

Don Quixote: Suffering Fools Wisely

by Emily DeVoti

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“He is either mad, or he is reading Don Quixote.”

—Philip III of Spain, on seeing a student bang himself on the head while laughing hysterically over a book

This June, Don Quixote will descend into Lower Manhattan. Forging bravely forward through windmilling subway turnstiles, he catches a train to Chambers Street. Here—being careful not to skewer passersby with his trusty sword as he unfolds his pocket map—he finds his destination in an unassuming office building at 40 Worth Street. Is this another Quixotian misadventure, he wonders, in a rare moment of self-awareness, as his wrinkled finger presses a button to Floor 13. But no, he had it right. We have been waiting for him. And the moment he steps foot out onto the surreal corporate landing, his soul transmigrates into a brilliant splinter of multi-disciplinary performances tracing the episodic incidents of his now nearly 400-year-old tale.

In Praise of Folly: The Don Quixote Project, an evening of adapted stories from Miguel Cervantes’ classic text, is the creation of the 11-year old Peculiar Works Project. The evening is comprised of seventeen separate pieces ranging from three to fifteen minutes each, as interpreted by artists from diverse backgrounds including music, theater, dance, puppetry, video, and performance and installation art.

The event, dubbed a “site-specific, multi-disciplinary traveling adventure through Cervantes’ fantastical world of delusion and knight errantry,” is set in a 30,000 square foot performance space—the floor of an office building donated by Jeffrey Gural of Newmark and Company Real Estate. It is a generous stage by any standards. And over one hundred artistic collaborators set out to fill it with insight and festivities, as they guide the audience—bolstered as you are with complimentary tapas and sangria—through a transformed landscape of hallways, offices, conference rooms and assorted unlikely nooks and crannies of all shapes and sizes. Just so, you are encouraged to trace our bumbling hero’s path with a physical voyage of your own.

The Don Quixote Project began three years ago, when Peculiar Works decided to take a new look at what many consider the world’s first modern novel. They invited artists who they liked working with to find sections of the text they would be interested in interpreting. “First thing you should do is read the book,” Catherine Porter, lead producer of the project, told her artists, “And that should take you a while...” Next, they returned to Porter and her colleagues with sections that compelled them. From here, excerpts (ranging from two pages to four chapters long) were selected in such a way that they could each lend a hand in telling the overall story, while allowing the artists to express, in their own particular styles, what first engaged them in the novel. After a three-year residency with HERE Arts Center, where the pieces were individually supported and developed, the project is now ready for its group unveiling.

In regard to the site-specific element of the piece, Porter says that it is perhaps more specifically “site-responsive,” in that each artist responds to the space in some way within the piece they’ve created. However, the space is also related to the general ideas that first attracted Peculiar Works to the novel. “It is about the attempt to do good in a world that doesn’t care,” says Porter, pointing to the significance of exhibiting Quixote’s misunderstood acts of altruism—and those of the performing arts—in a typically bottom-line corporate environment. In Don Quixote, the protagonist “fails miserably—and comically,” as the theater’s press proclaims, “and yet his generous heart has an extraordinary impact on his world.”

Sadly, in 400 years, it is debatable how many steps towards a more caring world we have made. But the altruism of Newmark and Company, though not a solution to under-subsidized arts, is a hopeful model that brings to mind the midtown organization Chashama. Working primarily with the Durst Organization (the developers who erected the Condé Nast building and own other chunks of midtown), the non-profit offers free or subsidized theater and studio spaces in buildings that are temporarily between tenants or awaiting more permanent real estate transactions. If these be fools, may the fools lead the wise to a brighter future.

In Praise of Folly: The Don Quixote Project
produced by Peculiar Works Project
Thursdays through Sundays, June 10-27
Th. & Fri. at 7pm, Sat. & Sun. at 5pm and 7pm
40 Worth Street, 13th Floor (between Church and W. Broadway)
reservations required: 212-529-3626, ext. 1
www.peculiarworks.org
admission: \$25 (including tapas and sangria)
discount previews (\$15) on June 11-13 (excluding 6/12, 7pm show)
benefit performance (\$50): June 12th at 7pm