



An Interview with Dale Wasserman

This interview took place on May 23, 1997. It was transcribed by Amy Williamsen, then reviewed and corrected by Mr. Wasserman. The original videotape is held by Television Services of Northern Arizona University.

A talk by Mr. Wasserman, "Don Quixote as Theater," was published in Cervantes, 19.1 (1999), 125–30. A just-published memoir on his early years as a hobo is "Flipping the Meat Train," American Heritage, February 2001, 58–66.

DAN EISENBERG: Good afternoon. My name is Daniel Eisenberg, of Northern Arizona University. We are honored to have here in Flagstaff and at Northern Arizona University Mr. Dale Wasserman. Welcome.

DALE WASSERMAN: Thank you.

DE: Mr. Wasserman is a distinguished playwright. He is still composing and having new plays produced. He is best known, perhaps, for his composition of the play *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and especially for the work that concerns us here this afternoon, which is *Man of La Mancha*. We're going to have an innovative and exciting production here at Northern Arizona University beginning on June 6 [1997]. Mr. Wasserman, could you

tell us something about how you came to write this play and what attracted you about the figure of Don Quixote?

DW: It happened by pure accident, actually. I was in Spain writing a movie when I read in a newspaper that I was there for the purpose of researching a dramatization of *Don Quixote*. That was a laughing matter because, like most people on earth, I had not read *Don Quixote*, but Spain seemed just the right place to repair that omission. So I waded into the novel and came out on the other side of a half-million words convinced that it could not be dramatized.

DE: And why was that?

DW: It's simply that it covers too great a spectrum of possibilities. One could take a section of it, perhaps, but it's a protean work. It is all things to all people and I thought it is a little like trying to pour a lake into a bucket. It's simply too massive to compress.

DE: And how did you proceed at that point?

DW: I got interested in its author, Miguel de Cervantes. I ran across one fact which immediately attracted me and set up a possible affinity. That is he was first and preeminently a man of the theater—he was a playwright, he was an actor, he was a man who went on the road with his shabby little performing troupe. He wrote thirty to forty plays, perhaps more, none of which were considered to be very good. But, in his love for the theater, his passion for it actually, he never really wavered. And this is what gave me the idea—write a play about Miguel de Cervantes, and blend or cross-fertilize his creation, Don Quixote with his own personality, his own life. Just possibly, then, one could have something approaching a dramatization.

DE: How did you come to turn this into a play, this story of his life and his career as a playwright?

DW: Well, I had the notion of doing a play about Cervantes which would invoke Don Quixote as his alter ego. I wrote an outline of it in one page, presented it to a then famous television producer, David Susskind, and rather to my amazement, he said "Here's a check. Start writing." When they hand you that check, you're trapped. So, I began.

DE: And you went to Switzerland, is that correct, to work on the play?

DW: I was frightened of not being able to do it, so I gathered my research together and my scattered wits and I went to Switzerland and moved into a small house overlooking Lake Maggiore. I stayed there for three months until I had a first draft of the play.

DE: And you showed it to Mr. Susskind at that point?

DW: With much trepidation, I sent it to New York, took off quickly for a good time in Italy, and got a cable back rather promptly saying "We're going into production in November. Get back here."

DE: What year was that?

DW: 1959.

DE: And did they go into production?

DW: They did indeed. The first production was called *I, Don Quixote*. My original title, curiously, was *Man of La Mancha* but Mr. Susskind said the audience must have the "Quixote" identification so the title was changed to *I, Don Quixote*. The cast included some eminent actors: Lee J. Cobb played the dual role, Eli Wallach was his Sancho, and Colleen Dewhurst, in her first major role, actually, played Aldonza.

DE: And how did it get from there to the BBC?

