

The Knight, The Child, and The Sequined Bra: Deconstructing Cultural Appropriation and Sexualization in Competitive Dance's "Man of La Mancha"

Introduction: The Paradox of the Quest

In the vast and often bewildering landscape of contemporary competitive dance, a peculiar and persistent phenomenon presents a stark cultural paradox. The song is "I, Don Quixote," a defiant anthem from the 1965 Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha*. The singer is often Linda Eder, whose 1997 cover transformed the showtune into a soaring power ballad. The dancer, however, is not the character who sings it—an aging, celibate, delusional male knight from 16th-century Spain—but almost invariably a young girl or teenager. She is clad not in the character's period-appropriate armor and breeches, but in revealing, flamenco- or Kitri-styled costumes of bra tops, briefs, and cutout leotards. Her performance is not the narrative-driven theatrical jazz of the original production but a dizzying display of hyper-flexibility, contortion, and acrobatics, often with overtly sexualized undertones. This jarring juxtaposition—the quest of a mad old knight repurposed for the gymnastic spectacle of a scantily clad child—is the subject of this report.

This phenomenon is not a random aesthetic mismatch or an isolated case of poor taste. It is a potent and revealing case study that exposes the systemic intersection of commercialization, choreographic decontextualization, the sexualization of childhood, and the insidious mechanisms of cultural appropriation within the modern for-profit dance industry. An examination of this trend reveals how profound artistic and cultural legacies are flattened, commodified, and repurposed to serve a market that prioritizes spectacle over substance, trophies over technique, and shock value over storytelling. The journey from a 16th-century prison cell on a Broadway stage to a convention center ballroom floor is one of profound erasure—the erasure of character, of narrative, of history, and of culture.

This report will deconstruct this phenomenon by first establishing the authentic artistic, historical, and narrative context of *Man of La Mancha* and its signature song. This foundational understanding will serve as a baseline against which the radical deviations of the competition routines can be measured. Second, it will analyze the cultural and economic ecosystem of contemporary competitive dance, exploring the interwoven pressures of commodification, the mandate for "tricks," and the pervasive sexualization of young performers that create the conditions for such routines to flourish. Third, it will conduct a detailed analysis of the costuming choices, contrasting the historically

appropriate attire of the musical with the "Spanish-inspired" competition wear, and applying a rigorous academic framework to demonstrate how these deviations constitute cultural appropriation. Finally, this report will synthesize these elements to present a cohesive argument that these routines are the logical, if lamentable, product of a system where artistic integrity is frequently sacrificed for commercial viability, and where the appropriation of one culture is used as a vehicle for the exploitation of another.

Part I: "I Am I, Don Quixote" - The Theatrical and Historical World of La Mancha

To comprehend the depth of the decontextualization at play in competitive dance routines set to "I, Don Quixote," one must first understand the rich and specific world from which the song originates. *Man of La Mancha* is not merely a collection of songs but a complex, layered work of theatre with a distinct narrative, profound themes, and a specific historical and aesthetic grounding. The original character, costuming, and choreography provide a crucial baseline that illuminates the vast chasm between the musical's intent and its contemporary competitive interpretation.

1.1 The Prison and the Dream: Narrative and Thematic Context

Man of La Mancha is, at its core, a play-within-a-play.¹ The musical's book by Dale Wasserman, with music by Mitch Leigh and lyrics by Joe Darion, is not a direct adaptation of Miguel de Cervantes' 17th-century novel

Don Quixote. Instead, it is a story about Cervantes himself, imagined during his imprisonment in a Seville dungeon awaiting trial by the Spanish Inquisition in the late 16th century.² This framing device is essential to the musical's meaning. The outer play is set in the grim, subterranean reality of the prison, a world of darkness and despair populated by hardened criminals.¹ When his fellow prisoners stage a mock trial to confiscate his possessions, most notably his manuscript, Cervantes offers his defense in the form of a play, enlisting the prisoners as actors.⁵

Through this theatrical transformation, Cervantes becomes Alonso Quijana, an old country gentleman who, having read too many books of chivalry, has lost his sanity and reinvented himself as the knight-errant Don Quixote de La Mancha.¹ The squalor of the prison melts away, replaced by the imagined landscapes of La Mancha. The prisoners,

for a time, are transformed alongside him. This structure establishes the musical's central thematic conflict: the battle between brutal reality and the power of illusion, between cynicism and idealism.⁷ Don Quixote's quest is a desperate, often foolish, attempt to see and impose goodness, honor, and chivalry upon a world that has none. He famously mistakes a windmill for a giant and a common tavern for a castle, but in the process, he also sees a downtrodden, abused prostitute, Aldonza, as his pure and noble lady, "Dulcinea".⁴ His unwavering belief, however mad, has the power to momentarily transform her perception of herself and inspire the cynical prisoners who watch his tale unfold.

The song "I, Don Quixote" (officially titled "Man of La Mancha (I, Don Quixote)") is the character's introductory anthem. It is not a generic declaration of strength but a specific statement of purpose from a man who has consciously chosen madness as an alternative to a painful reality. He sings it as he sets out on his quest, establishing his new identity and his mission to "right all wrongs" and "battle all evil".⁶ The song is imbued with the character's specific folly and nobility; its power comes from the audience's knowledge that his quest is, by all rational measures, impossible.

Furthermore, the historical setting is crucial. The story takes place in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, a time when the figure of the knight-errant was already a romantic anachronism.⁸ The

caballero had evolved from a warrior into a courtier or landowner; Don Quixote's decision to don rusty armor and ride out on a quest was, even within the context of his own time, an act of profound delusion, a retreat into a mythical past.⁸ The musical, therefore, is not just about a madman; it is about a man who retreats into a historical fantasy to escape the unbearable present of the Spanish Inquisition's prison.

1.2 The Knight of the Woeful Countenance: Character, Costume, and Original Choreography

The protagonist who sings "I, Don Quixote" is meticulously defined. He is an "aged" gentleman, a "tall, thin man in his late forties" or older, whose body is gaunt and worn.¹⁰ His madness stems from an obsession with chivalric literature, an intellectual and idealistic folly, not youthful vigor or aggression.¹³ He is, as his squire Sancho Panza later dubs him, the "Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance".¹¹ This physical and psychological profile is diametrically opposed to the young, athletic, female performers who adopt his anthem in the competitive dance world. This is not a simple adaptation; it

is a fundamental inversion of the protagonist. The source material presents an old, male, celibate, physically broken but spiritually idealistic character, while the competition routines substitute a young, female, sexualized, and physically hyper-flexible performer. This demographic and thematic reversal is the most significant deviation, providing the foundation upon which all subsequent decontextualization is built.

The original costuming reflects this character and his historical context. Theatrical productions, from the original 1965 Broadway run to modern revivals, costume Don Quixote in what he is: an old man playing knight. This typically involves a pastiche of antiquated, rusty armor worn over late 16th-century menswear, such as a simple dress shirt and knee breeches.⁴ The provided video of the 1992 Barrington High School production and the 2007 Robert Cuccioli performance, as well as the rehearsal photograph from Burnsville High School, all adhere to this established aesthetic, showcasing costumes that are narrative-driven and historically evocative rather than stylized or revealing. The play-within-a-play concept further suggests that costumes are improvised from items found in the prison or Cervantes's trunk, reinforcing an aesthetic of authenticity and resourcefulness, not polished spectacle.⁴

The original choreography for *Man of La Mancha* was created by Jack Cole, a seminal figure in American dance history known as the "Father of Theatrical Jazz Dance".¹⁴ Cole was not a choreographer of abstract tricks; he was a master of creating movement that was deeply integrated with character, narrative, and music. His signature style was a sophisticated fusion of modern dance (having trained with Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman), Cecchetti ballet, and a vast vocabulary of ethnic and social dances, including Indian Bharatanatyam, Afro-Caribbean rhythms, Spanish flamenco, and American Lindy Hop.¹⁴ His involvement signifies that the original movement for "I, Don Quixote" was conceived as a form of storytelling, expressing the character's specific state of mind and purpose. It was theatrical jazz, a codified art form, not a display of disconnected gymnastic feats. The pointed inclusion of Jack Cole in the provided cartoon, ordering the woman off the "Spanish Donkey" of modern dance trends, is a direct and poignant commentary on the abandonment of this integrated, artistic legacy in favor of what the cartoon labels "choreographic ignorance" and "gratuitous acro".¹⁷

1.3 The Pop-Power Anthem: The Decontextualization via Linda Eder's Cover

A pivotal step in the journey of "I, Don Quixote" from Broadway stage to competition floor was its musical transformation. The original 1965 Broadway cast recording

presents the song as a piece of musical theatre: the orchestration is of its time, and the vocal performance is inextricably linked to the character of an aging, determined, and slightly unhinged knight. Linda Eder's 1997 cover, however, is a different entity entirely. It is a quintessential 1990s power ballad, characterized by a polished pop-rock arrangement, a slick studio production, and Eder's formidable, soaring vocals.

