

Foam *Quijote*: A Puppeteer's Take on Adapting Cervantes

Jason Yancey
(Grand Valley State University)

In 2012, I collaborated with my colleagues from Theatre at Grand Valley State University to mount the first modern stage production of Tirso de Molina's *Antona García*, in a multi-faceted experience that proved immensely rewarding and laid the groundwork for new and creative pedagogical exploration. In the beginning, the objectives of adapting a classical text for the modern stage were focused exclusively on Tirso. Following my initial translation of the play into English, I worked with James Bell to refine the script for a performance directed by Karen Libman and featuring nearly thirty student actors, plus two Spanish-language *entremeses*¹ I directed with students from the Spanish department. The production was very well-received both at home in Allendale, Michigan, and in El Paso, Texas, where two performances were staged at the 2012 Siglo de Oro Drama Festival, hosted by the Chamizal National Memorial of the U.S. National Park Service. In many ways, this endeavor represented the culmination of decades working in the overlapping spaces of Early Modern literature, theatre production, and education, and yet it was also my inaugural attempt at translating and adapting a major work for performance, a task made all the more complicated by the fact that Tirso's original play ends with the characters charging into battle before abruptly pausing to promise the audience a sequel that the playwright would ultimately never deliver. In an effort to resolve the story, Bell and I borrowed portions from José Cañizares, whose 1755 play, *La heroica Antona García*, addressed numerous gaps in the Tirso version to provide a clear and far more satisfying conclusion. It was a thrilling creative process – scholars, artists, educators, and students working in concert with Tirso and Cañizares to reshape and repackage an exciting but fragmented story for a twenty-first century audience that in general spoke little to no Spanish and knew almost nothing of Spain's cultural or historical origins. At the conclusion of a season spent wrestling with linguistic, narrative, and cultural obstacles, on an outsized journey that used student performers to target diverse audiences, I found myself hungry to embark on another project and naturally turned to the one thing I assumed my audience would recognize from the Siglo de Oro: *Don Quijote*. The result was *¡Quijóteres!*, a 30-minute, bilingual puppet theatre adaptation of the novel that aimed to introduce young audiences – regardless of their background – to the themes and comic adventures of Cervantes's famously misguided hero.

Despite the unquestionable theatricality of the novel's content and structure, the *Quijote* as a play rarely lives up to the diversion of its namesake, and for good reason. Attempting to reduce a nearly 1,000-page book down to a performance of any length – let alone a 30-minute puppet show – represents its own brand of windmill-tilting, and demands a truly Alexandrian degree of cutting that threatens the final product very much like the hero himself: malnourished and primed for defeat no matter how well-intentioned. Dale Wasserman, who launched such a venture for his 1965 musical *Man of la Mancha*, described his initial reaction to the task this way:

I was aware that there had been dozens, perhaps even hundreds of such attempts—plays, operas, ballet, puppet shows, movies—every dramatic form possible. I was also aware that they had one thing in common: they failed. (125)

¹ *El Marión*, by Quevedo; and *Los muertos vivos*, by Quiñones de Benavente.

He goes on to explore both the reason and the creative potential inherent in this phenomenon:

Trying to compress this book into a neat dramatic structure was like trying to force a lake into a bucket—ambitious but impractical. It was clear that Don Quijote was all things to all people, and that no two of them could ever agree on its meanings. In that, perhaps, lay the power of the book. Each reader seemed to have read something different, something shaped by the attributes which the reader brought as personal baggage. No two people with whom I have ever had a discussion seemed to have read the same book. No two could agree on a precise meaning. One suspects that this may be the most potent reason for the enduring success of the novel—that each may take from it the meaning that he personally chooses. (126)

Rather than aim for a direct transference of the material from literature to theatre, Wasserman's embrace of the novel as "all things to all people" gave him license to extract certain characters, themes, and events in constructing a narrative of his own choosing. Specifically, Don Quijote's declaration of self in chapter five of the first part: "Yo sé quién soy" (Cervantes, 43) provided a Cervantine seed that would later germinate in Wasserman's *Man of La Mancha*. "To one whose profession is theatre," he says of the phrase, "it is instantly recognizable as the statement of an actor [...]. From this point forward I felt quite comfortable with Don Quijote. I understood him: an actor" (126). In the face of inevitable criticism for ways in which his adaptation had strayed from the source material, Wasserman would repeatedly affirm that he had never intended to produce "The" *Quijote*, but rather a particular reading of the tale that appealed to his personal interests. Curiously, Wasserman's approach reflected precisely what I had just experienced and enjoyed during my work adapting *Antona García*, a process that had taught me to believe that translators and adapters, in the words of Ilan Stavans, are "renditioners, as conduits of the sensibility of their respective ages," who "improvise within the parameters" of the source material in ways that "fit their respective sensibilities."

