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## A Diary for I, *Don Quixote*

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DALE WASSERMAN

It's late summer of 1959, and I am in Spain writing a movie (whose title escapes me) when I read, in the *International Herald Tribune*, that I am busy preparing a screenplay based on *Don Quixote*. Further, the item explains, a certain actor has already been engaged to play the starring role. I'm amused. The item is nonsense, undoubtedly a ploy by some space-hungry press agent to get his client's name in the papers.

The truth is that I have never read *Don Quixote*. But I am aware that it has spawned at least four movies and a host of adaptations in the theatrical media. As I mentally riffle through the list I become aware that in addition to common parentage all these adaptations have one other item in common: they failed. My curiosity is piqued—why, if their source is so seminal, do the derivative works produce so bleak a record?

Spain is the appropriate place to investigate the puzzle. Daily I loaf in the Plaza de España reading the Putnam translation of *Don Quixote* with—potent coincidence—the twin statues of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza looming over my shoulder.

I finish Volume Two, dazed but with the firm conviction that this literary monument could not and should not be dramatized. It is evident that *Don Quixote* is all things to all people, few of whom will agree on its inventory of meanings. But its author?

Another matter. What sort of man was this Miguel de Cervantes who could pour a river of wit and wisdom, of invention and inspired folly into a magnum opus such as this? I feel less curious about the novel than I do about its author.

In a search for Cervantes I cover miles of dusty roads and delve in many a dusty manuscript. Many weeks go into travels to the villages where Cervantes lived and worked, place-names made famous by his one-time presence. To Argamasilla, Tomelloso, the Cave of Montesinos. To Alcázar, and to Esquivias where I sit at the desk where Cervantes wrote and viewed *La Mancha* through his window. To Toboso, home of the legendary Lady Dulcinea, and to Campo de Criptana where there are windmills. Any Hispanic scholar could recite the itinerary, but I am not a scholar and I am seeking something more elusive...the aura of the man himself, a clue to the special vitality of his work.

I find it—and suddenly my interest is trebled. Cervantes, I learn, was first and foremost a man of the theater: a playwright, actor, and director, forced, through frustration of his primary ambition, to ways of making a living “which are not on the map.” Now a light switches on, illuminating the reason for my interest. I sense an affinity, not with the man who, in his desperate final years wrote *Don Quixote*, but with the playwright of more than forty plays, with the man who traveled the dusty roads of Spain with a troupe of scruffy actors, performing for illusory profit.

My life, too, is of the theater, similarly obsessive and harrowed by like difficulties. Fundamentally, I am dealing with a colleague. Someone whom, through common experience, I recognize. I decide that if there is a play lurking in the vicinity it will not be an adaptation of *Don Quixote* but a work devoted to its author.

As for the novel *Don Quixote* a single line leaps out at me, of such significance that I find it a clue as to how such a work may be accomplished. It occurs in an encounter between Quixote and the farmer Pedro Alonso to whom Quixote spins out a fantastic tale of imprisonment by a potentate in his castle. The farmer is astonished, for he has been Quixote’s lifelong neighbor. He says, “Can not you see that I am not Don Rodrigo de Narváez nor the Marquis of Mantua, but merely Pedro Alonso, your neighbor? And you are neither Baldwin nor Abindarráez, but a respectable gentleman by

the name of Alonso Quijana?"

Don Quixote replies, "*I know who I am, and who I may be if I choose.*"

This is not the statement of a madman, nor of one with vacant rooms in his head. To a man of the theater it is instantly recognizable as the statement of an actor. Don Quixote has *chosen* a role and is playing it with all the histrionic conviction he can muster. Nor is this the only clue to his conscious role-playing. Again and again he speaks of his love of the theater. "I love plays and have always been an admirer of the drama," he says. And again: "nothing tells us better what we are or ought to be than comedians and comedy."

Cervantes is a practiced man of the theater. His creation, Don Quixote, is an actor, aware of the role he is playing. With these discoveries I have all I can gain from research in Spain. By late autumn of 1958 I am back in New York, now to undertake the really difficult task—thinking.

