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PORTLANDCENTERSTAGE

The Guide

A theatergoer's resource edited by the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

Cyrano

By Edmond Rostand
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PCS's 2014-15 Education & Community Programs are generously supported by:



PCS's education programs are supported in part by a grant from the Oregon Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts.

with additional support from

Autzen Foundation

Holzman Foundation

H.W. & D.C.H. Irwin Foundation

Mentor Graphics Foundation

and other generous donors.

Setting

Paris (and Arras), 1640; Paris, 1655



Characters



CYRANO – an energetic, impulsive, emotional soldier-poet. A poor nobleman.

ROXANE – a beautiful, elegant, smart romantic, with an impetuous heart and a deep soul.

CHRISTIAN – a handsome, proud, bold soldier, shy with women.

LE BRET – Captain of the Gascony Guard and Cyrano's best friend. Moderate, sympathetic, articulate but not flashy.

DE GUICHE – aristocratic intriguer, enamored of Roxane. Alternately admires and resents Cyrano.

RAGENEAU – Big-hearted pastry-chef and lover of poetry, to the point of obsession.

DE VALVERT – Aristocratic, stylish, vain, expert swordsman.

LIGNIERE – a drunken poet.

DESIREE – Roxane's old nurse and current chaperone. Watchful over Roxane's honor, cranky about soldiers.

Synopsis

Cyrano de Bergerac, an impoverished poet-soldier famed for his wit and his courage, agrees to help his comrade Christian woo Roxane, the beautiful and passionate woman they both love.



Playwright Edmond Rostand The Adaptors



Edmond Rostand was born on April 1, 1868 to a wealthy Provençal family. He first achieved distinction as a writer of comedies for the stage, including the burlesque *Les Romanesques* (1894), the basis for the popular musical *The Fantasticks* (1960). But Rostand was only ever a moderate success before the premiere of his heroic comedy *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897), which ran for 300 consecutive nights and inspired unprecedented excitement among French audiences at the time. Largely on the basis of *Cyrano*, Rostand was elected to the prestigious Academie Francaise in 1902. He continued to write ambitious epic plays, but he never again experienced the success and the acclaim that *Cyrano* achieved. A victim of the worldwide flu pandemic, Rostand died in Paris in 1918

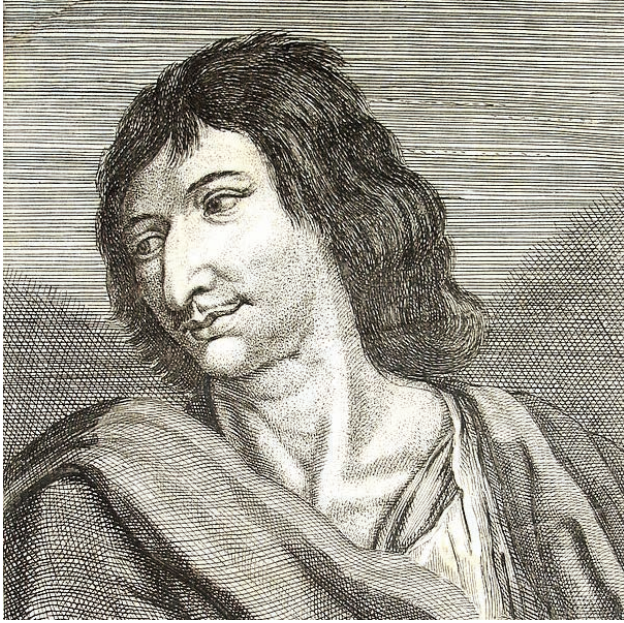


Playwright and co-adaptor Michael Hollinger's plays include *A Wonderful Noise*, *Tooth and Claw*, *Red Herring*, *Hope and Gravity*, and *Opus* (which received a PCS production in our 2010-11 season). He is a three-time recipient of the Barrymore Award for Outstanding New Play, the Roger L. Stevens Award from the Fund for New American Plays and the F. Otto Haas Award an Emerging Theater Artist. He currently teaches Theater at Villanova University.