This act of covering the song effectively decontextualizes it. Divorced from the narrative of the prison, the character of Cervantes, and the folly of Don Quixote, the lyrics are rendered generic. "To dream the impossible dream" is no longer the specific credo of a particular madman but a universal, emotionally charged anthem of individual defiance, perseverance, and self-assertion. The song's thematic power is untethered from its narrative meaning. This transformation makes it "available" for choreographers in the fast-paced, commercially driven world of competitive dance. They can harness the song's raw emotional impact and powerful musical builds without needing any knowledge of, or obligation to, the story it was written to tell.

This musical decontextualization creates a parallel process with the aesthetic decontextualization that follows. A choreographer who feels free to use a song without understanding its narrative context is predisposed to use "Spanish-looking" costumes without understanding their cultural context. Both actions stem from the same systemic mode of operation within commercial dance: the stripping of context to create a generic, emotionally resonant, and ultimately marketable product. The pop cover provides the emotional fuel, while the appropriated costume provides the visual theme, allowing a routine to be assembled quickly and efficiently without the encumbrance of historical or cultural fidelity. The song's journey from a specific narrative moment to a generic power anthem is the first and crucial step in its journey toward the competition stage.

Part II: The Modern Arena - A World of Tricks, Trophies, and Trauma

The contemporary competitive dance world is a unique ecosystem with its own distinct culture, economy, and value system. It is within this specific environment that a song about a 16th-century Spanish knight becomes a vehicle for a hyper-flexible young girl in a sequined bra top. Understanding the pressures of this world—the relentless drive of commercialization, the athletic mandate for "tricks," and the pervasive, often harmful, sexualization of its young participants—is essential to understanding why and how such routines are created, rewarded, and perpetuated.

2.1 The Commodification of the Stage: Capitalism and Competition

At its core, the modern dance competition industry operates on a capitalist, "pay-to-dance" framework.¹⁸ It is a for-profit business where the primary product being sold is not dance education, but the "experience" of performing and competing in a professional-feeling atmosphere.¹⁸ This experience comes at a significant financial cost to families, with estimates for deeply involved competitors easily topping \$1,000 per month, covering entry fees, travel, hotels, and increasingly expensive custom costumes.¹⁸ For a single three-minute solo, entry fees can range from \$100 to \$110.¹⁸

This economic structure creates a powerful incentive system. Dance studios, which function as brokers in this model, are driven to produce routines that win. Trophies, titles, and high scores are marketing tools used to attract more students, whose tuition and fees are the studio's lifeblood.¹⁸ As one mother of a dancer noted, the pressure to win leads parents to "gladly dish out 700 for a custom costume that'll get the Platinum".¹⁹ This commercial pressure has been amplified exponentially by the rise of reality television shows like

Dance Moms and *So You Think You Can Dance*, and by the visual currency of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok.²⁰ These platforms have shifted the focus from dance as an art form to dance as a pathway to fame, rewarding spectacle, "shock value," and personality-driven drama over artistic substance.²² The provided cartoon explicitly identifies "Reality TV Trash" and "Overcommercialization" as key forces torturing the art form's legacy [Image 1].

The result is a self-perpetuating cycle where winning becomes the primary goal, often at the expense of all other considerations. An overwhelming number of comments from dance teachers, parents, and adjudicators attest to the fact that the most provocative, trick-laden, and "raunchiest" routines are the ones that consistently win top awards.¹⁹ A mother of dancers lamented, "I literally saw a 9 year old do a solo called 'Booty' to a mash up of a dozen different butt songs and place overall this year".¹⁹ A dance teacher explained the frustration: "If it keeps winning then people will keep doing it. Everyone complains, nothing changes. Why? Because it scores high".¹⁹ This creates a powerful market demand for choreography and costuming that aligns with what is perceived to be "winnable," regardless of its artistic merit or appropriateness.

2.2 The "Gratuitous Acro" Mandate: The Primacy of Tricks over Technique

The spectacle demanded by the commercialized competition circuit has found its most potent expression in "tricks"—a colloquial term for the acrobatic, gymnastic, and contortionistic feats that now dominate competitive dance choreography. The provided cartoon visually captures this crisis, depicting the figure of "Theatrical Legacy" being tortured on a device explicitly labeled "Gratuitous Acro" and "Contortion" [Image 1]. This sentiment is echoed throughout the extensive commentary provided by the dance community, with a recurring complaint that competitions feel "more like we are at a half gymnastics meet".¹⁹ Teachers and parents express profound frustration at seeing routines that are "95% tricks and only 5% dancing" consistently win over pieces rooted in strong, traditional dance technique.¹⁹ One teacher described the formulaic nature of modern routines as going "from trick to trick. Two minutes of the same tricks different song, different student".¹⁹

This trend is not new, but has been amplified by online culture. The archival screenshots of The Contortion Home Page from 2002 and the Dance.net stretching forum from 2003 show a long-standing subculture celebrating extreme flexibility [Image 2, Image 3]. What was once a niche interest has now become a mainstream expectation, a prerequisite for success in the competitive arena. The pressure on young dancers to achieve these extreme poses—scorpions, chin stands, oversplits, and hyperextended "tilts"—is immense, leading to significant concerns about long-term physical harm, including joint damage and the need for hip replacements by age 30.¹⁹ As one nurse and mother of a dancer starkly put it, "Osteoarthritis at age 28. Is that what they want for their kids?".¹⁹

The consequences of this "trick-centric" culture extend beyond physical injury to the very fabric of dance education. The focus on spectacle has led to a devaluation of foundational dance technique and artistry. Numerous teachers report encountering students with years of "competition" experience who cannot execute or even name basic steps like a *pas de bourrée* or a *jeté*.¹⁹ One teacher recounted an encounter with a 10-year-old fundraising for her dance team who could perform a "heel stretch" but was unfamiliar with basic ballet and jazz terminology.¹⁹ This "choreographic ignorance," as the cartoon labels it, is a direct result of a system that rewards isolated, spectacular feats over the connecting tissue of dance itself. The rich traditions of theatrical jazz—the very form Jack Cole pioneered for

Man of La Mancha—are being lost, replaced by what master teacher Nick Lazzarini calls a curriculum of "pirouettes, leg lifts and tilts" without the dynamic steps that connect them.¹⁹ The result is a generation of performers who are, as one teacher lamented, trained to be "trick monsters" rather than well-rounded dancers.¹⁹

2.3 "Rhinestones on Lingerie": The Pervasive Sexualization of Young Dancers

The commercial and athletic pressures of the competition world converge in the pervasive sexualization of its young, predominantly female, participants. Academic research, including work by the American Psychological Association, defines sexualization as a multi-part process: when a person's value is equated solely with their sexual appeal, when they are held to a narrow, sexualized standard of physical attractiveness, and when they are objectified, or "made into a thing for others' sexual use".²³ This framework is alarmingly applicable to the contemporary dance scene, where prepubescent girls are frequently presented in risqué costumes to perform sensual movements that are widely criticized as age-inappropriate and potentially harmful.²³

