

# Cyrano de Bergerac in New York: The tale of a gallant individual

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A revival of French writer Edmond Rostand's well-known 1897 comedy-drama, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, opens on Broadway October 11. The play tells of a charismatic and famously large-nosed duelist-poet who spends his days entertaining the people of Paris with his whimsical wit, while at the same time harboring romantic (and unspoken) feelings for his lovely cousin Roxane.

The current version, staged by the not-for-profit Roundabout Theatre Company, uses a recent translation by Ranjit Bolt, which was debuted at the Bristol Old Vic in 2007. Bolt's translation apparently stays true to Rostand's text. The play is written entirely in rhyming couplets and, remarkably, for the most part, the actors make this work.

Set in Paris in 1640, the opening scene, although quite amusing, goes on far too long. Members of the general public are awaiting patiently for the comic performer Montfleury (Andy Grotelueschen) to arrive and entertain them. His eventual buffoonery goes down quite well with the people, but not so with the roguish Cyrano (Douglas Hodge), who makes an extravagant entrance, waving his sword at Montfleury and driving him off the stage.

In the same scene, Cyrano makes it clear that any man who even looks in the direction of Roxane (Clémence Poésy) will feel the force of his biting wit and dexterous sword-play. Two such men exist in the shape of the Viscount Valvert (Samuel Roukin) and Christian (Kyle Soller).

The sadistic Comte De Guiche (Patrick Page) is plotting to marry Roxane off to the fawning Valvert. Naturally, this does not sit well with our hero Cyrano. A duel ensues between Cyrano and Valvert, and to the astonishment of the onlooking public, the former simultaneously composes a ballad. After Cyrano inflicts a fatal wound, the infuriated Comte vows revenge as he storms off.

The piece lives or dies on the performance of Cyrano and in the role, four-time Olivier Award-nominated Douglas Hodge is very impressive. To be frank, he carries the show. The play is known for introducing the word "panache" into the English language and Hodge's performance certainly demonstrates a lot of it. More importantly, however, the performer brings a humanity to a character that can so easily be (and has often so easily been!) caricatured.

However, despite the best intentions of Hodge and the ensemble, the first act generally lags. Far too much time is spent on Cyrano's poetic pining for Roxane and this quickly comes across as indulgent.

Cyrano and his cadet comrades spend a great deal of their time drinking and engaging in all-round tomfoolery. The mood shifts when we learn that Christian, a new arrival in town, is in love with Roxane. Cyrano soon discovers from his cousin that this love is requited and herein lies the play's central conflict.

Roxane begs Cyrano to take care of the naïve young man. Cyrano obliges. The inexperienced Christian, in turn, pleads with Cyrano to aid him in wooing Roxane with some romantic verses—and Cyrano, somewhat

reluctantly, obliges.

This results in a quite touching, and famous, comic sequence. After Christian fumbles through some romantic verse of his own that fails to impress the young woman, Cyrano comes to his aid, whispering impromptu poems for the young cadet to recite. This approach proves successful, and before long Christian and Roxane are embracing. Cyrano can only gaze on ruefully.

Christian and Roxane are presently married, and it appears as though nothing can go wrong for them ...

However, the Comte De Guiche intrudes treacherously upon their happiness. Outraged at having lost control over the beautiful Roxane, the Comte coldly sends Christian, Cyrano and all the cadets off to Arras, in northern France, and war with Spain.

In the second act we experience the horrors of war as the French cadets are forced back by the Spanish and left to starve by the malevolent Comte. Not even Cyrano's quick wit can cheer them up now.

Roxane, however, has not given up on her love. She pursues Christian into battle, crossing the Spanish lines dressed as a boy. They briefly reunite, but all too briefly ...

One of the most affecting moments in the piece comes when Cyrano and the cadets return from an off-stage battle with the now wounded Christian. Although Cyrano tries desperately to hide him from Roxane, she knows only too well who lies in his arms and weeps uncontrollably.

Poésy is sincere in her portrayal of Roxane, although at times she underplays the role. This reviewer was sitting in the third row and found her barely audible, so one can only imagine that those in rows further back must have strained to hear her. The actress, perhaps best known in North America for her performances in the *Harry Potter* series, alas, brings too much of her film persona to the current role.

That being said, it is hard for any of the performers to

match the energy and intelligence Hodge brings to his portrayal. The closing scene is particularly poignant. Years after the war, Roxane now lives in a convent on the outskirts of Paris. Cyrano is writing clever pieces for the local newspaper and every week he comes by to share anecdotes from daily events with her. On this particular day, however, he arrives shaken by an earlier incident.

He has aged considerably. Gone is the carefree charisma and what we see before us is an individual physically and psychologically damaged by the effects of war and, more immediately, by an attack from a disgruntled local who did not take kindly to being mocked in one of Cyrano's articles.

Roxane quickly senses Cyrano's uneasiness as he attempts to proceed in his usual manner. She comes to his aid, along with Cyrano's dear friend Le Bret (Max Baker). They both struggle to keep the floundering Cyrano in an upright position as he wearily drifts off, initially reciting the lines from a letter by the now deceased Christian ... "Roxane adieu, I soon must die. This very night beloved. And I feel my soul heavy with love untold."

This and Cyrano's subsequent heroic speech about all that he was in his life and all that he wanted to be are performed with a remarkable depth and sincerity by Hodge, and never once come off as overly sentimental.

In an age where it seems like most actors simply use the stage as a way of propelling or sustaining a film and television career, it is refreshing to see a performer of Hodge's caliber exhibit such wonderful stage-craft.

Admirers of the Rostand narrative will also be pleased to note that director Jamie Lloyd avoids imposing any unnecessary "concepts" in this production. The play for the most part is performed in a straightforward and serious manner.



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