

History of *Man of La Mancha*

MAN OF LA MANCHA

Man of La Mancha was perhaps the first true “concept musical,” the kind of musical in which the over-arching metaphor or statement is more important than the actual narrative, in which the method of storytelling is more important than the story.

The roots of Wasserman’s *Man of La Mancha* lay in the Golden Age of Television for CBS’s Dupont Show of the Month program. Originally produced as a non-musical television play *I, Don Quixote*, starred Lee J. Cobb as Cervantes, Colleen Dewhurst as Aldonza and Eli Wallach as Sancho Panza. Upon its telecast, the play was well received by both the public and the critics alike and Wasserman received an award from the Writers Guild of America.

The television play was then adapted for the stage. Albert Marre, who was directing the stage production, asked Wasserman to turn it into a musical. Mitch Leigh was selected as composer and the original lyricist was W.H. Auden. Auden wrote great poetry but not great lyrics and he was writing a different, more cynical show. Consequently, he was replaced by Joe Darion, of *Shinbone Alley* fame, who stepped in and wrote the lyrics for the musical which we know and love today.

I, Don Quixote has an almost identical plot to what would become *Man of La Mancha*. The opening lines to the most famous song in the show, “The Impossible Dream”, were written by Wasserman as part of a monologue. In the musical, the character of Cervantes proposes to improvise the story of Don Quixote inside the prison and invites the other prisoners to take part. In the play, Cervantes describes the character of Don Quixote and the play segues into the story of the knight. The play also includes many adventurous episodes from the novel which were omitted from the musical due to time constraints.

Man of La Mancha was born out of the experimental theatre movement of 1960s New York, and was written to be played in a small theatre. Its original New York production was staged in three-quarter thrust, with the audience on three sides of the stage. Just as Cervantes’ novel rarely provides much detail of the settings of Quixote’s adventures, leaving it up to the reader’s imagination, likewise the musical’s creators wanted their show to be extremely minimalist, with a bare set, minimal costumes and props, and the challenge to its audience to *participate* in the storytelling through the use of their own imagination. But it asks for us to participate in another way as well. In its heart, *Man of La Mancha* is about the 1960s, and by extension, about any time of political unrest—including today—and it is about the responsibility of each of us to make the world a better place than we found it.

Man of La Mancha is not a musicalization of *Don Quixote*; it is instead a show about a few hours in the life of Miguel



Don Quixote by Salvador Dali.

de Cervantes, using *Quixote* as a storytelling device. As the show’s bookwriter Dale Wasserman has written, “My man of La Mancha is *not* Don Quixote; he is Miguel de Cervantes.” In fact, only a tiny part of the novel is dramatized in the show; after all, there are more than four hundred characters in the novel. When Wasserman originally set out to write the first, non-musical version of his play, he remembers, “In theory the answer seemed simple. I’d write a play about Miguel de Cervantes in which his creation, Don Quixote, would be played by Cervantes himself. The two would progressively blend in spirit until the creator and his creation would be understood as one and the same.”

Man of La Mancha first opened at the Goodspeed Opera House in 1964. Rex Harrison was to be the star of this production, but when he found out that he actually had to sing the songs, he lost interest. Michael Redgrave was also a candidate for the role of Cervantes / Don Quixote.

On November 22, 1965, the musical opened at the ANTA Theatre off Broadway, downtown near Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village. It was the perfect place for it, sharing more in common with radical, anti-establishment works like *Marat/Sade* and Wasserman’s own *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, than with *Hello, Dolly!* or *The Sound of Music*. The ANTA had no fly space, no proscenium arch, no curtain, none of the trappings of traditional theatres. But by some weird quirk of contract law, the ANTA was officially categorized as a Broadway house because of its seating capacity, despite being some forty blocks from the rest of Broadway, and only a few blocks from other off Broadway houses. So, as it would all its strange life, *Man of La Mancha* was born straddling the

experimental world of off Broadway and the commercial world of Broadway.