In taking up the sword to produce a version of the *Quijote* using puppets, one quickly discovers a banquet of material ripe for the task, from intensely comical depictions of the ridiculous, to all the clashes and crashes, valor and vomit, that has distinguished the novel as the quintessential funny book for more than four centuries. In order to narrow the selection process, I embraced my role as "renditioner" and, like Wasserman, began with a moment I found personally meaningful and charged with creative potential: Don Quijote's dramatic encounter with Maese Pedro. This familiar mishap, described in Chapter 26 of Part Two, sees the protagonist join the audience for a puppet show based on the medieval tale of another knight errant, Gaiferos, who seeks to rescue his lady Melisendra from captivity. The events that follow unravel quickly when performers and spectators take turns interrupting one another. Eventually, Don Quijote becomes so enthralled and incensed by the spectacle that he literally crosses the line between fact and fiction, what Ortega y Gasset called "fronteras de dos continentes espirituales" (209), and leaps onto the stage, putting an end to the performance and destroying the puppets in the process. At first glance, it was a natural choice to create a puppet adaptation by drawing inspiration from an episode prominently featuring puppets, yet by using Gaiferos' chivalric tale as a catalyst to blur the relationship between the real and the imagined, and by fracturing the narrative into conflicting voices at odds over how to tell a story, the chapter itself is an excellent microcosm of major themes explored throughout the entire novel.

The metafictional nature of this chapter would prove especially useful given the two kinds of audiences my play would address, whose modern background and needs would inhabit spaces often as foreign to the “continente espiritual” of the seventeenth-century novel as Don Quijote’s was to Maese Pedro’s, and for whom this production would likely represent their first introduction to the text. My primary audience, comprised of children in an elementary school setting, probably did not understand or speak Spanish and possessed little to no familiarity with the *Quijote*. For them I hoped the play would offer an engaging, comical, action-driven introduction to Cervantes’s misguided knight – and to Spanish literature in general – that would encourage them to learn more and ring familiar when they did. These elements included Don Quijote’s preparations, his assault on the flock of sheep and subsequent beating by the *pastores*, his nauseous reaction to drinking the *bálsamo de Fierabrás*, and his iconic siege of the windmill. My secondary audience of university students spoke some Spanish and perhaps had enough understanding of the *Quijote* to recognize more subtle references to events and characters detailed in the story, including Sancho’s promised *ínsula*, debates over the hero’s actual name, Cervantes’s military service in the Battle of Lepanto, and Don Quijote’s determination to avoid the jousting tournament in Zaragoza. I also made an effort to address some of the narrative innovations that have prompted scholars for centuries to regard the *Quijote* as the first modern novel by making Cervantes a character in the play – as commentator, arbiter, and sometimes instigator behind the misfortunes of his protagonist – and culminating in Maese Pedro’s literal stage within a stage and puppets performing puppets. For both groups, I hoped to preserve the beauty and flavor of the original language, and frequently incorporated passages taken directly from the source without translation into English, including many names, catchphrases, and descriptions of the heroes and villains Don Quijote references throughout his adventures.



Figure 1. Sancho looks on in fear as Don Quijote draws his sword to attack the flock of sheep he mistakes for battling armies.

Although I sought to preserve many aspects of the novel, my experience with *Antona García* had taught me that finding a modern corollary can many times achieve the desired effect more than a faithful adherence to the source. For example, because visual representations of Don

Quijote almost exclusively show him wearing his shaving basin *yelmo de Mambrino*, I worried that to a casual observer unfamiliar with either shaving basins or medieval helmets, it had come to represent an actual helmet, thereby losing its original value as the signifier of an unstable man. In an attempt to counteract this, I replaced the shaving basin with a large cooking pot as a more modern equivalent to an improvised metal helmet and more immediately recognizable as ridiculous. Additionally, the adaptation pays special homage to the book's metafictional elements through an appearance by Sansón Carrasco, who describes himself as Don Quijote's "biggest fan," having bought into an extensive array of merchandising, including posters, action figures, cereals, and even underwear. Goaded by Cervantes and eager to join the adventure himself, Sansón later returns in disguise as the puppeteer Maese Pedro, replacing Ginés de Pasamonte's role in the novel as a way to minimize the number of characters in the play.