Costuming is the most visible and frequently cited locus of this sexualization. The provided commentary from parents and teachers is a litany of outrage over "skimpy clothes," "bra tops and booty shorts," "almost bikini clothing," and costumes that are little more than "rhinestones on lingerie".¹⁹ Examples range from 6-year-olds dressed as "sexy-looking convicts" to 14-year-olds in what looked like "negligees" performing with a mattress on stage, to a routine where young girls pole-danced on a cross.¹⁹ A retired costume designer recalled being fired in the 1980s for refusing to put young girls in "G string leotards," indicating the longevity of this trend.¹⁹

Central to this issue is the "no tights" trend. The abandonment of traditional dance tights in jazz, lyrical, and contemporary genres is a key marker of the shift toward a more revealing and sexualized aesthetic. Dozens of comments in the provided material lament this trend, citing the loss of modesty, professionalism, and a clean, finished "line".¹⁹ Tights are seen as a layer of protection, both physically—warming muscles and preventing floor burns—and psychologically, providing coverage and preventing wardrobe malfunctions and indecent exposure.¹⁹ The move to bare legs is often justified as being "cool" or "modern," mimicking what is seen on television shows like

So You Think You Can Dance.¹⁹ However, for many observers, it is a primary contributor to the "crotch shots" and over-exposure that make them, especially fathers, deeply uncomfortable.¹⁹ One adjudicator was fired from a competition company for questioning the lack of tights, highlighting the industry's resistance to criticism on this front.¹⁹

This combination of revealing costumes and provocative choreography has documented harmful outcomes. The hyper-focus on the body contributes to poor body image, low self-esteem, and, most alarmingly, eating disorders.²³ One of the most powerful testimonies provided is from a studio owner and mother whose own daughter developed

anorexia: "When she started slimming down me and everyone praised her. Now she weighs 88lbs and may need to be hospitalized... This focus on the body and being pretty and sexy and revealing costumes is not just harmless fun that ends on stage to get rewards. It can do real damage".¹⁹ Beyond mental and physical health, the online proliferation of images and videos of sexualized young dancers increases their vulnerability to online predators, a concern voiced by a correctional facility worker and multiple parents.¹⁹

Ultimately, the trifecta of commercialization, the "tricks" mandate, and sexualization forms a deeply interconnected, self-reinforcing system. The commercial pressure to win trophies and attract clients creates a market for spectacle. The most immediate and accessible form of spectacle is extreme acrobatics and contortion. These "tricks" necessitate costumes that allow for maximum physical freedom and, crucially, display the lines of the body, which leads directly to the adoption of minimal, revealing attire like bra tops and briefs. This attire, when combined with the "fierce" or "passionate" performance quality encouraged by judges, results in the overt sexualization of the child performer. These sexualized, trick-filled routines are visually memorable and often score high, which reinforces their commercial viability and perpetuates the entire toxic cycle. The system requires the dancer to be viewed not as a child, but as a "mini-adult" or an athletic commodity. The frequent pleas to "let them be children" are a direct reaction against this functional erasure of childhood, which is a prerequisite for the child to be commodified, judged, and sold within the competition marketplace.¹⁹ The discomfort expressed by fathers and other audience members stems directly from this violation of the child/adult boundary, a boundary that the logic of the market has rendered obsolete.

Part III: The Costume as Cultural Text - From Spanish Knight to "Spanish" Dancer

The costuming choices for competitive dance routines set to "I, Don Quixote" are not merely aesthetic deviations from the musical's original design; they are complex cultural texts that reveal a profound misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Spanish cultural heritage. By replacing the historically evocative attire of a 16th-century knight with a generic, sexualized "Spanish" look, these routines engage in a process of cultural appropriation that is both symptomatic of and instrumental to the broader issues within the competition industry.

3.1 The Aesthetics of Misrepresentation: Analyzing the "Spanish" Costume

An analysis of the costumes typically used for these routines, as seen in the provided image links, reveals a consistent vocabulary of visual signifiers. These include:

- **A Red-and-Black Color Palette:** This combination is a powerful, albeit stereotypical, signifier of Spanish passion and drama.
- **Ruffles (*Volantes*):** Layers of ruffles, particularly on skirts or briefs, are a direct visual quote from flamenco attire.
- **Polka Dots:** Another common element borrowed directly from the aesthetic of the *traje de flamenca*.
- **Revealing Cuts:** Crucially, these signifiers are applied not to a traditional dress but to modern, athletic dancewear such as bra tops, high-cut briefs, and leotards with large cutouts, all worn over bare legs.

This collection of elements creates a visual shorthand for "Spanishness." The aesthetic is a conflation, a generalized pastiche that borrows from the visual culture of flamenco and, to some extent, the character of Kitri from the 19th-century ballet *Don Quixote*. While the ballet is based on episodes from the same Cervantes novel, it is an entirely separate work from the musical *Man of La Mancha*, with a completely different score, narrative focus, and aesthetic tradition. The character of Kitri, a feisty innkeeper's daughter, is worlds away from the musical's protagonist, the aging, mad knight. To conflate the two, and to apply a generic "Spanish dancer" look to a song sung by Don Quixote, is an act of profound historical and choreographic ignorance, a key problem identified in the provided cartoon's critique of the modern dance world [Image 1].

3.2 Flamenco Beyond the Emoji: The True Cultural Context

To understand what is lost in this misrepresentation, one must look beyond the stereotypes to the true cultural context of flamenco. Flamenco is not a generic national dance of Spain. It is a complex and profound art form with deep, specific roots in the history of the Gitano (Roma) people of Andalusia in Southern Spain.²⁷ For centuries, the Gitanos were a marginalized and persecuted minority. Flamenco—an art comprising *cante* (song), *baile* (dance), and *toque* (guitar playing)—emerged as a powerful form of cultural resistance and an expression of their pain, joy, and resilience.²⁷ It is, as one

scholar notes, "born of mixture and movement," blending Gitano traditions with Andalusian, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim influences.²⁷

The iconic flamenco dress, the *traje de flamenca* or *traje de gitana*, is not merely a costume but a symbol of this rich heritage. Its origins are humble, evolving from the practical, ruffled gowns worn by Gitana and peasant women who attended livestock fairs in the 19th century.²⁹ Even its decorative elements can carry deep meaning; the polka dots, for example, are said to trace back to a nomadic legacy where small mirrors were sewn onto dresses to ward off evil spirits.²⁷ The dress is a living tradition, constantly evolving with fashion yet remaining a potent symbol of Andalusian and Gitano identity.³⁰

Furthermore, flamenco dance itself is a rich language of expression, characterized by intricate rhythms (*compás*), profound emotional depth (*duende*), and a highly codified, often gendered, movement vocabulary.³¹ Traditional female flamenco dance (

baile de mujer) emphasizes graceful and expressive arm movements (*braceo*), intricate hand and finger work, and soft twists of the upper body, often described as dancing "from the waist up".³² Male dance (

baile de hombre) traditionally focuses on powerful, rhythmic footwork (*zapateado*), with strength and sobriety, or dancing "from the waist down".³² While modern flamenco artists continually deconstruct and challenge these norms, the foundational principles remain rooted in this complex system of expression. This stands in stark contrast to the vocabulary of the competition routines, which prioritizes gymnastic flexibility and acrobatic tricks over the intricate rhythms and narrative emotion of authentic flamenco.