Life magazine called the show “a metaphysical smasher.” The *New York Post* said, “*Man of La Mancha* is a triumph of creative imagination and stagecraft.” London’s *Morning Telegraph* said, “*Man of La Mancha* is what theatre is for, why theatre lives and endures.” *Rolling Stone* wrote, “*Man of La Mancha* has a heart that sings and a spirit that soars.” John Chapman of the *New York Daily News* called the original production, “an exquisite musical play—the finest and most original work in our musical theatre since *Fiddler on the Roof* opened. It moves enthrallingly from an imaginative beginning to a heart-wrenching end.” Norman Nadel wrote in the *World-Telegram & Sun*, “To reach the unreachable star—what a soaring aspiration for an indestructible dreamer, and what a glorious summation for a bold and beautiful new musical.” He went on, “Thus it goes all evening—realism aligned with romanticism, and each sharpened by the other.”

The show starred Richard Kiley as Quixote and Joan Diener as Aldonza, and it won the Drama Critics Circle Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Variety Drama Critics Award, the Saturday Review Award, and five Tony Awards, including best musical and best score. The show moved uptown in March 1968 to a regular Broadway house, the Martin Beck Theatre, then, oddly, moved in March 1971 to the off Broadway Eden Theatre, then again in May 1971 to the Mark Hellinger Theatre back on Broadway. It ran a total of 2,328 performances and was revived in 1972 (less than a year after the first production closed), and again with Kiley in 1977. The world famous French/Belgian songwriter and singer Jacques Brel saw the show in New York and fell in love with it. He brought it to Paris, playing the lead himself. Luckily, a French cast album was made, preserving Brel’s soulful interpretation. Productions of *La Mancha* were mounted all over the world, and in September 1972, it even opened in the Soviet Union. The show was revived again in 1992 with Raul Julia and Sheena Easton, then again in 2003 with the African America actor Brian Stokes Mitchell as Quixote. Today, the show enjoys 300-400 productions each year.

When the play was made into a film in 1972, Peter O’Toole played Cervantes / Quixote. Everyone else in the cast with the exception of O’Toole, who was dubbed by Simon Gilbert, sang their own songs. Some material from the original television play, which was omitted from the stage musical, was included in the film version.

The Spanish Inquisition

Miguel de Cervantes was tried by the Spanish Inquisition in 1597, and was excommunicated for “offenses against His Majesty’s Most Catholic Church,” escaping more severe punishment, which could’ve included burning at the stake. He served several prison terms.

In 1478 Ferdinand and Isabella established the Spanish Inquisition. Quite separate from the Medieval Inquisition instituted by Pope Innocent III, the Spanish Inquisition was controlled by Ferdinand. The Spanish Inquisition was used as a cloak for grand larceny as well as political and private revenge, and the inquisitors were known for their fanatical zeal and great cruelties. The church and state were united closely (mostly for the profit of the state), and heresy was considered a crime against both, to be compared only with high treason and anarchy.

At the time of Ferdinand and Isabella, Spain was a mixture of Christian, Jewish and Muslim cultures that had generally lived a peaceful co-existence. Granada in the south was very Moorish and the cities of Seville and Barcelona had large Jewish populations. The Jews were very loyal subjects and occupied many important religious and political quotes. The kingdom of Castile even had an unofficial rabbi.

However, towards the end of the 14th century there was a growing feeling of anti-semitism. In Seville hundreds of Jews were killed and the synagogue was completely destroyed. Similar incidences happened in the cities of Cordoba, Valencia and Barcelona. Following this there was a huge conversion of Jews leading to a new social group in the 15th century: New Christians or *conversos*. By going through the long and difficult process of converting, Jews could escape persecution and hold many offices and posts that were earlier closed to them. *Conversos* were not trusted by either Jews or Christians.

