

(GUITAR MUSIC)

NEHAL JOSHI: You are listening to The Shakespeare Theatre Company's Prosecast.

HANNAH HESSEL RATNER: Welcome to the Prosecast for "Man of La Mancha," which is running from March 17th to April 26th at Sidney Harman Hall. I'm Hannah Hessel Ratner, Audience Enrichment Manager, and I am joined, once again, by Drew Lichtenberg, the Literary Manager and Production Dramaturge.

DREW LICHTENBERG: Hi, everyone.

RATNER: We are very excited to be talking about "Man of La Mancha," which feels like it's been something we've been thinking about now for months and months, so, it's exciting that we're in rehearsals and getting so close to performances. At the time we're recording this, the set is being built, the actors are going into final runs before moving on to the set, so, it's a great time, that the play is really coming together.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I think we actually—we usually do our musical—last year, we did it for the Christmas season, and we announced our season last year right after we did "Forum," so I remember talking to Alan last January or more than a year ago about "Man of La Mancha," so, it feels like it's been a very long time, and only now are we finally staging it, but, it feels like it's been gestating for a long time.

RATNER: Yeah, and "Man of La Mancha," is, of course, a classic 1960s musical based off of an even more classic novel, Miguel de Cervantes' "Don Quixote," and, similar to the plays that we've been seeing on our stages this year, "Metromaniacs" and "Dunsinane," it takes the source material, but turns it into something totally unique, rather than it begin just a straight adaptation, which is, I think, one of the things that is most exciting about this play. So, we're going to talk about that, and talk about the enduring qualities of the novel and—

LICHTENBERG: —what makes it impossible to adapt.

RATNER: Exactly, and "The Impossible Dreams" of adaptation.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, exactly.

RATNER: And then, we're going to be joined by actor, Nehal Joshi, who's playing Sancho Panza, so, look forward to listening to that and hearing from him. But, let's talk a little bit about the musical itself and its birth story because there's a fun STC connection also. It was originally created at Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut, and Michael Kahn happened to be rehearsing something else in the next room.

LICHTENBERG: Well, I think the story is that—and Goodspeed is this sort of tryout musical theatre house that developed and then premiered a lot of the great musicals from the Golden Age, and I think this was one of their most successful musicals ever, and this was, I believe, 1964.

RATNER: Yeah, it opened on Broadway in '65, I believe—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: So, that makes sense.

LICHTENBERG: And the Director—oh, it's in the Director's notes—I can't remember—it's in Michael Kahn's letter in the program, but, I can't remember the original Director of the show—anyways, he was commissioned to direct "La Mancha" and another show in rep with "La Mancha," and he was, I think he got a Hollywood job. Michael muttered something about, "Oh, it was a Hollywood show or a TV show or a movie or something," so, they had to find another Director to take over the other show in Rep.

RATNER: (LAUGHS) Right, so, Michael became that Director, and this was like a big career move.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, it was a huge break for him because it was right before he directed for Joseph Papp, so, he was still an emerging Director, sort of an unknown in some ways, and I think he got the job because he was the Acting Coach of this Director's wife, and she recommended—

RATNER: It's all about who you know.

LICHTENBERG: "Oh, there's this great Director who's been coaching me on giving me private acting lessons."

RATNER: And what he said, if I—when I remember at first rehearsal, he was telling the story—he said that the musical he was working on proved to be utterly forgettable, and no one's ever done it again, but, he was able to sit in on rehearsals of "La Mancha—"

LICHTENBERG: And see that play get sort of assembled and put together. Also, the other interesting thing is that, since the shows were in rep, the cast of "La Mancha" was also in the show that Michael was directing, but, all of the stars played sort of supernumerary roles for him, so, the original Cervantes, the original Aldonza, they're all sort of extras in the show he was directing, and he was directing these very talented actors who were supernumeraries in that show.

RATNER: That's pretty great.

LICHTENBERG: So, yeah, it's just an interesting kind of trivia, and I'm going to find this guy's—

RATNER: It's a fun connection. The original musical was actually written, it was written by Dale Wasserman, and it was originally written to be a teleplay, and then, was turned into a musical and other kind of fun things, right? The original lyricist was going to be W.H. Auden.

LICHTENBERG: Right, which everyone thought was a humongous coup, and then, turned out to be an absolute disaster because Auden was a great lyric poet, but, he was not a great lyricist.