3.3 The Mechanism of Erasure: Applying Appropriation Theory

Given this context, the use of flamenco-inspired aesthetics in these competition routines can be analyzed as a textbook example of cultural appropriation. Academic discourse defines cultural appropriation as the adoption of elements from a minority or subordinated culture by members of a dominant culture, particularly when done without permission, understanding, or acknowledgement, in a way that strips the elements of their original context and meaning, often for commercial profit.³⁴ This is distinct from cultural appreciation, which involves respectful engagement, learning, and a desire to connect cross-culturally, and from cultural inspiration, which uses an idea as a jumping-off point for a new and distinct creation rather than direct imitation.³⁸ The key

differentiating factor is the power imbalance between the borrower and the source culture.³⁷

Applying this framework to the "Man of La Mancha" routines reveals several layers of appropriation:

1. **Trivialization and Decontextualization:** The rich, symbolic elements of the *traje de flamenca*—the ruffles, the colors, the polka dots—are reduced to mere decoration. They become, as Michelle Heffner Hayes describes, "external trappings... used as decorations on your own history".³⁷ Stripped of their connection to Gitano history, Andalusian fairs, and the specific traditions of flamenco, they are trivialized into a generic signifier for "Spanish" or "passionate."
2. **Erasure:** This process actively erases the history of the Gitano people. The costume, in its appropriated form, no longer tells a story of cultural resistance or resilience. The audience, likely unaware of the true origins, sees only a fiery, exotic aesthetic. The struggles and contributions of the marginalized community that created the art form are rendered invisible.²⁷
3. **Commodification:** The appropriated aesthetic is instrumental in creating a marketable product within the competition system. The "Spanish" theme provides a visually striking package that is easily recognizable and commercially available from costume companies. This commodified cultural symbol is then used to win trophies and generate profit for studios, perpetuating a cycle where cultural heritage is mined for commercial gain without benefit to the source community.¹⁸
4. **Reinforcement of Stereotypes:** The use of this aesthetic, particularly on a sexualized young female body, reinforces harmful and long-standing stereotypes of the "fiery," "sensuous," and "exotic" Spanish or Latina woman.²⁷ This trope has historically been used in Western culture to objectify and "other" women from these cultures. The appropriation, therefore, does not just borrow an aesthetic; it borrows and perpetuates a harmful stereotype.

The appropriation serves as a functional tool for the sexualization present in these routines. The stereotype of the "fiery, passionate" Spanish woman, which is invoked by the flamenco-style costume, provides a problematic cultural alibi for the sexualized movements of the young dancer. The costume's signifiers are culturally coded to imply "passion" and "sensuality," which are then used to frame and justify choreography that would otherwise be seen as blatantly inappropriate for a child. In this way, the appropriation becomes the vehicle through which the sexualization is delivered and, in the context of the competition stage, legitimized.

This process ultimately enacts a double erasure. First, it erases the actual character of Don Quixote and the narrative of the musical he inhabits. Second, it erases the cultural history of the Gitano people and the authentic meaning of flamenco. What is left is a hollowed-out shell: a powerful but meaningless song paired with a decorative but history-less costume. This void is then filled by the only values the competition system consistently rewards: hyper-athleticism and sexualized spectacle. The final product is a performance whose content is dictated entirely by the commercial logic of the competition, using the hollowed-out cultural artifacts as its container. The following table provides a stark, at-a-glance summary of this profound transformation.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Theatrical vs. Competition Presentations of "I, Don Quixote"

Feature	Theatrical Production (<i>Man of La Mancha</i>)	Competitive Dance Routine
Protagonist	Don Quixote: An aging (40s+), male, idealistic but physically frail knight. ¹⁰	A young (child/teen), female, hyper-flexible, athletic performer.
Costuming	Historically-inspired 16th-century menswear: armor, breeches, shirt. ⁴	"Spanish-inspired" revealing attire: bra top, briefs, cutout leotard with ruffles, often red/black.
Movement Vocabulary	Narrative-driven theatrical jazz (Jack Cole), focused on character and storytelling. ¹⁵	Gymnastic/acrobatic "tricks": high-leg tilts, oversplits, contortion, multiple turns. Emphasis on spectacle over narrative. ¹⁹
Core Theme/Message	Idealism in the face of despair; the quest for chivalry in a cynical world. ²	Individual power, defiance, physical prowess, "fierceness," often with sexualized undertones. ¹⁹
Cultural Context	Rooted in Cervantes' 17th-century novel and the history of the Spanish Inquisition. ¹	Decontextualized. Uses generic "Spanish" aesthetic signifiers stripped of their Gitano cultural origins. ²⁷

Part IV: Synthesis - The Anatomy of a Flawed Creation

The convergence of a 16th-century knight's anthem, a 1990s power ballad, a culturally appropriated flamenco aesthetic, and the hyper-athletic body of a sexualized child is not an accident. It is the logical, albeit deeply flawed, outcome of the systemic pressures analyzed in the preceding sections. This synthesis explains how these disparate elements are assembled into a coherent, if problematic, package that serves the specific needs of the contemporary competitive dance industry.

4.1 The Path of Least Resistance: A Choreographic Shortcut

For a choreographer working within the high-pressure, time-crunched, and commercially-driven environment of a competitive dance studio, the combination of Linda Eder's "I, Don Quixote" and a "Spanish" theme represents a path of least resistance—a convenient, pre-packaged choreographic kit. The creation of dozens, sometimes hundreds, of routines per season necessitates efficiency. In this context, deep artistic or cultural research is a luxury that the production schedule often cannot afford.

Linda Eder's cover provides the raw emotional power and dramatic musical builds necessary for a "winning" competition piece, but it does so without the narrative baggage of the original musical. The choreographer can tap into its themes of defiance and strength without ever needing to know who Don Quixote was or what his quest entailed. The song's title, "Man of La Mancha," lends a veneer of artistic and theatrical legitimacy, suggesting a connection to high art that the routine itself does not possess.

Simultaneously, the "Spanish" costume, readily available from commercial costume catalogs that market such themes, provides an instant, visually striking concept. It offers a clear aesthetic—red and black, ruffles, a flower in the hair—that is easy for an audience and judges to read and remember. This combination of a decontextualized power anthem and a visually generic but recognizable theme allows for the rapid assembly of a routine that feels "emotional" and looks "themed" without requiring the labor of genuine artistic interpretation or cultural investigation. It is a shortcut that prioritizes efficiency and marketability over fidelity and respect.

4.2 The Unholy Alliance: How Appropriation and Sexualization Serve Each Other

As established previously, cultural appropriation and the sexualization of children are not merely parallel problems within these routines; they are mutually reinforcing forces. The relationship is symbiotic and deeply problematic. The act of appropriation provides the cultural framework to license the act of sexualization. By invoking the stereotype of the "fiery," "passionate," and "sensuous" Spanish woman through the use of flamenco-esque ruffles and colors, the routine creates a context in which the sexualized movements of the young performer can be interpreted as "passionate" or "fierce" rather than simply inappropriate. The cultural stereotype becomes a shield, deflecting criticism by framing the performance as an expression of a particular (misrepresented) cultural character.

Conversely, the young, sexualized body becomes the site upon which the appropriated culture is performed. When the rich traditions of flamenco are reduced to a few decorative elements on a revealing costume worn by a child performing acrobatic tricks, the culture itself is trivialized and objectified. It is no longer a living heritage of a resilient people but a set of aesthetic props for a gymnastic display. The child's objectification and the culture's objectification become one and the same. This unholy alliance serves the competition system perfectly: it allows for the creation of routines that are simultaneously "exotic" enough to be memorable and "sexy" enough to be judged as "powerful" or "mature," hitting two of the key markers for high scores in the current climate.

4.3 A Failure of Legacy: The Torture of Art

The provided cartoon offers a devastatingly accurate visual metaphor for this entire phenomenon [Image 1]. The central figure, a woman labeled "Theatrical Legacy," is shown being tortured on a "Spanish Donkey." This device, also known as a *chevalet*, was a real instrument of torture where a victim was forced to straddle a sharp, triangular wooden rail, often with weights attached to their feet, causing excruciating pain and permanent injury to the perineum.⁴⁴ The cartoon's use of this specific device is chillingly precise. The routine is, in essence, a form of artistic torture.

It tortures the theatrical legacy of *Man of La Mancha*. The nuanced story of idealism and madness is dismembered, and its protagonist is inverted. The integrated, narrative-driven choreography of a master like Jack Cole is replaced by "Gratuitous Acro" and "Contortion." The entire artistic creation is placed under the strain of "Overcommercialization," "Reality TV Trash," and "Choreographic Ignorance."

Simultaneously, it tortures the cultural legacy of flamenco. The art form's deep connection to the Gitano people, its history of resistance, and its complex vocabulary are stripped away, leaving only a decorative shell to be exploited. The weight of "Overcommercialization" presses down, forcing the art form into a shape it was never meant to hold.