Figure 2. (From left to right): Sancho Panza (played by Katie Munoz) and Don Quijote (played by Caleb Duckworth) observe the puppet show (performed by Russel Cerda) on a miniature replica of the full stage, while Sansón Carrasco—disguised as the famous Maese Pedro (played by Lindsay Viviano) narrates the story.

The demands of reducing the work to thirty minutes left insufficient room – despite my best efforts – for other wonderful threads of interest such as Don Quijote's encounters with Marcela, the Duke and Duchess, or Maritornes. In the end, as Wasserman describes, the play emerged as one of many possible threads teased out from Cervantes's classic tale. It is not "The" *Quijote* or anything approaching such. Rather, with Maese Pedro's puppet show as my guide, I aimed to create an adaptation that would connect with my audience and that remained faithful, if not identical, to the core values of the original.



Figure 3. Don Quijote shows Cervantes his armor prototype: a newspaper paper hat. When Cervantes smashes the hat during “testing,” Don Quijote replaces the paper version with a metal cooking pot.

Having worked through several drafts of the text, construction for the show began in May 2013. This was not my first encounter with puppetry. In fact, I had been building and performing with puppets for nearly fifteen years. During my days as a student at Brigham Young University, I pursued a major in Spanish – where I had worked with Valerie Hegstrom and Dale Pratt to direct four, full-length *comedias* in Spanish – and a second major in Theatre – where I worked as a prop and scenic carpenter, studied children’s theatre with Harold Oaks, and took a puppetry class in preparation for a production of Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* that I would write and direct. Toward the end of the semester, the instructor of my puppetry course, Rosemarie Howard, extended to me the first of many invitations to perform with her at a community event, and during the years that followed, I continued to build puppets and write plays, design and produce a multitude of different stages, and even make a bit of money doing commissioned work for all of it. Whereas *Antona García* had evolved from my background producing early modern Spanish Theatre, *¡Quijóteres!* – a combination of the words Quijote and *títeres* – would add to that my experience in puppetry. Nevertheless, the puppets for this show would stretch those skills to a scale and degree of detail unlike anything I had ever worked on before.

For *¡Quijóteres!*, I designed nine wide mouth or “Muppet” style puppets: seven human characters (Don Quijote, Sancho, Cervantes, Sansón Carrasco, Pastor, Labrador, and Mujer), plus Don Quijote’s horse, Rocinante, and finally, a Windmill that transformed on stage into a giant. Although the lengthy construction process would share much in common with puppets I had

previously made, observing their deterioration over time, coupled with intermittent builds to practice new techniques, led me to make numerous changes in materials and methods with an eye toward improved operation and durability. I anticipated a long and vigorous performance schedule and took pains to ensure the puppets would meet the challenge.



Figure 4. The foam heads of Don Quijote (top left) and Sancho Panza (top right) prior to receiving the fleece “skin.” (Bottom) The entire cast of puppets hang in a row, ready for the next step of costumes and hair.

The process began with an original and customized pattern used to produce a foam structure for the head and body, with each puppet expressing unique physical characteristics. Don Quijote’s head – as if stacked high with lofty ambition – was the tallest in the group and displayed a face with slightly sunken eyes and distended chin, while Sancho’s head – in direct contrast to his master’s – was the shortest and widest of the group, with plump and rounded features. Sansón Carrasco would occupy a symbolic space in-between the two, both tall and round, with a massive protruding nose as his defining trait. Rocinante’s long mouth and undulating snout would be the simplest to design and most difficult to create, while the cylindrical Windmill and roof-mouth represented its opposite: easy to build after weeks spent exploring how a shape that began as a

molino de viento might quickly and effectively morph into a monster on stage. After the foam understructure received a skin of fleece, the puppets were dressed in hair and costumes reflecting their personality and station, from Cervantes's collar ruff, red velvet jacket, and slicked mane and mustache, to the Pastor's tattered burlap vest and wild, twisting beard, and the Mujer's colorful floral print dress, long blonde hair, and puffy lipstick. As most puppet builders will affirm, oftentimes the smallest of details added at the end of the construction process will make the greatest contribution to a puppet's expressive character. For example, Don Quijote's tufts of hair – made from several costume beards – jutted out from his head like exclamation points resembling the arms of a windmill, while the Pastor's bulging red eyes and twisted nose suggested a man perpetually caught up in a scuffle. Although none of the puppets required or possessed legs, most had short, black rods extending up from the elbows. This approach, more commonly associated with ventriloquist puppets than the typical "Muppet" style which extends perpendicular from the wrist, was used so that the puppeteers could easily handle and release the arm control during performance without the unused rod left dangling to interfere with the puppet's movement and misshape its arm. In the end, I estimate that each puppet required roughly 20-30 hours of labor to complete.