RATNER: And one can't expect a lyric poet to necessarily function well with the world of 1960s musical theater, unfortunately.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I have to say, corroborates everything I've ever heard about Auden: Brilliant critic, great poet, but not necessarily a practical man of the stage.

RATNER: Yeah, so, instead—

LICHTENBERG: Even though he'd also lived in a house with Benjamin Britten. There's a great book to be written about Auden, one of my heroes.

RATNER: (LAUGHS) We're filled with divergence today, which, I enjoy. But, so, this musical ended up having a team that was a very Broadway team creating music that sounds, you know, so catchy and Broadway. "The Impossible Dream" has become an enduring song, a standard sung by all sorts of artists.

LICHTENBERG: Right, right. When Brian Stokes Mitchell has a Gala, he will come out and sing "The Impossible Dream."

RATNER: And every time, it just gets your heart soaring, you know.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: It has that quality, and the, there are other songs that are also extremely memorable.

LICHTENBERG: "I Like Him," Sancho Panza's song.

RATNER: Mmm hmm. "Dulcinea."

LICHTENBERG: "Dulcinea" is a beautiful song.

RATNER: "I, Don Quixote."

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I mean, pretty much, you go down the list of the score, and it's like, "Oh, I know that song. I can hum that tune. I know that song."

RATNER: And so, one of the interesting things about the play is that even though these songs are so memorable, and feel very Golden Age of Broadway, the structure of the play is actually doing something quite different and really reflecting theatrical changes that were happenings in the 1960s as well as a kind of political perspective.

LICHTENBERG: Alan Paul, the Director, always points out that this is a Broadway musical without an Intermission, which is very unusual, because usually, Broadway musicals want to sell candy and popcorn and t-shirts.

RATNER: And you can buy all those things before the show.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, you can buy them before the show. There's no—there's a unit set, there's not a lot of set changes, or at least as it was originally written, there's this convention that's evolved of the windmill popping up and various sort of, "Now, we're in the inn, and now, we're in these others places," but, that was not how Wasserman conceived of it, and even though the team was all very Broadway, the composer, who, again, is slipping my mind. It's not Joe Darion because that was the lyricist. Mitch something? But, he was a student of Paul Hindemith, who is this famous German 20th-Century sort of Neo-Classical composer, and George, our Music Director, has talked about how, really, the sound of "Man of La Mancha" doesn't have any strings, which is radical—

RATNER: Mitch Leigh is the composer.

LICHTENBERG: Mitch Leigh, Mitch Leigh—doesn't have any strings which is radical for mid or early 60s musical, and it really sounds kind of like a jazz band crossed with a kind of Neo-Classical or European Classical music style of writing.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: So, in many ways, it's a radicalization or a modification or it's kind of downtown New York, the avant-garde coming to Broadway, crashing the party.

RATNER: And then, I think what's happening on our stage, taking that a step further, is kind of an added intensity of percussion and sound that harkens back to this kind of Spanish flavor, and the choreography has a very kind of early Flamenco and Spanish feel to it, so, it's a lot of heavy-hitting rhythmic patterns created by the actors themselves.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I think what's really interesting about what Alan has done with his concept for the show is that he's emphasized the reality of the circumstances that everyone's in. He's treated it more like a play, more like the original play that it was, the one-act kind of artsy play, if you will, rather than this big showoff-y Broadway musical. We're in an Inquisition prison, it's a unit set, everything that comes out of Don Quixote's trunk is a real thing that gets re-fashioned into a theatrical prop to tell the story of the musical.

RATNER: So, let's talk a little bit more about that structure. I had mentioned that the musical is not a straight adaptation of "Don Quixote," and what they've done, as Drew just said, is to make a frame of being in an Inquisition prison, and our lead character is not just Don Quixote. He's actually Cervantes himself.

LICHTENBERG: Right. That's the twist. I mean, I think it started when Wasserman read parts of "Don Quixote." It's not clear if he actually finished the book.

RATNER: It's a long book, to be fair.

LICHTENBERG: I have not finished the whole book.

RATNER: It's multiple parts.

LICHTENBERG: It's hard to get through "Don Quixotes," as anybody from Freshman English class will testify. I think Nabokov actually once sat down and sort of made a chart of all of the episodes in every chapter of "Don Quixote—"

RATNER: Nabokov.

