

STUDY GUIDE FOR
MAN OF LA MANCHA

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“I know who I am and who I may be if I choose.”

(Don Quixote in *Don Quixote de La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes)

Miguel de Cervantes, Biography

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, the son of a would-be surgeon, was born, scholars would have us believe, on September 29, 1547. He served briefly as a soldier in Italy in 1570 and during combat Cervantes was wounded and lost the use of his hand, an injury which he would brag about for years. Following a furlough because of this, Cervantes was captured by pirates in 1575 and sold as a slave to a rebel Greek living in Algiers. After many attempts at escape he was finally ransomed back to his family in 1580, much to the sadness of the Greek who delighted in Cervantes' skill at writing and conversation. Upon his return he attempted to scrape together a living for himself and his family by writing plays, none of which received much popularity. In 1605 Cervantes sees published the first part of what can arguably be called the first modern novel, capturing the human spirit for hundreds of years to follow: *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha*. In 1616, one year after publishing the much awaited second part of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes died leaving behind a few modestly successful plays and a collection of fiction.

Overview Spanish Inquisition

“The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water. God turns it withersoever He will.’ Do you believe that this comes upon you from us? The Lord has put this thing into the heart of the king.”

(Queen Isabella on her reasoning for the Inquisition)

During the Spanish Inquisition's almost four centuries of influence over the Spanish Empire, religious and ethnic intolerance reigned freely all in the hopes of purging the soul and saving it from eternal damnation without regards for the body. Before even the hopes of “salvation” would arrive in the form of a mass trial, or *auto de fe*, prisoners were held without knowledge of their accused crime or a date when they would possibly stand trial. Those lucky enough to receive a trial were often forced into confessions listing off every slight transgression they had ever committed. If a confession was still not easily forthcoming, torturers would endeavor to burn, stretch, pummel, and soak an admission out of the detainee.

The prisons themselves were constructed below palaces and castles in caverns of darkness; above in the palaces themselves, the trials would take place. As soon as an arrest occurred, all communication was forbidden; the use of writing implements, direct contact with family, and communication with other prisoners lest they should spread their heresies. Prisoners were kept in chains and even more elaborate detention devices, such as a *pié de amigo*, an iron fork-like chin rest to which the hands of the prisoner would be chained to. The day to day conditions of the prisons would reflect the overall scheme of the inquisitors, doling out just enough food of meager nutritional value to keep a prisoner on their feet. Cold, infested, and dank dungeons with no light deprived the accused of a knowledge of time of day or year. There are records of some prisoners being held for over twenty years.

Parallels can be drawn from this time period to much of contemporary history: religious intolerance as evidenced in the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, ethnic hatreds in Kosovo between Albanians and Serbs, and in recent U.S. History the idea of guilt by association as shown in the McCarthy hearings, incredible and barbaric torture as exhibited at Abu Ghraib, and prolonged detention without knowledge of a hearing is eerily present at Guantanamo Bay.

Prison Life

“As far as this business of solitary confinement goes-the most important thing for survival is communication with someone, even if it's only a wave or a wink, a tap on the wall, or to have a guy put his thumb up. It makes all the difference.”

(Sen. John McCain, remembering his imprisonment during the Vietnam War)

“You be in the [segregation center], you're in there by yourself. End up playing with roaches... You end up going crazy.”

(19 year old prisoner of Riker's Island)

“America is the land of the second chance - and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life.”

(President George W. Bush)

“My pain is so bad that killing myself to make it cease is not outside the realm of possibilities. And I have seriously understated in this letter how bad my conditions are...”

(Prisoner in Colorado)

Man of La Mancha and Dale Wasserman, Playwright

DALE WASSERMAN, playwright, says of himself:

"I was born. That seems fairly certain, but where or when less so, since I could not boast a birth certificate. By profession I'd describe myself as a Showbiz Hobo, having made the jump from riding the rails to theatre pro at the age of 19. I've been a stage manager, lighting designer, producer and director. At the age of 33, in the midst of directing an unspeakable Broadway musical, I walked, feeling that I couldn't possibly write worse than the stuff I was directing. Writing was difficult due to an almost total lack of education. In my years of jumping freights, though, I did a heap of reading, 'borrowing' two books at a time from small town libraries, returning them to another library in a town further down the line, and hooking two more. (It's possible that single-handed I brought the Dewey Decimal System to its knees.)

I succeeded as a writer by lucking into the Golden Age of television, and thereafter segued into stage plays and movies. I have written around fifty works for TV, some two dozen stage plays and musicals and fifteen feature films. For a time I occupied an executive suite at MGM as a producer-writer. Upon being sprung I wrote the stage adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* which flies lustily to this very day...

As to awards, have received the usual quota of Emmys, Tonys, Ellys and Robbys and, for all I know, Kaspars and Hausers. I'm unsure of the number because I don't attend awards ceremonies and so receive the knick-knacks by mail if at all. Ah, yes, one exception: when the University of Wisconsin offered an Honorary Doctorate I did appear in cap and gown to address the audience in the football stadium at Madison, because a scant quarter-mile from where I was being Doctored I had hopped my first freight at the age of 12. Irony should not be wasted.

(from The Impossible Musical, by Dale Wasserman)

Man of La Mancha

Man of La Mancha began as a play for television called *I, Don Quixote*. Inspiration came from several sources, to be sure, the most easily recognizable of course being Cervantes's novel, *Don Quixote*; additionally *The Exemplary Novels*, in particular a short story written by Cervantes called 'Riconete y Cortadillo' from which Wasserman found the inspiration for the rough yet playful characters dwelling in the prison, but who seem so eager to participate in their own trial and Cervantes's "defense".

Wasserman states emphatically that his play is not an adaptation of *Don Quixote* but more about the man Cervantes and how Wasserman connected with the knowledge of Cervantes's as well as his own life and career in the theatre – albeit for Cervantes, not a very successful one. Knowing full well of the countless

failed adaptations of the history of Don Quixote, Wasserman struck playwright gold with the conceit not of an adaptation, but of a fictionalized retelling of a moment in Cervantes's life during the writing of the famous novel.

I, Don Quixote was performed during television's Golden Age in 1959. A fairly new medium producers were running to find quality programming to fill constant dead air. Compared with today it truly was a Golden Age of endless possibilities. Almost immediately following the one and only performance, Wasserman received offers to option the teleplay to make it into something else, something bigger. It sat in a development holding pattern, during which Wasserman adapted the a new novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, for the stage. In August of 1965, after a summer of work-shopping and refining, the musical which has been translated into over twenty eight languages, and performed in twice as many countries, was born.

Pre-Show Questions

- Where is the play set? Does it ever leave the space?
- Is there a feeling you get when you walk into the theatre?
- Have you seen a “musical” before? What are some of the things that make it a musical?
- What is more important, the music or the story? Why?
- Have you seen *Man of La Mancha* before? What was that production like?

Post-Show Questions

- What is the play about? Who is the “Man of La Mancha”?
- Which character did you connect with the most?
- What was your favorite song? Which prison character sang it?
- What was more important to you, the songs or the story of Cervantes?
- What are some feelings you have from leaving the play?

Further Reading

Wasserman, Dale. The Impossible Musical. Applause Theatre & Cinema Books. New York. 2003

McCrary, Donaly P. No Ordinary Man: The Life and Times of Miguel de Cervantes. Peter Owen. London and Chester Springs. 2002.

This study guide was generously provided to The Paramount Theater by Ben Calvert of Court Theatre in Chicago, IL following their 2005 production of *Man of La Mancha*.