

The Prison

The climax of the show comes when Cervantes brings music into the non-musical world of the prison. Cervantes brings (metaphorical) music to the gray lives of his fellow prisoners, giving them a kind of existential salve, even though many of them may never again see the light of day. The prisoners have formed their own justice system mirroring the Inquisition, including the assumption of guilt and the forfeiture of all the accused's possessions.

This literal prison mirrors alternately the "prison of the mind," as Carrasco sees Quixote's madness, but also the prison of conformity that Quixote battles against. In the last scene, the Padre, mirroring Carrasco's view, says, "Where is he, I wonder? In what dark cavern of the mind?" They see the madness as a prison, while Cervantes sees it as Quixote's liberation.

Take note that the prisoners' personalities mirror those of the characters they are given to portray: the authoritative Governor becomes the Innkeeper, the cynical Duke becomes Dr. Carrasco, etc. Cervantes can then perform the merits of his vision to three separate audiences – the prisoners who have put him "on trial", the characters within Don Quixote's play, and the real audience in the theater.

The Trial

With the addition of the "trial" aspect to Cervantes' play, he must please his audience in order to keep his possessions, just as a real actor must please an audience in order to keep his job. And though this isn't a formal trial (that waits for Cervantes when he is brought before the Inquisition), the idea of him being put on trial by his fellow prisoners is an interesting one. First, though they are prisoners, they have created their own system of trial and punishment within their prison; they are imitating the Inquisition in this forcibly constructed world. Second, a trial is basically a theatrical presentation after all, with a formal structure designed to present a narrative, specific parts to be played, a formal set, etc.; and the defendant's goal (or that of his attorney) is to convince the jury – his audience – that his story is worth believing and caring about. Cervantes telling a story as his defense isn't as unorthodox as it may seem. All trials are a matter of competing narratives.

Myth

There's the heart of *Don Quixote* —continuous collisions of illusion and reality. Which of them shall overcome? Quite willfully, I (Wasserman) chose illusion. For illusion is the intriguing choice in a world where reality too often destroys the spirit. The most significant line in my play is a very simple one. Sansón Carrasco informs Quixote that there are no knights, no chivalry, that there have been no knights for three hundred years —and these are *facts*. Quixote replies: “Facts are the enemy of truth.” I (Wasserman) do believe that facts are the enemy of truth. Carrasco adjures Cervantes that one must see life as it is. Cervantes rallies, his natural buoyancy of spirit asserting himself, and goes on to say: “When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To seek treasure where there is only trash. Too much sanity may be madness. And maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it might be.”

Elaborate, realistic costumes and props detract from the magic of the story. *Man of La Mancha* was one of the first musicals to understand that the theater's greatest strength is that it is abstract, not grounded in reality like film. As the show's interior story begins, Cervantes says to the prisoners and to us, the audience, "Come, enter into my imagination." It is an explicit acknowledgement of what is best and purest about live theater. It is an art form of the imagination, and at its best, it requires the participation of its audience to tell its stories.

Reality

Here are three levels of meaning: first, Don Quixote, who perceives but one reality; second, the innkeeper, who knows that Don Quixote is mad but who pretends; and, last, the muleteer, who refuses to pretend. These three perspectives give Cervantes the opportunity to examine truth, reality, and experience from all sides. Reality is reflected to us as from three mirrors, and reflected simultaneously, so that we perceive at the same moment three possible truths. Cervantes never pronounces in favor of any one of these truths but allows them to exist side by side or superimposed one upon another, creating from the relationship of one reality to another a work of art of great variety and depth.

Along with the various levels of reality at play in *Man of La Mancha*, there are also several kinds of truth. There is literal truth, the kind that Dr. Carrasco and the muleteers see, the kind of truth based on observable, provable facts. But even in the world of fact, there is always room for interpretation. As Quixote says, "Facts are the enemy of truth." Any politician can attest to the fact that numbers, quotations, and other seemingly concrete facts can easily be twisted to support nearly any argument. *Man of La Mancha* has very little respect for facts. This musical instead centers on emotional truth, focusing on nobility, virtue, and integrity rather than identity, time, or place. The show also deals with universal truths, the things that are true for all people – the need for respect, compassion, and achievement.