LICHTENBERG: Which you would love to see.

RATNER: I love him.

LICHTENBERG: And it was—he ended up saying it was like a tennis match. It was 6-4, 4-6, something like that, like, “Death Wins, It’s Cancelled: Don Quixote vs. Death” because he dies before the last match can be played, but, it has dozens of episodes in it, and it’s not just Don Quixote’s life or Alonso Quijana, who thinks he’s Don Quixote, it’s all of these other characters telling him their life stories, so, it’s this kind of menagerie or panoply of 16th-Century Spain.

RATNER: And then, on top of that, Cervantes is playing with reality and non-reality because there was this fake 2nd Edition that someone else published that then, when he wrote his part, too, he incorporated it into it, so, you have this kind of blurring of lines of what is a novel or what is real.

LICHTENBERG: Right. It was published in two volumes, each one of those has a prologue. In between the first and second volumes, a fake sequel was published by an imposter, and Cervantes—it actually inspired Cervantes to finish the novel, and it’s—the prologues are all sort of Cervantes saying, “How am I going to introduce this story of ‘Don Quixote,’” and then, he begins arguing with another Cervantes who’s offstage somewhere in the book, so, it’s this endless kind of hall of mirrors of personae, nom de guerre, pseudonyms, very much like “Metromaniacs,” actually, all these different alter egos, and it becomes this fascinating impossibility to try to find or locate who Cervantes or where his voice is in the text, and where Quixote’s is, and how they blur together.

RATNER: Right, so, it’s kind of brilliant that this musical adaptation blurs them together in a very new way.

LICHTENBERG: Well, yeah. I think Wasserman looked at the book, and said, “This should not be adapted,” you know. “I’m not going to be Orson Wells, and spend my whole life trying to adapt this into the best movie ever made and ultimately fail. I’m not going to be tilting at windmills in that way, if you will.” And so, he decided to, instead, dramatize what can be dramatized, which is the reality of one man, Miguel de Cervantes, in a prison at this one moment in his life, and we know that he was in prison at one point in his life, and where the idea for this novel could have come out of, so, it’s an interesting example of adapting something by steering into the curve instead of away from the curve. We never go towards all of the layers. Instead, we begin with the bare material, naked realities, and then, we let a lot of things be suggested by Cervantes’ character.

RATNER: And so much about the character of Don Quixote is this idea of someone making up a life for themselves, and dreaming things that are not reality, but what one wishes could be reality. It’s kind of the power of creation and the power of creativity.

LICHTENBERG: The power of the imagination. The power of the theatre.

RATNER: Yeah, which then, all gets blended in through Cervantes’ creation and within the prison.

LICHTENBERG: Right. It’s often remarked that Cervantes and Shakespeare were close contemporaries, and they died the same year. There’s a legend—

RATNER: Magical!

LICHTENBERG: That they died in the same week or one the same day.

RATNER: On the same day, as the legend goes.

LICHTENBERG: And one thing that's always fascinated by people that they can't—they look at Cervantes' life, and he has this—I don't know if we're going to talk about this later—but, he has this very, very kind of peripatetic life. He failed at a number of things. He wanted to be a playwright, he was an actor, he was a soldier, he was sold into slavery by pirates, and they look at this amazing literary creation of "Don Quixote" at the very end of his life, and they say, "Where did this come from," and it seems, to me, very similar to scholars looking at Shakespeare, who had this very mundane kind of life, in comparison. You know, he retired at the age of 45 or whatever, and moved to the country, and lived there with Anne Hathaway, but where did Hamlet, where did Falstaff, where did these amazing creations come from, when we know so little about Shakespeare or we know so little that is remarkable about Shakespeare? There's something similar, this question of "Where do these amazing literary or imaginary creations come from inside the great artists, inside the great writers," and I think that's the question that the musical is kind of fascinated by, is, like, "What inspires someone to come up with this character of Don Quixote, and what does the character represent to all of us?"

