



Exploring CYRANO

by Edmond Rostand
adapted from the original by Jo Roets

Upperstage, Sept 18 - Oct 19, 2002



The Story

Cyrano is one of the greatest love stories ever told, a tale of a brilliant soldier and poet and an unusual love triangle, focusing on the importance of honor, the difference between beauty and illusion, and a rather large nose.

Cyrano de Bergerac is a French soldier, a member of the Gascony Guards, famous for his extraordinary swordsmanship, his exquisite poetry, and his extremely large nose. It is this last quality which has convinced Cyrano that no woman could ever love him, especially the beautiful and intellectual Roxane.

Meanwhile Roxane has fallen for the handsome new cadet Christian, who alas is completely tongue-tied in her presence. Suppressing his own feelings, Cyrano helps Christian woo Roxane by writing love letters to her under his own name.

Yet a third rival for Roxane's attention is the powerful De Guiche, but when he plans a secret midnight marriage ceremony, Roxane manages to marry Christian instead. In a jealous rage, De Guiche sends the entire regiment to the front lines of the war.

Surrounded by the enemy, Cyrano nonetheless manages to write Roxane twice daily professing his love under Christian's name. Just as Christian begins to understand Cyrano's true feelings, Roxane arrives with food for the starving soldiers. Christian insists that Cyrano tell Roxane the truth, but before he has the opportunity, the battle begins. The resolution of the tale is poetic and poignant. ★

The Playwright: Edmond Rostand

Written in 1897, *Cyrano de Bergerac* was the greatest success of French poet and playwright Edmond Rostand's career. At a time when France had lost its position as cultural center of Europe, the play symbolized the glory of France. It is said that on opening night the audience remained on their feet applauding for an hour after the final curtain.

Born in 1868, Edmond Rostand grew up in an artistic family. His father was a scholar and a poet, his uncle was a composer, his aunt wrote a book of verses. But the strongest influence in his life was his Spanish grandmother, who gave Edmond his vivacity and panache.

As a child Edmond loved reading, especially the works of the English Romantic Sir Walter Scott and the French Emperor Napoleon. Rostand was an outstanding student and young writer, and once wrote several love poems and letters for a less articulate schoolmate to send to his sweetheart. Although he studied to become a lawyer to please his father, he continued to write poetry.

Rostand's first play, debuting in 1894, was *Les Romanesques (The Romantics)*. The play's simple charm and lyricism inspired a modern musical version, *The Fantasticks*,

which opened in New York City in 1960 and only recently closed—making it the longest-running theatrical production in American history.

Rostand's other plays included *L'Aiglon (The Eaglet)* which treated the history of Napoleon II and was awarded the French Legion of Honor. In 1901, he was voted into the French Academy, becoming the youngest writer ever to be admitted.

He died in 1918.

Even during his own lifetime, Rostand's poetic drama existed well outside the mainstream.

Other playwrights like Ibsen, Chekhov, and Shaw explored contemporary social issues in realistic settings. Rostand deliberately conjured up an old-fashioned, romantic vision of the past. For him, the realities of everyday life were unimportant. Rostand's characters are obsessed by their dreams and their ambitions,

and it is their undying devotion to these dreams, even in the face of failure, which makes these characters great.

Rostand returns us to a time when theatre can be heroic and magical, tragic and funny, all at the same time. And he reminds us that while we must live in the real world, it is our dreams and aspirations that give life meaning. ★



The Play

The Adaptation by Jo Roets

Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* is a massive undertaking for any theatre, with five elaborate 17th-century settings and some fifty speaking characters plus citizens, Musketeers, thieves, pastrycooks, poets, cadets, actors, musicians, pages, children, soldiers, spectators, nuns, and more. The IRT produced the full play on the Mainstage in 1990 with a cast of 33.

The current Upperstage production, called simply *Cyrano*, is an adaptation for three actors by Jo Roets, the co-artistic director of the Blauw Vier (Blue Four), an internationally acclaimed Dutch children's theatre company in Antwerp, Belgium. One actor plays Cyrano, a second plays Roxane, and the third plays Christian and several supporting roles. The script plucks the heart of the story from Rostand's sprawling epic and presents that heart in a refreshing, new, simple setting. Director John Green (whose work you may have seen on the IRT Upperstage in *Julius Caesar* or *The Taming of the Shrew*) and his designers and actors have devised a clever, modern, and deeply theatrical production which will showcase the art of acting along with the beauty of language and the power of a great story. ★



Romanticism & romance

Cyrano de Bergerac is often referred to as a "romantic" play. The words *romance* or *romantic* are usually used today in reference to loving relationships. But in the world of arts and literature, these words have a long history and a wide variety of meanings.

In the middle ages, a *romance* was a French literary form. Chivalry was in flower, and poetry focused on the heroic deeds of knights and their relationships with their ladies. Many men were away from home during the Crusades, and the tradition of the *chevalier servant* arose—one who loves his lady from afar, writing her poetry, serving her in every way, but never even as much as touching her.