DW: (Laughs). It didn't get to the BBC. It was highly successful on the air, rather to everybody's surprise, because we all considered it perhaps a bit too intellectual, a bit too much for the audience. It wasn't. Letters poured in from all over the country, phone calls—it was in those glorious days called the Golden Age of television—when there were live, breathing people out there and they responded to what they saw and television was not yet controlled by the advertisers. So, the response being as enthusiastic as it was there were almost immediately offers to alter its form somewhat and do it on Broadway.

DE: And how did you respond?

DW: I responded by running away from it, doing six other shows and a few movies and it wasn't until five years later, I believe, that I undertook the musicalization of the play.

DE: And where did that concept come from of turning it into a musical?

DW: It had always been there. Some of the speeches were so high-flown, they went into such rhetoric, that they were more naturally musical than they were stage speeches, and just as easily some of

what I called my “aria speeches” became lyrics for songs.

DE: I remember you saying that some of the best lines in the songs came out of these speeches in the plays... “The Impossible Dream”

DW: It hurts... It hurts but it’s true.

DE: Has the play ever been produced again since the musical came out?

DW: No, I have never allowed it to be produced. I do intend to publish it before too long together with some reminiscences about and around it, but production no.

DE: And you had quite a lot of difficulties in actually getting the musical produced because it was such an unusual musical with a protagonist who was going to die that producers or backers were not enthusiastic about its potential as a musical, is that correct?

DW: You’re perfectly right. The backers backed away. They said “This is too intellectual.” They did point out the fact that you cannot have a musical in which the leading man dies on stage and they found other fault with it. But we persevered and we originally opened at a small theater called “The Goodspeed Opera House” which has since become quite famous as the birthplace of musicals. There we were able to refine it, reduce our errors, increase our virtues and we collectively got together enough financing to move—not to Broadway, but to New York.

DE: So somewhat of a quixotic quest itself to get the musical actually onto Broadway, isn’t that so?

DW: It was, it was indeed. There was every reason for its not being a commercial success. Actually when we opened, as I say not on Broadway, but in Greenwich Village down at Washington Square, we had an advance that wouldn’t have bought the cast lunch. But an interesting thing happened as people began to see it. Even a few at a time, they began to buy more tickets on their way out and to phone their friends. From ground zero in about three weeks we went to capacity and then we stayed there for about five years.

DE: So it was word of mouth, really.

DW: Totally. A wonderful example of word of mouth, yes.

DE: And why do you feel that this adaptation or recreation or whatever (I’d like to know your term for it) was successful whereas previous attempts to dramatize *Don Quixote* had failed?

DW: The secret was I didn’t really dramatize *Don Quixote* at all. I

wrote a play about Miguel de Cervantes and I drew upon others of his works. Most people have not noticed because they're not Cervantes scholars, but there's a good deal of other Cervantes writings in there. The *Exemplary Novels* are certainly in there, "Rinconete and Cortadillo" is it?...

DE: Yes.

DW: I borrowed characters from those and I concentrated upon Cervantes in distress, in crisis, and used Don Quixote only as a splendid creation and not as the absolute center of attention.

DE: How much do you feel that Cervantes identified himself with Don Quixote or that Don Quixote is a projection of Cervantes?

DW: I think enormously. The clue to me was when I discovered that Cervantes was not merely a man of the theater but that theater was his passion, and that the only reason *Don Quixote* the novel exists was his need to make some money in his later, stressful years. The theater permeates *Don Quixote*. I ran across one line in *Don Quixote* that clued me in on a possible way to do this: it comes from the scene where Quixote meets a neighboring farmer, Pedro Alonso, I think is the name, and Alonso says "You are not this splendid thing that you say you are and I am not this splendid thing you think I am." And Don Quixote says to him "I know very well who I am and who I may be if I choose." That was the proverbial light bulb turning on for me because it said to me "Don Quixote is an actor." He is very conscious of playing a role, he is very conscious of writing his role as he plays it, and he is very conscious of keeping himself upstage center as he plays with all attention focused upon himself. But he is an actor, not a madman, and he is not a man obsessed. He is not a man with empty rooms in his head. He is an actor. And, with that sort of stimulus, I found it possible to expand upon that and to write the play.