Beyond puppets, the show also required the construction of numerous specialized props, including sheep, swords, soldiers, potions, books, vomit, a miniature stage and puppets, quick-change disguises, and, of course, windmills. The extent of this collection, combined with the physical size of puppets and the number of characters appearing together in certain scenes, required a larger playing space than my steel-frame hand puppet stage could accommodate. Rather than construct an entirely new stage, I welded new structural pieces and sewed new fabric coverings to essentially stretch the stage horizontally, making the playing space wider, deeper, and slightly taller. By September, thanks to help from friends and family, and generous financial support in the form of grants from my university, the construction phase ended, and the show was ready to be cast.



Figure 5. Rehearsals for the scene depicting the battle between Don Quijote (played by Caleb Duckworth) and the Windmill (played by Russell Cerda and Lindsay Viviano).

In 2009, when I began my tenure-track position at Grand Valley State University and learned that my course on Spanish Theatre Production would not have access to costumes, props, scenery, or even a stage, I instinctively turned to puppetry as an alternative setting to experience the theatrical process. In what has become known as “the puppet class,” currently anticipating its twelfth session, advanced-level students write and create original puppet shows, entirely in Spanish, culminating in several weeks at the end of each semester performing their shows in local elementary schools across the community. Although students in the course rarely have any prior experience or future career goals in theatre, the puppet proxy serves as a kind of “stunt double” toward overcoming their affective filter by deflecting and absorbing attention. The surprising success of this course as a confidence-building vehicle for language acquisition has produced numerous opportunities for scholarship on the pedagogical impact of puppets in a language classroom, including conferences, publications, guest-speaker invitations, and workshops. When it came time to cast *¡Quijóteres!*, I turned to the pool of students who had previously taken the puppetry course and made an effort to recruit several in particular who had demonstrated outstanding skill as capable and dependable puppeteers. In all, I selected four students – two men and two women – including Caleb Duckworth, who had also performed in *Antona García* and would now play the role of Don Quijote.² The rehearsal period lasted two months, 2-3 nights per week, and was one of the most challenging productions I have ever directed due to the unproven nature of the text, the intense physical demands of manipulating puppets of this size, the complicated interchange of props and costumes in a small space without a clear field of vision, the frequent shifting of characters played by a single puppeteer, and the bilingual, sometimes stylized dialogue to memorize.



Figure 6. Children from several grades assembled to watch a live performance of the show at Storm Lake Elementary School (Storm Lake, IA).

² The remaining cast members included Katie Munoz (Sancho Panza, Rocinante), Russell Cerda (Cervantes, Pastor, Labrador, the Windmill), and Lindsay Viviano (Sansón Carrasco/Maese Pedro, Mujer).

The first performance took place on October 19, 2013, to an intimate but packed house in the Kirkhof Student Center of the GVSU Allendale campus. The show was very well-received, and the added enthusiasm of a live audience served to motivate the team by confirming hopes and putting fears to rest. The following week we drove to Buena Vista University in Spring Lake, IA, where we gave a public performance of *¡Quijóteres!* on campus. Traveling with the show in this way opened the door to numerous other opportunities related to educational outreach. For example, during our trip to BVU we also visited three upper-level Spanish classrooms to discuss the process and challenges of adapting the *Quijote*, and we conducted several speaking engagements that explored puppetry in general, including a workshop promoting the benefits of puppetry for language acquisition, and a university-wide forum on the history and diversity of puppetry as an art form. Without a doubt, the highlight of the BVU visit took place at the local elementary school where we performed the show twice for a packed house of enthusiastic children. Each performance concluded with a short Q&A session where the performers stepped out from behind the stage, puppets in hand, and responded to a broad range of inquiries from curious audience members eager to know more about what they had just seen. These moments of dialogue provided us with invaluable insight into their familiarity with puppets as well as the novel. For example, it was not uncommon during these sessions to hear children express amazement at seeing a “real puppet” or hearing the name “Don Quijote” for the first time.