In my experience concepts grow by accretion, not by flashes of inspiration. But this was an exception; I can remember the precise moment when, after mentally chewing on the problem for some weeks, the play's design flashes into view and I feel that rare *frisson* which signals, "Got it!" Within an hour at the typewriter I have stated it in one page and even given it a title: *Man of La Mancha*. Here is a replica of that page:

*Miguel de Cervantes, aging and a lifetime failure, is thrown into prison for levying against a church in his job of gathering supplies for the Grand Armada. His fellow prisoners, dregs of the underworld, convene a kangaroo court for the purpose of seizing all of Cervantes' possessions. These possessions include a manuscript which we will later surmise to be the story of a certain eccentric who calls himself Don Quixote.*

*Cervantes cleverly persuades the "court" to allow him to present a defense in the form of an entertainment. Given permission, he assumes the character of his eccentric knight and involves the other prisoners in playing roles in the seemingly ridiculous story. There are interludes of return to reality when the presence of the Inquisition, before which Cervantes will be tried in reality, makes its ominous presence known.*

*As the entertainment proceeds we will detect the character of Cervantes blending with that of his creation until we come to understand that the two are spiritually the same person. In the process the prisoners are entertained, then involved and finally touched by emotions long since chilled, in particular one upper-level criminal called "The Duke." The story of Don Quixote is interwoven with the life of Cervantes; actually, we don't know how either one will end except that each will illuminate the other.*

I take my single page to David Susskind, the bravest television producer I know. He takes a full two minutes to ponder it, points out the difficulties (extreme) of selling such a play to the public, then asks what I would need to write it. I explain: an advance, so I can back off to some place where there's nothing in my life but writing this play. Susskind says, "You've got it." A contract dated October 19, 1958, is issued together with a check. In February of the year 1959 I'm on my way to Switzerland, there to isolate myself in a mountainside cabin overlooking Lake Maggiore, in order to wrestle with a play which I really don't know how to write.

Early in the process I encounter a serious lacuna in my concept. There is no character through whom the Quixotic ideal will flower finally, who will experience catharsis through dedication to the Quest... And so is born the character of Aldonza, "a savage alley cat, veteran if not always victor of many back-fence tussles," whom Quixote will identify as his Lady Dulcinea. In the novel *Don Quixote* there exists the name but no such character. My Aldonza will become the pivot upon which the entire play turns, the catalyst which makes it "work."

More than ever I come to realize how lonely is the occupation of writing. Daily I stumble along, working from instinct rather than plan, surprised again and again by what emerges from the typewriter. I am unaware of deepest feelings until they confront me on paper. On the day I write, "to dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe, and never to stop dreaming or fighting..." I stop, disturbed by such fancy philosophy. I strike it out. Put it back. Twice.

But my real surprise comes with the play's climax. I hadn't planned it as it appears on the paper. I have something much more

sophisticated in mind. But it writes itself as the death of Quixote and his transfiguration through his one convert, Aldonza. Then one day, three months after commencement, the script is finished. No, not finished—what play ever is “finished?”—but there’s a complete draft, and those loveliest words in the language, *The End*, have been written. On June 8, 1959, with considerable trepidation I ship it off to New York, abandon my cabin and take a train to Tuscany where I will unwind at leisure.

My leisure is not long-lived. A cable follows me to San Gemignano. It reads: SCRIPT EXCELLENT. PRODUCTION SCHEDULED FOR CBS DUPONT SHOW OF THE MONTH. REHEARSAL BEGINS OCTOBER 15TH OR THEREABOUTS. SOME REVISION REQUIRED. WHERE ARE YOU? RETURN SOONEST. Signed, of course, by David Susskind.

Actually, I’m stunned. I had never expected so quick approval of a project which is unconventional, of dubious audience-appeal and, most damning of all, “intellectual.” At bottom, I hadn’t really expected approval at all, and in my mind was already toying with a conversion to theater form after its rejection for television. I drop such considerations, suspend my hedonistic pursuits and book the earliest plane out.

