

MAN OF LA MANCHA

Virginia stage company

October 26 through November 11

For tickets call: (757)671-8100

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

First, let's get to those pesky spotlights that shine into the audience's faces throughout the production .. Why are they there? To alienate us from the stage? To blur the images of the actors? To suggest the probing, unrelenting torture of the Spanish Inquisitors? I suppose, maybe, it's the latter. Even so, the real people of that horrendous time didn't endure blinding lights in their faces so why do we have to?

To re-imagine Broadway musicals when they are done outside the Big Apple is hardly new. The vast majority of theatres do not have the budgets and other resources to replicate Broadway. Sometimes, though rarely, the show is helped by a leaner presentation or even a new concept. This "re-imagined" production, however, does little to bring new life to this highly theatrical work based on Cervantes DON QUIXOTE.

Director Amanda Dehnert has chosen to do LA MANCHA as a play with incidental music. She has elected to work without a choreographer. I was fortunate to see the exciting contributions, including a terrifying rape scene which is all but ignored here, by the way, of Jack Cole in the original production at the temporary ANTA Washington Square Theatre on the campus of NYU. It was a highly charged musical, not a stage play, as stated in the program, and it was given a performance I shall never forget.

I once heard the great George Abbott say that in doing a musical you have to cast singers! . He went on to say not just singers who can hit the notes but who can sing the character. Dehnert doesn't follow Mr. Abbott's wisdom. She also virtually eliminates the orchestration so the music seems anemic. Blockbuster though it is, this show is Mitch Lee's only hit. He is not a major composer. His music needs the help of creative orchestrations.

In fairness, I don't know how much influence this director had in choosing the cast. Jamie La Verdier is a standout and comes mighty close to making the show about Sancho Panza. Something's awry when "I Like Him" stops the action. As Cervantes/Don Quixote/Alonzo Quijano, Philip Hernandez, proves that he knows how to build a song but is not able to make the music soar. Dehnert has the actor so busy "being generic insane" that we lose belief in and sympathy for Don Quixote. He is emotionally unmoving. Hernandez is a fine performer not helped by the director. Rachael Warren is quite simply totally miscast. A talented actress, but not right for Aldonza.physically or vocally. The remaining members of the company are adequate but vocally weak in many cases.

There's a touch of Peter Weiss' MARAT/SADE in this production. You'll recall that splendid work was done in an insane asylum reflecting the crazy world of the French revolution. Dehnert has everybody acting pretty nutty as well. The atmosphere is more mental hospital than dungeon. Both of these shows were, by the way, done in the turbulent sixties. She also works extremely hard to add humor through sight gags including a man in drag. Not needed, The comedy should come from the characters.

I liked Kris Stone's ominous, scary set and Lap Chi Chu'S lighting is fine except for those blinders across the audience side of the stage. Bring your sun shades or a visor.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.