Martín Solá and Meghan Kreidler star in “Man of La Mancha” at Theater Latté Da. Below, Kreidler portrays Aldonza, who blossoms under Don Quixote’s influence.

In a crazy world, who is the sane human? Is he the one who tilts at windmills, creates his own heroes and dreams of impossibilities because only in fantasy is there the hope of a different world?

This was the philosophy behind “Man of La Mancha,” which might today be nothing more than a dusty old musical if not for the elusive nature of its truth and purpose.

Theater Latté Da has opened its 20th season with a nicely realized staging of “La Mancha,” a work drawing inspiration from writer Miguel de Cervantes and his dazzling protagonist, Don Quixote.

Director Peter Rothstein places the work in the cinder-block holding area of a modern detention center (set by Michael Hoover). It’s a well-intentioned stab at relevancy that makes its case convincingly up to the point where the dialogue references the historic Spanish Inquisition.
We get the point. Resisting absurdity in a world of claustrophobic ideology is timeless.

Cervantes (Martín Solá) puts on a play within a play, telling the story of Don Quixote in hopes that the prisoners will find him innocent in their kangaroo court.

Meghan Kreidler portrays Aldonza, who blossoms under Don Quixote’s influence.

Kreidler portrays Aldonza, who blossoms under Don Quixote’s influence.
It is a stunning moment when that drama begins in Rothstein’s production. Designer Marcus Dilliard’s lights shift from cold klieg to dramatic red. Handmade props (Abbee Warmboe) and masks (Abbey Syme) are distributed to the prisoners, who become actors in telling the story of the “knight errant.”

Solá has the requisite charisma, voice and stamina to make Cervantes/Quixote a man who convinces his fellow prisoners that he deserves better than his fate. He might not be the craziest or most mesmerizing Quixote I’ve seen. He is flush with nobility and honor, though.

Meghan Kreidler portrays the sullen Aldonza, who slowly blossoms under the influence of Cervantes/Quixote and becomes devoted to him. One almost feels a breeze every time Kreidler crosses the stage, as she is so physically dominant and spiritually tough. Her voice, loud and brash, softens remarkably in “What Does He Want of Me?”

Zachary Garcia is just a bit off as the bumbling Sancho — more cute than amusing. Andre Shoals is excellent as the Governor, a sympathetic prisoner who has agreed to give Cervantes a fair hearing in the prisoners’ kangaroo court. Rodolfo Nieto, Sara Ochs and McKinnley Aitchison stand out in the ensemble.

Everyone on stage, under Denise Prosek’s musical direction, sings well and fight choreographer Annie Enneking gets to show off her chops with a lot of bodies heaving themselves around the stage.

“La Mancha” did not send me away with the thrill of “Sweeney Todd” or “Ragtime” in recent years at Latté Da. It is, however, everything this company does so well with musical theater: conceive, articulate, find the passion and tend to all the details. You can’t ask for much more than that.

Graydon Royce is a longtime Star Tribune critic.
Lead singer Meghan Kreidler is thrashing her way through the song “Bully,” during rehearsal with her band, Kiss the Tiger.

“Every once in a while you think what it would be like to be someone else,” she shouts, struggling against two guitars, bass and drum in a 12- by 10-foot muffled room.

In the heat and noise, the lyric seems to be the question facing Kreidler.

A striking, versatile and hardworking actor, she might be named Emerging Artist of the Year at next Monday’s Ivey Awards for Twin Cities theater. But Kiss the Tiger went on a summer tour that ended up playing a packed Lower Manhattan club at 1 a.m.
That’s a little intoxicating and Kreidler — who is playing Aldonza in Theater Latté Da’s new production of “Man of La Mancha” — admitted this might be the time (which comes in everyone’s life, of course) to think about being a rock star.

“It’s turning into a bigger passion of mine,” she said over coffee.

Can she do both? Of course. And she will, probably. But band tours get in the way of steady theater work. It’s a gamble. She gets it. She has two guiding values: to be comfortable with uncertainty and be willing to take risk and failure.

“You put your work out, you try not to get your hopes up too far,” she said. “But it’s so much not in your control.”

From ‘speech nerd’ to star

Kreidler walks into the Latté Da rehearsal hall, straps on a skirt and starts kicking Dan Hopman in the groin, whacking him in the chest with her open hand. Sweating through a scene in which she fights five men, Kreidler gets smacked around, smacks them around and ends up getting cold-cocked.