Tramping through the length and breadth of Spain brings the conviction that the fantasies of Don Quixote were based on the most accurate background of detail and that Henry James's "twin demons of observation and imagination" had never been harnessed in a better pair

Dr. Carrasco

If Quixote's belief that "Facts are the enemy of truth" is the central tenet of both Quixote's and *Man of La Mancha*'s world view, then Dr. Carrasco represents facts and Quixote represents truth, a deeper truth than mere facts can describe. Though the Innkeeper clearly thinks Quixote is insane, he sees no reason to change him. Most of the people who encounter Quixote know he's crazy but figure he's harmless enough. But his insanity is a personal affront to the scientific logic of Dr. Carrasco; he believes that Quixote must be forced to see his insanity, no matter the consequences. Carrasco does not recognize the existence of a deeper, more profound human truth than his science shows him. Carrasco is the most narrow-minded of any character in the show; he believes that only his perception of the world can be accurate, that what is real is limited to that which can be proven.

Quixote says at one point, "Too much sanity may be madness;" in other words, it's not always wise or healthy to dismiss those things predicated on faith. Some things can't be proven, but that doesn't mean they're not real. In his own way, Dr. Carrasco is as

extreme in his view as Quixote, and that is why the show's climactic confrontation is saved for these two characters. It's interesting to note that Dr. Carrasco/The Duke never sings alone. As the symbol of cold, hard reality, he does not participate in the very unnatural, very artificial act of singing in a musical.

Padre

Though the Padre also thinks Quixote is nuts, the Padre is the one person who believes that perhaps he should be allowed to live in his dream. When Carrasco promises a cure for Quixote's madness, the Padre says, "May it not be worse than the disease." He knows that taking a man's dream away from him can be devastating, or in this case, fatal. In our real world, the same is true of many people who retire from their jobs; without a goal to strive toward, without a purpose for being, they find nothing left in life. Similarly, when Quixote's quest, his "secret flame," is taken from him, he has no further reason to live. The death of his dream means the death of him. In the song "To Each His Dulcinea," the Padre sings, "And yet how lovely life would seem if every man could weave a dream to keep him from despair." The Padre knows Quixote is mad, but believes that madness to be in some way healthy in this case. The Padre is the position of moderation in the middle of the two extremes represented by Quixote and Carrasco.

Windmills

Quixote's first "misadventure" in the show is his famous tilting at windmills. So why did Wasserman include this episode instead of the hundreds of others in the novel? Was it because that moment has become Quixote's identifying act over the centuries? Or does this event hold symbolic meaning that establishes important themes in the show? Does the windmill represent the giant monolith of religion (or government) that can withstand any attack by a single man? Is the windmill a metaphor for various institutions built by man that have become so powerful, no man can bring them down?

Don Quixote

Examine his statement, "I know who I am, and who I may be if I choose." That is not the statement of a madman, nor of one with vacant rooms in his head. To one whose profession is theater, it is instantly recognizable as the statement of an actor, an actor perfectly aware of the role he is playing and quite properly annoyed by any who question his assumed identity. From this point forward I (Wasserman) felt quite comfortable with

Don Quixote. I understood him: an actor. That's what he was, first and last, writing his own play, always holding center stage. "In my childhood," he tells Sancho, "I loved plays, and I have always been an admirer of the drama." And he also says: "Plays are the semblance of realities, 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."

Again and again, we find evidence that Don Quixote is *acting* his role. We rarely see him alone, but when we do, it is observable that he no longer acts the madman but is calm and introspective —the introspection of an actor mentally devising further scenes in the drama. To Sancho he says: "For a knight-errant to run mad upon just any occasion is not meritorious; no, the rarity is to run mad with purpose." Or, as paraphrased later: "There's no credit in going crazy by accident, you've got to do it by *design*." Miguel de Cervantes was passionately and preeminently a man of the theater. Very logically, his literary creation was an actor quite aware of the role he was playing. Here is where I found an affinity, an identification, and a solution to containment of the novel within a coherent form. The solution, of course, was not to dramatize the novel at all, but to write a play about a playwright and his alter ego. Both of them were actors, fantasists, dreamers of impossible dreams.

The achingly human ambivalence of Quixote, who is both a criticism and a defense of man's idealism. In making us love him and recognize parts of him in ourselves, this absurd but magnificent dreamer has revealed deep truths. He has shown to what an important extent all men can, and must, create their own reality – and how inspiring and dangerous it can be.

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).

References

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