

Centaur version of classic is a madcap marvel

BY PAT DONNELLY, THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 13, 2010



Michel Perron (left) plays a huggable Sancho Panza, and Peter Anderson is a tour de force as Don Quixote. To watch scenes from the play, go to montrealgazette.com/videos
Photograph by: PHIL CARPENTER, The Gazette

DON QUIXOTE

Time to brush up on your Cervantes -in an entirely pleasurable fashion. Don Quixote has arrived at Centaur Theatre, in a dazzling, madcap production, directed by Roy Surette.

This version of the picaresque adventures of a hapless 17th-century Spanish idealist was penned by Colin Heath, who also wrote *For Art's Sake*, just produced here by Geordie Productions, and Peter Anderson, who plays the title role of Quixote -brilliantly. If Miguel de Cervantes purists are offended, they must be reminded of precedents, such as the Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha* (1965) or, locally, Dulcinea Langfelder's solo *Dulcinea's Lament* (2008).

This beautifully designed production (wood-hued set and ingenious props by David Roberts, stunning costumes by Sheila White) cleverly caricatures the legendary Spanish hero through physical comedy, the use of commedia dell'arte style masks, and a colloquialized text packed with punch lines.

Don Quixote is a co-production with Vancouver's Arts Club Theatre, in association with Axis Theatre, also of Vancouver. Having been previously exposed to the work of Axis, which has specialized in physical theatre for more than 30 years, I wasn't surprised to find myself witnessing a production that felt a bit like sophisticated children's theatre with naughty bits slipped in for adults. What I didn't expect was to see finely honed Axis techniques passed on so smoothly to two Montreal actors, Harry Standjofski and Michel Perron, who have truly outdone themselves in this piece.

Perron, especially, takes to the genre like a duck to water, portraying the goofiest, most huggable Sancho Panza imaginable. Standjofski, who plays several roles and strums the guitar to boot, is at his hilarious best as a sadistic aristocrat who torments the Knight of the Woeful Countenance and his loyal sidekick.

Given the use of half-masks with outlandish noses, it's not always easy to discern who is playing whom. The voice of Vancouver actor Mike Wasko, who plays the ruthless Samson Currasco, among others, is as distinctive as it is resonant. But other members of the eight-actor cast, which includes Glenda Braganza, as Marcela, Sasa Brown, as Antonia, Beatrice Zeilinger, as Teresa, and Allan Zinyk, as Doctor Nicolas, aren't as easy to track.

Anderson's performance is a tour de force, which enhances rather than destroys traditional images of Quixote. His dance of madness (choreographer Karen Pitkethly), is as funny as it is touching. He is, by turns, amazing (riding a rather unstable looking windmill), pathetic (grovelling to be dubbed by a tavern keeper), and inspiring (whenever his dream lady, Dulcinea, is mentioned he springs to attention like a puppy). Speaking of canines, the man-sized white hound that enters with the nobles in the second act is a wonder to behold.

While this Don Quixote marks a collaboration between three companies and multiple individuals, the clever wordplay (studded with malapropisms) and ironic, play-within-the-play, commentary of the script sets the blueprint. But director Surette deserves the credit for synchronizing all elements into a fully achieved work of art.

The cross-pollination of Vancouver and Montreal theatre talent begun by Surette when he took over Centaur Theatre three years ago is redefining the aesthetic of our flagship anglophone theatre in a fascinating way.

Don Quixote continues at Centaur Theatre, 453 St. Francois Xavier, until Dec. 5. Call 514-288-3161 or go to www.centaurtheatre.com.