It’s a workout, trying to navigate the class and gender conflicts that Cervantes stokes in “Don Quixote’s” female character, Aldonza. She sings beautiful ballads from a place of abuse and poverty. How does the actor find the happiness in her life?

“This role undergoes the biggest transformation in the show,” said director Peter Rothstein. “It’s fun to watch her navigate a complicated journey. She’s been really playful in rehearsals.”

Kreidler was a self-described “competitive speech nerd” at Eagan High School. She got up at 6 on Saturdays, competed all day, and went to tournaments across the country. The work shows now in her simple command of the stage and her utility of voice and comfort in performing.

“It might be cool for you to mention my directors,” she wrote in an e-mail. “They were mostly women and they provided me with so much of my early training and confidence building.”

So, Joni Anker, Jodene Wartman and Nancy Owzarek? Meghan Kreidler still remembers you.

Kreidler graduated in the 2013 University of Minnesota/Guthrie Theater BFA acting class that included Nathan Barlow, Michael Hanna and Ayesha Kinnunen. She spent a year in the Children’s Theatre apprenticeship program, where she “learned how to work 10 shows a week.”

Penumbra artistic director Sarah Bellamy first saw Kreidler in “Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals” at Theater Mu four years ago.

“She has a formidable stage presence,” Bellamy said. “And that shows as a calmness and steadiness.”

Bellamy hired Kreidler to write a monologue about growing up Asian-American, and read it as part of Penumbra’s Race Workshop Program.

My memory is of China, is how Kreidler begins her monologue. We’re digging a hole to China!

That was the name given to me; A young boy who inscribed my soul with first memories of race.

But I am Korean-American; My mother gave me my Korean half; Robust novel she is;
My eyes are hers; My nose are hers; Things he didn’t realize when he called me China;

But he dug the hole deeper and deeper.

Who is she? And what’s next?

Kreidler turns 27 in December, an age when humans realize, “I thought I knew everything but now I don’t.”

It was only a few years ago that she traveled to Korea with her mother. As a child, she would hear her mother speaking on the phone and singing songs in Korean.

The trip was “a profound experience for her,” said Randy Reyes, artistic director at Theater Mu and a mentor.

Reyes cast Kreidler in “Flower Drum Song,” as Linda Low, the beautiful song-and-dance girl who wants to leave “San Francisco U.S.A.” to become a movie star in L.A.

“Linda Low was her story,” Reyes said. “Meghan connected to Linda immediately. She wants more out of life. She wants to pursue a career.”

Linda’s fear, of course, is that she’ll be playing Asian-American stereotypes if she does become a movie star in L.A.

“How do you scrape out a career in this industry where how you look means so much?” said Reyes.

Dynamic performance style

To brush up her dance technique, she worked with the Flying Foot Forum, whose director, Joe Chvala, wisely cast her in “A Christmas Carol” at the Guthrie, which he directed last year.

“That was the most nervous I ever felt, being on that stage,” Kreidler said of her performance as Mrs. Cratchit, which she will repeat this year. “It’s a privilege.”

Her favorite play, though, has been “Vietgone,” Qui Nguyen’s excellent play about his South Vietnamese father and mother and the U.S. exit.

Kreidler got to do it all in Mixed Blood’s production last April. She rapped, she played tough, she played hurt, she danced. The combination of styles played to her strength.

“It’s the only kind of theater I want to develop now,” she said. “I felt good about everything I was doing in that show.”

Most remarkably, her performance did not seem impressed with itself, which is a risk in a tour-de-force role. She just confidently did the work.

This is the thing about Kreidler. She has good manners. She’s friendly, curious and intelligent. She has a good gauge for what needs to be taken seriously and what can be dismissed or better enjoyed with humor.

How could you ever be a rocker with that attitude? Where are the trashed motel rooms? The lawn chairs in the pool?
In theater, Kreidler is obliged to slip behind a character and assume an identity. In the band, it’s her, and only her, with no fight coach, director, choreographer to help. It’s freedom, terrible freedom.

“It’s an exaggerated version of myself,” she said. “But it’s me.”

She’s apparently gotten comfortable with slipping into her own character. She’s still savoring the band’s summer tour. “We got a great reception and it added fuel to the fire,” she said.

