

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Of Men, Women, Windmills and Winning Combinations

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 3rd, 2017

It seems churlish to write about the production of *Man Of La Mancha* at A Noise Within (ANW) several weeks into its run, but the company's rotating schedule, combined with the need to catch up to shows with shorter calendars, resulted in this late viewing.

Not *too* late however. In this 25th year of its existence, ANW is ending its 2016-17 season with a flourish: an exceptionally moving production of this iconic musical by Dale Wasserman, with music by Mitch Leigh and lyrics by Joe Darion, playing in repertory with Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Eugene O'Neill's rarely staged delicious comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!*

A Noise Within's Founding Artistic Co-Director Julia Rodriguez-Elliott has staged *Lear* and *La Mancha*, and both feature her partner and husband, Founding Artistic Co-Director, Geoff Elliott, playing the massively demanding central roles of King Lear and Miguel de Cervantes/Don Quixote, respectively.

Lear or *La Mancha* alone would be challenge enough, but delivered as they are here in rotating rep — including a back-to-back performance scheduled for Saturday — it is ambition that brushes close to danger.

It is a lot of a good thing, but it does not disappoint.



I-r, Geoff Elliott and Kasey Mahaffy in *Man of La Mancha* at A Noise Within.

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King Lear and *Ah, Wilderness!* were [reviewed earlier](#). But the *La Mancha* surprise is how, 52 years in, this musical still resonates, perhaps because of its tone, its anthem-prone score and its message of hope in the darkest of times. Watching it in close proximity to *Lear*, with the same actor performing both parts, underscores the emotional parallels of both dramas. Even though they were created 400 hundred years apart and deal with very different events, the depth of the humanity in each aging protagonist is very much the same.

Originally based on a 1959 nonmusical teleplay titled *I, Don Quixote*, written by Wasserman (and starring Lee J. Cobb), the musical version of *La Mancha* opened at Connecticut's Goodspeed Opera House in 1964, moved off-Broadway in 1965 and eventually to Broadway that same year. It

became a hit, playing more than 2,300 performances and went on to achieve an equally astonishing international success.

From a technical standpoint, what is striking yet again is how little it takes to create memorable theatre. Boards and a passion validated once more. On an almost bare stage, we find the rabble prisoners of The Spanish Inquisition decked out in contemporary rags, locked away in a dungeon to await almost certain death. When Miguel de Cervantes (Geoff Elliott) and his servant Sancho Panza (the ever engaging Kasey Mahaffy) land in their midst, they are ripe fodder for this growling mob that wants only to rob them.

But Cervantes, a failed poet, writer and tax collector, imprisoned for causing the foreclosure of a monastery, talks his fellow prisoners into sparing him and Sancho *if* he entertains them with a play. And so begins the transformation of Cervantes into Alonso Quijano, knight-errant and old man with a wandering mind who becomes Don Quixote de la Mancha and sets off with his “squire” Sancho, in search of fame and fortune...

The plot is needlessly convoluted by so many transformations, yet it manages, with the simplest of found objects, to convey Don Quixote’s flailing battles in his quest for honor, love and glory. (Fred Kinney is the resourceful scenic designer.)

Of course, it’s Leigh’s soaring music and Darion’s clever lyrics that carry the day, mostly because they’re at once so exalted and by now so familiar. But aspects of the action are irresistible too. Aldonza’s seduction by Quixote’s kindness from servant-girl and prostitute into the Dulcinea to whom he’s pledged his love (“Dulcinea”); the honesty of Sancho Panza’s response, “I don’t know,” followed by the genuine “I Really Like Him,” when asked why he sticks with this foolish old man; the humorous triptych of Quixote’s niece, his housekeeper and the padre in a three-way confessional, wherein each one pretends that everything they do is for the Don, because they’re “only thinking of him.” And finally that impossible song, “The Quest,” more commonly known as “The Impossible Dream,” which inevitably seals the deal.



l-r, Cynthia Marty, Jeremy Rabb and Cassie Simone in *Man of La Mancha* at A Noise Within.

So much for the bones of this successful show, but there is a great deal else to admire about the production at ANW, starting with the inventiveness of Angela Balogh Calin’s costumes, her use of trash bags, kitchen bowls, strainers and the other cheap kitchen tools to create her magic. There is the changeable mood lighting by Ken Booth and, above all, the live orchestra — woodwinds, brass, percussion and guitars, delivering the alchemy of that score under the direction of Dr. Melissa Sky-Eagle.

In the end, it’s the combined work of the director and all the members of the creative team that delivers the results. Rodriguez-Elliott proves herself a director of nimble intelligence and distinction with both *Lear* and *La Mancha* — formidable twin tasks to undertake even under these best of circumstances.



Cassandra Marie Murphy and Geoff Elliott in *Man of La Mancha* at A Noise Within.

The acting ensemble is universally strong, but two super achievers deserve to be called out: Cassandra Marie Murphy, a powerful actor and singer who has the vocal strength and range

required of the hardened Aldonza, as well as the ability to reveal her inner softness — and ANW regular Jeremy Rabb, who never ceases to amaze. Possessing the craggy features a Leonardo might have wished to paint, he endows the Padre, with all the solemnity, hypocrisy and wiliness required of the role.

Of course, the magisterial Geoff Elliott dominates both *Lear* and *La Mancha*. His dual undertaking is a *tour de force*, full of sound and fury when it needs to be, especially as the hubristic Lear, yet also capable of devastating vulnerability. A big man of almost overbearing physical stature, Elliott is a performer endowed with the cultivated vocal projection of a fine classical actor, and a booming baritone that can really deliver a song. He owns a collection of attributes that many actors would kill for and very few possess. Yet he is most affecting as the *naïf* Don Quixote, weakened by his weakening brain and filled with an utterly disarming, almost childlike tenderness.

This pairing of *Lear* and *Man of La Mancha* crowns ANW's 25 years of survival, reportedly with a balance sheet that has never dipped into red ink — an almost unheard of achievement.

If they still have the tickets, and if you have the appetite and stamina for marathon theatre, you could do worse than see *Lear* and *La Mancha* on the same day this Saturday, May 6.

Otherwise, see it when you can. But see it.

Top image: l-r, Geoff Elliott and Kasey Mahaffy in Man of La Mancha at A Noise Within.

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: *Man of La Mancha*

WHERE: A Noise Within, 3352 E Foothill Blvd, Pasadena, CA 91107.

HOW: Tickets start at \$25, available at www.anoisewithin.org or at 626.356.3100. Student rush with ID, one hour before performance: \$20.

WHEN: *La Mancha*: Saturday, 8pm; Sunday, 2pm; May 12, 8pm; May 13, 2 & 8pm; May 21, 2 & 7pm; June 2, 8pm; June 3, 2 & 8pm; June 4, 2pm.

***King Lear*:** Today, 7:30pm; Friday 8pm; Saturday, 2pm.

Ah, Wilderness! May 14, 2 & 7pm; May 19, 8pm; May 20, 2 & 8pm.

Season ends June 4.

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