garry Lennon's](#) colorful costumes avoid any hint of operetta in their worn-out reality.

Music by [Mitch Leigh](#). Lyrics by [Joe Darion](#). Original production directed by [Albert Marre](#). Originally produced by [Albert W. Selden](#) and [Hal James](#). Directed by [Michael Michetti](#). Choreography, [Kitty McNamee](#). Sets, [Tom Buderwitz](#); costumes, [Garry Lennon](#); lighting, [Lap-Chi Chu](#); sound, [Philip G. Allen](#); music director, [Brad Ellis](#); production stage manager, [Vernon Willet](#). Opened, reviewed Feb. 15, 2009. Runs through March 1. Running time: **1 HOUR, 50 MIN.**

With: [Roberto Alcaraz](#), [George Ball](#), [Brad Culver](#), [Thomas Fiscella](#), [Christopher Guilmet](#), [Daniel Guzman](#), [John Kassir](#), [Ethan Le Phong](#), [Robert Mammana](#), [Maegan McConnell](#), [Stefan Raulston](#), [John Todd](#), [Wendy Worthington](#), [Sam Zeller](#).

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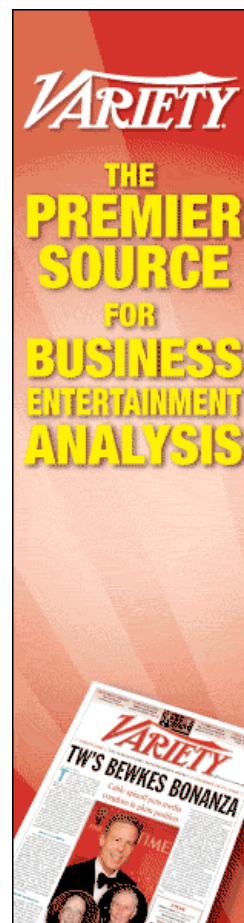
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