Now the band is recording a handful of new songs, most of them written by Kreidler’s boyfriend, co-frontman and rhythm guitarist Michael Anderson. Gathered in a crackerbox room to rehearse a few weeks ago, it was clear they were enjoying it. “Sweet solo,” she said to Andrew Berg after a trippy lead guitar part.

“It feels good to play again,” said Anderson.

“Yeah, it does,” she said.

Graydon Royce is a longtime Star Tribune critic and arts writer. He can be reached at roycegraydon@gmail.com.
After the curtain call at Sunday’s matinee performance of Man of La Mancha, director Peter Rothstein stepped onstage to salute an early mentor, in attendance, who helped inspire his lifelong love of theater. She must have been gratified to see how her former student is multiplying her gift, creating productions that remind audiences why art matters.

In this particular instance, Rothstein has revitalized a musical that’s been consigned to musty dinner theaters. Man of La Mancha is far from the most obvious show to prove demonstrably relevant in 2017, but Rothstein homes in on one of the musical’s key lines: “When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies?”

Rothstein sets Theater Latté Da’s new production in an immigration detention center: a brutal chamber with concrete walls and stained floors, a grating buzzer sounding whenever the security door is opened. By removing the play-within-a-play’s setting from the Spanish Inquisition to the present day, Rothstein brings the themes of human dignity and desperate imagination into sharp relief.
Once the story is underway, though, the production luxuriates in the brilliant music and witty script that have kept playwright Dale Wasserman’s adaptation of Don Quixote in regular rotation for half a century. As author Miguel de Cervantes, Martín Solá sublimely embodies the noble mien that makes the ostensibly disordered Spaniard a magnetic figure. He’s accompanied by Sancho (Zach Garcia), his right-hand man.

One of Rothstein’s many excellent choices here was to cast the fierce Meghan Kreidler as Aldonza. Far from the blowsy wench her clients perceive, Kreidler makes Aldonza a formidable personality who’s devastating in her disappointment when her Don proves unable to defend her. Her eponymous testimonial song is at the dark heart of this moving production.

It’s not all gloom in La Mancha, though, thanks to on-point character acting by the entire ensemble—notably Andre Shoals as the Innkeeper and Jon-Michael Reese as an amusingly reluctant Padre. With Reese flanked by McKinnley Aitchison’s Antonia and Sara Ochs’ Housekeeper, “I’m Only Thinking of Him” is so entertaining that you can almost miss the pristine quality of the trio’s singing.

A four-member band is hidden from view, but their presence is strongly felt as music director Denise Prosek captures the warmth of composer Mitch Leigh’s Spanish-flavored music.

The production ends with a gut punch, as we return to the detention center and the diverse characters step forward to sing a reprise chorus of “The Impossible Dream.” After last fall’s election, theater artists across the country promised to respond swiftly. Who could have guessed that a 1964 musical would constitute one of this season’s most powerful rebukes?

**Man of La Mancha**

**Ritz Theater**

345 13th Ave. NE, Minneapolis

612-339-3003; through October 22
Theater Latte Da (which I would say were my favorite theater company, if I as an impartial theater blogger had favorites) is opening their 20th season of doing theater musically with Man of La Mancha, a 400-year-old story beloved in musical and many other forms. At its core this is a story about optimism and hope, about seeing the good in people and the world, even when everything you see and everyone you meet tells you otherwise. It's about clinging to and fighting for ideals of chivalry, decency, and honor in the face of evil and corruption. In other words, it may be exactly the story that this world, and this country in particular, needs right now. As usual, Theater Latte Da puts its own unique re-imagined spin on the 1964 classic that heightens the relevance of the piece. An incredibly talented and beautifully diverse cast about half the usual size for this musical, a small but powerful four-piece orchestra, and a modern twist to the play-within-a-play structure make this Man of La Mancha an inspiring, moving, and engaging piece of theater musically, just as I have come to expect from Theater Latte Da.