DE: You said that you thought that Cervantes's goal in writing *Don Quixote* really was to get some money when he was in difficult financial circumstances. Do you think that he had a message for modern readers to take from the work?

DW: I have a distinct impression that he began the work in one vein, with one intention, and that as it grew, it got deeper, wider and expanded to fill an intention that I doubt very much that he began with. And people still argue about what that intention

was...but the point is: it is not a single intention, it is actually several—and for this reason, I think, no two people quite agree upon the meaning of *Don Quixote*.

DE: What do you see in the figure of Aldonza or Dulcinea?

DW: That's very interesting because there is no such person of course in *Don Quixote*. There is a name—there is presumably the daughter of a neighboring farmer whose name is Aldonza Lorenzo—as a person she never appears in the book. I'd like to take a little pride in that, not in many other things, but in that because Aldonza, as she appears in the play *Man of la Mancha*, is purely my own invention. And, she is, in a way, the catalyst of the entire play.

DE: Does she represent the same function in your play as the imaginary character does for *Don Quixote*?

DW: Yes, fundamentally yes. Except, of course, in the play she is personified as a slattern, a trollop, a person who couldn't be more remote from the notion of the Lady Dulcinea. She is and remains the sole convert to *Don Quixote's* philosophy in the end of the play, and in achieving that convert his ideals were not abandoned.

DE: What do you see *Don Quixote's* philosophy as being?

DW: Idealism...idealism. The opportunity to find some grace in living when so little appears in reality.

DE: What grace is there in living? Is it that life is fulfilled by pursuing one's ideals?

DW: That the ideals of chivalry, transmuted to some degree, are possible of achievement by someone who will obsessively follow that call, and the ideals are lovely ideals. They almost never occur in life, but the mere fact that they are there as objectives is the marvelous thing. When I wrote the phrase "the impossible dream" (and often, I've regretted writing it) I meant literally "the dream is impossible," but the continual striving toward it is the point, and not the achievement.

DE: What is that *Don Quixote* is trying to achieve with his striving?

DW: He says he hopes to add some measure of grace to the world. It's a highly generalized statement, but I find it a lovely one.

DE: Now one of Cervantes's characters that does not play as large or complex a role in *Man of La Mancha* is Sancho. Could you comment on what your view was of the function of Sancho, or

what Cervantes or yourself was trying to do with Sancho?

DW: Well Sancho plays the role, fundamentally, of the pragmatic straight man to Quixote's madly comic idealism, and the contrast provides a frame for Quixote's seeming madness. Without Sancho, there is no Quixote, because we do not have the constant interplay of the pragmatist versus the idealist.

DE: I recall from when you were here at NAU before that one of the questions was the evolution in Sancho that you have in Cervantes' work in which he does become more idealistic—some people have said that—and adopts to some extent Don Quixote's ideals. But that's something that is not present in *Man of La Mancha*, is that correct?

DW: I abandoned that completely for *Man of La Mancha* because it goes far beyond the scope that could be attained in a play which is primarily about Miguel de Cervantes and certainly not about Sancho's progression of character.

DE: Shortly, we are going to take a break and after that I'd like to talk about this particular production and what is different, unique and innovative about this production. But in summarizing our discussion of Cervantes and what you have done inspired by Cervantes, I wonder if there are any concluding remarks that you would like to add.

DW: Well, something that I have found ironic—and perhaps this may be a little beside your point—is that phrase, “the impossible dream.” Unfortunately, it became a catch phrase. I have seen it used for baseball teams and bidets; General Mills has used and General Westmoreland used it, and everybody *misuses* it.

DE: (Laughing) And they don't pay you for it!

DW: And they don't pay me for it. Not only that, but they all misuse it because an impossible dream is *literally* impossible whereas everyone has taken it to mean some project that is faintly difficult but achievable. It is such a misreading of the phrase and the play, I wish I could correct it.