In New York I find the production office already busy. Lee J. Cobb, of *Death of a Salesman*, has been signed to play Quixote/Cervantes. Eli Wallach will be Sancho Panza, Hurd Hatfield the Duke, and Viveca Lindfors will be my “splendid alley cat.” Audrey Gellen will produce, and Karl Genus, who’d staged an earlier work of mine, *American Primitive*, will direct. The prisoners will be an impressive assemblage of Broadway actors.

The revisions are significant but not extensive. I’d intended my prisoners to “improvise” their characters in the Quixote story, but it’s considered potentially confusing. There’s a request from “sources” that I take out the Inquisition and make it a secular Court. (Are Catholics still defending the Inquisition? I suppose it’s perfectly possible...after all, many people are still defending the Holocaust.)

I have only one disagreement with Susskind. He objects to my title, *Man of La Mancha*. The audience, he maintains, will not be able to identify La Mancha nor grasp its significance. They must have

a handle of identification. He's right, of course; and the title changes to *I, Don Quixote*, a title I dislike to this very day.

In rehearsal I have a problem with Viveca Lindfors. She's a fine actress, but approaches the role with darkling angst more suited to Sweden than to Spain. I discuss it with her, but she's obdurate, and for the first time I ask that an actress be replaced—a stormy scene! In her place, only a few days before broadcast, we hire a fascinating unknown, Colleen Dewhurst. She'll be sensational, launching a distinguished career which will find its fruition in the theater.

The play is performed—live!—on November 9, 1959. *I, Don Quixote* is one of the last major plays to be performed live on television. A nerve-wracking experience; I was in the control room as the shots were called, as the inevitable mishaps happen. I have little sense of how it is registering on the public, but shortly I learn. There is a wonderful thing about live television: one is immediately aware that live people are watching it. In those days my telephone number was listed in the New York directory. Within ten minutes after the end of the performance at ten-thirty P.M. it began ringing. The first call was not encouraging, an irascible Oklahoman voice demanding: "Didn't you know that Cervantes had lost his left hand?" I explain: not lost, but crippled, but the caller is unappeased. The calls that follow, though, are exhilarating, not merely complimentary, but grateful for a play respecting intelligence and the commitment of emotion. They come from Texas, Oregon, Ohio... many states, many kinds of people. My phone did not stop ringing until three o'clock in the morning.

The press reviews were excellent if not entirely unequivocal. "One of television's finest hours," said the *New York Times*. *Time* magazine gave it an entire page, commenting that "Writer Dale Wasserman caught the tragic essence of Don Quixote's tragic role. In a tricky but effective device he fused author and hero into one character and let both proclaim, "To dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe..." *Variety*, that tough trumpet of show business, was atypically tender in saying, "The greatness of the Miguel de Cervantes masterpiece never has been so clearly illustrated as in this teleplay. The beauty of the presentation is that it reached such a significant number of people at one time—the audience that television ordinarily so disdainfully neglects." And

it added, "Wasserman's play was an important dramatic achievement, re-kindling the fame of Cervantes' words and the spirit of his characters without losing the substance of his inspiring story."

But the review I enjoyed most was the shortest: a banner headline in *Life* magazine which proclaimed *I, Don Quixote* as "a metaphysical smasheroo!"

I have reflected on the fact that so few people in press or audience recognized that *I, Don Quixote* was *not* an adaptation of the novel but an examination of its author. If this reveals anything it is simply that *Don Quixote* is the book everybody knows but many fewer actually read.

Almost immediately I was aware of having chosen the wrong medium for the work. Requests for theatrical rights came steadily, but I had serious doubts as to its viability in standard play form. After allowing one aborted option for Broadway, I withdrew it pending evolution of a form more suitable. Inevitably that form implied the musical, with its invitation to imaginative flow and enhanced emotion. I was to allow five years to elapse—years spent in writing unrelated movies and plays—until the right associations were formed and the play rewritten for the stage in the shape of an unconventional musical known then, and apparently for decades to come, by my original title, *Man of La Mancha*.

But that is another and even unlikelier story.