

## CRITIC'S PICK

# Review: James McAvoy's Rapping Cyrano Dazzles With Words

In Martin Crimp's time-bending version of the Rostand "Cyrano de Bergerac," directed by Jamie Lloyd, people make love and war through glorious language.



By Ben Brantley

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LONDON — A bright and noble passion floods the Jamie Lloyd Company's ravishing "Cyrano de Bergerac," starring a fiercely romantic James McAvoy in the title role. Contrary to expectation, it is not the passion of a man for a woman.

Or a woman for a man. Or for that matter, two men for each other, though all these feelings are freshly and revealingly considered in the production at the Playhouse Theater here.

What instead animates and illuminates Martin Crimp's postmodern retooling of Edmond Rostand's classic is spelled out for the audience. Literally: Early in the show, while the rest of the cast is performing downstage, a lone actor with a paint brush is quietly daubing seemingly disconnected strokes in black Gothic lettering on a blank white wall.

It takes a while for the markings to assemble themselves into a coherent sentence. But when they do, it's as if lightning has torn open the night. The statement is a naked and simple confession: "I love words. That's all."

That was the moment in this production, directed with transformative audacity and insight by Lloyd, when I, a weary theater critic — who had seen two earlier versions of "Cyrano" in the previous few months — fell in love all over again with a play I thought I had outgrown years ago. And I remembered what had excited me so much about Rostand's script when I was a boy.

For although the rapier-wielding Cyrano had physical courage and athleticism to burn, they weren't the sources of his most prodigious and irresistible skill. It was his ability to speak extempore with an eloquence and inventiveness unrivaled in 17th-century Paris. For clumsy, weedy kids like me who

spent hours alone reading the dictionary, the silver-tongued, homely Cyrano opened a glorious new vista on possibilities for becoming a hero.

You might think that such a word-centric point of view is an anachronism in the 21st century, when transmittable and carefully curated images have become the dominant form of self-expression. Yet during the past several decades, vigorous, spontaneous rhymed poetry has become a fixture of mainstream playlists, via hip-hop recordings and the biggest Broadway hit in years, Lin-Manuel Miranda's "Hamilton." Lloyd's "Cyrano" presents this empowering art as a natural successor to the competitive poetics of Rostand's drama.

I couldn't help thinking of another recent Miranda project on Broadway, the improvisational rap fest "Freestyle Love Supreme," in the early moments of this "Cyrano." The set here (by the omnipresent Soutra Gilmour), like that of "Freestyle," is a nearly empty box with a row of microphones as its principal adornment.



Anita-Joy Uwajeh, far left, as Roxane. Marc Brenner

The polymorphic ensemble, which assembles onstage in anonymous, contemporary street clothes, includes a beatboxer (Vaneeka Dadhria) to set the rhythm for recitation. And it's soon clear that if you want to stand out in this crowd, you'd better know how to deploy those mics, which become substitutes for swords in duel and battle scenes.

This amplified speech dazzles, seduces and destroys. And no one tops McAvoy's Cyrano, who is described with awe as the "all time crazy genius of the spoken word."

He is also said to have an impossibly large nose, about which he is exceedingly sensitive. McAvoy, whose screen credits include the “X-Men” series and M. Night Shyamalan’s “Split,” possesses a leading-man handsomeness that is not disguised here; there’s no prosthetic schnoz. Yet once he starts talking, in a sonorous voice that leavens shiny bravado with shadows of self-loathing, you never doubt he has a nose that is, as he puts it, permanently “set to the max.”

That’s because in this production, words — and the tone and cadence with which they are spoken — are what shape reality. During the past decade, Lloyd has been moving steadily toward elegant and deep simplicity, evident in his recent revival of Harold Pinter’s “Betrayal.”

His “Cyrano” has the audiovisual wit that characterized his 2019 take on the Pinter radio play “A Slight Ache.” You could close your eyes and still completely follow the story of this production. But that doesn’t mean it’s ever physically static: Lloyd works his cast (and those mics, and a few chairs) into emotionally resonant, almost balletic patterns.

I have never seen a “Cyrano” that so wrenchingly captures the tragic loneliness of not just the title character, but also that of the beautiful, intellectual woman he adores, Roxane (a vibrant Anita-Joy Uwajeh) — here an overalls-wearing proto-feminist — and the handsome, inarticulate man she thinks she loves, the young soldier Christian (Eben Figueiredo, deeply touching).

As usual, Cyrano courts Roxane, who is as word-crazy as he is, by proxy for the tongue-tied Christian. Freed of the tethering constraints of period scenery (including that famous balcony), the deception feels newly and unusually convincing.

In the scenes of verbal lovemaking, the performers look not at each other but straight ahead. Cyrano, pretending to be Christian, says to Roxane: “Let’s be like the blind / and see each other in the dark spaces / of each other’s mind.”

The pulsing susurrus in McAvoy’s delivery of such lines makes this the most erotic “Cyrano” I have seen. It makes perfect sense that toward the end, amid harrowing scenes of soldiers under siege during battle, even Christian feels the sensuous tug of Cyrano’s words.

“Is there a version of life where two men can live as one person?” Christian asks Cyrano in the early-morning darkness before a fatal battle. The question resonates on many levels, including ones Rostand probably never consciously intended, and it leads to a kiss of unsurpassed tenderness.

Crimp, the adventurous author of “The Treatment” and the sexual role-play drama “When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other,” finds depths of ambiguity in “Cyrano” that you may not have ever realized were there. His era-scrambling cleverness — also evident in his 1999 adaptation of Molière’s “The Misanthrope” — can initially feel off-puttingly arch.

The rhyming dialogue embraces an assortment of latter-day slang and obscenities, along with copious references to the evolving forms of poetry (with a riff on Emily Dickinson) and contemporary cultural ideas like gender fluidity and “women and the male gaze in poetry.” Ultimately, though, such academic game-playing comes to feel part of a bottomless obsession with language and its possibilities to match Cyrano’s.

As rendered here, the play’s final scene is heartbreaking in fresh ways, which include a chilling presentation of the later life of an independent woman like Roxane in a male universe. And the production ends not with a triumphant declaration, but the ellipsis of an incomplete rhyme. The rest is silence.

Nonetheless, you’re likely to leave the theater with words, spoken and unspoken, resounding in your ears — glorious, pyrotechnic words ringing, exploding and shape-shifting forever and ever.

**Cyrano de Bergerac**

Through Feb. 29 at the Playhouse Theater, London; [theplayhousetheatre.co.uk](http://theplayhousetheatre.co.uk). Running time: 2 hours 50 minutes.