As you might remember (and if you don't, the playbill is filled with informative timelines and history), Man of La Mancha is set in a prison during the Spanish Inquisition, where playwright Miguel de Cervantes must defend himself and his play about Don Quixote, the foolishly idealistic knight in an era when knights are going out of fashion. Latte Da's version is set in a modern and cold waiting room, perhaps a deportation center, but not explicitly so. Entering the Ritz Theater, much of the cast is already seated on stage, looking bored or frightened or annoyed as they await their fate. The show begins when Cervantes enters and begins telling his story, enlisting the other prisoners/detainees to take part, who do so reluctantly at first but with growing enthusiasm.
Don Quixote and Sancho Panza (Martín Solá and Zach Garcia, photo by Allen Weeks)

Within the story of Don Quixote, we watch as "the maddest wise man, or the wisest mad man" looks for dragons to fight and fair ladies to rescue, with his eager squire Sancho Panza. Everyone around him, including said fair lady Aldonza, whom he calls Dulcinea, thinks he’s nuts. But many grow to be on his side as they see his pure motive - to fight for what's right. Some of his family and friends attempt to shake him out of the illusion and back to reality, which they succeed in doing, to his detriment. In the end he leaves those he has touched better for it, like Aldonza who calls herself Dulcinea and sees herself as he saw her, as they continue Don Quixote's fight for a better world.

Martín Solá makes his #TCTheater debut, direct from Broadway (he left On Your Feet, the Gloria and Emilio Estefan bio-musical, just last month to do this show), and he’s as wonderful a Don Quixote as one could ask for. Noble and sympathetic and slightly crazy, he makes it easy to see why Don Quixote won so many people over to his side. And what a voice! The rest of the 11-person ensemble (plus a few extras) is made up of #TCTheater favorites, including Zach Garcia as an adorable Sancho Panza. Meghan Kreidler brings her trademark fierceness to the role of Aldonza, her tough exterior making her eventual softening even more moving. Rodolfo Nieto brings his powerful voice and presence to several roles, I only wish we got to hear him sing more. Really everyone in the ensemble (which also includes McKinnley Aitchison, Dan Hopman, Sara Ochs, Jon-Michael Reese, Matt Riehle, Andre Shoals, and Guillermo Rodriguez Zermeño) is fantastic, stepping in to play multiple roles in the story, and silently watching from the side of the stage when not.
Cinder block walls have been built around three sides of the stage, with a glass guard's room behind, looking every bit the cold and sterile waiting room, an unpleasant and unwelcoming place to be. It's transformed into the landscapes of Don Quixote's imagination with the addition of a few clever props and pieces. The same happens with the ensemble's modern day clothing, as they become knights, ladies, and monks when pieces (including creepy cool masks) are added, a process which sometimes happens right on stage (scenic design by Michael Hoover, costume design by Rich Hamson). Denise Prosek's off stage four-piece orchestra sounds bigger than it is, and gets a little help from ensemble members for a few songs.

Peter Rothstein and Theater Latte Da seem to just what show we need at any given time (see also last fall's sublime Ragtime), and have done so again with Man of La Mancha, playing at the Ritz Theater in Northeast Minneapolis through October 22. Click here for more info and to purchase tickets, and make note of the $29 Saturday matinees and post-show discussions after most Thursday and Sunday performances.

Of course we can't just bury our head in the sand or a story (or sheet cake) when the world gets tough. But sometimes it helps to immerse ourselves in a fictional world where things make sense, where noble knights fight against tyranny and win. Sometimes it's the escape we need to be able to get up in the morning and face another day of hurricanes, senseless tweets, horrific violence, and damaging
legislation. And then take up our fictional swords, mount our invisible horses, and tilt against the very real and scary windmills in the world.
To dream the impossible dream
To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go

To right the unrightable wrong
To love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary
To reach the unreachable star

This is my quest, to follow that star,
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far
To fight for the right without question or cause
To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause

And I know if I'll only be true to this glorious quest
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm when I'm laid to my rest

And the world will be better for this
That one man scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To fight the unbeatable foe, to reach the unreachable star
Theater Latté Da has opened its twentieth season with a beautifully realized, heartfelt production of Man of La Mancha. Latté Da has long shown its valor as a presenter of honored musical theater works—Cabaret, Sweeney Todd, Ragtime among so many others—without the opulence of the Broadway tours and major local houses, but with a grasp of their emotional and intellectual cores that results time and again in effervescent productions. Man of La Mancha continues in that path, a triumphant marriage of powerful material, inspired design, and committed performances. I suggest you get your tickets now.

Based upon Miguel de Cervantes' classic novel "Don Quixote"—published in 1604, and second in all-time sales to the Bible—Dale Wasserman's book for Man of La Mancha imbeds the Don Quixote saga within a context drawn from Cervantes' own life: being brought to trial by the Spanish inquisition. Cast into a prison's holding area populated by a gaggle of cut-throats and peddlers of sin who await trial, Cervantes, calling himself a poet of the theater, draws on props and costumes from his trunks to divert his cellmates from assaulting him by engaging them in the enactment of his manuscript.

