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ARTS & CULTURE | THEATER REVIEW

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Spoiler alert: this *Quixote* comes to a bad end

Betrayal undermines an engaging man of La Mancha in Writers Theatre's latest.

By Tony Adler [@taadler](#)

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Henry Godinez

MICHAEL BROSILOW

Henry Godinez isn't the Don Quixote type. That is, he doesn't much resemble the popular image of that famously misguided knight errant, propagated by everybody from Daumier and Doré to Dali and Picasso. Based, I guess, on a brief description that appears at the beginning of Miguel de Cervantes's vast 400-year-old comic novel *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, we've come to picture the man from La Mancha as your basic long drink of water. Godinez, by contrast, is compact and muscular. What makes him convincing as the title figure in Mónica Hoth and Claudio Valdés Kuri's otherwise frustrating *Quixote: On the Conquest of Self*,

running now at Writers Theatre, isn't his looks so much as his great, good-humored energy. His cracked charm.

To be accurate, Godinez doesn't play Quixote in the conventional sense. We're not meant to believe that he's acting the role of the delusional old gentleman who, having read one too many books on chivalry, embarks on quests that always turn into follies. No, Godinez is supposed to embody Quixote the literary construct: aware that he's a fiction, angry and embarrassed at the silent tyrannies of his author (whose identity bewilders him), afraid of the fate that waits for him on the final page, and, in the meantime, straining against the story that holds him captive.

We hear him before we see him, groaning and whining somewhere in the shadows while a spotlight pinpoints a hardbound copy of Cervantes's book, lying open, spine down on the stage. When the lights come up, we find Quixote in virtually the same position as the book: legs in the air, body balanced over the cervical area of his own spine. In the physics of this show, Quixote is somehow bodily tethered, not just to his narrative but to the paper-and-board reality of the object that houses it. He has to maintain his contorted position until an audience member can be induced to fulfill his instructions, first, to read a passage from the book, and then to close it. The closing frees him to move about at will, much as Dorothy Gale's application of oil frees the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*.

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The conceit sounds complicated, but in this staging by coauthor Kuri, it can be lots of fun. Quixote's dependence on the kindness of strangers forces him to bring a steady stream of civilians onstage to help him read ballads, mime scenes, and otherwise emote. This is where the aforementioned cracked charm comes in handy. By turns peremptory and sweet, Godinez is great at wrangling helpers, voluntary and reluctant. And his athleticism, expressed in what look like punishing somersaults, devised under the supervision of acrobatic adviser Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi (a cofounder with me of

the Actors Gymnasium), give his performance a feeling of go-for-broke abandon. A hodgepodge set of armor, decorated by costume designer Sanja Manakoski with bottle tops, pull tabs, license plates, and flattened beer cans, heightens the antic, improvisational atmosphere.

The problems arise well into the 90-minute performance, when the script turns from telling this strange Quixote's story to making him serve an inspirational message. (Spoiler alert: I'm about to discuss a crucial surprise. Stop reading if you don't want it ruined for you.)

At a certain point Quixote asks for a show of hands from those who've read Cervantes's masterpiece in its formidable entirety. He engages one of the respondents, a young woman called Xóchitl (Aztec for "flower"), and they banter rather thrillingly about the novel she professes to love—so thrillingly, in fact, that I considered myself lucky to be present for the exchange. What were the odds? Well, as it turned out, they were excellent: it very soon becomes clear that Xóchitl is a ringer. Played by Emma Ladji, she's there to push the piece into its mawkish final phase.

Looking back, I'm a little startled at the depth of my reaction to the gimmick. It hit me hard, as a betrayal of all the genuine invention that had gone on before—of my investment in Godinez's marvelous performance. More important, *Quixote* loses any claim to internal integrity at that point, metamorphosing awkwardly, reductively, childishly into the sort of thing you might expect to see touring to schools as part of a self-esteem program ("We're defeating the Monster of Apathy!"). Hoth and Kuri even take a page from Peter Pan, having Xóchitl solicit our dreams rather than our applause in order to work a climactic miracle. What a crock. What a disappointment. 🏠

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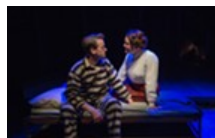
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