Over the months that followed, we accepted special invitations to repeat the performance and outreach experiences in many other states, schools, and public settings, including Meredith College (Raleigh, NC), Orchard View Elementary School (Grand Rapids, MI), Ada Vista Elementary School (Ada, MI), Southern Indiana University (Evansville, IN), and Michigan State University (East Lansing, MI). Though the last live performance was held in April 2014, the project continues to generate a great deal of interest in the academic community, including presentations at the symposium of the Association for Hispanic Classical Theatre (El Paso, TX), the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Faculty Research Colloquium at Grand Valley State University (Allendale, MI), and the International Society for Luso-Hispanic Humor (Manoa, HI). The *¡Quijóteres!* script was later published by *The Mercurian*, an online journal specializing in theatrical translations and adaptations.³

³ <https://the-mercurian.com/2016/06/19/quijoterres-the-ingenious-puppet-don-quijote-de-la-mancha/>



Figure 6. The *¡Quijóteres!* cast and their puppets (from left to right): Russell Cerda, Lindsay Viviano, Katie Munoz, and Caleb Duckworth.

I am very pleased with the enormous success of the *¡Quijóteres!* project and owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my four student performers – Caleb Duckworth, Katie Munoz, Russell Cerda, and Lindsay Viviano – for their creative passion and their entirely voluntary and unfailing commitment to the project. None received academic credit or monetary compensation for their work, yet the success of the experience would not have been possible without them.

From *Antona García*, where I developed an interest in translating and adapting early modern Spanish theatre, to *¡Quijóteres!*, where I produced bilingual adaptations using puppets, the sequence of these events and the lessons I learned through them altered the trajectory of my scholarship toward a more vigorous study of exciting connections between puppetry and Spanish literature. I next produced a play titled *The Fabulous Johnny Frog*, based on seventeenth-century *entremeses* featuring the character of Juan Rana. With this performance, I sought to build on the success of *¡Quijóteres!* while also making a concerted effort to address its most significant shortcomings. For example, rather than use wide-mouth hand puppets as before, the Juan Rana play was performed with shadow puppets that were much easier, faster, and less expensive to build, required far less space to store and transport, and were dramatically simpler to manipulate. Replacing the need for a cumbersome stage set-up, the shadow puppets made use of a fabric screen and LCD projector light source. Most significant, where *¡Quijóteres!* had required months of

difficult rehearsal and memorization, the film projection that accompanied *The Fabulous Johnny Frog* included a dialogue scroll visible only from backstage, allowing the performers to read their lines straight off the screen and making it possible to fully prepare the show after just a few hours of rehearsal. In 2018, I recruited the assistance of three colleagues – Esther Fernández (Rice University), Jonathan Wade (Meredith College), and Jared White (Buena Vista University) – for a trial performance at the AHCT symposium in El Paso, TX. The overwhelming triumph of this virtually “ready-made” approach to theatre production promised tremendous pedagogical value as a way to involve students in live performance with just a minimal investment of time and effort. This result prompted the four of us to pursue the idea more fully by organizing the Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe. Dedicated to imaginative, bilingual storytelling that educates while it entertains, the troupe has presented at school, universities, festivals, and conferences across the country and is currently working on a shadow puppet adaptation of *¡Quijóteres!* for debut in 2021.⁴

More than just another stage adaptation of literature’s most famous *caballero andante*, *¡Quijóteres!* served a critical role toward bridging the divide between a multitude of “continentes espirituales.” Creatively, it produced a new rendering of the narrative in a theatrical form not often associated with the text, and introduced a wide range of creative opportunities for further exploration by Dragoncillo. Pedagogically, it demonstrated the tremendous potential of student produced puppetry as an entertaining and engaging vehicle for teaching literature, promoting culture, and stimulating language acquisition. In a journey not unlike the one laid out by the novel and its hero, what began as a straightforward exercise in dramatic adaptation would eventually unwind its own “rastrillado, torcido y aspado hilo” (Cervantes 225) toward new theatrical frontiers.

⁴ More information, including a video of the full *¡Quijóteres!* performance, is available at the Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe website: <https://dragoncillo.com>.

Works Cited

- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de. *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*. Ed. by Salvador Fajardo and James Parr. Asheville, NC: Pegasus, 1998.
- Ortega y Gasset, José. *Meditaciones del Quijote*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1990.
- Stavans, Ilan. "One Master, Many Cervantes." *Humanities* 29.5 (September/October 2008).
<https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2008/septemberoctober/feature/one-master-many-cervantes>
- Wasserman, Dale. "Don Quijote as Theatre." *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 19.1 (1999): 125-30.