



Don Quixote's Alive and Well And Living at McQuaid

By FR. WILLIAM O'MALLEY
Director of Dramatics
McQuaid Jesuit High

It all began with picking the play. But this time it was easy. "Man of La Mancha" had run five years on Broadway, and in August the amateur rights became available. It would cost: the royalties were high, the stage was simple to look at but complicated to build, and, well, we had gone over \$300 in the hole on our Fall play. It was also going to be difficult: the music places great demand on both singers and orchestra—and we didn't even have an orchestra, yet.

But "La Mancha" was the right show, because it says something about what human beings are and can be. With today's hectic pace, people go to the theater to relax and laugh and not to be forced to think. That's why our heavy plays like "J.B." and "Crucible" draw smaller audiences.

So "Man of La Mancha" was right: it's a play to make an audience relax and laugh. But it also makes us join the people onstage, into whose lives Don Quixote came smashing. It makes us wonder, with them, if this impractical old man who has never grown up perhaps sees a more beautiful and more real world than we. It makes us wonder, and this is the purpose of art.

The next step — the most difficult and the most important — is picking the people. Whatever choice you make, you are going to have to live with for two months. It takes a kind of instinct to see in the shaky voice and stumbly gestures of

a tryout the potential that can be honed and given confidence and polish in eight weeks.

A horde of boys descends on the McQuaid cafeteria and, one by one, they come into a small room to bellow up and down the scale and sing "The Impossible Dream" — each one, with hardly an exception, claiming he has a cold today and that's why his voice is not up to par.

Then troops of girls from Mercy, St. Agnes, Brighton, Penfield line up, with the same ubiquitous cold and cases of nerves so intense that they sound as if they're singing from inside a Waring blender.

Sister Margaret Mary and I must have heard "The Impossible Dream" about 220 times, and from that number we could pick only 30. It meant cutting people with good voices, people who had been in "Oliver" and "Take Me Along" and "Roar of the Greasepaint". But we had to choose the best we could find. Everyone we chose had to be able not only to sing but to act, too.

Moreover, each role demands a specific physical and psychological type. Don Quixote must be wise; Aldonza has to be gorgeous, tough, voluptuous, innocent; Sancho is a clown, bumbly and soft-hearted; the Innkeeper must be big and commanding but gentle enough to know that "madmen are the children of God." We found them all. And we began.

For two months, the McQuaid

cafeteria becomes a small cave of make-believe. The Golden Helmet of Mambrino is really an old tin shade from a sun lamp. Quixote's sword is a piece of lath and his lance a warped length of scantling. And the set he strides around is neither a prison nor an inn but masking tape and vinyl tile. But that's what "Man of La Mancha" is all about: "seeing treasure where there is only trash!"

Gradually, a play begins to emerge. People come onstage at the right time; six shy boys begin at last to snarl with convincing savagery as they brutalize Aldonza; the hooves of the horse and mule begin to dance their flamenco together and with the tempo of the music. And one day, when you're rehearsing the finale, Aldonza begins "The Impossible Dream" and one by one the entire cast joins in, and prickles run up and down your spine, and you know it's there and it's good.

I never stay backstage during a performance. On Thursday, March 18, at 8, I will go to the back of the Mercy auditorium, pace awhile, fret awhile, and finally sit down. At that moment, "Man of La Mancha" will cease to be mine. It will belong to them, the cast, and they will share the beautiful thing we have made — the play and the love — with all of us.

Is it all worth it? Look around this page, and you'll see that it is.

Photos by McQuaid Camera Club