In its original staging, the time frame for this holding-room is Cervantes' own lifetime, the late 1500s, reflected in the set and costume designs. In a stroke of genius, director Peter Rothstein has time-travelled the setting, turning it into a windowless cinderblock-walled room. Discarding the overture, for 30 minutes before the play's actual start, the room's occupants enter one by one, dressed in clothes that could be seen any day of the week on Lake Street, each silently expressing pride or anger or fear. They seat themselves on the cheap molded plastic chairs, waiting to be called forth for judgement. Given our daily news and Latté Da's diverse casting, this appears to be not a Spanish dungeon, but an American immigrant detention center. Yet not a word of Wasserman's text is changed. When the leader of the prisoners, called The Governor, asks Cervantes why he is there, he forthrightly states he is being called before the inquisition. It makes no difference: etched in our mind is the understanding that this is not a history story, but a poetic depiction of current events.

From this moment we are hooked, galvanized, as much by the interplay of the prisoners in this holding room as by Cervantes' tale of an aging gentleman brooding over the wrongs of the world until he goes mad, believing himself to be a knight charged to do battle against injustice and restore chivalry and honor to their rightful place. Calling himself Don Quixote de la Mancha, he enlists his faithful friend Sancho Panza to join him as squire to his Knight Errant. After a noble failure doing battle with a windmill, which appears to Quixote as a monster, he and Sancho repair to a castle—actually a rough roadside inn. There he meets the wench Aldonza, who serves food and drink to the muleteers at their tables, and
serves herself to them in their beds. Don Quixote sees none of this, only a vision of chaste loveliness, to whom he gives the name "Dulcinea." While the humiliated family the gentleman left behind are determined to bring his lunatic antics to an end, Aldonza is deeply troubled, wondering if she dare seek within herself the faith to rise above her debased existence. Though she is brutally tortured by the men who see her only as their whore, her transformation is both heartbreaking and life affirming, a glorious moment both on page and on stage.

Wasserman's book, finely crafted, does not stand alone. It is aided by a lush score by composer Mitch Leigh and lyricist Joe Darion that includes such musical monuments as "The Impossible Dream," "Dulcinea", "Man of La Mancha," "To Each His Dulcinea," "What Do You Want of Me?," and "Aldonza." In turn, these songs capture their characters' idealism, hope, despair and confusion, while others create whole scenes that illuminate Don Quixote's noble form of madness, such as his being dubbed a knight by the kindly Innkeeper. Only one song in the entire score might be considered a throw-away—Sancho Panza's "A Little Gossip," but it serves to bring some comic relief at a time when the story's pathos is almost unbearable. Latté Da's resident music director Denise Prosek provides her usual miracles, creating beautiful, full sounds from a four-member orchestra.

Rothstein's production gloriously captures the heart of Don Quixote's quest. As the prisoners take their parts in Cervantes' tale, their pedestrian apparel is replaced by vibrant costumes, designed by Rich Hamson with a folkloric quality that brings to mind the work of children's book illustrator Tomie dePaola. All of the characters in Cervantes' story, save Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, and Aldonza, wear half masks that give them false noses and foreheads, a device that delightfully succeeds in establishing the pretense of the narrative. Cast members wave tree boughs when there is a need for a forest, and a pair of actors don horse heads and serapes to provide Quixote and Sancho with their noble steeds. A couple of simple tables and trunks are moved around to create each setting, in concert with the sublime lighting.

Then there is the cast, a gathering of sublime talent who pour their hearts into this show. Martín Solá, a New York based actor, makes a magnificent local debut as Cervantes and Don Quixote. He delivers every line with utmost conviction, both as the idealist Cervantes, who has seen the brutality of the world, yet still has "never had the courage to believe in nothing," and as Don Quixote, whose strain of madness might make him the sanest of all men in a world gone mad. Solá has a gorgeous voice, delivering a rousing "Man of La Mancha," a tender "Dulcinea," and an inspirational "Impossible Dream" that stops the show. As his fair maiden, and everyone else's kitchen slut, Aldonza, Meghan Kreidler is sensational. Her self-contained slow burn as a sullen prisoner in the holding room as she accepts her part in Cervantes' play, carries over to her tough portrayal of Aldonza, accustomed to taking abuse from the men around her, thrown off her feet by kindness and respect. When she begins to believe in the goodness Don Quixote has bestowed upon her, she lights up the room. Her singing conveys an inner longing in "What Do You Want of Me" and rips the stage apart with the despairing "Aldonza."

