



Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespearean Festival



*Cyrano
de Bergerac*

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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For more information about Festival education programs:

Utah Shakespearean Festival

351 West Center Street

Cedar City, Utah 84720

435-586-7880

www.bard.org

Cyrano de Bergerac

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About the Playwright: Edmond Rostand

Edmond Rostand was born in Marseilles, France, on 1 April 1868 to wealthy parents. He went to Paris to study law and was admitted to the bar, but became more interested in writing poetry than in the legal profession.

In 1890 he published a volume of lyric verse that received a few favorable reviews. The same year, Rostand, then twenty-two, married Rosemonde Gérard, a nineteen-year-old poet of later distinction and the granddaughter of a marshal of France under Napoleon. Such personal associations with national glory, as well as Rostand's upbringing in southern France, perhaps accentuated a natural penchant for romance and grandiloquence. He published other poetry and soon became increasingly attracted to the theatre, to which he was to devote most of his future efforts.

His first play actually to reach the boards was *The Romancers* (*Les Romanesques*, 1894), a charming if trivial satire on romance that was to achieve enormous success in New York over half a century later as *The Fantasticks*. Though it ridicules excessive romantic attitudes, the play itself is in sharp contrast to the drab naturalism of contemporary drama, and it presages the very mixture of imaginative romanticism, declamation, wit, and wistfulness that was to characterize Rostand's major works.

Sarah Bernhardt starred three years later in Rostand's *The Woman of Samaria* (*La Samaritaine*, 1897). Here the triumph of ideal over physical love is dramatized in a biblical spectacle with a very human Jesus (speaking like Rostand himself) inspiring a new Magdalen to carry his message, lead the mob to Jacob's Well where Jesus waits, and join in the Lord's Prayer.

It was his next work, however, that elevated Rostand into the ranks of great French playwrights. *Cyrano de Bergerac* brought him immediate and worldwide fame. Not yet thirty, he was lionized at home. In 1900 Rostand was appointed officer of the Legion of Honor, and three years later he became the youngest member ever elected to the French Academy.

Rostand wrote his leading parts for great French actors such as Coquelin and Bernhardt. In fact, it was Bernhardt who played Napoleon's weak-willed son in Rostand's next work, *The Eaglet* (*L'Aiglon*, 1900). While this play did not create quite the furor of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, it enjoyed international success and consolidated Rostand's reputation.

Ill health at this time caused Rostand to leave his admirers in Paris and take his family into retirement to a luxurious villa in Cambo, in the southern countryside at the foot of the Pyrenees. He spent many years working on an allegorical animal drama that eventually became *Chanticleer*. The play was eagerly anticipated by a public that had not had a new Rostand drama for a decade. But, though it has been praised by some critics as his most profound work, it never enjoyed the popularity of the preceding plays.

In his last years, Rostand produced a verse pantomime, worked on a never-completed Faust, and almost finished his dramatization of another legendary character in *The Last Night of Don Juan* (*La Dernière Nuit de Don Juan*, 1921), which was published posthumously. Rostand died in Paris on 2 December 1918.

Synopsis

In the theatre hall of the Hotel de Burgundy, awaiting the night's play, Christian, a young but somewhat doltish soldier, anxiously looks for the beautiful Roxane to appear in her box. Christian is passionately in love with Roxane; however, he fears he will never have the courage to speak with her. Others in the audience are awaiting the arrival of Cyrano de Bergerac because the actor Montfleury, Cyrano's enemy and one of Roxane's suitors, is to star in the play, and Cyrano had threatened him with bodily injury if he appeared.

Finally Roxane arrives, the play begins, and Montfleury comes onto the stage. Suddenly a powerful voice orders him to leave, the noble Cyrano appears, and the performance is halted. Valvert, another of Roxane's suitors, insults Cyrano, by pointing out his large nose, and Cyrano, sensitive about what he knows is a disfiguring feature, challenges Valvert to a duel. Cyrano, to show his contempt for his adversary, composes a poem while he is sparring, and with the last line draws blood.

Cyrano confesses to a friend that he is in love with his cousin—Roxane—despite the fact that he could never hope to win her because of his ugliness. At this point, Roxane's chaperone interrupts to give Cyrano a note from Roxane, who wants to see him. Cyrano is overcome with joy.