RATNER: And it kind of then leaves you, also, with this idea that these characters are inside all of us because there's an element to the storytelling of the musical that allows us, as an audience, to become part of the creation process, and to visualize, even though we are seeing this single unit set is, as you talked about, that we are creating the windmills, and we are creating the magic of this love story, and reclaiming terrible things and making them beautiful just with the power of our minds, and we, in the audience, get to participate in that process.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I mean, the conceit of the musical is, it's such a fascinating one, that Cervantes gets thrown into a prison, and the prisoners are all like, "Oh, we want to burn all your stuff, or go through all your stuff," and he has this one manuscript that is going to become "Don Quixote," it's not published yet. And, so, he sort of convinces, he sort of wins the prisoners over by talking them into staging this play, in which they all play roles in the story of "Don Quixote."

RATNER: And, of course, one kind of has to note in a Theatre History way, that this play was written a year after "Marat/Sade" by Peter Weiss, which does the same thing—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, right. The Peter Brook production.

RATNER: That Peter Brook directed—that does the same thing.

LICHTENBERG: It's set in prison. Unit set.

RATNER: With the actors being the prisoners, and, actually, they're—it's a mental institution, so the actors are all mentally ill, and they are rewriting, they're doing a play within the play, telling the story of the death of Marat, but, that trope, that has then be used multiple times by multiple writers to take the situation where then, you have people playing this part. I mean, I think, it is the all-female production of "Julius Caesar" in London a couple of years ago, and, I think, traveled to New York, just did the same thing, where it's these female prisoners telling the story, or the one-man "Macbeth" that Alan Cumming's just did on Broadway. He's in a mental institution, and he's playing the story, so, there's something about creating these spaces that are confined, but that allow us, then, to explore a story in a really new way

LICHTENBERG: Well, yeah, it's sort of intensification through reduction. You have this naked space that is bereft of a lot of the things we actually look for in a theatre space, and the name of the book that Peter Brook wrote is "The Empty Stage," right, and somehow—

RATNER: "The Empty Space."

LICHTENBERG: "The Empty Space." Somehow, even, despite the fact that there's nothing onstage or maybe because of the fact that there's nothing onstage, we fill in all of the gaps. We have this amazing ability, as audience members, to believe in things that we know not to be true, and that's a good definition of the theatrical itself, right?

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: The willing suspension of this belief. I mean, why does "Midsummer Night's Dream" end with mechanicals putting on a performance, which again, in Shakespeare's time, was on an empty stage with a minimum of props and costumes? I had a teacher once in college who said, "The plot just ends at the end of Act IV, and then, you can just throw away all of Act V."

RATNER: (LAUGHS)

LICHTENBERG: And, like, from a literal-minded perspective, that's true, but in a sense of the theatre as an enchantment, the theatre as something that encourages us to believe in a kind of reality beyond appearance.

RATNER: The way it connects and plays upon an audience, yeah.

LICHTENBERG: It's essential to the whole meaning of the, of the piece, so, there's a fascinatedly kind of Pirandellian, Brechtian, Peter Brook-ian quality to this piece that I'm really excited to see come alive.

RATNER: And I think that we should just mention, as we're talking about this unit set, our audience members are used to seeing the Harman, you know, with multiple sets and these grand designs, and this design, even though it's stationary, it's actually, I think, one of the most—

LICHTENBERG: Spectacular—

RATNER: Spectacular!

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: It's, I mean, it's a cage onstage. It's, I think, the highest set we've ever had. The height of it is really something, and it's complicated because you can't enter and exit through traditional means. There, they have to create ways of actors getting on and offstage, and the majority of actors will be onstage the whole time, and, like Drew said, there's no intermission, so, we are watching, in real time, these actors—

LICHTENBERG: And Alan's cut the Overture, so, there's not even that kind of mystic chasm before the theatrical experience starts. It's going to be like—

RATNER: Right, they're going to be onstage when people enter.

LICHTENBERG: Right, it's going to be like "Cats." They're going to be in character when you enter.

RATNER: (LAUGHS) Except they're not coming into the audience, and crawling on you.

LICHTENBERG: (LAUGHS) But, yeah. I mean, it reminds of this adage, speaking of how spectacular the set is, people have talked, since Bertolt Brecht died, why Brecht's plays have been produced widely, and part of it is because they were very expensive. Even though they looked really spare and reduced, you needed to have, like, all of the money in East Germany going towards these monumental theatrical sets, and sometimes, you need to break a few eggs to make an omelet. Sometimes, you need to, like, really go for it in a spectacular way, even though you're still talking about a unit set.

