

English National Opera
London Coliseum

MUSIC ★★ ★

STAGING ★★ ★



LEIGH

Man of La Mancha

Review by Antonia Couling • Photography by Manuel Harlan

Man of La Mancha was considered *avant garde* at its 1965 premiere. Its unconventional book breaks so many standard musical theatre rules. At best, its storytelling is linear, and at worst dragging and didactic, with two-dimensional characters and so much spoken exposition that the dramatic impetus hasn't got a chance

Much like Cervantes' hero, I held firm in my belief in the quality of this endeavour. All those involved extolled *Man of La Mancha's* virtues, both in terms of its ethical stance, its musical qualities and its theatrical potential. And while the first is clearly expressed, and Mitch Leigh's score certainly has its moments – 'To Dream the Impossible Dream' is one of the most stirring musical numbers there is – it is on the third count that this piece literally stumbles.

Most of my hopes hung on director Lonny Price. If anyone could inject some energy and pace into this piece, he would be the man, with his great track record of previous Grade Linnet ENO musical productions. His attempt to bring the work into the present day by setting it in a makeshift prison in the basement of a plundered museum was, however, far too light a touch and lacked any punch. Cervantes' trial defence – the retelling

of the Don Quixote story – reverted to traditional costume with some chilling scenes. The 'Little Bird' rape scene, as Quixote's attempts to reform the prisoners by way of teaching them a song, was deftly staged as the apparent change of heart turns to threat. The set (James Noone) was used well to convey the mood between prison and play, but was too static, physically.

There was no denying the gusto and clarity of the excellent 30-piece ENO orchestra under David White. Nicholas Lyndhurst's measured delivery and wonderful comic touches as the Innkeeper were highly enjoyable. He alone injected some innovative characterisation into his role. Danielle de Niese showed total commitment as Aldonza/Dulcinea, but her tendency to rein in her voice due to the microphones wasn't always satisfactory. The Padre (Minal Patel), Housekeeper (Julie Jupp) and Antonia (Lucy St Louis) supplied competent light relief and some

beautiful singing. Sanzo Panza was taken well by old pro Peter Polycarpou, though I yearned for some edgy scene-stealing at the expense of his master – though again, much of the fault lies in the two-dimensional writing of the character. The great physical comedy of Emanuel Alba as the Barber was a highlight.

Kelsey Grammer in the lead role was, unsurprisingly, commanding. With such a big star in the driving seat, we felt we were in safe hands. His vocals were spot on and packed with empathy. 'Dream' was delivered with a sensible pacing, building to full engagement, pathos and belief – he really meant every word. Ultimately it was his charisma and stage presence that carried the piece: it's the only thing that can. I had the opportunity to see it again 10 days after press night and you could sense the improved energy and slickness. The piece also grew on me with familiarity, though this is only because I was willing to see past its flaws. **ON**