

Arguing actors perfectly cast

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Inside the dimly lighted theater two actors are arguing. The younger man debates the issue calmly and rationally, but his confidence shows signs of splintering beneath the passionate arguments of his fellow.

It is not a scene from a play. A Tribune interview of La Compania de Teatro actors Jose Rodriguez, 40, and Oscar Giner, 29, has turned into an intense one-on-one discussion about the characters they will play in the company's production of "The Adventures of Don Quijote."

Giner thinks the audience will identify more closely with his character, the earthy but good-natured squire, Sancho Panza.

"As a human being you feel closer to Sancho than to Don Quijote," Giner says to Rodriguez.

"I don't," responds Rodriguez, the actor who plays Don Quijote, that immortal tilter of windmills and dreamer of the impossible. He believes people want to identify with the romantic Quijote.

"I think they (Sancho and Quijote) are two sides of the same coin. One doesn't exist without the other," Rodriguez said.

Watching the friendly feuding it is easy to tell that the two men are perfectly cast. Created by Miguel de Cervantes early in the 17th century, Quijote and Sancho are an odd couple who predate the Neil Simon version by several centuries. Total opposites when they first meet, Quijote and Sancho argue everything from the nature of reality and truth to the meaning and purpose of existence.

"Obviously we are arguing for the love we have for our own parts," said Rodriguez, La

Compania's artistic director. He hopes his adaption of the Cervantes classic, which opens at 8 p.m. Thursday at the KiMo Theater (it also plays 10 a.m. Feb. 11, 1 p.m. Feb. 12 and 3 p.m. Feb. 13), will stir up some arguments among the audience.

"I may be wrong, but I think we have kept the skeleton of the plot and been faithful to the spirit of Cervantes," Rodriguez said. "I hope that I have chosen material that conveys the idea that the book says so many different things. Which is right? Is Quijote mad or not? I hope people all leave the theater saying different things."

Rodriguez founded La Compania in January 1977. Since then the bilingual company has performed works by Lope de Vega, Garcia Lorca, Ray Bradbury, Albuquerque novelist Rudy Anaya, Albuquerque poet E. A. Mares and Rodriguez's own adaptations of New Mexican folk plays, passion plays and pageants. "The Adventures of Don Quijote" is the last new work Rodriguez will appear in before leaving the company in April to study for the Catholic priesthood.

The story of Don Quijote is primarily Cervantes' parody of the chivalric romances that were so popular during his time. It's about a country gentleman who gets so caught up in the popular stories of knights and damsels fair that he imagines himself to be a knight-errant and sees monsters, rascals and beleaguered ladies all about him. It is one of Rodriguez's favorite books and bringing it to the stage is the accomplishment of a personal quest.

He boiled the mammoth classic down to a two-hour, two-act production in English.

"If nothing else, I wanted people who see it to get at least an outline of the story," he said. "And secondly, I would like for them to be able to take with them at least a

glimpse of the big philosophical themes, particularly the one of reality and illusion."

To bring home this theme with force, La Compania technical director Sergio Palermo has designed a set based on Pablo Picasso's "Guernica," the famous painting that illustrates the horror of a bombed city with figures rooted partly in reality and partly in nightmare.

In La Compania's production, for example, the windmill will look partly like the windmill it is and partly like the monster Quijote thinks it is.

"What fascinated me was not so much the theme (of 'Guernica') but the images that were one thing but were also obviously something else," Rodriguez said.

And that brings us back to Giner and his arguments in support of Sancho.

"You have to find a character that would go between Quijote's madness and this world," Giner said. "Sancho is the messenger. He explains Quijote to the world and the world to Quijote. He is a very crucial character and because of that the audience's identity will go to Sancho. He is closer to the people."

Rodriguez smiles. He still does not agree entirely, but he realizes that he and Giner are really not that far apart.

"Quijote and Sancho are both transcending their own humanity from their different points. At one point they meet," Rodriguez said. "The core of this story is their relationship with each other, which is really man's relationship with himself and the things around him. In the end Sancho Panza becomes Don Quijote."

And when Rodriguez leaves La Compania in April, it is Giner who will become artistic director.



Oscar Giner as Sancho Panza and fellow actor Jose Rodriguez as Don Quijote