In the early 1800s, when the rules of Neo-Classicism governed the art world with order, reason, and balance, the young French *Romantics* broke out from these strictures with artworks celebrating freedom, exuberance, and the wildness of nature. Exotic settings, harsh contrasts between beauty and the grotesque, and the lone hero who stands against the tide were hallmarks of *Romanticism*.

Written almost a century later, *Cyrano* nonetheless exhibits the influence of this era. Like the original Romantic plays, *Cyrano* reaches back in history for its exotic setting, evoking the 17th century through both the color and sweep of swashbuckling adventures and the flourish and sentiment of formal love poetry. The play is filled with contrasts between the beautiful and the grotesque: the handsome (but non-verbal) Christian and the long-nosed (but brilliant) Cyrano, the passion of love amidst the violence of war.

Even within Cyrano himself, we see both the fearless warrior who doesn't flinch at a combat of 100 to one, and the fearful lover who can never confess his feelings. The character of Cyrano, a modern *chevalier servant*, also captures the essence of the Romantic hero: the perpetual loner whose quest must inevitably end in an unfulfilled yet valiant death. ★

Jose Ferrer won the first ever Best Actor Tony Award for his 1946 Broadway performance as Cyrano (left); in 1950, he won an Oscar for the same role.

The World of the Play



The Historic Cyrano

Rostand based his play on a real person. Savinien de Cyrano was born in 1619. His family enjoyed the life of lesser nobility, with two rural castles, one of which was Bergerac. After receiving his early education from a country priest, Cyrano studied in Paris, where he acquired his distaste for tradition and the authorities of 17th-century society.

Cyrano's cousin Madeleine Robineau, married to the Baron de Neuville, took charge of Cyrano's social education. Cyrano enlisted with the Noble Guard of the Gascons, and later the Regiment of the Counts. The wife of the newly wed Count of Canvoys wrote him as many as three letters a day, and the Count turned to Cyrano more than once to supply him with love poems to send to his wife.

Cyrano was considered a staunch individualist: historical accounts refer to him as "the Intrepid" and "a madman." He had a hot temper and superb swashbuckling skill. At a time when duels were fought over the slightest insult, he earned a reputation as "a great sword-clanker." One account reads, "Bergerac's nose, which was very ugly, was the cause for his killing at least ten people."

Cyrano's cousin Madeleine retired to a convent when the Baron de Neuville died in battle. Wounded at the siege of Arras, Cyrano lived as best he could in the intellectual circles of Paris. He wrote two fantasies in prose, plays, letters, and even a study in physics, called *Journey to the Moon*. He died in 1655 from a head injury. ★

(left)
Constant Coquelin
as Cyrano in the 1897
premiere production.

(below right)
Gerard Depardieu
as Cyrano in the 1990
French-language film.

The Cadets

The story of *Cyrano* takes place in France in the 17th century, during the years 1640 to 1655. From 1618 to 1648 France was at war against Austria and Spain. During most of this period—1617 to 1643—Louis XIII was King of France. (This is also the time and place of Alexander Dumas *pere's* novel *The Three Musketeers*.) The Thirty Years War was an effort to wipe out Protestantism and establish a new stronger Catholic rule in Europe. Though largely Catholic, France fought on the side of the Protestants. Ultimately France emerged triumphant, but the war devastated Central Europe.

Cyrano and Christian are members of the Gascon Cadets—a company of soldiers from the Gascoyne region in southwestern France. The Gascons were known for their bravery—and for their flamboyant bragging. ★

The Art of the Duel

Noblemen in France and throughout Europe had a long tradition of fighting duels to defend their honor. If a man refused to apologize for an insult, if two gentlemen could not resolve a quarrel peacefully, they settled the matter by sword (or, later, pistol). It was considered extremely poor taste for a nobleman to settle matters in the courts; lawyers were very middle class. Like all concerns of French etiquette, the duel was governed by strict rules. Unfortunately, it was a deadly game; between 1589 and 1607 some 4,000 gentlemen in France alone were killed in duels. ★

Precious Ladies and the Art of Conversation

In Cyrano's time the court set standards for fashion and behavior, and those who inhabited fashionable circles followed strict, if not necessarily logical, guidelines. Intelligence and wit in conversation were so highly valued that a particular style was developed by certain fashionable ladies. *Préciosité* was a form of conversation marked by detail and excess. Rather than say, "Blow out that candle," a *précieuse* might say, "Eliminate the superfluity of that flaming illumination."

Préciosité was developed in the salons, where gossip and conversation about art and politics reigned supreme. The most popular guests were those whose discourse sparkled most. Details mattered; in discussing love, for instance, it was said the *précieuses* "distinguished nine kinds of esteem and twelve sorts of sighs."