Jews who continued to practice their faith were not a direct object of persecution; however, they were a target of suspicion because it was thought that they influenced *conversos* to return to their former faith. On March 31st of 1492 a decree was issued that all Jews had to accept baptism into the Catholic faith or leave the country by July 31st. They were allowed to take all their possessions with them, but were forced to sell their land. Gold, silver and coined money were forfeited to the Inquisition. It is thought that of a population of 80,000 Jews, about one-half of them chose emigration. The most intense period of persecution of *conversos* lasted through 1530. With the reign of King Charles I in 1516, *conversos* were hopeful of an end to the Inquisition; however, the new king left the system in place.

During the 16th century, most trials were focused on the beginnings of Protestantism. The first trials directed at Protestants were against a sect of mystics or *Alumbrados* in Guadalajara and Valladolid. None were executed, but the trials were long and ended with prison sentences. The subject of the *Alumbrados* opened up the Inquisition to many intellectuals and clerics interested in the ideas of Erasmus. Ironically both Charles I and Philip II of Spain were admirers of this philosopher and theologian.

The third group to suffer under the Inquisition were



An instrument of torture used to make the accused confess



The coat of arms of the Inquisition

moriscos, or Muslims who had converted from Islam. The highest population of *moriscos* lived in the areas of Granada and Valencia. Officially, all Muslims in Castile had converted to Christianity in 1502. Those in Aragón and Valencia were forced to convert in 1526. Many *moriscos* maintained their religion in secret. Initial policy toward them was more of a peaceful evangelization than intense persecution. In the kingdoms of Valencia and Aragón, a large majority of *moriscos* were under the jurisdiction of the nobility and persecution would have been viewed as an assault on the economic interests of this social class.

The Inquisition judges, aided by local bishops and state authorities, would come to a town and announce a grace period, the Edict of Grace, for all heretics to come in and confess their crimes and be punished, after which the trials began. All the self-incriminated who presented themselves within a period of grace of one month were offered the possibility of reconciliation with the Church without severe punishment. Self-incrimination was not in and of itself the saving grace for many people, one also had to accuse all accomplices.

Every Catholic citizen was charged with the responsibility to report suspicious behavior. Accusers were anonymous—the defendant had no way of knowing who had accused him. False denunciations were common resulting from personal vendettas. The names of witnesses were kept

secret.

Following a denunciation, the case was examined by *calificadores*, followed by detention. Many people were detained for long periods of time (sometimes up to two years) before their case was heard. Property of the accused was immediately sequestered by the Inquisition. The property was used to pay for procedural expenses as well as the accused's maintenance and costs. This often subjected the relatives of the defendant to poverty.

Torture was often used to force confessions of guilt. At public ceremonies, the names of the guilty were announced and punishments inflicted, ranging from fines and excommunication to imprisonment for life or burning at the stake, called "purification." The most popular methods of torture by the Inquisition were *garrucha*, *toca* and the *potro*. The *garrucha* consisted of hanging the criminal from the ceiling by a pulley with weights tied to the ankles, with a series of lifts and drops during which arms and legs were pulled and often dislocated. The *toca* forced a cloth into the mouth of the victim forcing them to drink water spilled from a jar so that they had the impression of drowning. The *potro*, or the rack, was the most popular instrument of torture. When the victim confessed, the torture was ended.

Minor infractions were punished by having to wear the *sanbenito*, a gown on which was painted a sign of the crime committed. Other potential results of trial were acquittal, suspension, a public penance (consisting of a fine, exile or sentence to the galleys), a public ceremony of reconciliation, a long period in jail or public whipping. The most serious punishment was burning at the stake in a public execution. If repentant, the body was garroted before being burned, if not the individual was burned alive. If the accused died prior to the completion of trial, their body would be burned in effigy.

The Inquisition was abolished during the Napoleonic Empire (1808—1812) but was reinstated when Ferdinand VII recovered the throne in 1814. The Inquisition was finally abolished in 1834 by Royal Decree during the reign of Isabel II. The total number processed by the Inquisition was approximately 150,000. Between 3,000 and 5,000 were put to death. ♦