The next morning, while waiting for Roxane, Cyrano composes a love letter to Roxane, which he leaves unsigned because he intends to deliver it in person. However, when Roxane appears, she confesses she loves Christian and asks Cyrano to protect him in battle. Cyrano sadly consents to do her bidding.

Christian joins the famed Gascony Guards, and he and Cyrano become friends. He confesses his love for Roxane and begs Cyrano's help in winning her by composing tender, graceful messages. Although his heart is broken, Cyrano gallantly agrees and gives Christian the letter he had written earlier. This begins the deception wherein Cyrano writes beautiful letters and speeches, and Roxane falls in love with Christian's borrowed eloquence.

Eventually, Christian decides he wants to speak for himself. Under Roxane's balcony one evening, he tries, but must ask the aid of Cyrano, who is lurking in the shadows. Cyrano, hidden, tells Christian what to say, and Roxane is delighted over the sweet words she thinks are Christian's. However, a monk interrupts bearing a letter from Comte de Guiche, who wants Roxane as his mistress and who is commander of the cadets. The letter says that he is sending the cadets into battle, but he is remaining behind for one night to see Roxane. Roxane pretends the letter directs the monk to marry her to Christian immediately, which he does. The marriage is not consummated, however, because the cadets leave for the front.

During the following battle, Cyrano risks his life to carry letters to Roxane, and she never suspects the author of these messages is not Christian. Later, Roxane joins her husband on the battlefield and confesses that his letters had brought her to his side. Realizing that Roxane is really in love with the nobility and tenderness of Cyrano's letters, Christian begs Cyrano to tell Roxane the truth. But Christian is killed in battle shortly afterward, and Cyrano swears never to reveal the secret.

Fifteen years pass; and Roxane, grieving for Christian, is retired to a convent, carrying his last letter next to her heart. Each week Cyrano visits Roxane, but one day he comes late, concealing under his hat a mortal wound inflicted by an enemy. Cyrano asks to read aloud Christian's last letter; as he does so, Roxane realizes that it is too dark for Cyrano to see the words, that he knew the contents of the letter by heart, and that he must have written it; she also recognizes his voice as the one she had heard under her balcony on her wedding night. She also realizes that for fifteen years she has unknowingly loved the soul of Cyrano, not Christian. Roxane confesses her love for Cyrano, who dies knowing that, at last, she is aware of his love and that she shares it with him.

Characters

Cyrano de Bergerac: A chivalrous poet, swordsman, playwright, musician, and member of the Cadets of Gascoyne, a company of guards from southern France, Cyrano is cursed with a ridiculously long nose that makes him insecure and keeps him from revealing his love for his cousin Roxane.

Christian de Neuville: Perhaps the opposite of Cyrano, Christian is a handsome but simple young nobleman who lacks wit and intelligence. New to Paris and to the cadets, he falls in love with Roxane and joins Cyrano's company of cadets early in the play.

Comte de Guiche: A powerful, married nobleman in love with Roxane and not fond of Cyrano, de Guiche is deceitful and always angry. He attempts several times to have Cyrano killed, once by a hundred men.

Ragueneau: Cyrano's friend, Ragueneau is a pastry chef with a deep love for poetry. He gives away pastries in return for poems, and, therefore, innumerable poets visit him frequently.

Le Bret: Cyrano's friend and closest confidant, Le Bret is a fellow soldier and guardsman. He worries that Cyrano's principles will ruin his career, but Cyrano ignores Le Bret's concerns.

Carbon de Castel-Jaloux: Cyrano's friend and the captain of his company, de Castel-Jaloux is a strong-willed and successful leader.

Vicomte de Valvert: An insolent young nobleman, de Valvert is lauded by de Guiche as a possible husband for Roxane, a scheme that would give de Guiche access to Roxane. After he insults Cyrano's nose, de Valvert is defeated in an ensuing duel.

Montfleury: A fat, untalented actor, Cyrano bans him from the stage.

Bellerose: The man in charge of the theatre at the Hotel de Bourgogne

Jodelet: A comedian in the theatre at the Hotel de Bourgogne

Cuigy: A minor nobleman and hanger-on, Cuigy is always at the fringe of Paris nightlife.

