

# Man of La Mancha — surprisingly complex

By Michael Toscano

The musical *Man of La Mancha* is one of those shows that's so familiar we think we know it, even if we've never seen it. That's due in great part to the fact that its second act anthem, "The Impossible Dream," became an omnipresent pop standard in the 1960s and has remained with us ever since. A second song from the show, the love ballad "Dulcinea" also became a hit.

We also think we know the show because it is based on the famous story of Don Quixote, the elderly Spaniard who goes around "tilting at windmills."

But while everyone knows of this show, many have never seen it. Keegan Theatre is giving all of us a chance to correct that omission, and it's a splendidly performed and nuanced, even gritty, production.

## Darkness and light

UnderMark Rhea's inspired direction, the show mixes whimsy with very dark themes and manages to alternately wallow in despair and soar with inspiration.

Despite the comedy that's present and the pleasantly melodic songs, this is hardly a standard-issue 1960s-era pop musical. It is more complex than that and demands much of the audience.

The names behind the show are not familiar. Composer Mitch Leigh, lyricist Joe Darion, and librettist Dale Wasserman never had any other notable successes. Nevertheless, this work endures and seems startlingly fresh today.

In meeting the challenges of skillfully staging this work, especially within the cramped confines of D.C.'s ancient Church Street Theatre, Keegan deserves our thanks. In fact, the intimate performing space is the perfect venue for *Man of La Mancha*.

The setting of the musical is a dungeon, and the sense of claustrophobia it engenders would be diluted in a larger hall.

## Cervantes' tale

*Man of La Mancha* is not really the story of the foolish knight Don Quixote. It's actually about the writer who created him, Miguel de Cervantes.

In the Spanish city of Seville at the end of the 16th century, Cervantes

finds himself in a dungeon, held for supposed crimes against the Church. This much is historically accurate, and it had to do with the writer's side job as a tax collector and his belief that the Church should pay its fair share. But that's another story.

The play soon goes off into imaginary territory, as Cervantes is put on trial by the other inmates before the authorities can get to him. In his defense, he tells the tale of the addled old man Alonso Quijana, who believes himself to be a knight defending virtue and heroic idealism.

This knight's name? Don Quixote de la Mancha, of course. Thus, we have before us a play within the play, as Cervantes brings the old idealist to life, with the inmates performing the roles of the people he encounters.

Rhea has chosen to eliminate the intermission because he thinks the break interrupts the flow of the storytelling. That's a gamble, but as he said, "People watch movies for two hours without intermission. I think they'll sit through this OK." He's right. The show moves rapidly, and the intermission is not missed. At times the darkness of the play can be a bit taxing, and one longs for lighter moments to bubble forth again, but that's all a part of effective storytelling.

The Cervantes/Quijana/Quixote character, a romantic optimist, is played by David Jourdan. He is matched by the cynical and downtrodden, but lovely, prostitute Aldonza. Played by Carolyn Agan, Aldonza becomes the knight's "lady" Dulcinea in the story Cervantes tells.

The two provide a fiery mix, the relationship leading to both the loveliest and most sorrowful moments of the play.

Jourdan's voice is husky, his diction less than precise. It may not be technically up to some of the considerable demands of the score, but his voice is full of rich character, flaws and all, that enhance the effect of his

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PHOTO BY RAY GNIEWEK

David Jourdan, who plays the writer Cervantes and his famous character Don Quixote, is comforted by Carolyn Agan, who plays a jailed prostitute and the character Dulcinea, in the Keegan Theatre's production of *Man of La Mancha*.

# **La Mancha**

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singing.

Jourdan's eyes tell much of the story, as he has captured the happily crazed look that elicits empathy.

Agan's sweet voice is a crystal clear delight. But more than that, she skillfully plays the widest range of emotions. Starting off cynical, Agan allows Aldonza/Dulcinea to blossom under the attentions of the old knight, only to retreat into baleful bitterness after an extremely harrowing scene of violence.

The ballad "Dulcinea" is a perfect showcase for the actors' gifts. Jourdan introduces the song early on, and it is full of sunshine and hope. When Agan reprises the number much later, it is inexpressibly sorrowful.

Also of note are the performances of Michael Innocenti as Cervante's servant sidekick Sancho Panza, and Kevin Adams as the leader of the prisoners and the Innkeeper of the Quixote fable.

Innocenti provides many comic moments, yet never loses the character's compassion. Adams is both scary and fun, the latter never more so than in the "Knight of the Woeful Countenance," as he bestows that "title" on Quixote.

Rhea's vision gambles that the beauty of the themes and the songs will make up for the distressing themes and ugliness. His approach is daring and successful, providing a

fully developed version of a musical and laying bare its earnest, clever premise.

Rhea's work is supported by George Lucas' set, a multi-level, fully dimensional and unrelentingly grim dungeon space and the bawdy, spontaneous-seeming choreography from Melissa-Leigh Douglass.

There are several nice, fanciful flourishes from costume designer Kelly Peacock such as her stylized, Picasso-like burros and the silly, yet gallant, steed.

Full of challenging contradictions, this is a beautifully staged fable.

## **If you go**

*Man of La Mancha* continues through Aug. 16, performed by Keegan Theatre at the Church Street Theatre, 1742 Church Street, N.W. in Washington, D.C. The theatre is located in the Dupont Circle area between 17th & 18th and Q & P Streets, N.W.

If you use Metro, take the Red Line to Dupont Circle. If you drive, allow extra time to find a parking spot as on-street parking is scarce.

The closest parking garage is Colonial Parking at 1616 P Street, N.W. (\$6 after 5:30 p.m.).

Showtime Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays is 8 p.m. with Sunday matinees at 2 p.m.

Tickets are \$35, with \$5 discounts available for seniors and students. For tickets, call (703) 892-0202, extension 2, or e-mail [boxoffice@keegantheatre.com](mailto:boxoffice@keegantheatre.com). For general information, visit [www.keegantheatre.com](http://www.keegantheatre.com).