RATNER: Yeah, yeah. Simplicity is actually—

LICHTENBERG: Simplicity is actually hard and expensive—

RATNER: Yeah. Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: And you need to get the details right.

RATNER: Exactly.

LICHTENBERG: It also reminds me of another saying that the Set Designer's actually the most powerful person in the theatrical show because his set dictates blocking. It actually enforces what the actors are allowed, how they're allowed to move and what configurations are allowed to be grouped onstage. It's very important, when the Director's meeting with the Designer early in the process, to get the floorplan right because everything that, everything that flows throughout the rest of the show in performance is dictated by those choices.

RATNER: Yeah. Well, let's end there, for now, and we'll be joined by Nehal in just a second.

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RATNER: So, we are back, joined by Nehal Joshi. Hi, Nehal!

JOSHI: Hi, everybody!

RATNER: So glad that you could be with us right before you go into rehearsal today.

JOSHI: Yeah, yeah. I'm glad I could be here, too. The weather's not so great.

LICHTENBERG: No, winter is dragging on.

JOSHI: Yeah. (LAUGHS)

RATNER: Oh. Well, hopefully, by the time the show opens, we'll be in—closer to spring.

JOSHI: It's kind of perfect La Mancha weather though because, you know, they call La Mancha an arid desert.

LICHTENBERG: (LAUGHS)

RATNER: (LAUGHS)

JOSHI: So, maybe D.C., right now, could be sort of, kind of similar to that.

RATNER: Yeah, it doesn't feel very Spanish outside, but, you know.

JOSHI: It's very German.

LICHTENBERG: You know, I, I—what is the, what is the area of Spain that La Mancha is in? It's in, like, the central part.

JOSHI: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Where all the plains—

JOSHI: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Where they film all the Spaghetti Westerns.

JOSHI: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Right? Like Sergio Leone movies, kind of.

JOSHI: Yeah, I guess it would be kind of the Utah or Iowa.

LICHTENBERG: Nebraska maybe, the Great Plains

RATNER: Totally.

LICHTENBERG: It's the Great Plains.

JOSHI: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: It's like a John Ford movie, "Man of La Mancha."

RATNER: (LAUGHS)

JOSHI: (LAUGHS)

RATNER: It kind of is, sure. Yeah. Uh huh. Uh huh.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, sure. Hannah's humoring me. She's like, "Yeah right."

JOSHI: (LAUGHS)

RATNER: Well, in this production, everyone's wearing jeans, which also feels very Western.

LICHTENBERG: (LAUGHS) A lot of denim.

RATNER: Lots of denim.

JOSHI: It is weird. The cowboy hats are a strong choice, but—

RATNER: (LAUGHS)

LICHTENBERG: (LAUGHS)

JOSHI: There are no cowboy hats. The clown—no, there's no clown, except for me.

RATNER: Well, you are the clown.

JOSHI: I am the clown.

RATNER: So, can you talk about a little bit about the role of Sancho, and kind of the clown-like qualities in this world that's also a very realistic—

JOSHI: Yeah, I mean, Sancho, he's one of the great clown characters of the American musical theater, of musical theater period. I mean, you know, I've read some people say he's up there with Feste and some of Shakespeare's great clowns as Cervantes' character, not as Dale Wasserman's character, but, he's, you know, he's a simple man. He's a farmer, and—I'm sure you probably got into this, got into this—there's a difference between Sancho, the character in "Man of La Mancha" and Sancho, the character in "Don Quixote" because they're different, purposefully different for the musical than for the book. He's a, you know, he's a simple man, who is going on this quest with a—Don Quixote, with Cervantes in search of something bigger than himself, you know. He sort of lives a plain life and he dreams of things that are bigger than himself like any person does, and he is on that quest, in some ways, to see a world that is outside of himself, see something bigger than himself, and that's something, I would say, most people in the world are doing on a daily basis.

LICHTENBERG: Do you think that—

JOSHI: That's not a very funny answer.

RATNER: (LAUGHS)

LICHTENBERG: Do you think that the--yeah, right. He's a laugh riot.

JOSHI: And he's a clown. (SINGS)

RATNER: But, that's the thing about clowns, right? Clowns are funny, but not really funny underneath.

