



Peter Dinklage as the title character in the musical adaptation of “Cyrano.” Credit...Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Review: Peter Dinklage Tackles ‘Cyrano’ Without the Nose

The Emmy-winning “Game of Thrones” star shows off his abundant charisma in a lachrymose musical adaptation of Rostand’s classic.



By Ben Brantley

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Deep, imperious and thundering with an angry irony, the voice precedes the man. When it first tears through the darkness, amplified to eardrum-rattling volume, you sense a collective quickening of pulses at the Daryl Roth Theater, where a somber and monotonous new variation on “Cyrano de Bergerac” opened on Thursday night.

Presumably, most of those who have gathered to see “Cyrano,” as this New Group production is called, are there for the express purpose of setting eyes upon the possessor of that voice, Peter Dinklage. These are the fans who know and adore him as Tyrion Lannister, the witty, wily and dangerously underestimated warrior of the blockbuster series “Game of Thrones,” which ended its eight-season run earlier this year.

The man who won four Emmy Awards playing Tyrion, I hasten to announce, is by no means a disappointment as the witty, wily and dangerously underestimated title character of “Cyrano,” a musical adaptation of Edmond Rostand’s classic by Erica Schmidt, who is also the show’s director (and Dinklage’s wife). Before he became a combative representative of the kingdom of Westeros in “Thrones,” Dinklage had amply demonstrated that he had the chops to rule a New York stage, most notably in the title role of Shakespeare’s “Richard III” at the Public Theater in 2004.

That production used Dinklage’s height (he is 4-foot-5) to enhance the outsider status of Richard, who was born with a hunched back. And in “Cyrano,” whenever people refer to its hero’s famously large nose, that’s not really what they’re talking about.

“What you have heard is true,” this Cyrano announces with a weary matter-of-factness. “I am not a rumor. I am proof that God has a sick sense of humor.” (A Depeche Mode shout-out?)

This declaration is made early in the play, after the nasty nobleman De Guiche (Ritchie Coster) dares to describe Cyrano's very presence as "offensive." De Guiche proceeds to speak, awe-struck, of Cyrano's "nose," a word that is framed by punctuating pauses. Yet Dinklage, unadorned by any prosthesis, has a handsome but unexceptional nose. (In fact, the word "nose" occurs exactly twice in the script.)

It is clear that it is his dwarfism that's at issue here. It is equally clear that Cyrano is more charismatic, intelligent and self-aware than anyone else on the stage, just as Dinklage's Tyrion was the cleverest Westerosi of them all in "Thrones".

In other words, using Dinklage as Cyrano was a natural idea. I only wish that this production had lived up to its inspired coup of star casting.

For the play's first 15 minutes or so, it seems as if this might be the case, introducing new shades of romantic darkness into a theatrical chestnut. The show's score has been composed by Aaron Dessner and Bryce Dessner, members of the rock band The National, with lyrics by that group's frontman, Matt Berninger, and Carin Besser.

Certainly, it sounds nothing like your standard fancy-dress musical. (For the record, there have been previous musical versions of "Cyrano," including at least two forgettable Broadway productions.) The National is celebrated for its air of literate melancholy, a mood that becomes this particular Cyrano.



Dinklage, at right, with Jasmine Cephas Jones as Roxanne and Blake Jenner as Christian. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

His hopeless love for the beautiful Roxanne (Jasmine Cephas Jones) is expressed in grave and anguished ballads, sung as he composes passionate letters to her for his friend, the handsome Christian, played by Blake Jenner. (Christian is the inarticulate soldier whom Roxanne thinks she loves.)

With melodies that bring to mind the sort of Leonard Cohen numbers you listen to when you have a hangover, and really want to feel bad, these songs throb with compelling masochism. “Humiliation and pain,” sings Dinklage, who has the perfect as-deep-as-a-well voice for such subjects, as Cyrano deconstructs his love. “My hunger, my patience, my devastation.”

Jones, best known as the shady lady who led Alexander astray in the original cast of “Hamilton,” has a throaty mezzo that complements Dinklage’s saturnine bass. This Roxanne and Cyrano at first seem like a matched set of sharp, sardonic and eloquent fatalists, in the tradition of immortal literary couples like Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald, or Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne. (Christine Jones and Amy Rubin’s non-period-specific set, which is intermittently enlivened by falling glitter or leaves and is broodingly lighted by Jeff Croiter, is dominated by a black chalkboard scrawled with words.)

Unfortunately, everyone in the show sings this way, including the shallow Christian, the mean old De Guiche and even Roxanne’s prim chaperone, Marie (the talented performer and composer Grace McLean). And all this musical angst, rendered in what often feel like the same endless vamps, soon starts to flatline.

Even more dispiriting, this production deprives Cyrano of most opportunities to execute the singular, poeticizing performance art that has made the character immortal. Rostand’s fabulous catalog of all the literary forms by which a person might make fun of Cyrano’s nose? There’s not even a vestige of an equivalent here.

The big balcony scene, in which Cyrano pretends to be Christian? We aren’t even allowed to see Dinklage’s face when Christian climbs into the arms of the woman Cyrano worships.

Far too much time is devoted to rehashing, point by point, Rostand’s plot, which without the virtuosic set pieces is tedious stuff. The entire show feels woefully static, with performers (dressed in ahistorical costumes by Tom Broecker) lined up across the narrow stage like participants in a high-school pageant.

The choreography by Jeff and Rick Kuperman is mostly performed as a sort of incidental sideshow, with hackneyed slow-mo effects that presumably are meant to suggest how love transforms time.

Previously staged in a workshop production at Connecticut’s Goodspeed Opera House, this “Cyrano” still feels like a good idea in search of a matching form. As it is, the show sinks into sluggish earnestness early, and you keep waiting for it to recapture the promising wit and daring with which it began.

It says much about what went wrong that Cyrano no longer identifies the trait that most defines him, the one he will die clutching, as his “panache.” Instead, it is his “dignity” that he most values.

That worthy substitution may make Cyrano more of an Everyman. Who doesn’t want to hold on to dignity? But it deprives a deathless romantic of the romance that has always been what really makes him stand out in the overcrowded field of lovelorn literary swains.

Cyrano

Daryl Roth Theater

101 E 15th St.

Flatiron/U. Sq.

800-745-3000

Website

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Credits Adapted by Erica Schmidt from "Cyrano de Bergerac" by Edmond Rostand; Music by Aaron Dessner and Bryce Dessner; Lyrics by Matt Berninger and Carin Besser; Choreography by Jeff and Rick Kuperman; Directed by Erica Schmidt

Cast Ritchie Coster, Josh A. Dawson, Peter Dinklage, Hillary Fisher, Christopher Gurr, Blake Jenner, Jasmine Cephas Jones, Nehal Joshi, Grace McLean, Erika Olson and Scott Stangland

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