In the cartoon, the theatrical pioneer Jack Cole stands by, aghast, shouting, "GET HER OFF THAT THING THIS INSTANT!" It is a cry from the past, a demand from a tradition of integrated, meaningful art to rescue itself from a present that too often prioritizes profit over people and spectacle over soul. It is a plea to stop the torture and restore dignity to both the art of theatre and the cultures from which dance so often draws its inspiration.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Quest

The analysis of competitive dance routines set to Linda Eder's "I, Don Quixote" reveals a phenomenon that is far more than a simple aesthetic choice. It is the logical and deeply troubling product of a commercialized dance industry where systemic pressures often lead to the decontextualization of art, the sexualization of children, and the appropriation of culture. The journey from a 16th-century Spanish knight's anthem to a hyper-athletic performance by a scantily clad child is paved by a series of interconnected forces: the commodification of the competition experience, the mandate for spectacular "tricks" over substantive technique, the transformation of a narrative song into a generic power ballad, and the mining of cultural aesthetics for marketable themes. In this process, the legacies of both the musical *Man of La Mancha* and the Gitano art form of flamenco are erased and replaced with a spectacle whose primary values are commercial and athletic, not artistic or cultural.

The evidence, drawn from academic research and the powerful, lived experiences of dancers, teachers, and parents, points toward a clear conclusion: these routines are a symptom of a broader crisis in the for-profit youth dance world. They demonstrate how cultural appropriation can serve as a vehicle for age-inappropriate sexualization, with the "exotic" stereotype of the Spanish woman used to frame and justify the provocative performance of a child's body. The result is a double erasure—of the source material's narrative integrity and the appropriated culture's historical meaning—leaving a void filled by the values of the marketplace.

Addressing this complex issue requires a multi-pronged approach that targets the various stakeholders who, wittingly or unwittingly, perpetuate this cycle. The following actionable recommendations offer potential pathways toward reform:

- **For Dance Educators and Choreographers:** There is a fundamental ethical responsibility to engage in deeper education. This includes researching the historical and cultural context of any music, theme, or movement vocabulary before incorporating it into a routine. Educators should move beyond costume catalogs and YouTube clips to consult academic sources, cultural experts, and primary materials to ensure respectful and informed creation. The goal should be to cultivate artists, not just "trick monsters," by prioritizing foundational technique, dance history, and cultural studies within the curriculum.¹⁹
- **For Competition Directors and Adjudicators:** The power to change the system lies significantly in the power to define "what wins." Competition organizations must move beyond boilerplate rules about "appropriateness" that are rarely enforced.¹⁹ Judging criteria should be reformed to explicitly reward artistry, narrative coherence, technical execution over trick quantity, and culturally authentic or respectfully inspired presentations. Conversely, clear point deductions or disqualifications should be implemented for blatant cultural appropriation and age-inappropriate sexualization in costuming and choreography. Many adjudicators express frustration with the current state but feel powerless; empowering them with clear, enforceable guidelines is a critical step.¹⁹
- **For Parents:** As the primary consumers in this "pay-to-dance" economy, parents hold significant power.¹⁸ This power should be wielded with critical awareness. Before enrolling a child, parents should research studios thoroughly, observing classes and viewing past performances to assess their approach to costuming, music, and choreography. They should ask studio directors pointed questions about their philosophy on age-appropriateness and their curriculum for dance history and cultural education.²⁶ Ultimately, parents must be encouraged to prioritize their child's long-term physical and psychological well-being and their holistic artistic education over the short-term validation of a plastic trophy.

The "Impossible Dream" sung by Don Quixote was a quest to see virtue in a cynical world. Perhaps the new impossible dream is the quest to reclaim the art of dance for children from the grip of a system that too often values them as products rather than people. It is a formidable quest, but as the voices of concerned teachers, parents, and dancers demonstrate, it is a quest that many are ready and willing to undertake.

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The Quixotic Quest for Authenticity: A Historically Informed Performance Framework for "I, Don Quixote" in Theatrical Dance

Introduction: An Impossible Dream? Reclaiming Artistry in a World of "Tricks"

The contemporary landscape of competitive and commercial dance is fraught with a profound and widely felt tension. This conflict is starkly visualized in a cartoon depicting a figure labeled "Theatrical Legacy" being tortured on a Spanish donkey, a medieval instrument of punishment [Image 3]. The device is weighted down by the pressures of "Gratuitous Acro," "Contortion," "Reality TV Trash," and "Overcommercialization," all while a young dancer performs a hyper-flexible, technically extreme pose nearby. This image serves as a potent visual thesis for a crisis articulated with palpable frustration by a vast community of dancers, educators, parents, and adjudicators. Their collective voice, captured in extensive commentaries, laments a culture where artistry has been supplanted by athletics, where storytelling is secondary to spectacle, and where the physical and psychological well-being of young performers is often sacrificed for a plastic trophy.¹

This is not an isolated or niche concern. Across the dance world, there is a rising chorus of disillusionment. Educators and artists express dismay at a system that increasingly rewards gymnastic feats over choreographic substance. "If I see one more tilt or cartwheel in a ballet dance I shall scream," declares one ballet teacher, her sentiment echoed by a dance mother who notes, "Half the time I'm not sure if we are at a dance competition or a gymnastics meet!"¹ This "trick-centric" culture, fueled by reality television and social media, has created a generation of dancers who, as one teacher observes, "think dance is pick a song, choose all your favorite tricks, and throw all them together".¹ The consequences are severe, ranging from a rise in career-ending injuries in young bodies to the hypersexualization of children, with one father recounting his horror at seeing dance schools "hypersexualizing small children" at public parades.¹ A retired costume designer recalls being removed from a contract for refusing to put young girls in "G string leotards," a trend that has persisted and intensified.¹

This report proposes a powerful and practical antidote to this pervasive issue, using as its case study the creation of jazz and musical theater routines to Linda Eder's 1997 cover of "I, Don Quixote" from the musical *Man of La Mancha*. The proposed solution is a methodological framework borrowed from the world of classical music: Historically Informed Performance (HIP). HIP is an approach that seeks to perform music in a manner faithful to the style and conventions of the era in which it was conceived.² It is not a rigid set of rules but an intellectual and artistic process grounded in research, critical inquiry, and profound respect for the source material—the very qualities often missing from the trend-driven, imitative culture of contemporary competition dance.⁴

The application of HIP principles to dance offers a path away from empty spectacle and toward meaningful artistry. The quest for "authenticity" in performance, as understood through the lens of HIP, is not about achieving a single, perfect historical replication, which scholars acknowledge is impossible given the lack of definitive records like sound or video recordings from past eras.³ Rather, the value lies in the

process of inquiry itself. The problem with the contemporary "tricks" culture is not merely that it is inauthentic to a given character or story, but that it represents a fundamental failure of inquiry—a culture of copying what wins or what is viral on social media without questioning its artistic or historical validity.¹ By adopting a HIP framework, a dance educator's role is elevated from that of a mere "routine cleaner" or assembler of popular moves to that of an artist-dramaturg, one who engages in a deep, scholarly, and creative dialogue with the source material to produce work of integrity and substance. This report will provide the theoretical and practical tools for educators to undertake this "quixotic" but essential quest.

Part I: The Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance - A Character-Driven Movement Philosophy

Who Is Don Quixote? A Literary and Psychological Profile

To choreograph "I, Don Quixote," one must first ask: who *is* Don Quixote? A superficial interpretation might see him as a generic hero, a strong and valiant knight. However, a deeper analysis of Miguel de Cervantes' 1605 novel and the 1965 musical *Man of La Mancha* reveals a far more complex, tragicomic, and physically vulnerable figure. This nuanced understanding is the essential foundation for creating a movement vocabulary that is authentic to the character.