JOSHI: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: If you listen to any Comedians Podcast, it's, like, stories of depression and suicide and—

JOSHI: Well, you know, comedy's very technical, you know. I think people don't realize that, when you go to see a stand-up comic or you, you see comedy onstage or, like, I did "Oklahoma" here at Arena Stage a while back, and there was a lot of comedy. I played the Peddler in that, and there was a lot of comedy in that, but, every bit of that comedy was worked on and thought about and—because you have to really make it as honest as possible because, in a sense, the comedy of the moment is seeing yourself and seeing this sort of ridiculousness or the satire—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

JOSHI: —of the person in that experience, and, I mean, that's sort of the hard thing about playing Sancho or playing any comic character is that you really have to ground it into a reality that people can understand because then, they'll laugh at it because they understand it.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I think comedians have to be honest onstage in front of people—

JOSHI: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —relentlessly.

JOSHI: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: And it's hard to do that. It's hard to hold a mirror in front of yourself in that way, or, like, working on a bit technically really hard.

JOSHI: Yeah, yeah, and, I mean, you work on it over and over again. There's a little bit—I hope it stays in the show—and there's a bit in "I Like Him," which is my—

LICHTENBERG: Your big song.

JOSHI: —one of my big songs, which I do with a bench that we've been working on again and again and again. It's sort of this little slapstick bit, and I hope it stays in the show, so, look for that.

RATNER: (LAUGHS)

JOSHI: And, we, yeah—but that bit that goes by in, like, a flash, has taken me, like, hours and hours of rehearsal just to get right.

RATNER: Well, and this show is also just a very, very challenging show in some other ways. We were talking about the set and the challenges of it being a unit set, where people are onstage for, really, just about the entire time with no intermission. What's that been like in the rehearsal room, and, now, as you're starting to do runs?

JOSHI: You know, the whole play takes place in a prison, and I think that's the central metaphor of the play also. The prison is also a metaphoric object along with it being a physical object in the play, and I think it's great to have a play where you basically have to focus on the play throughout the whole thing.

Cervantes takes you on this journey, and, in some ways, if you get to take a break and sort of analyze—and I think that's sort of against the central story of the play, and I think Dale Wasserman actually wanted that, in some ways, that the entire play takes place in the prison because the idea is not necessarily that you physically go to another place, like it has in some productions. It's the, it's that you make that place within your surroundings, the idea—I guess the metaphor—being, you know, whatever life you live, whether you're a banker or whether you're a doctor or whether you're an actor, it's that you make do with what you have, and that you make the world out of the parts that you have, and I think that the great thing about doing a play where you don't leave the stage, where you don't go away from that, is that you focus on the story, and, I don't know, I guess that's sort of the best way to answer that in this moment.

RATNER: Well, how about, as an actor, what's it like, just like from an endurance level?

JOSHI: Well, it's hard. I mean, if you sit and watch anything for a long time, sit and watch a movie, especially a dense movie, you could be really exhausted, and, for an actor, what you have to do is you have to have utmost focus because people are looking at you at any moment. I mean, you're the lead character of somebody's play, no matter who you play, whether you're the spear carrier in the back. I mean, somebody's going to be looking at you at any moment, so, you have to be focused at every moment, and that kind of level of concentration is very hard. I mean, try it right now. Just sit, wherever you are, just focus on a point for five minutes, and don't think about anything else but that point, and see how quickly your mind goes someplace else, and I mean, for an actor, I mean, that's why we work 3 hours a night because we couldn't. We'd probably all go crazy. I mean, the Looney Bins would be full of actors—

RATNER: (LAUGHS)

JOSHI: —that have people who have minds that just exploded from, you know, focusing that hard on any one thing, so, yeah, it's difficult, but, you know, it's rewarding, too, because there's a great meditative kind of quality to that kind of focus. It's also rewarding because you are displaying your art. I mean, we're sort of sociologists in a kind of way. Actors are kind of sociologists who study people in the societies that they live in, and it's, it's great. People want to take a break from their lives, they can. I mean, you can. I mean, we're doing a Podcast right now. That's part of our lives, you what I mean? At this moment, and these people at home are listening to this Podcast in their lives, and that's their moment, and they're not taking a break from that to, I don't know, to go to Iceland in their minds, so you can't necessarily.

RATNER: (LAUGHS)

LICHTENBERG: I'm, like, in the Fjords right now.

