

"Let's do something Insane tonight,"
Cindy said to me. It was the evening
before Thanksgiving, and she had met
me at the office after work.

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"Uh," I said warily, for I am old and
set in my ways, and like to plan out
Events six months to a year ahead of
time. "Uh, what sort of Insane, my
little polkadot?"

"Well, how about let's go to see MAN OF LA MANCHA?"

"A fine idea. It's sold out until next April, of course, but -- "

Cindy got a sly look in her eye. "Bet you we can get seats!..."

Cindy's plan was simple: get to the theater (the ANTA, just off Wash-
ington Square) about a half an hour before curtain time, and wait until
a cancellation comes in. "Nobody cancels for a show like MAN OF LA
MANCHA," was about what I said.

Well, we stood right by the ticket counter from 7:45 till two minutes
before curtain time. In a way, I suppose I was a trifle irritated by
the whole crazy idea.

They looked like college freshmen, and I didn't really pay too much
attention when the two flustered kids came surging up to the now almost
deserted boxoffice. Suddenly I realized they had said they had four
tickets and wanted to turn two of them in, and that Cindy had said,
"Sold!" before any of the other half dozen or so people hanging around
cd say anything.

Before I'd really realized what had happened, I'd dug out \$17, which
was eagerly exchanged for two tickets, and Cindy and I were proceeding
into the already darkened theater. The ANTA differs slightly in design
from the usual theater (in addition to the fact that it's made out of
sheet metal); the seats are amphitheater-style, the stage at the focus
of the half-round of seats -- like a clam, as it were. It is not an
extremely large theater, therefore; almost all the seats sell at the
top \$8.50 rate except for the last five or six rows.

I flashed the tickets at a uniformed lass, and suddenly became aware
that I was rather shabbily dressed for a smash hit show. Then I real-
ized I had not even looked at the goddam tickets except to verify that
they were \$8.50's and that we weren't being stung with last night's
tickets or something. Too late! We were being escorted down the aisle
...down....down...down...down...towards the stage -- hell, if the usher
didn't stop pretty soon, we'd be on the ghoddam stage! -- and finally
she stopped.

Second row, they were. About two yards from the stage itself, and only
slightly above the level of the stage. We could have asked for seats
like that for the show a year from now and not have gotten them.
(And beside us sat the two youths -- whose dates had obviously not been
able to make it.)

The usher had not given us a program, and I was trying to signal her...
when the lights dimmed definitively, and the overture began...

If any of you have heard the cast album of MAN OF LA MANCHA, you have some idea already of my state of mind as that overture began.

Musically speaking, I already knew the show was as close to perfection as one can hope for in theatrical performances. The melodies are as intricate and complex as that of Leonard Bernstein -- and indeed the closest musical parallel to this show is Bernstein's CANDIDE -- and several of the songs are quite simply pure magic.

Again for those of you who know the cast album, the finale of MAN OF LA MANCHA quite plainly could draw tears from a human vegetable. Well, this I already knew, of course; I'd heard the album perhaps a dozen times, on my trusty FM radio. I'd planned on seeing the show some day, plentifully provided beforehand with at least three very clean white handkerchiefs (I'm emotionally very susceptible, and not ashamed to admit it).

...But there was one thing I was not really quite prepared for.

Briefly sketched, the idea of MAN OF LA MANCHA is not a very promising one. It's a musical based on the book DON QUIXOTE. Right? And next year they'll do MOBY DICK THE SONG OF SOLOMON, and THE RISE AND FALL OF THE THIRD REICH. Broadway producers have the brains of planarian worms.

Not only that, but they've framed the Quixote story -- it all takes place in a prison of the Spanish Inquisition, where Cervantes has been jailed for unspecified reasons. The inmates give him a mock trial, and his defense is to tell the Quixote story, using the prisoners and the miscellaneous objects of the prison as his characters and props. Feh.

But it works.

From the moment it starts, it works. They stop for nothing, they explain nothing, they apologize for nothing. Richard Kiley as Cervantes/Quixote gives an epical performance. There are no intermissions, no breathers, no relenting in the presentation of what, afterwards, I cd only describe as the most total theatrical experience of my life. This story of the most glorious madman in the history of romance simply confronts every man and woman in the audience with the maddest, most infectiously beautiful fragment of glory in the history of American theater. It is inspired.

You think, perhaps, I overstate. Those of you who have heard the album, go to see it -- use Cindy's method, or pay a scalper (if you can find one who isn't using the tickets himself), or simply order seats in advance (actually, if you're not picky about days or seats, you cd get seats for January or February). If you haven't heard it, you shd have. And when you hear it, hear it through.

Believe me, you won't be sorry.

There aren't many things in life that are so close to being perfect as makes no never mind, friends. You can't afford to miss them when they come along. May I never more be hoping you are the sane, if MAN OF LA MANCHA isn't one of them.