

CRITICS PICK

‘Cyrano’ Review: A Dashing Peter Dinklage Offers a Fresh Spin on a Romantic Classic

Screenwriter Erica Schmidt knows Cyrano’s nose ought not be his defining feature, reinventing Edmond Rostand’s play to suit her husband’s “unique physique” and exceptional talent.

By Peter Debruge



English audiences have long been partial to Romeo and Juliet, but in this critic’s outside-the-box opinion, Edmond Rostand’s “[Cyrano de Bergerac](#)” is the more romantic play. For starters, its tragedy hinges not on teenage impatience and suicide but deep, long-unrequited affection. Convinced that his physical appearance makes him unworthy of his beloved Roxanne, the chivalrous Cyrano dares not express his ardor directly, ultimately taking his secret to the grave. And yet, Shakespeare’s tale of star-crossed lovers is told and retold infinitely more often than Rostand’s.

On those occasions when “Cyrano de Bergerac” is performed in English, it’s often stripped of its verse or played for laughter and farce (à la 1987’s “Roxanne”), whereas [Joe Wright](#)’s splendid new adaptation presents “Cyrano” as 21st-century MGM musical. By enlisting Bryce and Aaron Dessner of the National to compose the songs — lovely, wistful pop ballads for which Matt Berninger and Carin Besser supplied the lyrics — “Cyrano” restores the show’s sense of poetry. At the same time, Wright, back on form and evidently reinvigorated by the pandemic, once again displays the kind of radical creativity that made early-career stunners “Pride and Prejudice” and “Atonement” so electrifying in their time.

With its swooping cameras and beyond-dazzling production design, Wright’s style is more alive than ever, giving new meaning to the word “panache.” But even before the helmer came aboard, writer Erica Schmidt had an epiphany: that she might reimagine Cyrano as a dwarf, and that there was no actor more suited than her husband, [Peter Dinklage](#), to play the title role (which he did, in an Off Broadway staging that she directed). Hollywood may have been slow to recognize it, but Dinklage truly merits leading-man status, and while his singing voice leaves something to be desired, Schmidt’s bespoke script plays to many of the star’s unique strengths — it’s a love letter the likes of which Rostand would no doubt approve.



So, with all due respect to the Bard, we might well ask: What's in a nose? Cyrano, defined by any other feature, might smell as well. Here, Dinklage's diminutive stature serves the same purpose the character's oversized schnoz originally did, lending Cyrano an outsider quality that he must overcompensate for in personality (this was much as Gérard Depardieu played it in Jean-Paul Rappeneau's definitive screen version). Our hero has been called "freak" so often that the insult has lost its sting, and Cyrano's swordsmanship and wit are such that any rejoinder is sure to prove more cutting — as the movie demonstrates in its dynamic retelling of the opening theater scene, wherein Cyrano makes his flamboyant entrance. He interrupts the actor mid-monologue, then proceeds to upstage him with a rap battle-cum-duel, showcasing talents Dinklage seldom gets to display on-screen.

As Cyrano's trusted friend Le Bret (Bashir Salahuddin) is quick to recognize, this foolish show has all been for the benefit of one person: Roxanne ([Haley Bennett](#)), who attends with the powerful yet off-putting Duke de Guiche (Ben Mendelsohn), restyled here as the kind of rival we might expect to find in a Disney fairy tale. There's good reason for this change, which allows Schmidt to better define Roxanne's character from the outset: "I'm nobody's pet, no one's wife, no one's woman," she asserts early on. Granted the film's first song, "Someone to Say," Roxanne's more than just the abstract object of Cyrano's affection but an independent woman who knows what she wants — or at least, she thinks she does, when she falls for one of Cyrano's new recruits, Christian (Kelvin Harrison Jr.).

But Cyrano knows Roxanne's heart perhaps better than she does, and while his breaks when she tells him of her feelings for Christian, he nevertheless promises to protect the young recruit. Cyrano also realizes that without his help, this inarticulate soldier stands no chance of wooing Roxanne, and so he offers to ghostwrite the love letters she expects. The bargain, as Cyrano sees it: "I will make you eloquent, while you make me handsome." And so begins the greatest courtship the stage has ever known, with Christian reprising the earlier "Someone to Say" number, this time from his perspective.

The plot of "Cyrano de Bergerac" is well-known enough to spare recounting what follows, except to point out that Wright — whom I consider one of the medium's most visionary craftsmen — has outdone himself in devising original, cinematically innovative ways to stage the film. There's always been something a bit baroque about Wright's style: an ornate and somewhat ostentatious more-is-more approach in which costumes, sets and whatever elaborate choreography the camera might be doing all contribute to the overall pleasure we derive from watching it. In "Anna Karenina," it all became too distracting. By the time of "Pan," Wright had gone off the deep end. But now he's recovered, and he wasn't about to let COVID stand in his way.

Shifting the setting to the island of Sicily, where he could create a responsible bubble within which to execute his epic vision, Wright embellished the natural production design of the available locations (including Mount Etna for the front-line battle scenes). Cyrano and company may have been real-life characters, but even Rostand (famously meticulous about the historical specifics) took considerable license. Here they serve as archetypes as Wright updates the 17th-century aspects to suit his aesthetic, damning the gentry with ribbons, frills and powdered faces while giving Bennett a more iconic modern look as Roxanne.

The son of puppeteers, Wright instinctively understands how to use the proscenium yet never confining himself to conventional frames. At the end of Act 1, when Cyrano is cornered by a mob of thugs, he orchestrates the ensuing fight scene in a single shot, as Dinklage handily dispatches 10 adversaries. Later, when the character assumes his letter-writing duties, Wright ingeniously layers shots of Roxanne and her two suitors to convey the complexity of this love triangle. And most importantly, in the famous balcony scene – the moment when Rostand most clearly surpasses “Romeo and Juliet” – the movie cleverly devises a way for its smitten hero to address Roxanne directly. Brilliant though Schmidt’s script may be, Cyrano would be the first to admit, “Words can only get me so far.” Wright’s direction does the rest.

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Reviewed at Telluride Film Festival, Sept. 3, 2021. MPAA Rating: PG-13. Running time: 123 MIN.

Production: (U.K.) A Metro Goldwyn Mayer Pictures presentation, in association with Bron Creative, of a Working Title production.

Producers: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Guy Heeley. Executive producers: Aaron L. Gilbert, Jason Cloth, Matt Berninger, Carin Besser, Aaron Dessner, Bryce Dessner, Erica Schmidt, Sarah-Jane Robinson, Sheeraz Shah, Lucas Webb. Co-producer: Cass Marks.

Crew: Director: Joe Wright. Screenplay: Erica Schmidt, based on the stage musical she adapted and directed from “Cyrano de Bergerac” by Edmond Rostand. Editor: Valerio Bonelli. Music: Aaron Dessner & Bryce Dessner; lyrics: Matt Berninger & Carin Besser.

With: Peter Dinklage, Haley Bennett, Kelvin Harrison Jr., Ben Mendelsohn, Bashir Salahuddin, Monica Dolan.