Alonso Quijano, the gentleman who transforms himself into Don Quixote, is a man defined by his age and physical state. He is consistently described as a gaunt, middle-aged or old man.⁸ His chosen steed, Rocinante, is not a mighty warhorse but a worn-out barn nag, a direct reflection of his master's own dilapidated condition.⁹ His defining characteristic is an idealism so profound that it manifests as a form of madness; he is a man who "believes only what he chooses to believe" and is driven by a desperate quest to revive the virtues of chivalry in a world he perceives as cynical and devoid of honor.⁸ His quest is not one of physical conquest but of moral and spiritual conviction. He sets out "to right the unrightable wrong" and "to fight the unbeatable foe," missions that are, by their very definition, doomed to worldly failure.¹¹

The musical *Man of La Mancha* adds another layer to this identity. The story is framed as a play-within-a-play, performed by Cervantes himself as a defense during his imprisonment by the Spanish Inquisition.¹¹ Don Quixote is thus presented as a "storytelling device," an act of defiant imagination in the face of brutal reality.¹³ This creates a tripartite identity—the historical author Cervantes, the fictional gentleman Alonso Quijano, and the imagined knight Don Quixote—that underscores the theme of creating one's own reality through belief.

Crucially, Don Quixote's heroism is consistently defined by his physical failures. His most famous adventures are, in fact, defeats. He is soundly beaten by the windmill he mistakes for a giant, he is pummeled by muleteers at the inn, and his spirit is ultimately broken not in a glorious battle but in a psychological confrontation with the "Knight of the Mirrors," who forces him to see his own reflection as a fool.¹⁰ His nobility lies not in his physical prowess but in his unwavering persistence in the face of constant, humiliating defeat. He is, as literary analysis suggests, a "tragicomic hero" whose journey is composed of "laughable misadventures".⁹ Therefore, to choreograph a dance for this character that portrays him as a triumphant, acrobatic powerhouse—a "winner" in the modern competitive sense—is to fundamentally misunderstand and betray the profound pathos at the core of his story. An authentic choreographic interpretation must embrace his physical vulnerability and locate his heroism in the resilience of his spirit, not the perfection of his body.

Choreographing Character, Not Calisthenics

The prevailing trend in competitive dance of inserting acrobatic and contortionist "tricks" into routines, regardless of genre or narrative, is a practice widely condemned as artistically bankrupt by a large segment of the dance community.¹ When applied to the

character of Don Quixote, these movements are not only anachronistic and stylistically jarring but represent a complete misreading of the source material. The "gratuitous acro" that weighs down the "Theatrical Legacy" in the provided cartoon (Image 3) is the perfect label for this phenomenon. A choreographic approach informed by the character, rather than by a checklist of crowd-pleasing stunts, is essential.

Drawing on the principles of using dance to interpret literature, the movement vocabulary for Don Quixote should be built from his core traits.¹⁵ Instead of aiming for the weightless, effortless quality prized in many dance forms, the movement should possess a certain

groundedness. It should have a tangible weight that suggests Quixote's age and his connection to the dusty plains of La Mancha. His idealism can be expressed through expansive, reaching gestures of the arms and an upward gaze—a physical manifestation of his "beseeching" the world to be better than it is.¹⁶ His moments of madness can be portrayed not through chaotic flailing, but through sharp, angular, and perhaps slightly off-balance shifts in movement that interrupt a more stately pace, representing the sudden intrusion of his chivalric fantasies.

Most importantly, the choreography must be narrative. The lyrics of "I, Don Quixote" are a declaration of purpose: "Hear me now... I am I, Don Quixote... I go wherever I'm led... On a quest... to follow that star... no matter how hopeless, no matter how far!".¹¹ The dance should physically enact this journey. Instead of a series of disconnected tricks, the movement should tell the story of his quest, his battles, and his unwavering, if foolish, determination. The following table offers a practical tool for educators, contrasting common but inappropriate competition tricks with character-driven alternatives that serve the story and honor the protagonist.

Table 1: A Choreographic Lexicon for Don Quixote: Replacing Incongruous Tricks with Character-Driven Movement

Common Competition "Trick"	Analysis of Incompatibility with Don Quixote	Suggested Character-Driven Alternative
Scorpion / Needle	This is a display of contortionist flexibility and extreme spinal hyperextension. It directly contradicts the character's established age, gaunt physique, and physical frailty. It is a movement	A determined, reaching arabesque with the focus on the expressive line of the arms and the unwavering forward gaze, suggesting a yearning for his "Dulcinea" or the star he follows.

	of pure, modern athleticism, devoid of any narrative purpose for a 16th-century madman. This type of move is frequently cited as an example of the unwelcome gymnastic influence in dance. ¹	The height of the leg is secondary to the <i>intention</i> of the line. The power comes from the character's conviction, not his flexibility.
Leg Hold Turns / A La Seconde "Pump" Turns	These turns require a high degree of athletic control and have a "show-off" quality. The emphasis on achieving multiple rotations is a form of competitive "winning" that is antithetical to Quixote's character arc of noble failure. The technique is often poor, as noted by critics of this trend. ¹	A series of traveling turns, such as determined chaîné or piqué turns, that move resolutely across the stage. This represents his relentless, rambling journey through Spain. The focus should be on covering space and forward momentum, embodying his quest, rather than on static, stationary rotation.
Chest Stand / Chin Stand	This is a gymnastic floor-work skill that has no basis in the character's world, physicality, or historical period. It is a moment of pure contortion that halts all narrative momentum and serves only as a display of flexibility, a common complaint among dance educators. ¹	A dramatic fall to the knees or a full, heavy collapse to the floor, representing his physical defeat by the "giants" (windmills). The movement should express exhaustion and the impact of the blow, followed by a slow, effortful, and determined rise, showcasing his resilience.
Hyperextended Tilt / "Crotch Shot"	This move is widely and vehemently condemned in the dance community for its hypersexualized and inappropriate nature, often nicknamed the "Standing Pelvic Exam" or "vagina shot". ¹ It is a grotesque and absurd choice for a character who is an elderly, dignified, albeit mad, gentleman	A strong, defiant lunge with the torso held upright and noble. One arm can hold a makeshift lance (or mime one), aimed at an imagined foe. The line created should be one of heroic, if foolish, challenge. The focus is on a powerful, knightly posture, not on a pelvic display.

	committed to the ideals of courtly love.	
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Part II: A Historically Informed Framework for Staging

Lessons from the Lute: Translating HIP Principles from Music to Dance

The early music revival of the 20th century was fueled by the principles of Historically Informed Performance (HIP), a movement dedicated to exploring how music from the Baroque, Renaissance, and earlier periods might have originally sounded.² This was achieved through rigorous research into historical documents and the use of "period instruments"—either restored antiques or faithful reproductions.³ For the dance educator seeking to escape the prescriptive and ahistorical trends of the competition world, these same principles can be translated from the concert hall to the dance studio, offering a robust methodology for artistic creation.

The core tenets of HIP provide a clear alternative to the prevailing competition mindset. The first principle is **source fidelity**. HIP musicians prioritize primary sources, such as original manuscripts, composer's notes, and historical treatises on performance practice, over later, edited versions of a score.³ For the choreographer of "I, Don Quixote," this means turning to Cervantes' novel, the libretto of

Man of La Mancha, and historical records of the period, rather than to YouTube clips of winning competition routines.¹

The second principle involves **period "instruments."** A musician playing Bach on a Baroque violin with gut strings and a curved bow will produce a sound vastly different—and arguably more authentic to the composer's intent—than one playing on a modern violin with steel strings.² For dance, the "instrument" is the costumed body and its movement vocabulary. A historically informed approach, therefore, requires that the costuming and the choreographic language be appropriate to the era and character being depicted, rather than simply applying a generic, contemporary dance-wear aesthetic.

Third is the principle of **contextual understanding**. HIP scholars acknowledge that performance practices, aesthetic values, and social norms are not universal but change dramatically over time.¹⁹ A dance about a 16th-century Spanish nobleman should not be filtered through a 21st-century "Instagram-ready" aesthetic, which prizes hyper-flexibility

and revealing costumes for "likes" and trophies—a practice widely critiqued by dancers and teachers.¹

Finally, and most importantly, HIP is about **inquisitiveness over replication**. Pioneers of the movement understood that a perfect recreation of a past performance is impossible.³ The goal is not to create a static museum piece but to engage in a process of "asking questions" about how the work might have been realized.⁴ This transforms the artist from a mere reproducer into an active interpreter. This stands in stark contrast to the competition mindset, where the goal is often to replicate a winning formula. The HIP artist reads treatises; the competition choreographer, according to widespread testimony, watches trending videos.¹ The HIP artist seeks to understand the creator's intent; the competition choreographer often seeks to please judges with a checklist of predetermined "tricks".¹ Adopting a HIP framework is therefore a radical act of intellectual and artistic reclamation for the dance educator.