RATNER: (LAUGHS)

JOSHI: (LAUGHS) This is—I'm being so literate. I need to have a beer. Does anybody have a beer?

RATNER: This has been a very, and what you missed in this Podcast was, you know, Drew talking theatre theory at a very high level, so, I think you're fitting in very well right now.

JOSHI: It's crazy, right, this play?! Like, it's a musical. It's "Man of La Mancha," and yet, it is so crazy dense. I mean, the plot, in sort of some ways, is like "Metromaniacs" in a kind of way. It's really a crazy, dense plot, and I don't even know how it works, but it works because of this, this man in the middle of it, who has this dream of something bigger than himself, and it is so human, this idea of whatever life you live in, that there is a part of you inside yourself, there's a child inside of yourself, that yearns to enjoy and to experience every moment in its fullest, and we, somehow, as human beings, as we get older, sort of start tampering that person down.

RATNER: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, it's like a, it's all, it's all part of that quest to get back to the prenatal state of innocence in a way.

JOSHI: Yeah, yeah.

LICHTENBERG: I remember, Nehal, the first week or so, you asked me for the, the Wasserman book.

JOSHI: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: And I think it was up in the room already. That was my excuse for not going and finding it.

RATNER: (LAUGHS)

LICHTENBERG: But, it seems like you've done a lot of research or done some background reading, maybe more than other actors in the show. Is that true? Like, what kind of, what kind of—

JOSHI: Actually, you know, I'm on this great trajectory in my career where I get to take these great roles in musical theater, and reexamine them, and last year, I did a production of "Les Mis," at the Dallas Theater Center that was really well-received, which was great, but, one thing that we did is we went back to the Hugo and re-read the Hugo and figured out what of the Hugo—

RATNER: You were playing Jean Valjean.

JOSHI: I was Jean Valjean, and we were—

LICHTENBERG: Congratulations.

JOSHI: Oh, thanks. But, we went back to the Hugo and we read the Hugo, and we thought, "What of the Hugo is in this story and of what of the Hugo can we—that has sort of drifted away from this story—can we put back in by what, by the words that are actually there," and the one thing that we talked about was the journey of Jean Valjean begin a man who wasn't very nice. I mean, in the musical, he has become a much nicer character and much more playing character that way, but, he's not a very nice man in the book, and when you meet Jean Valjean for the first time, he's this sort of rough man. He goes to the Bishop's house. One of the first jokes he makes when he sits down at the table with the Bishop is, "Ha, ha, ha! I could kill all of you right now!"

LICHTENBERG: Right.

JOSHI: That's a horrible dinner conversation!

RATNER: That's not funny.

JOSHI: What an awful dinner conversation! And then, after that, after the Bishop gives him the candlesticks and everything, he literally steals a coin from a child, and that's how he has this great transformation, and I thought, "We should put more of that back in the story," so, when we came to "Man of La Mancha," I thought, "Who of the 'Quixote' is in—what of 'Don Quixote' is in the actual story of 'Man of La Mancha,'" and I wanted to go back to that, and I also wanted to know why Wasserman put it together this way because I feel like getting back to the original impulse of the author is always important to understanding the humanity that he's trying to display. I mean, Shakespeare does it all the time, so, it was important, to me, to sort of discover Sancho in the way that he sees it, and then, from that, see the way that I see it in 2015 in my life here, and so, I only feel like those, those are the ways that these plays—there's the reason we do these plays at places like Shakespeare Theatre. The reason we do "Man of La Mancha" is because we want to see it in a new way. We want to see it in a way that is the 2015 way of seeing it, and also, the way that these actors in this room see it, to play the humanity that we want to show these people who come to see us.

RATNER: So, before we let you go back to rehearsal, can you just tell us what you're doing in the rehearsal today? Do you know?

JOSHI: We are working in the last section of the play. We're working on the "Knight of the Mirrors" section, which is, if you know the play, you know what I'm talking about. If you don't, it's one of the climatic moments in the play, and we're also working on the fighting. There's a lot of great fighting. David Leong, who's a wonderful Helen Hayes-nominated Fight Director in town—

LICHTENBERG: Along with Roc Lee.

JOSHI: Roc Lee.

LICHTENBERG: Helen Hayes Award nominee.

