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Cal Shakes' 'Quixote Nuevo' a terrific, music-filled romp

By Lou Fancher



Emilio Delgado (Quixote) enlists Juan Amador (Sancho Panza) in "Quixote Nuevo." Photos Kevin Berne

company turns tilting at windmills into a terrific, music-filled romp with lessons that last. Latino playwright Octavio Solis sets the modernized tale of an heroic/comic knight-errant on a final quest for reclaimed love in the town of La Mancha, Texas, and nearby Mexico. Director KJ Sanchez leads a cast of Latinx actors through a fantastic adventure filled with buoyant song, hilarious costumes, unharnessed humor and resonant themes including family, friendship, immigration, aging, dreams, dementia, death and more.

If there is risk, it lies in the complex issues raised and ultimately, intentionally left open-ended by the production. Audiences depart with layers: comic lines that prompt secondary laughter, appreciation for the rich, multicultural landscape the production suggests is under threat in America, and food for thought on universal themes related to mortality and individual responsibility within society and community.

Quixote (played with keen wit and charm by Emilio Delgado) is a former college professor, an aging man whose dementia has exceeded his family's ability to care for him. A sister, niece, priest and psychologist - the latter two are revealed to be former students - collaborate in fits and starts to move him to a senior living center, The Blue Fountain. Resisting with sword and searing proclamations, consumed with a vision of finding his Dulcinea, the woman he out of fear for his own safety failed to meet and marry at a border crossing long ago, Quixote sets out on his majestic steed - in actuality a horse skull-decorated three-wheel bicycle, his helmet an upside down bedpan.

Paired with Sancho (dexterous, goofy, lovable Juan Amador as bicycle ice cream vendor), the two men escape well-meaning family members, border patrol guards, prostitutes, a coterie of bandit-like angels, imagined demons and dragons and more.

Act II spins the tale into dark corners: an immigrant tells the story of crossing the border between Mexico and the United States only to be thought of as a gangster, hated because of his skin color and race, wandering in circles while his family dies at his feet. He is left only with a wedding ring, stuffed animal and child's hairbrush. His "sun-charred" mind wonders what is mirage, illusion, delusion, dementia and reality. Perhaps hope and love and ice cream bikes are fake, or ghosts. Bringing the topic of borders into 2018, Quixote "slays" the wall - to tell the rest would spoil the experience for audiences who've yet to see the play.

Remarkably, largely due to the casts' full command of comedy - most especially Amy Lizardo, who shines in multiple roles - "Quixote Nueva" is joyful to watch. Vibrant costumes (bandoliers loaded with medicine bottles, bold contrast of color and texture by costume designer Ulises Alcalá), kinetic staging (a Sancho dummy tossed tortuously in a blanket earns applause) and playwright Solis' clever, punchline phrasing (examples too numerous to list), add up to a laugh-filled 2.5-hour experience.

Departing, the play's larger picture leaves much to ponder. What words and which actions define nobility, valor or honor in a world that shuffles elderly people into assisted living homes - called "assisted dying centers" by one character during the play's first act. How are we to discern between the intentions of people with dementia and dictators whose proposals seem crazy as they seek to build walls that become boundaries on love, humanitarianism, empathy, opportunity. "Clouds soar over the border all the time. Why then can't we?" asks Quixote.

Attending live theater performances at California Shakespeare Theater is risky business.

First, there's the possibility of sweating during a matinee in 100-degree temperatures or having to hunker under fleece at nighttime when Bay Area fog rolls over the Oakland Hills and it's more than drama that sets the crowd shivering. Will the production as it grasps the horns of well-known, highly revered Shakespeare plays and other classic repertoire - unleashed with modern sensibilities and style - result in brilliance or bastardization? Will there be humor and grit, exuberance and elegance, delicious froth, high production values and topical depth that lasts beyond the final curtain? (There is no physical curtain on the Orinda stage, but Cal Shakes plays do have actual, often memorable endings.)

Opening the 44th season with the World Premiere of "Quixote Nuevo," a retelling of Miguel de Cervantes' classic Spanish novel, "Don Quixote," the theater

It's a good question.

Cal Shakes' "Quixote Nuevo" plays at the Bruns Ampitheatre through July 7 - added performances Thursday, July 5 at 7:30 p.m.; Friday, July 6 at 8 p.m.; and Saturday, July 7 at 8 p.m. For tickets or information, visit www.calshakes.org.

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