Lignière: Christian's friend, Lignière is a satirist and drunkard with many powerful enemies. Cyrano protects him from the hundred men hired by de Guiche to ambush him.

Brissaille: Cuigy's friend, Brissaille is another minor nobleman.

Bertrandou: A flute player

Roxane: Cyrano's cousin, Roxane is a beautiful and intellectual heiress. She has a soft spot for romance and a love for poetry and wit

Lise: Ragueneau's sharp-tongued wife, Lise does not approve of her husband's patronage of the local poets. An altogether unhappy woman, she leaves Ragueneau for a musketeer.

Mother Marquérîte de Jésus: Mother Superior of Roxane's convent, Marguérîte de Jésus is compassionate. She admires and respects Cyrano and therefore allows him to visit whenever he wishes.

Sister Marthe: A nun of Roxane's convent.

Sister Claire: A nun of Roxane's convent.

Cavalrymen, Musketeers, Citizens, Poets, etc.

Optimistic Idealism

By James Mills

From *Midsummer Magazine*, 1992

The *fin-de-siècle* period in France was a time of continued disillusionment from the disastrous results of the Franco-Prussian war, of political and social division caused by the stormy *Affaire Dreyfus*, and of uncertainty from the inefficiency and instability of the Third Republic. It was a time of turbulence in literature when naturalism was passing from the scene and symbolism was running its course. But with Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* came a new impetus from neo-romantic idealism which took a struggling France into the more optimistic *Belle Epoque* of the early twentieth century.

After the play's opening in 1897, Emile Faguet, the renowned literary critic, boldly declared that "A great poet decidedly appeared yesterday . . . on whom Europe is going to fix its eyes with envy, and France with a proud and hopeful delight" (Jules Haraszti, *Edmond Rostand* [Paris: Fontemoing et Cie, 1913], 123). (All quotations in this paper which were originally written in French have been translated into English by James Mills.) So pronounced was Rostand's impact that it was said that "France suddenly became alive with the appearance of *Cyrano*" (Marc Andry, *Edmond Rostand, le panache et la gloire* [Paris: Plon, 1986], 78). Dubbed "the king of La Belle Epoque," Rostand went on to dominate the French stage from 1897 until his death in 1918 (Andry, 11).

Practically Unknown

Prior to *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Rostand was practically unknown to the public. His play, *Les Romanesques*, was performed only fifty times in ten years, while *La Princesse lointaine* was a failure. Another play, *La Samaritaine*, which appeared in the same year as *Cyrano*, was performed only to a limited audience. Yet, other than Corneille's *Le Cid* and Hugo's *Hernani*, no French play has had such an immediate success as *Cyrano*.

As a playwright Rostand had an intimate knowledge of the theatre and "was a master craftsman, with a high degree of theatrical intelligence, with scenic sense, with a delight in solving technical difficulties" (Thomas Doyle and David Hoffman, Ed., *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*, trans. Howard T. Kingsbury [New York: Noble and Noble, Pub., Inc., 1963], 23). His literary masters included Shakespeare, who gave him the spirit of enchantment, Corneille, who taught him about *l'ésprit précieux*, and Racine, who caused him to appreciate the tragic. His sense of the comic was influenced by Molière, his verve and wit by Regnaud, his use of vaudeville by Labiche, and his refinement of subtle sentiments by Marivaux. (For additional information on Rostand's literary formation, see chapter 2 of Haraszti's *Edmond Rostand*.)

The insertion of the author's life into *Cyrano* has been much discussed by a number of his biographers. Alba della Fazia Amoia is one who has related the youth's experience as a boarder at school writing love letters for a friend who then copied them to send to his girlfriend to "the immortal trio of Cyrano, Christian, and Roxane" (Edmond Rostand, Twayne Series [Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978], 63). Rostand's wife, Rosemonde Gérard, herself a poet, included an anecdote in her book about her husband that sheds light on how the idea first came to him for *Cyrano de Bergerac*. While spending a summer in Luchon, he met a young man grievously disappointed in love, wrapped up in his sorrows. Later, Edmond met the young lady, who spoke passionately of the young man: "You know, my little Amédée, whom I had judged to be so mediocre, is marvelous; he's a scholar, a thinker, a poet." (Amoia, 63). When Rostand realized that Amédée was, in reality, none of these but rather "a pale reflection of her ideal," the idea for *Cyrano* was born.