Dressing the Hidalgo: Authentic Costuming for Late 15th/Early 16th-Century Spain

Creating a historically informed costume for Don Quixote requires a more nuanced approach than simply researching a single time period. The narrative itself provides the most crucial clues. Cervantes' novel, written in the early 17th century, states that Alonso Quijano "clean[s] up some armor that had belonged to his ancestors and had for ages been lying forgotten in a corner, covered with rust and mildew".²² The musical

Man of La Mancha is set during the Spanish Inquisition of the late 16th century.¹¹

Therefore, the most historically and artistically sound costume is one that is intentionally dissonant: it should depict a man of the late 16th century wearing the outdated, piecemeal, and decaying armor of a late 15th-century ancestor. This visual contrast immediately tells the story of a man out of time, clinging to a past that no longer fits the present.

The base layer of the costume should reflect the attire of a modest Spanish gentleman, or *hidalgo*, from the late 1500s. This would consist of several key garments:

- **The *Camisa* (Shirt):** Worn next to the skin, this would be a linen garment, full through the body and sleeves. The neckline and cuffs would be gathered, often with a drawstring, creating a small, distinct ruffle that was the direct precursor to the large, elaborate ruffs of the later period.²³ For a man of Quixote's standing, it

would be plain, perhaps slightly yellowed with age, rather than intricately embroidered.

- **The *Jubón* (Doublet):** Worn over the *camisa*, the doublet of this era was a close-fitting, often padded jacket designed to create a structured torso, typically with a V-shaped waistline that followed Spanish fashion.²³ The sleeves were separate and laced or tied to the body of the doublet, which allows for the *camisa* to be pulled through in puffs at the shoulders and elbows, a technique known as slashing.²³
- **The *Calzas* (Hose/Breeches):** This period saw a transition from the full-length hose of the 15th century to separate upper stocks (breeches) and nether stocks (stockings).²³ For a character like Quixote, who is both impoverished and clinging to the past, an older style of full hose would be a logical and informed choice. These would be made of wool, cut on the bias for stretch.²⁷
- **Fabrics and Colors:** The dominant aesthetic of the Spanish court was one of "sombre richness".²³ While the wealthy wore black velvets and silks, a man of Quixote's modest means would wear durable fabrics like wool and linen in earthy tones: browns, ochres, muted greens, and faded grays.

Over this 16th-century base, Quixote dons his "armor," which should look like a relic from the late 15th century. It must not be a complete, shining suit. The text specifies it is "rusty and mildewed," and his quest for a helmet famously ends with him seizing a barber's brass shaving basin.¹⁰ This aligns perfectly with the musical's theatrical concept, where prisoners in a dungeon create their costumes from found objects.²⁸ The armor should be piecemeal: a dented breastplate, perhaps a single pauldron (shoulder piece) or gauntlet, and the basin-helmet. For dance, these pieces should not be made of metal but of lighter, flexible materials like painted leather, molded plastics, or even repurposed items like pieces of old tires, as one innovative production successfully used.³⁰ The costume is not just clothing; it is a narrative device. The visual clash between his everyday 16th-century attire and his broken, anachronistic 15th-century armor tells the entire story of his character: a man of the present hopelessly, tragically, and nobly trying to live in the past.

Deconstructing Convention: The Problem with "Spanish" Costumes and Cultural Appropriation

When choreographing for music with a Spanish theme, the competitive dance world overwhelmingly defaults to a specific, recognizable aesthetic. This look, heavily influenced by the character of Kitri from the ballet *Don Quixote* and a generalized idea of flamenco, typically features a red and black color palette, ruffled skirts, and revealing designs such as bra tops, briefs, bare midriffs, and bare legs over fishnet tights or no tights at all.¹ The images provided as "Typical costume" examples 1 through 4 perfectly illustrate this trend. While visually striking, this approach is historically inaccurate for the character of Don Quixote and, more troublingly, engages in problematic cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation is defined as the adoption of elements from a minority or marginalized culture by a member of the dominant culture, often stripping these elements of their original context and meaning, reducing them to caricature, and using them for commercial or aesthetic gain without acknowledgment or respect for their source.³⁴ The power dynamic is key; it is not merely cultural exchange but an act that can perpetuate stereotypes and erase the history of the originating community.³⁷

Applying this critique to the conventional "Spanish" dance costume reveals several issues. First, it **flattens a diverse culture**. The "Kitri/flamenco" look takes a specific, regional, and culturally rich tradition—Andalusian flamenco, which has deep roots in the Gitano (Romani) communities of Southern Spain—and misapplies it as a generic signifier for all of Spain.³⁸ Don Quixote is from La Mancha, a central region with its own distinct cultural identity. Using a flamenco aesthetic for a character from La Mancha is geographically and culturally inaccurate, akin to dressing a Louisiana Creole character in a New England pilgrim's outfit. It erases the specific identity of the source material in favor of a broad, easily digestible stereotype.

Second, this aesthetic engages in **exoticism and caricature**. As one source notes, costume catalogs often advertise "China doll" or "Arabian Bollywood" outfits that lean into the "exoticization of culture and people".³⁴ The fiery, passionate, red-and-black "Spanish" look similarly plays into a long-standing stereotype of the "Latin lover" or "fiery señorita," a superficial representation that ignores the complexity of Spanish history and identity. It is a costume that performs "Spanishness" as an exotic commodity rather than engaging with the actual historical and literary character.

Finally, and most alarmingly, this costuming trend is deeply enmeshed with the **hypersexualization of young performers**. The extensive commentary provided by the dance community makes this point unequivocally.¹ Bra tops, booty shorts, and the absence of tights are not historically or culturally grounded choices; they are conventions of a modern, commercialized dance culture that prioritizes revealing the body, often in a provocative manner. Teachers and parents express disgust and

discomfort at seeing young children in costumes that resemble "lingerie" or "stripper" outfits, performing choreography that involves "gyrating" and "twerking".¹ These choices have no connection to the dignified, albeit mad, elderly gentleman Don Quixote or the somber world of 16th-century Spain. They are a projection of a harmful modern trend onto a historical narrative, sacrificing artistic integrity and the well-being of children for a look that is perceived to "win" at competitions.¹

Part III: From Theory to the Studio - A Pedagogical Guide

The Value of Vernacular Productions

When seeking inspiration, dance educators are often drawn to polished, professional productions or high-scoring competition routines. However, in the case of *Man of La Mancha*, the user's question about the value of watching high school, college, or community theater productions is particularly astute.⁴⁰ While these vernacular productions may lack the technical virtuosity of elite dancers, they often capture the *spirit* of the musical with a unique authenticity that is highly instructive.

The core conceit of *Man of La Mancha* is that it is a play-within-a-play, staged by prisoners in a dungeon using only the props and materials they have on hand.¹¹ The show's creators intended an extremely minimalist aesthetic, challenging the audience to participate in the act of imagination alongside the characters.⁴⁹ This is the very essence of Quixote's own journey: creating a world of chivalry and honor through the power of his own belief. Amateur and educational theater productions, often operating under significant budget and resource constraints, are forced to embrace this same spirit of imaginative resourcefulness.

Production photos from various theatrical stagings demonstrate this principle in action. Designers speak of creating costumes from the "dungeon itself," using medieval torture helmets as inspiration for horse masks or crafting armor from found objects like old tires and beer cans.²⁸ This creative problem-solving is far more aligned with the musical's narrative and thematic core than the expensive, sequined, and standardized costumes common in the competition world. The slickness and high production value of many competition routines, paradoxically, can work against the very story they are trying to tell.

Therefore, watching these non-professional productions can be an invaluable exercise for a choreographer. It provides a model for prioritizing storytelling and imagination over spectacle and budget. It teaches the artist how to "do more with less," which is precisely the challenge Cervantes sets for himself in the prison dungeon. These productions often reveal a deeper understanding of the material because they are not beholden to a judging system that rewards spectacle over substance. They offer a powerful reminder that the most authentic element of *Man of La Mancha* is not a flawless turn sequence or a dazzling costume, but the raw, unadorned power of human imagination.