Zach Garcia is delightfully innocent and good-hearted as Sancho Panza, fully aware of his friend's insanity but willing to go along with it because, as he says, "I Like Him." Andre Shoals brings his powerful frame to bear as the Governor, spokesperson for the prisoners, but turns into a goodhearted soul as the Innkeeper. Jon-Michael Reese draws some comic moments out of his role as the Padre, but is pure heart in the soul-searching "To Each His Dulcinea," while Rodolfo Nieto's solemn deep voice lends ominous power to Doctor Carrasco, the man of science who does battle against madness.
The battle between Quixote and the muleteers, and the abduction of Aldonza are both choreographed with style and vigor by Annie Enneking. There is not so much stage dancing in this production, but powerful state pictures framed by the keen eye of director Rothman.

If your impression of the Man of La Mancha is that it is an old-fashioned, sentimental piece, you may have heard too many overwrought renditions of "The Impossible Dream," or perhaps only know it by way of the unfortunate 1972 movie version. The original show opened on Broadway in 1965 and won the 1966 Best Musical Tony—a year after Fiddler on the Roof, a year before Cabaret. It easily holds its own between those milestone musicals. Theater Latté Da has taken that winning show, uncovered the best of its heart and wisdom, and made it feel relevant to the year 2017. In 1965, with the struggle for civil rights blazing and the war in Vietnam heating up, many Americans were seeking an "Impossible Dream." Doesn't that sound like a good idea right now as well?

Man of La Mancha continues through October 22, 2017, at the Ritz Theater, 345 13th Avenue NE, Minneapolis, MN. Tickets: $29.00 - $49.00. For tickets call 612-339-3303 or go to theaterlatteda.com.

Music: Mitch Leigh; Lyrics: Joe Darion; Book: Dale Wasserman; Original Production Staging: Albert Marre; Director: Peter Rothstein; Music Director: Denise Prosek; Scenic Design: Michael Hoover; Costume Design: Rich Hamson; Lighting Design: Marcus Dilliard; Sound Design: Kevin Springer; Properties Master: Abbee Warmboe; Wig Design: Paul Bigot; Dialect Coach: Keely Wolter; Fight Choreographer: Annie Enneking; Technical Director: Bethany Reinfeld; Stage Manager: Tiffany K. Orr; Assistant Director: Shannon Twohy; Assistant Stage Manager: Lyndsey R Harter.

Cast: McKinnley Aitchison (Antonia), Zach Garcia (Sancho), Dan Hopman (The Captain/Tenorio), Meghan Kreidler (Aldonza), Rodolfo Nieto (The Duke/Dr. Carrasco), Sara Ochs (Maria/The Housekeeper), Jon-Michael Reese (Paco/The Padre), Andre Shoals (The Governor/The Innkeeper), Martín Solá (Miguel de Cervantes/Don Quixote), Guillermo Rodriguez Zermeño (Pedro). Ensemble: Joe Allen, D. Angelina Nguyen Gabrielle Sacha, and Mason Tyer.
The promise of a better life motivates us all—as we seek to improve our circumstances and sense of personal meaning. Dale Wasserman’s classic musical Man of La Mancha tells the timeless tale of Don Quixote, a man who heroically seeks betterment by shedding the impediments of reality and escaping into delusional adventure. It is an absurd story in many ways, but also offers a glimpse into the joy that accompanies hope.

The setup is simple: an eccentric poet by the name of Miguel de Cervantes (Don Quixote’s author) awaits his fate in a prison and is forced to entertain his fellow prisoners with the strange tale of Alonso Quijanoa, a senile man who has come to believe he is Don Quixote, a knight in waiting who must prove his valor by fighting imaginary beasts and wooing invented ladies of high standing.

Originally staged with characters awaiting their fate in the Spanish Inquisition, director Peter Rothstein’s production (Theatre Latté Da performing at The Ritz through October 22nd) swaps in a current prison setting, with props and characters indicating a waiting room for immigration enforcement. It is a boldly
relevant statement—and it works. Don Quixote’s impossible dream drives him, and it is the analogous American Dream that drives those seeking citizenship, creating amity with Quixote’s futile optimism.