Historical Inaccuracies

The historical basis for the play has also been much debated, for there was a real Cyrano who lived in the time of Louis XIII and, like the fictional character, had a large and ugly nose. However, a number of critics have pointed out the historical inaccuracies between the fictional Cyrano and the real one, none of which, however, diminishes the poetic value of the play. Martin Jacob Premisela, for example, has written that the real Cyrano was a noble, although of obscure origin, who may have been born in the domaine of Bergerac or Bergerat in the surroundings of Paris. He reminds the reader of the claim that Cyrano may have even been of Italian origin (*Edmond Rostand* [Amsterdam: J. M. Meulenhoff, 1933], 75, note 4). He points out that Roxane's real name was Magdeleine Robineau, and not Robin, and that Cyrano and Montefleury remained friends, not enemies. Furthermore, he states that Cyrano did, in fact, take a protector, the Duke of Arpajon (78).

Amoia has suggested that the real Cyrano was born in Les Halles district of central Paris on 6 March 1619, and that the "de Bergerac" title appeared later when the father acquired two castles in the outskirts of Paris, one of which was known as Bergerac. As the second child, Savinien de Cyrano was authorized to use the title of the second castle to become Cyrano de Bergerac (64).

According to Amoia, the real Madeleine Robineau was married in 1635 to the Baron de Neuville and loved to dance and to eat and was noted for her "peach complexion" (65). She took charge of Cyrano's social education until he enlisted as a cadet with the Noble Guards of the Gascon captain, Carbon de Casteljaloux. After being wounded in battle at Mouzon in 1639, Cyrano left the cadets to join the regiment of the Counts and participated in the siege of Arras where he and his comrades would spend the long hours smoking and playing cards.

One of the soldiers, a newlywed named the Count of Canvoye, would receive as many as three letters a day from his young bride, but it was Cyrano who supplied the rather dull husband with love poems to send back to her. Stabbed in the throat by an enemy saber, Cyrano recovered consciousness to learn that Madeleine's husband had been killed in battle. When he returned to Paris to convalesce, he further learned that Madeleine was spending her life in prayer and penitence. However, upon seeing her in the convent he hardly recognized her for her clothes were "of the poorest sort," and her former "peach complexion" was hidden under long grey hair. It is reported that "he fled from the convent, horrified, and vowed never to return (Amoia (65-66).

While at the residence of the Duke of Arpajon, Cyrano was struck on the head by a falling beam causing him to spend one year on the brink of death. His friend Henry le Bret assisted him, and Madeleine is said to have visited him twice. A short time after her second visit, on 28 July 1655, Cyrano died.

"This Disastrous Adventure"

The play named after him was performed on 28 December 1897 at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin with Constant Coquelin, to whom the work was dedicated, in the role of Cyrano. Initially, nobody had given the play much hope for it was a long work in five acts, expensive, with over fifty speaking parts and five décors, with complicated stage directions, and written about an anachronistic subject. In a moment of discouragement, Rostand apologized to Coquelin, saying: "Pardon! Ah! Pardon me, my friend, for having led you into this disastrous adventure" (Emile Ripert, *Edmond Rostand, sa vie et son oeuvre* [Paris: Hachette, 1968], 75-76).

Happily, for as long as one hour after the closing curtain, most of the audience remained in the theatre giving an enthusiastic standing ovation. A new French hero was born.

“To Show, To Preach, To Exalt”

The primary goal of *Cyrano de Bergerac* is “to show, to preach, to exalt the dignity of love” (Preamsela, 68). That is the basis of the panache, rather than pride, misanthropy, or social, moral, intellectual independence. The dignity of Cyrano lies in his selflessness, while for Christian it is in his ultimate abandonment of a love that he has not earned (Preamsela, 68).