In *Cyrano*, Roxane's love of intelligent conversation and witty repartee identify her as a *précieuse*. Cyrano's easy success in this world is as clear as Christian's utter failure. Note, however, how Roxane's attitude changes as she grows to love "the soul behind the words." ★



Cyrano's Enduring Appeal

Cyrano de Bergerac has been acclaimed around the world for more than a century. In 1923 the *New York Times* wrote, "It would be difficult to exaggerate its charm for all who love humor and fancy, the thrill of valiant deeds, and the glamour of romantic love enveloped in an atmosphere of poetic eloquence and shot through by the lightning flash of wit." Louis Kronenberger wrote in 1946, "Rostand's play offers all those dashing, pathetic, impossibly romantic things for which the human heart hungers."

Next to Hamlet, the role of Cyrano is usually considered the most coveted role for an actor. At 1,400 verse lines, the role is the same length as Hamlet, and requires as much if not more breadth: from comedy to tragedy, from whispered sentiment to brash swordplay, from the grotesque to the sublime. The role was written for Constant Coquelin, the most celebrated actor in France at the time. Since then, many great actors have tested their mettle against the role, including in recent years Christopher Plummer (1973) and Derek Jacobi (1983).

An opera version appeared in 1913. In recent years a musical theatre version was very popular in the Netherlands, although it failed to capture audiences on Broadway. Numerous film adaptations have had success, including Jose Ferrer's in 1950 and Gerard Depardieu's original-French-language version in 1990.

In 1987 the film *Roxanne* featured Steve Martin as a long-nosed fire chief in a Rocky Mountain ski town who falls in love with a beautiful astronomer who is smitten by a handsome young fireman. The final reel abandons classic Romantic tragedy for a happy Hollywood ending.

The Truth about Cats and Dogs is a 1996 film which twists the *Cyrano* premise even further. Janeane Garofalo plays a successful radio veterinarian whose on-air voice and wit charm a handsome listener, but whose insecurities about her appearance prompt her to ask a model friend (Uma Thurman) to impersonate her face-to-face. Even without its historic trappings, the Cyrano tale is one which continues to delight generations of audiences. ★

Themes & Questions for Discussion

Honor

According to the ideal of 17th-century French society, Cyrano was an *Honnête Homme*, an honorable man, a man whose courage on the battlefield was matched by his refined manners. Etiquette manuals of the time describe the *Honnête Homme* in almost superhuman terms: he is wise, religious, virtuous yet adventurous, witty yet direct, tall, handsome, and slender (but not vain), an excellent fighter and sportsman, a rider, a dancer, a tennis player, a musician—as one writer puts it, “the height and crown of all virtues.” Make your own list of “honorable” virtues. How is it different from this list? How is it similar? Name some persons with honor, either from history or today’s world or even your own life. What makes them honorable?

It is interesting to note that in this period a man’s honor was considered to be more important than his honesty. Thus the characters in the play have no inhibitions about disguising themselves or pretending, even lying. As long as they act with honor, their character remains intact. What is more important? Honor or honesty?

(above right)

Nicholas Hormann as Cyrano
in the IRT’s 1990 Mainstage production.



Irony

Irony may be loosely defined as a difference between what appears to be and what is. What examples of irony can you find in *Cyrano’s* plot, characters, and situations? Describe & discuss these ironies.

Love

Usually, when lovers say, “I would die for you,” it is a figure of speech. Cyrano really means it. Every day he crosses enemy lines merely to send love letters to Roxane. What is love? How important is love to a person’s happiness?

Friendship

Just as love is a major theme in the play, so is friendship. What is the difference between love and friendship?

Sacrifice

Cyrano grants Roxane’s wishes while sacrificing his own feelings. He remains loyal to Christian up to his own death. To what lengths should a person go for a friend?

In what ways does Rostand express the idea that the spiritual is nobler than the physical in life?

Character

Does Cyrano have a “tragic flaw”? If so, what is it? Do you see the play as a tragedy or a comedy? Why?

One of the principal ways we define characters is how they change over the course of the play. How do each of the three main characters in this play—Christian, Roxane, and Cyrano—change?

Wish Fulfilment

Suppose events in the play were different and Roxane and Christian were able to live together in marriage. What do you think would happen? What if Roxane learned the truth and she and Cyrano married—what would happen?

Obsession

Roxane is a 17th-century *précieuse*—one who is obsessed with literary talent, wit-cisms, and wordplay, to the point where this obsession governs all her feelings. Her assumption that Christian’s physical beauty must be matched by verbal dexterity leads to deception, and eventually death. How might Roxane’s life have been different if she had been more open-minded about love? What obsessions do people have in today’s world which interfere with their relationships?

Truth & Appearance

Cyrano, in many ways, defines himself by the shape of his nose. In what ways has this focus on his appearance inspired him to develop excellence in other areas? In what ways does his insecurity hold him back? Think about our contemporary culture’s obsession with appearances. How does this phenomenon affect the quality of our lives?

Are there ways in which Christian’s good looks are somehow a disadvantage? What good qualities in him are overlooked by either Cyrano or Roxane or both? In many ways, Christian corresponds with what we might call today’s “dumb jock.” What happens when we allow such stereotypes to limit our perception? ★

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