The Teacher as Dramaturg: A Practical Framework for Creation

Adopting a Historically Informed Performance framework requires a shift in the role of the dance educator—from a choreographer who simply sets steps to an artist-dramaturg who engages in a comprehensive process of research, interpretation, and creation. This approach not only results in a more authentic and meaningful final product but also enriches the educational experience for the dancers. The following is a practical, step-by-step guide for creating a routine to "I, Don Quixote" using this methodology.

Step 1: Research and Analysis

The process begins not in the studio, but in the library (or its digital equivalent). Before choreographing a single step, the teacher must immerse themselves in the source material. This involves reading a detailed plot summary of *Man of La Mancha* 11, studying literary analyses of the character of Don Quixote 8, and understanding the historical context of 16th-century Spain and the Inquisition.¹² This foundational research should be supplemented with visual research into the clothing of the period, using historical fashion plates, paintings, and academic texts as guides.²³ This research phase directly mirrors the work of a HIP musician studying historical treatises and is the bedrock of all subsequent artistic choices.

Step 2: Concept and Character

With a solid foundation of research, the next step is to develop a clear artistic concept. This moves beyond simply "doing a dance to this song." The teacher-dramaturg must ask critical questions: Who is our Don Quixote? Is the focus on his madness, his idealism, his physical frailty, or the tragicomedy of his quest? What is the central story or emotional arc that the dance will convey? This conceptual work provides a clear

directorial vision that will guide all choreographic and design decisions, ensuring a cohesive and purposeful piece.

Step 3: Movement Generation

Choreography should emerge from the character and concept. Instead of relying on a pre-existing vocabulary of "tricks," the teacher should use character-driven improvisation and choreographic tasks to generate movement.¹⁵ For example, dancers could be asked to create movement phrases based on keywords like "quest," "idealism," "frailty," or "defiance." They could explore the physical sensations of wearing imaginary, heavy armor or of fighting an unseen enemy. This process avoids the "checklist" approach to choreography so heavily criticized by the dance community and ensures that every step has a narrative or emotional justification.¹

Step 4: Informed Design

Costume design should be a direct extension of the research and concept. Based on the principles outlined in Part II.2 of this report, the design should focus on historically informed silhouettes, layering, and appropriate fabrics. This means rejecting the generic red-and-black flamenco look in favor of a costume that tells Quixote's specific story: the sober, earth-toned attire of a 16th-century hidalgo layered with the rusty, piecemeal armor of a bygone era. The teacher should create a simple "costume plot" for the dancers and parents, explaining the historical and character-based reasoning behind the design choices. This act of education helps build understanding and appreciation for the artistic process.

Step 5: Educate and Advocate

The final step is to bring the entire studio community into the process. The teacher must articulate the value of this approach, framing the conversation not as "we don't do tricks," but as "we are telling a story with our bodies." The extensive health and safety concerns raised in the provided commentary—the high rates of injury from hyper-flexibility, the negative impact on body image, the dangers of hypersexualization—can be used to advocate for a more holistic, ethical, and artistically rigorous approach to dance training.¹ By explaining the "why" behind the choreography and costuming, the teacher builds buy-in from dancers and parents, empowering the studio to resist the commercial pressures to conform and to champion a more thoughtful and artful approach to dance.

Conclusion: Fulfilling the Quest

The principles of Historically Informed Performance, born from a desire to reconnect with the authentic spirit of early music, offer a transformative methodology for the modern dance educator. This framework provides a powerful and necessary alternative to the pervasive culture of spectacle-driven, ahistorical, and often harmful practices that dominate much of the competitive dance landscape. By applying a HIP-based approach to a piece like "I, Don Quixote," educators can guide their students on a quest that is far more rewarding than the pursuit of a trophy.

This report has demonstrated that an authentic portrayal of Don Quixote must be rooted in a deep understanding of his character: an elderly, frail, yet indomitably idealistic man whose heroism is found in his spiritual resilience, not his physical prowess.

Choreography built on this foundation will naturally eschew the anachronistic and narratively empty acrobatics that have become commonplace. Similarly, costuming that is informed by actual historical research into late 16th-century Spain will not only be more accurate but will also serve as a powerful narrative tool, visually articulating the character's status as a man tragically out of step with his time. This informed approach inherently rejects the generic, culturally appropriative, and hypersexualized "Spanish" costumes that are both artistically lazy and ethically problematic.

The ultimate lesson from this framework is the elevation of the dance teacher's role. By embracing the process of research, analysis, and interpretation, the teacher becomes a dramaturg, an artist-scholar who guides students through a meaningful creative journey. This process transforms the dance studio into a laboratory for artistic inquiry, replacing the passive imitation of trends with the active, critical creation of art. The "impossible dream," then, is not to flawlessly execute a scorpion or win a national title. It is the far more noble and fulfilling quest to create dance that is intelligent, honest, and moving; to protect the physical and psychological health of young performers; and to cultivate a new generation of dancers who are not just technicians, but thoughtful, expressive, and resilient artists. In a world that often prizes flash over substance, this quixotic quest for authenticity is a dream worth pursuing.

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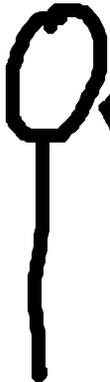
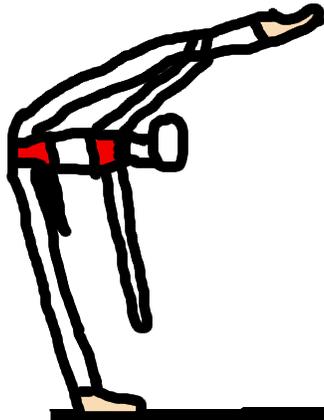
Appendix 1: Cartoons



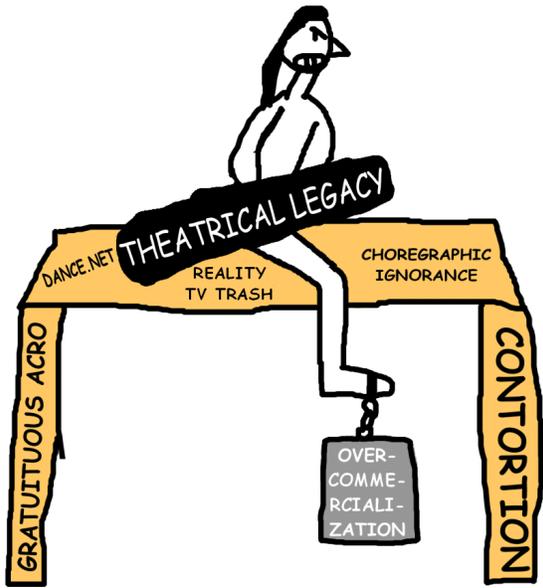
I AM I, DON QUIXOTE
THE MAN OF LA MANCHA
MY DESTINY CALLS
AND I'LL GO...



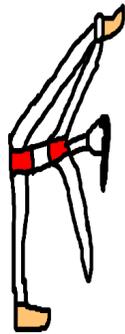
WHICH MUSICAL
IS THAT SONG
FROM?



THAT SONG IS FROM
MAN OF LA MANCHA,
EXCEPT THAT DON Q
DOESN'T WEAR BRA TOPS
AND BRIEFS AND SHOWS
HIS CROTCH
TOWARDS US!



I AM I, DON QUIXOTE
THE LORD OF LA MANCHA
DESTROYER OF EVIL AM I...



Appendix 2: The Images in my Head Regarding Dance Comp Routines to Eder's "Man of La Mancha (I, Don Quixote)"



[Frustrated](#)

[high kicks limited things](#)

[Need help with splits :P](#)

[Warming Up](#)



[pulled muscle](#)



[**Please Help** How Can I force myself!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!](#)

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	More mystic pixie pics and videos [page: 1 2]	32	3219	[redacted]	Sun Jun 04 06:43



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