It is a heroic comedy that approaches Corneilleian tragedy by glorifying the efforts of energy (Haraszti, 235). It is a comedy where tragedy is much present and where death intrudes: Cyrano is killed by an enemy, Christian commits a form of suicide by throwing himself into the fore of the battle to die, and Roxane symbolically dies as she casts aside love and society for voluntary confinement in a convent (Preamsela, 68).

Rostand was successful in recreating the life and atmosphere of an age, that of Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu and the early years of Louis XIV and Cardinal Mazarin. It was a time of national achievement, the Golden Age of French power and culture when French was the universal language of diplomacy and of polite society, and French taste and art were internationally adopted and imitated. He captured the social life of the Age of Splendor with “movement, exuberant spirit, romance, affectation, intrigue, self-sacrifice all crowded together as they were in those hectic years” (Doyle, 29). Ultimately, Rostand appealed to the collective soul of modern France seeking to find itself again.

Louis Haugmard’s claim at the end of World War I that “*Cyrano de Bergerac* . . . has remained the greatest theatrical success of all time,” (6) typifies the esteem in which the play was held at the time of Rostand’s death in 1918 (Edmond Rostand [Paris: E. Sansot et Cie., 1918], 6). Upon returning to his former school, the collège Stanislas, the playwright summarized the universal appeal of *Cyrano de Bergerac* with the following admonition to the students: “Be yourselves young Cyranos! Have panache, have soul” (Andry, 79)! Even Cyrano’s fictional rival, the Count de Guiche, recognized the hero’s greatness when he acknowledged: “He lives his life / His own life, his own way—thought, word, and deed / Free!” (Edmond Rostand, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, trans. Brian Hooker [New York: Bantam Books, 1981], 178. Ultimately, Cyrano’s integrity remains intact and his panache untarnished.

A Romantic Melodrama

By Jerry L. Crawford

From *Souvenir Program*, 1992

Labeled in various ways, *Cyrano de Bergerac* has been called “heroic comedy” (by its author, no less), “romantic comedy,” and “tragicomedy,” among others. Yet, perhaps it is best to refer to it as a “romantic melodrama.” That it is romantic is indisputable. Also, theatre at its most truly theatrical is melodrama—elevated, intensified reality stretching into a world of fancy, improbability, and imagination. The play also personifies a lyric expression and exotic grandeur. It is a magic carpet to a world in which everyone delights in escaping. At its opening, 28 December 1897, *Cyrano de Bergerac* caused a furor of excitement not seen since 1830 when Victor Hugo’s romantic *Hernani* stirred major controversy. Yet, Rostand and his epic play did not stir up controversy; rather, audiences uniformly cheered Cyrano as a man who embodied the very essence of French nationalism, along with his own individualism. Rostand relied on a plot of unrequited love and the language of romantic lyricism to guide his audiences through one adventure after another, culminating in a classic scene in which idealism triumphs and the supremacy of love is assured forever. Yet, while Cyrano was universally popular and was translated at once into many languages, an unusual fact must be kept in mind: the play was in many ways anachronistic, existing out of its given time.

Cyrano de Bergerac was presented to the world in an age conditioned to realism and naturalism. Regardless, there was no dissenting voice to its success. The popularity of this play has never dimmed. Why? Perhaps because there is always a place in our imaginations and hearts for romance, poetry, moonlight, and dashing behavior. Further, the genius of Rostand rested in his ability to balance intellect and emotion, unite poetry and reality, and weld idealism with rationalism without destroying a synthesized theatre experience. His key device in reconciling these seeming opposites was to employ a serious form, but to offset it through self-criticism and laughter on the part of the central figure. Rostand’s finest characters always have a sense of humor. Cyrano, for instance, possesses far more than his great nose; he possesses the unusual capacity to recognize what is immutable in the human experience and simultaneously smile.

Regardless, Cyrano’s outlook is not superficial because all his reactions are thoroughly intellectualized—they may be launched from his heart, but they reach us from his marvellous mind. The content and structure of the play are much the same.

Detractors have long accused Rostand of imitating Hugo, of distorting facts (indeed, *Cyrano* is a kind of history play), of exaggerating emotions, of indulging in verbal pyrotechnics, and of being too personal and limited in style and scope. In other words, they accuse Rostand of being a romantic. His supporters, on the other hand, applaud his verbal virtuosity, lyrical dialogue, elevating idealism, wit, grace, gentle satire, and ability to manage feats of enviable theatricality. In other words, they champion him for being a romantic. That he is somewhat limited in comparison to, say, a Shakespeare (an inevitable comparison in Cedar City, Utah) must be conceded; yet, Rostand has not been excelled in the particular dramatic style that made him famous.

