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## THEATER BY CHUCK ADAMS

caption



JOHN BAUGUSS

## Spinning Windmills

Lukewarm reception for *La Mancha*

**M**ounting its second ensemble cast in a row (after January's *Book of Days*), the VLT revives the internationally adored musical *Man of La Mancha* for a three-week run. Co-directed by friends Reva Kaufman and Peg Major, the musical treatment of Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedras' *Don Quixote* by playwright Dale Wasserman (who never read the novel) mostly sticks to the theme of idealism vs. realism in the face of the horror of the Spanish Inquisition. Thankfully the musical runs in one act, as the energy wanes and wanes throughout. But overall it's a well acted, uplifting show about tales and the tellers who tell (or believe) them.

The exposition is straightforward enough: Author-soldier-tax collector Miguel de Cervantes (Michael P. Watkins) is expelled with his servant (Claude Offenbacher) to a dungeon-esque holding cell for enemies of the Inquisition. His crime: Foreclosing on a church. The ensemble of prisoners, presided over by the Governor (Barry Carroll), raid his chest of possessions. Cervantes is unaffected until the Governor attempts to burn his *Don Quixote* manuscript. Cervantes protests and demands that he be allowed to perform his novel; if he tells a good story, *Don Quixote* is spared; if he tells a bad one, it's to be burned.

Thus begins the play within a play, as Cervantes dons a fake beard and ruffles his hair to play the highly delusional but sweet-as-a-grandfather Don Quixote de la Mancha, knight errant and keeper of the chivalrous flame. Wasserman condenses and boils the thick, complex novel into about five easily digested segments. The problem with this is that it becomes a one-joke story: Don Quixote mistakes windmills for giants, innkeepers for lords and whores for fair maidens. Alas, the joke soon wears thin. The audience last Saturday night sat mostly sedated.

The lack of energy mostly comes from the theater itself. The proscenium stage at the VLT puts all the action at a distance from the audience, as if the play were a movie merely being watched. Foreground props or players obscure background actions; vocals, unless overly projected, register with hit-or-miss precision; fight scenes appear slow and clunky. While the original Broadway version played well for its audience of hundreds,

smaller scale *La Mancha* productions would profit from either a dinner theater or a theatre in the round presentation. Bringing the pit band onto the stage (or closer to the audience) and blocking the songs with more skill might have livened things up a bit.

This is not to say that the stage *itself* was sub par. Indeed, Bill Campbell's set design for the medieval dungeon is innovative and technically brilliant, complete with a water well (one character falls in and is later retrieved sopping wet) and a raised stepladder that descends when Inquisitors enter to retrieve prisoners for questioning.

The heart of the play revolves around Quixote and Aldonza (Nikki Pagniano), the realist wench-prostitute (who the play-acting knight dubs "Dulcinea"). It is this clashing of idealism and realism that gives the play weight for modern audiences. Aldonza, who is frequently beaten and raped by the local muleteers, cannot accept Quixote's steadfast belief in her beauty despite all evidence to the contrary. Pagniano plays the part of the whip smart but vulnerable Aldonza to a sweeping crescendo (it doesn't hurt she's given poignant lines). At the end she roots for Quixote's continued delusion, and the audience, in turn, roots for her.

Offenbacher's Sancho Panza, on the other hand, is annoying. Contrary to the novel's Sancho (who follows the knight-errant because he's promised a squire's share of land), this version sticks with Quixote because he "likes him" — and even has a song about it called "I Really Like Him," pulling off the inglorious feat of being both musically grating and unfunny. Sancho is supposed to be the bumbling foil to Quixote's madness, but his jokes mostly fall flat.

Watkins pulls off his dual roles with finesse, easily slipping between the director and defender of the arts Cervantes and the elderly eccentric Quixote (allowing the audience to effortlessly navigate switches between truth and tale). Watkins thus assures *La Mancha*'s cohesion as a meditation on art and its all-too-human creators: If Don Quixote is the stubborn dictator of his reality, Cervantes is the stubborn dictator of his life. **EW**

*Man of La Mancha* continues through April 7. Tix are available at 344-7751.