JOSHI: Roc and David were both nominated for the production of "Mother Courage" that I did last year at Arena, and David's created these great fights: Two very realistic-rounded fights and one comic fight that you see in the middle of the show, and we're going to be working on those fights, which is going to be so much fun. I mean, the play is so much fun. I know we talk about all this dense stuff, but, the music's gorgeous, and the story is wonderful, and there are so many great comic moments of it, and there's so many dramatic moments of it.

LICHTENBERG: It's exciting. Yeah.

JOSHI: It is. It's a very exciting musical, and it's a joy to do, and I'm just excited to see where it goes.

RATNER: Awesome. Well, thank you so much for joining us.

JOSHI: Thank you!

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RATNER: Well, that was quite lovely.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. Nehal seems like a lovely man. He's very intelligent.

RATNER: I really like smart actors.

LICHTENBERG: He was talking about how, when you rehearse a bit, you have to estrange it or, like, focus on the technique, and I feel like tragedians often have great emotional access, and—not to say that they're not very skilled technicians, but they're not forced to stand outside of themselves necessarily all of the time, in the process—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: And think about, "Oh. How is this going to read?"

RATNER: I think you're right. The comedian has to balance the technical side of making sure that everything functions the way it has to.

LICHTENBERG: Is precise the same way, yeah.

RATNER: But, then, also has to be completely open emotionally in order to make that function.

LICHTENBERG: Right. Yeah. They're inside and outside of themselves in an interesting way.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: And, I remember when Geraint was here for "The Tempest," he, he would have nights where he was really on, and it was like, "Whoa! Somebody's poking him with something red hot. I don't know why he's really screaming tonight. He's really letting it go!"

RATNER: Yeah. Well, one of the great things I thought about, listening to Nehal talk, was how much the themes behind this play are resonating with him while working on it because sometimes, you know, you work on productions and it just feels like a job or you're trying to, to get through it, but, it seemed that he really believes in the message, and I think that that's kind of the wonderful thing about both "Man of La Mancha" and the novel and "Don Quixote" that it really allows people to invest in this dream.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, he said this in an interview we're publishing in Asides, but, this idea of innocence, of naivety and how hard one, the naivety, is at the end of the play, that you have to go through all this. You have to be in this dangerous and harsh world of the prison, and you have to struggle through all the hard things that people have struggle through every day in their lives, and that there's something very powerful about the idea of coming to this kind of naïve optimism that's a hard-fought naivety, rather than a simple kind of optimism. I think that's, I think that's a very powerful and universal message, and he does seem like a true believer, for sure.

RATNER: Yeah, and he's not alone in being a true believer, and I just wanted to note what's going to be happening in the lobby during our production of "Man of La Mancha." We have an exhibit, which we're

calling "Journey's Errant," which is on loan to us from a wonderful couple who have been collecting Don Quixote memorabilia books for years and years, and it's part of their own love story, and it's part of their own "Impossible Dream" to bring all these books together, to have this collection, so, we'll be displaying books and sculptures and various other odds and ends related to the story, and that will be on the Orchestra level and downstairs in the Gift Shop, so, if you're coming to the theatre, please do stop and see those collections because it's a really wonderful way, both of experiencing what it is about this show or about this story, Cervantes' story, that keeps artists, time and time again for years, revisiting these characters. The number of translations into other languages, that there's just really this longevity to this story, but also the story of Ralph and Barbara, this wonderful couple, who have journeyed together to make this collection possible.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. Here, here.

(GUITAR MUSIC)

RATNER: Well, thank you so much for listening to the Prosecast. It's been really wonderful to talk about this play and to get even more excited to see it in a few weeks, and we hope that you enjoy it. Thank you, Drew, as always, for your smart comments, and thank you, Roc, for being an awesome Sound Engineer.

LICHTENBERG: Highly decorated one, too.

RATNER: We'll have our fingers crossed for you as we get closer to the Helen Hayes Awards. Have a good day! Bye.

JOSHI: You've been listening to the Shakespeare Theatre Company's Prosecast for "Man of La Mancha." You can subscribe to the Prosecast series on iTunes" by searching for "The Shakespeare Theatre Company" or listening at asides.shakespearetheatre.org. Tickets to "Man of La Mancha" are available by visiting shakespearetheatre.org or calling (202) 547-1122.