It may be that Edmond Rostand was a minor poet with one major work; yet, despite his failures and shortcomings, Rostand will live on because he has given to the theatre its first, quality romantic melodrama. Rostand has also given to a tedious, often drab world “the gesture of a Cyrano.” *Cyrano de Bergerac*: an anachronism that is always in vogue, always in line with our hearts. With tears in our eyes, but a smile on our lips, we bow to Cyrano’s grand “white plume.”

Heroic Comedy or Romantic Tragedy

From *Insights*, 1992

In the heart of the naturalistic movement in France, Edmond Rostand returned to the romantic verse drama. In 1897, after Sarah Bernhardt had starred in several of his plays, Rostand reached his peak when Coquelin the elder (Benoit Constant Coquelin) took the title part in the poetic drama that won the most enthusiastic popular reception in dramatic history: *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

The play is based very loosely on the life of an actual French poet and soldier (1619-1655), a free-thinker and author of a few plays and of the satires *The States and Empires of the Moon* and *The States and Empires of the Sun*. In the play, Cyrano is a long-nosed daredevil who, thinking himself too ugly for Roxane, aids the inarticulate Christian to woo her. Cyrano writes Christian's love letters, and, in a superb balcony scene, whispers from the dark the poetic phrases that gain Christian entrance to Roxane's heart and to her chamber. Christian dies in the wars, however, and many years later Roxane in her convent discovers, as Cyrano is dying, that he was the author of the letters, that his was the spirit she had always loved. Roxane sighs: "I loved but once, yet twice I lose my love." Cyrano's sense of inferiority he bends to his glory; his love leads to his sacrifice. Yet the final moment of ecstasy atones for a barren lifetime.

In fact, "*Cyrano de Bergerac* for purposes of classification may be called a romantic tragedy [although Rostand spoke of it as a heroic comedy]. The play, however, combines so many elements of the dramatic art that more explanation seems necessary. Act One is full of local color. It is a picture of early seventeenth century France. Life seems almost to be overflowing. There is a restless, noisy audience made up of mischievous pages, gay young spirits, charming ladies, soldiers, tradesmen, and even pickpockets. The action is a delightful mixture of nonsense, of swagger, of romance, of fantastic courage and wit. Act Two, in Rageneau's pastry shop, adds a comic note and introduces the Gascons, every one a baron and a liar, and reveals the extent of Cyrano's affection and his self-sacrificing devotion. Act Three idealizes the impossible love of the hero in the glorious balcony scene, and we have the brilliant 'moon' speeches which might be chanted, so lyrical is the poetry and so rhythmical the swing of the lines. Our souls are touched by the sincerity, the passion of Cyrano's affection, the words, the gestures, the emotion of the perfect lover. Act Four presents the encampment of the Gascon Cadets just before battle, and charms us with its poetry depicting the bravery of empty stomachs, and then surprises us with the dramatic appearance of Roxane in her fantastic carriage. Finally, we have, in Act Five, the peace of a convent garden, and the quiet courage of the old swashbuckler, quick-witted, self-sacrificing, independent as ever, still hating shams and fearless even in the face of death" (*Noble's Comparative Classics* [New York City: Noble and Noble, Publishers, Inc.], 43-44).

The story is presented in a style that recaptures both the swagger and the preciosity of the seventeenth century. Its verse mingles bombast and grandiloquence, flourish and gallantry with sadness and devotion. The lightness of the period is caught in pastry-cook Rageneau, patron of poets. Its recklessness gleams on the clashing swords, as Cyrano composes a ballade while fighting a duel. The play is a colorful and consummate tapestry of romance, beneath its carefree bravado playing a quiet undertone of sacrifice and sadness.

Opening in Paris on 28 December 1897, the play ran for 200 nights to great public and critical acclaim. Within the year, there were many productions of *Cyrano de Bergerac* in Europe and the United States. The play was a great success everywhere.