Man of La Mancha is delivered with utmost creativity and skill from the cast and crew. Mitch Leigh’s music and Joe Darion’s lyrics soar in well-blended harmonies under Denise Prosek’s musical direction, Rich Hamson’s playful costumes quickly establish character quirks, and Marcus Dilliard’s lighting design transports us to fantastical settings despite the ever-present prison backdrop. Michael Hoover’s simple, industrial set design fits nicely with Rothstein’s vision, constantly serving as a reminder of the gravitas girding this story.

The actors deliver an impressive range of emotion, all portraying multiple characters. The principals are all strong, but Martin Solá is a revelation as Cervantes, Quijanoa, and Quixote, injecting unique characterization and depth into each persona. His vocals are outstanding as well, providing an electric rendition of the standard “Dream the Impossible Dream.” And although she had difficulty in the highest ranges of her songs, Meghan Kreidler is arresting as Aldonza, exuding emotional intensity under the weight of her character’s tough shell.

It must be said that while this production is exemplary, Man of La Mancha itself is clunky, with an episodic structure that sputters from one scene to the next instead of building momentum. Further, the show has a difficult time walking the fine line between commending Don Quixote’s idealism and cautioning against his delusions—especially tricky since his moral purity makes us yearn for his hallucinations to be reality.

That said, Quixote’s tale is a show within this show, and the narrator Cervantes is aiming not only to entertain and inspire his fellow prisoners in the face of oppression, but also to lament the loss of a dream proven very much impossible. Man of La Mancha’s messiness is reasonable in light of these complex aims, for so is concurrently acknowledging the despairs of reality and the undeniable utility of hope, something this production valiantly achieves.

David and Chelsea Berglund review movies on their site Movie Matrimony.
Post-performance, I will happily admit that I was very, very wrong. Clipping in at an intermission-less 110 minutes of non-stop action (be still my expediency-loving-heart!), *Man of La Mancha* Latte Da-style is engrossing, emotional, and even (dare I say it?): a little *avant garde*.

For an overview of the story as quick as Latte Da’s staging, lest any reader missed their *Wishbone: Man of La Mancha* is the musical re-imagining of the story of *Don Quixote*, Miguel de Cervantes’ eternal novel that launched a thousand literary copycats. Don Quixote is the self-appointed name of Alonso Quixano, a lesser nobleman who spends his retirement immersed in literature about the long-gone traditions of knighthood and chivalry. Somewhere along the way Quixano become convinced he actually IS Don Quixote, and sets forth to return Spain to the days of chivalry and manners and jousting and vigils. Alongside Don Quixote is his faithful companion Sancho, who is firmly rooted in the real world and able to help his friend safely navigate the visions he summons at every turn. They meet giants disguised as windmills; a castle disguised as a lowly inn; and a beautiful lady Dulcinea disguised as a lowly prostitute named Aldonza.
Don Quixote's illusions are relatively harmless to anyone but himself and are even found charming by several he encounters, until it becomes clear that the line between reality and fiction is becoming too unbearable for those around him to maintain. This mainly affects Aldonza, who struggles to marry her painful life of suffering with Don Quixote's endless adulations. Things come to a head when Don Quixote is finally tricked out of his madness by his nephew and enters the end of his life a much "saner," but unhappier, man. Woven throughout the action for this production is a trial of Cervantes himself, who performs the story of Don Quixote as his defense. Although it sounds a little weird, the intermittent trial really helps to keep the narrative moving and allows us to hear some of Cervantes' thoughts on his master work that bring even more relevance to the story of Don Quixote today.

The rest of the ensemble sylphs nimbly between multiple roles and constructs a rock-solid melodic foundation for the rest of the show. This is a cast so musical that you can hear their singing as they speak, from Rodolfo Nieto's thundering basso to McKinnley Aitchison's trilling (and thrilling) soprano. Jon-Michael Reese provides some much-needed comedic relief as the Padre, hilariously mediating a scene at the confessional and showing empathy for Don Quixote's plight when others are only ready to laugh. Andre Shoals bring mesmerizing presence as the Governor who puts Cervantes on trial, and Sara Ochs lends operatic gravitas to her role as the Housekeeper. The ensemble's impressive musical prowess is on full display by the end of the show, in which a rousing reprise of "The Impossible Dream" leaves the audience with full hearts and damp cheeks.

