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Cyrano de Bergerac

by Winnie McCroy

EDGE Editor

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Patrick Page and Douglas Hodge (Source:Joan Marcus)

The Beaux Art American Airlines Theatre is the perfect Broadway house for a play that is perhaps the best example of the Beaux Art in theater, Edmund Rostand's "*Cyrano de Bergerac*." The story is so familiar it has become an archetype: A man who believes himself too unattractive to believe a beautiful woman could love him helps a callow young swain romance by secretly providing eloquent voice to his feelings. You probably recognize that plot from films like "*Roxanne*," "*The Truth About Cats and Dogs*" and "*The Ugly Truth*."

Cyrano is a real Renaissance man, the kind of guy who "writes, practices medicine, struts and fights." But his outward bravado conceals deep insecurity

about huge nose. He loves the fair Roxane (Clémence Poésy). But when she sets her sights on comely cadet Christian (Kyle Soller) and asks Cyrano to protect him from the other burly Gascon soldiers, he cannot refuse her request. Cyrano begins to write her love letters, sharing his own deep emotions under the guise of Christian's crush. In versions such as the Steve Martin-Daryl Hannah "*Roxanne*," Cyrano eventually gets the girl. But the original is French, and in France, unrequited love must remain unrequited until death.

Douglas Hodge, who made such a splash as drag queen Zaza in the Broadway revival of "*La Cage Aux Folles*," does a truly excellent turn as the lead character. From the moment he throws open the theater doors and strides into the action *in medias res*, he shines, bringing with him bravado, excellent comic timing and amazing physicality.

His character is fearless; Cyrano's is the best swordsmen of all of France, his rapier's blade matched only by his rapier wit. He is also a master rhetorician, which he proves early on by chasing hackneyed actor Montfluery (Andy Grotelueschen) off the stage.

A member of the Gascons, one of the groups of cadets involved in the endless European wars of the time, Cyrano is a paragon of the dashing cavalier prototype that flourished in the rollicking Paris of the 1600s, probably best known today by Dumas' novel "*The Three Musketeers*."

Cyrano cares not a whit for the social niceties. He leads his life by the three-pronged strategy of courage, wit and a refusal to compromise. He is too proud to accept charity, even when he is on the brink of starvation, and loves nothing more than facing impossible odds. Give him 10 men to fight, and he will clamor for 100.

For Cyrano, however, romancing his love interest is far more difficult than any duel. After thwarting two would-be wooers of his beloved Roxane, the aristocratic Comte de Guiche (Patrick Page), and the slimy Valvert (Samuel Roukin) he finds himself helpless when she confesses her attraction to Christian.

Douglas Hodge, who made a splash as drag queen Zaza in "*La Cage Aux Folles*," is excellent as the lead character, bringing with him bravado, excellent comic timing and amazing physicality.

Christian hardly endears himself to Cyrano in their first encounter. The young cadet, having been informed of how sensitive Cyrano is about his nose, constantly interrupts Cyrano's recounting of his battle exploits the night before with nasal put-downs.

Instead of the expected duel, Cyrano reveals that he is Roxane's cousin and volunteers writing Christian's love letters for him. The ruse culminates in the play's most famous scene below Roxanne's balcony, in which the hidden Cyrano gives Christian his lines. Even when the cadets are caught behind Spanish enemy lines, Cyrano continues to cover for Christian in letters to Roxanne, now his wife.

The reason for the play's phenomenal success since its premier in 1897 isn't hard to discern. Its message that outward beauty blinds us to the deeper attractions of those whose beauty is deeper

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and within is still very much with us. Christian may be tongue-tied and witless, but Roxanne fell for his good looks. Only in the end does she realize that she overlooked the man who might have been her true soul mate.

In a drama that has a cast that could fill two subway cars, the Roundabout's production does especially good work investing all of the lesser players fleshing out their individual *raisons d'être*. The vivid direction makes us realize that the Gascons might be fearless, but their the French version of hillbillies, while all of the white-collared aristocrats are thin-skinned cowards who hound Cyrano to death.

"The nose" has always been a problem with "Cyrano," and this production falls once again for the obvious, making Cyrano's nose not just big, but downright disgusting and deformed. As for costumes, Soutra Gilmour provides faithful recreations of a time when both men and woman dressed elegantly, from the stained edges of Cyrano's red cloak to the military-style pants Roxane dons to cross enemy lines with provisions. As with the stone courtyard that frames the action, Japhy Weideman's lighting helps set the mood, from beams of light shining through windows in the morning to a softening mist at evening.

There's a nice verisimilitude to this production. When the bakers are at work, they produce real bread and cakes, which cast members happily devour. They eat and drink eagerly and messily, as starving soldiers would.

"Cyrano de Bergerac" offers something for everyone: witty repartee, exciting sword fights and cannon blasts, political intrigue, flowery poetry, comedic scenes and a romantic love for the ages. It is a play that is majestic and tear-jerking and pulsing with life. If you think you're tired of one of the theater's favorite war horses, Hodge and company will have you crying despite yourself.



"Cyrano de Bergerac" runs through Nov. 25 at American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. For info or tickets, call 212-719-1300 or visit <http://www.roundabouttheatre.org/Shows-Events/Cyrano-de-Bergerac.aspx>

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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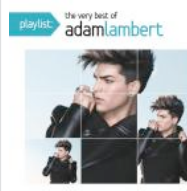


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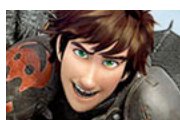


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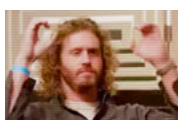
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