DE: To some extent, you identify with or are inspired by this previous playwright, Cervantes. Do you have an impossible dream?

DW: Of my own?

DE: Yes, sir.

DW: Well, if I had one, it was to become a writer. Now, in my own terms of the excellence that a writer ought to have, I never have become a writer and never will. But I am continually working at it and I hope that I may even become better than I have been.

DE: Thank you. We're going to take a break now and we'll come back in a few minutes and talk about this production here at Northern Arizona University of *Man of La Mancha*.

DE: Welcome back. We're going to continue our discussion with Mr. Dale Wasserman and we're going to turn our attention to the production which you are heavily involved with here at Northern Arizona University. I'd like to start by asking you how it happened that this important production is being held here in Flagstaff?

DW: Well, the reason for it is simply wonderful: they asked me. I was delighted at the idea because it opened a possibility for doing something that I felt was timely to do—it would not have been timely before—and we could experiment with it here under university auspices and with tolerance that we probably wouldn't get elsewhere.

DE: And you have found that tolerance?

DW: So far, beautiful.

DE: Good. Well, what is it that you are hoping to accomplish in this production? In what ways does this production differ from previous productions?

DW: Well, *Man of La Mancha* is, if I've counted right, thirty-two years old. At the time we originally did it, certain things were possible in theater and many other things were not. They have become possible. Since they have, we want to take advantage of them. Some of those things, for instance, are digital imaging; others are surround-sound. We can move into areas of the play that are much less literal than they were before—that's the basis of our production here.

DE: What sort of effect do you hope the person who comes and sees the production will have? What sort of experience?

DW: I hope that they will experience much more than a literal reality of a production. I hope they will hear more than the words. I hope that in our technique of using multiple projection screens and surround-sound that their senses will be impinged upon

rather than simply their ears and eyes and that it will be a much more sensory experience. And, above all, I hope that they will be able to trace what is going on in people's minds rather than overt actions on stage.

DE: What would you think that they should take away from the production in an emotional sense or in an intellectual sense or even a spiritual sense?

DW: The play itself is, I think, something of a spiritual experience—that, I hope, will be there, fortified. What I hope they will take away is a better understanding of those twins called reality and illusion and be able to see and experience the use of illusion in the play as emanating from Quixote's mind and of reality as reflected by the pragmatism of Sancho. But they will experience it in ways that were not possible before; ways that are, for the first time, being tried here.

DE: So you view illusion as an important part of our existence, is that correct?

DW: I think that all plays in some sense or other deal with illusion versus reality. Even the most earth-bound of them in a way deal with that question. To me, it is *the* basic subject in theater, and if we can broaden the reception of it as we are trying to do here, I think that we have done something of marked interest for theater.

DE: When the audience leaves the theater, what role would illusion have then? Is it something that they would take with them and use in their own lives?

DW: I think that in understanding the importance of illusion in our own lives, in everyone's life, they probably will appreciate its value more than they did when they entered the theater—that, at any rate, is my objective.

DE: What is the value of illusion?

DW: Illusion makes the hardships of life possible to survive. Life, for most people, is somewhere between a burden and a positively awful experience, with gleams here and there of sunshine. But illusion—being pretty much a function of imagination—makes possible the belief in other possibilities in life, in better worlds, in improvements which may or may not happen; but so long as the belief in them persists, life is given added value thereby.

DE: Well that's a very noble accomplishment for theater to do, and

for *Man of La Mancha* to do in particular.

DW: Theater has the nobility, I don't.

DE (laughs): I think some of us would disagree with that. Well, I think with that as a concluding remark, I would like to encourage anyone who is seeing this interview in advance of the production to attend, beginning on June 6 and continuing for eight or ten productions.

DW: Thereabouts...

DE: And we will have all us a memorable experience here at Northern Arizona University. Thank you for being with us this afternoon.

DW: My pleasure.

The unpublished play I, Don Quixote, will, thanks to the kindness of Mr. Wasserman, be published in the next issue of Cervantes.