

# Cyrano de Bergerac review - James McAvoy is fierce in radical reboot of romantic classic



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Cant-hater ... James McAvoy as Cyrano de Bergerac. Photograph: Marc Brenner

## Playhouse, London

Visual flummery and the famous nose are dispensed with in Martin Crimp's modern take on Rostand's proxy-wooning play

**T**his version of Edmond Rostand's play, as adapted by [Martin Crimp](#) and directed by [Jamie Lloyd](#), is not exactly Cyrano as we know it. It may not even be as we like it. But I found myself gradually warming to this radical deconstruction of Rostand's heroic comedy and totally captivated by [James McAvoy's](#) performance as the swaggering Gascon.

We are supposedly in a French theatre in 1640. What we actually see is a cast in modern dress who frequently line up across the stage using hand or stand mics. We still get the familiar story of Cyrano's proxy wooing of Roxane by putting words into the mouth of the inarticulate Christian. But, although endless jests are made about Cyrano's conk, McAvoy doesn't sport the usual false appendage. While driven by doubts about his ugliness, this Cyrano is also arguably the best-looking man on stage. So what is going on?



Honesty and feminist strength ... Eben Figueiredo as Christian and Anita-Joy Uwajeh as Roxane.  
Photograph: Marc Brenner

Crimp and Lloyd are at pains to remind us this is, first and last, a play about the dangerous lure of language: its capacity to both enchant and deceive. Their *Cyrano* is, on one level, the embattled artist who needs hate “so that I can create”. But there is a touch of masturbatory self-pity about his surrogate wooing: he becomes, as Christian says, “the man with the nose / And the acres of highbrow wet-dream prose.” Far from being a simple love object, Roxane is here a bookish intellectual who reacts angrily to the revelation of the truth and even Christian grasps the homoerotic implications of one man using another as the vehicle for his passion.

At its best, this re-reading of Rostand works beautifully. The scene where Christian becomes the mouthpiece for *Cyrano*’s improvised love verses is normally played with Roxane on a moonlit balcony; here, the characters sit on plastic chairs on a brightly lit stage and bring out the ironic sadness of the situation. Only in the last act did I find myself longing for the full romantic works and thinking nostalgically of a 1983 RSC production with Derek Jacobi’s *Cyrano* sitting under the falling autumn leaves of Ralph Koltai’s design.

But that was then and this is now and McAvoy admirably gives us a fierce, proud, word-intoxicated *Cyrano* who anticipates Molière’s *Alceste* in *The Misanthrope* in his hatred of cant and who speaks for the modern writer in his detestation of VIP sponsorship. Yet McAvoy also reminds us that the free-thinking *Cyrano* is fatally mired in self-deception.

Anita-Joy Uwajeh invests Roxane with a feminist strength and Eben Figueiredo subtly hints that Christian, while a verbal duffer, is more honest than *Cyrano*. There is vivid support from Michele Austin as a pastry cook who runs a school for poets and from Tom Edden as a sexually predatory De Guiche.

This is a *Cyrano* that dispenses with conventional spectacle, colourful costumes and visual flummery. Given that Rostand set out in 1897 to provide an antidote to naturalistic drama this may seem perverse. But Lloyd’s production makes you see an old play with fresh eyes and the opening image, in Soutra Gilmour’s stark design, of *Cyrano* staring fixedly at himself in a mirror, turns Rostand’s comedy into a study in physical and linguistic self-regard.

At Playhouse, London, until 29 February.