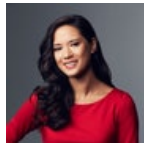


# Joe Wright Wanted to Make Something “Really Beautiful” During a Pandemic—So Here Comes *Cyrano*

The adaptation of the stage musical, starring Peter Dinklage and Haley Bennett, is completely absent of cynicism. Says Wright, “It’s my heart out there, trusting that people will respond to it with their hearts.”



BY REBECCA FORD

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**D**irector **Joe Wright** went through many of the same emotions as most of us during the early months of the pandemic. Panic and uncertainty. Fear. Boredom and stir-craziness. And, at one point, a deep, deep sadness. “There is a period where I just couldn’t stop crying for about three weeks,” he tells *Vanity Fair*. “Anything and everything would send me off into tears—a kind of grief, almost.”

It was after that period that he found an unexpected burst of energy—and a determination to make a film. “It was quite clear—I wanted to make something really beautiful,” says Wright. And while the 50-year-old filmmaker has spent the past few years dabbling in thrillers (*The Woman in the Window*) and biopics (*Darkest Hour*), he found himself being pulled back to the tone of his earlier work, elegant and emotionally direct period films that centered on anguished love stories, like *Anna Karenina* and *Pride & Prejudice*. “I believe that it’s our humble job as storytellers to help people heal from the kind of trauma that we’ve all been going through globally,” Wright says. “To help people feel connected at a time when we are feeling so completely disconnected from each other.”

It was June 2020 by then, and he had just gotten a new draft of *Cyrano*, an adaptation by **Erica Schmidt** of her stage play, which itself was based on the classic 1897 play *Cyrano de Bergerac*. It’s a musical that centers on a love triangle between a French Army officer named Cyrano, a beautiful woman named Roxanne, and a handsome new cadet named Christian. Cyrano is deeply in love with Roxanne, but, because of his physical appearance, assumes she would never love him back. So when she confides in him that she is in love with Christian, Cyrano, an accomplished wordsmith, helps Christian woo her by writing letters for him to send to her.



Haley Bennett and Peter Dinklage in *Cyrano*.

BY PETER MOUNTAIN/© 2021 METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES.

When Wright called up his longtime collaborator **Eric Fellner**, of Working Title Films, to tell him the script was ready, Fellner was frank: “He said, ‘You’ve got a 5% chance of making this happen,’” Wright says, remembering the pandemic uncertainty around film production at the time. “And I said, ‘Well, okay, that’s, that’s good enough for me.’”

**Peter Dinklage**, who is married to Schmidt, had already played Cyrano in the stage version, which changed Cyrano’s physical insecurities—traditionally it’s about his large nose—in a way Wright calls “incredibly affecting.” He continues, “Because most other productions one sees of *Cyrano*, the actor at the end of the night or the end of the film can take off this big nose, put it on a shelf and walk off into their life uninhibited, unencumbered. But Peter lives with who he is. And therefore it had a kind of knife point, emotionality.”

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**Haley Bennett** also reprises her role from the original stage version of the musical, which debuted at Connecticut’s Goodspeed Opera House in 2018. While Wright is Bennett’s partner and shares a daughter with her, they had only worked together professionally once, when he was an executive producer on her 2020 film *Swallow*. This would be their first project together with him in the director’s chair. “She’d been so wonderful in the stage production, there was no doubt in my mind that she should play Roxanne,” he says. “We have a very romantic idea, like John Cassavetes and **Gena Rowlands**—there’s a precedent of couples making movies together. My parents were puppeteers and worked together as well. It’s an added intimacy, I suppose.”

**Kelvin Harrison Jr.** (who plays Christian), **Ben Mendelsohn** (reuniting with Wright after *Darkest Hour*), and **Bashir Salahuddin** rounded out the cast, and MGM signed on to back the production. Now Wright just had to figure out how to make a period piece musical that required gorgeous settings of castles, theaters, and even war scenes—all during a pandemic. “There were moments where I felt like I wasn’t going to get it and I’d led everyone on a ridiculous folly,” Wright says. “They’d all put this amazing trust and faith in me, and I was going to disappoint them all.”



Roxanne (Haley Bennett), Cyrano (Peter Dinklage), and Christian (Kelvin Harrison Jr.) at the center of the love triangle in *Cyrano*. BY PETER MOUNTAIN/© 2021 METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES.

**T**he entire production established a bubble in the quaint, gorgeous Sicilian city of Noto, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2002. To keep their cast as small as possible, Wright—whose *Anna Karenina* famously blurred the lines between theater and film—approached it like a theater company, hiring about 150 background extras and dancers to play multiple parts throughout the movie. “If you look very carefully, you’ll see the same dancers in soldiers costumes. And then the next minute they’re dressed as sheep. And then the next minute they’re dressed as bakers,” he says.

Though there are big musical moments in the film, most of the songs—created by The National’s **Aaron Dessner** and **Bryce Dessner** for both the stage and film versions—are more akin to folk music than rock opera, what Wright describes as “emotional and tender and kind of humble.” Wright and his team cut songs and added others, but, like the stage version, all the singing for the film was done live on the set. “I didn’t want it to look like a pop video,” he says. “And when I’ve seen the actors sing onstage, it’s not always perfect. Sometimes they lose a beat because they’re crying too much or breathing too hard. But it adds intimacy and a

heartbreak to it, those tiny cracks and faults in the voice.”



Kelvin Harrison Jr. as Christian in *Cyrano*. BY PETER MOUNTAIN/© 2021 METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES.

When Wright had first imagined making *Cyrano* in June 2020, he thought about how, hopefully in the near future, it could be watched in a theater and experienced together as a community. It could be a beautiful escape for those who’d been feeling isolated for so long. It’s still slated for a theatrical release from United Artists on December 31, though as a likely awards contender, it could very well show for festival audiences sooner than that. Regardless of how viewers encounter it, the making of *Cyrano* clearly did open up something in Wright himself, who calls it “a return to my core.”

“It feels like a return to the childlike place within me, which is a good thing,” says Wright. “There’s no irony in the movie. There’s no cynicism in the movie, and I have to be quite brave to do that, because we use cynicism as a defense, I think. It’s

my heart out there, trusting that people will respond to it with their hearts. It feels like it's the kind of movie that I need to be making, especially now."



Peter Dinklage in *Cyrano*. "In film, one could get right into his eyes and see the tiny changes and tiny heartbreaks and minor triumphs," says Wright of Dinklage's performance. BY PETER MOUNTAIN/© 2021 METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES.

*Cyrano* will open in theaters December 31. This feature is part of **Awards Insider's exclusive fall-festival coverage**, featuring first looks and in-depth interviews with some of this coming season's biggest contenders.