The costumes are ingeniously designed by Rich Hamson and feature delightful macabre masks for each scene set in the fictional La Mancha. I was fixated on the masks, which are somewhere between a Hamlet skull and Dia de los Muertos attire and are utterly transformative. The swift costume changes are simple but completely metamorphic, and Hamson's work is a testament to the value of truly thoughtful design. Hamson's work is greatly assisted by the fabulous lighting from Marcus Dilliard, which transports the story to new dimensions. Deceptively complex operations such as placing the characters into top-lit chessboard squares or washing the entire frame in a violent crimson hue instantaneously alters the tone and provides the transition feeling usually assigned to scene changes, which aren't really present here. Mason and Dilliard's work in concert is all the cast needs to elevate Man of La Mancha to a whole new level, and they succeed swimmingly.

It's amazing how context changes the tone of everything, and this Man of La Mancha is no different. It's become a tired, overused cliche to talk about the difference in the world since our recent presidential transition. I don't mean to harp on it, but Don Quixote's apparent madness really seems so much more complex in light of current events. What could seem more pressing than the story of a man who is so delusional that he lives in a totally alternate universe, to the consternation of all who encounter him? Or conversely, and perhaps more relevant: how mad is it, really, to turn away from the cruelty and suffering of the real world and instead work with all of your heart and might to create a better, more beautiful one, even if it should cost you your sanity in the end? After all, as Cervantes writes:

“When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams — this may be madness. Too much sanity may be madness — and maddest of all: to see life as it is, and not as it should be!”
This *Man of La Mancha* is not to be missed; the music is lovely, the staging is tight as a drum, and you'll see a whole new side to a classic work of literature and theater. *Man of La Mancha* runs at the Ritz Theater through October 22; for more information or to buy tickets, click on this link.
Don Quixote looms as one of the emblematic figures of western literature. Spaniard Miguel de Cervantes had penned perhaps the most enduring of idealists when he finished his novel in 1604. At the same time William Shakespeare was in full swing on the English stage. In 1964 book writer Dale Wasserman, composer Mitch Leigh, and lyricist Joe Darion created what has become one of the most soulful musicals ever. And Man of La Mancha will probably last at least another four centuries. It is incomparable.

Theater Latte Da and director Peter Rothstein have staged a moving revival of Man of La Mancha at the Ritz Theater that soars with magnificent vocals guided by music director Denise Prosek and earthy performances that capture the grit and squalor of the rough side of life that is always with us. The set up is an assemblage of alleged heretics arrested by the Inquisition.

Don Quixote, an alter ego for Cervantes, is brought into a holding chamber with other prisoners, all of whom are cynical and pessimistic. Their jaundiced life view is hostilely reactive to his idealism. Therefore
they subject Quixote (Martin Sola) and his dutiful squire, Sancho Panza (Zach Garcia), to a mock trial. We witness what may be musical theater’s most absorbing metaphorical court room drama.

As the Don sings and shares his side of the story, the others find their hostility eventually melting away into pure vulnerability. The endearing Sola was born for this role and his vocals, blended with numinous insight about the character’s chivalrous goodness, make for a magnificent performance. His rendition of Dulcinea and the show’s most widely beloved tune, The Impossible Dream, are transcendent.

Sola is contrasted stunningly opposite Meghan Kreidler as the defensive Aldonza, who survives by selling her sexuality. Her renditions of the bitter It’s All the Same and that devastating tune simply titled Aldonza are breathtaking. This actress beguiles as she wrangles and wrestles aggressive louts to the rhythms of Prosek’s impeccable music direction and Annie Enneking’s dynamic fight direction. (The balance between Prosek’s musicians and the singing actors is perfect.)

All actors are fabulous but there are two supporting standouts: Rodolfo Nieto elicits a marvelous masculine resonance in both voice and physical carriage in various roles. Jon-Michael Reese brings lovely sensitivity to the small but crucial role of the Padre.

Rich Hamson’s period costumes serve the essence of Man of La Mancha beautifully but they are undercut by Michael Hoover’s contemporary sterile holding chamber set. This clash of concepts, which the director most likely authorized, is not reconciled at any point. The show runs over an hour and a half with no intermission. That is unreasonable and undercuts the magnificence this production nevertheless achieves. (People need to use the facilities.) That said, this is a brilliant production and the program notes are brilliant in their own right as well. So save your program after you’ve seen it.

Man of La Mancha
Through Oct. 22
Ritz Theater, 345 Thirteenth Ave. NE, Minneapolis
(612) 339-3003
www.latteda.org