

“I KNOW WHO I AM AND WHO I MAY BE IF I CHOOSE.”

PERHAPS *Don Quixote* was always destined to be one of the world’s great masterpieces. And perhaps it was inevitable that Cervantes’s great novel would become a stage musical. After all, Cervantes was primarily a playwright and actor. And in the novel, Quixote says to Sancho, “In my childhood I loved plays, and I have always been an admirer of the drama. Plays are the semblance of reality, and deserve to be loved because they set before our eyes looking-glasses that reflect human life. Nothing tells us better what we are or ought to be than comedians and comedy.” In another passage in the novel, Quixote says, “I know who I am and who I may be if I choose.”

The actors in *Man of La Mancha* play the part of an audience for Cervantes’s play, and then that audience becomes actors by playing parts in his play. For added dramatic effect, the prisoners’ personalities are like those of the characters they are given to portray. The Governor becomes the Innkeeper, the cynical Duke becomes Dr. Carrasco, etc. There are two audiences to be served—the prisoners who have put Cervantes “on trial” and the theater audience. Because of the parallel between the prisoners and their characters, Cervantes attempts to convince the prisoners of his story’s value while his character, Quixote, is trying to convince the characters *within* the play of the value of his world view. It can be argued that the director and actors of *Man of La Mancha* are trying to convince *their* audience of the value of the musical’s story. The burden of suspension of disbelief falls on both audiences simultaneously.

An actor portrays Miguel de Cervantes in *Man of La Mancha*, who in turn portrays Señor Quijana, who has become Don Quixote de La Mancha. At the end of the show, the Governor says, “I think Don Quixote is brother to Don Miguel.” In other words, all that is brave and good about the mad knight is also a part of Cervantes. When this story takes place (the late 1500s), there have been no knights in Spain for over three hundred years, but this is entirely irrelevant to Quixote. What matters to him is what those knights stood for (at least as portrayed in his books). Most of the characters in the show think Quijana/Quixote is insane because he sees windmills



Don Quixote by Honoré Daumier.

as giants, a kitchen wench as a high-born lady; he sees the world as he’d like it to be, as he thinks it *should* be, instead of as it is. Quixote says in the musical, “When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies?” Even more today than when the show opened in 1965, our real world *does* seem lunatic. The only way to stay sane in our contemporary world is to see the world as it could be. Though *Man of La Mancha* is just over fifty years old, and the novel is almost four hundred years old, the message is as timely today as ever. ♦

Edited from: Scott Miller (1996), “From Assassins to West Side Story: The Director’s Guide to Musical Theatre”. Scott Miller is the founder and artistic director of New Line Theatre, an alternative musical theatre company he established in 1991 in St. Louis, Missouri.