

Tilting at windmills
By: Valerie Walker
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If you've ever known an eccentric (and I've been fortunate enough to have known quite a few), you will be able to relate to Josefina (Sallie Willows), the niece of Alonso Quixano, who convinces himself he is the knight-errant Don Quixote de la Mancha, in Vpstart Crow's summer production at the Cramer Center.

Based on Miguel de Cervantes' iconic novel from the dawn of the 17th century, this adaptation was written by Conrad Seiler and directed by Jamie Bartosavage Erdman.

In both the novel and the play, Quixano becomes so obsessed with stories about knights, chivalry and adventure that he neglects food and rest and becomes mentally-altered, convincing himself that he is Don Quixote de la Mancha, determined to rid the world of all evil people.

Watching this play, I could not help but make the connection to a good friend whose descent into dementia I witnessed firsthand. My friend did not think he was a knight errant, but his decision-making process was no longer constrained by day-to-day worries such as paying rent, eating dinner, or going to work.

David Berkenbilt (Don Quixote) portrays this mental freedom with humor, and under Erdman's direction, focuses on the lighter aspects of the farcical comedy.

By the end of the play, we come to admire Quixote for his relentless belief in himself, his refusal to admit defeat or to cave in to reality, especially in the face of the world-weary characters around him.

Teresa (Lauren Billingsley), wife of noble squire Sancho Panza, is initially unwilling to lose her husband to "Donkey-Hotay" until she starts thinking about the possibility of becoming a duchess and looking down her nose at everyone.

Other characters play cruel practical jokes on Quixote, but he never bends and never bows his head in frustration. He simply refuses to acknowledge "reality" until a village doctor literally beats sense into him, and he returns to his old self.

It is at that point that we start to miss the old Quixote, and to notice a theme that has recurred in literature for generations: the question of who defines what sanity is, a question that formed a central theme in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Harvey," among other works.

The whole time Quixote pursues his quest, Sancho Panza (Chalmers Hood) follows along. Hood has just returned to the Cramer Center stage after an 18-month hiatus. He used to be a regular at the theater, and during the break he has matured and mellowed a little, but has not lost his flair for physical comedy, which he uses aptly while trying to care for his "master" as best he can.

I could not help but think about my own mentally ailing friend and wonder if maybe it might not be better to never worry about such trivial matters as food and shelter and be able to focus on the

romantic ideal.

Erdman doesn't let the show get too heavy, though. As she wrote in the playbill, "I want the humor, adventure and fun to be in the foreground and leave the serious issues to dwell in the background of your minds."

The focus on humor elicited a great reaction from the small but enthusiastic opening-night audience.

"The Wonderful Adventures of Don Quixote" runs through July 29 at the Cramer Center in Old Town Manassas. Tickets are \$20 for adults, \$15 for students, seniors and city/county employees.

For more information, visit www.vpstartcrow.com.