Playwright and co-adaptor Aaron Posner's other adaptations include *Stupid F*cking Bird* and *Life Sucks*, both derived from Chekhov plays. An acclaimed director, Posner is the former Artistic Director of Two River Theater in Red Bank, New Jersey and the founding Artistic Director of The Arden Theater Company in Philadelphia. *Stupid F*cking Bird* will receive a PCS production in our 2015-2016 season.

The Historical Cyrano



Cyrano de Bergerac, a soldier, playwright and poet, was born on March 6, 1619 and died July 28, 1655. He was a classmate of the playwright Moliere and a contemporary of the philosopher Rene Descartes. The historical Cyrano grew up in Paris, but adopted a Gascon accent and added 'de Bergerac' to his name, likely to impress his contemporaries. The son of a lawyer and member of Parlement, the historical Cyrano began his career as a soldier at 19 years old, fighting throughout the Thirty Years' War. True to the fashion amongst his contemporaries, he wrote letters, plays and novels that were biting satires challenging hypocrisy and complacency, often provoking bitter quarrels and official censorship. His tragedy, "La Mort d'Agripine," was suppressed by French authorities for its alleged atheistic morals. Moliere borrowed freely from his comedy, "The Pedant Tricked." The historical Cyrano likely died from injuries sustained defending his patron, the Duc d'Arpajon, during an assassination attempt. He lingered for over a year, but died at the age of 36. His friend Henri Le Bret wrote a short biography of Cyrano as an introduction to Cyrano's work, "The Voyage to the Moon," 1657—and it was this biography that served as the primary inspiration for Rostand's play.

A Taxonomy of Verse

TROCHAIC TETRAMETER – a meter in poetry that contains four trochees. A trochee is a long, or stressed syllable, followed by an un-stressed syllable.

DACTYLIC TETRAMETER – a meter in poetry with four dactylic feet. A dactyl is a long syllable followed by two short syllables.

RONDELET – a 24 line poem written in trochaic tetrameter.

CHANT ROYAL – a variation on the ballad, consisting of five eleven-line stanzas with a rhyme scheme a-b-a-b-c-c-d-d-e-d-E, and a five-line envoi rhyming d-d-e-d-E or a seven-line envoi rhyming c-c-d-d-e-d-E. To add to the complexity, no rhyming word is used twice. Introduced into French poetry in the 15th century by Christine de Pizan and Charles d'Orleans.

BALLADE – The ballade was one of the principal forms of music and poetry in 14th-century and 15th-century France. Not to be confused with the ballad, the ballade contains three main stanzas, each with the same rhyme scheme, plus a shorter concluding stanza, or envoi. All four stanzas have identical final refrain lines.

TERZA RIMA – A verse form of Italian origin, made up of tercets, the second line of each tercet rhyming with the first and third lines of the next one (a-b-a, b-c-b, c-d-c, etc.).

PAEAN – a loud and joyous song, a song of triumph, expressive of enthusiastic praise.

Glossary of Terms and Events

DUELING – A combat between two individuals, equally armed, intended to settle a point of honor between the two parties involved. Strict rules are agreed upon before the combat begins, and oftentimes each party recruits close friends to witness the event and outcome. Historically, duels have been frequently outlawed or strictly regulated, often with little impact on the popularity of dueling as a social norm.

TOUCHE – Originally, a fencing term used to acknowledge that you have been hit by your opponent. Also used to admit your opponent has made a good point in an argument. From the French *toucher*, “to touch.”

PANACHE – connotes flamboyant manner and reckless courage. The literal translation is a plume, such as is worn on a hat or a helmet. Rostand’s play was the first text to portray panache in a romantic fashion. Prior to Rostand, panache was not necessarily a good thing and was seen by some as a suspect quality.

GASCONY GUARD – a unit of the French military in the 17th century, composed of lesser nobles and meritorious commoners. Gascon officers had a high reputation, commanding 4 in 5 companies throughout the French army. Gascon soldiers were held to be paragons of military prowess and machismo.

THIRTY YEARS’ WAR – 1618-1648, a war between primarily Protestant princes of the Holy Roman Empire (modern Germany) and the Catholic Habsburg monarchs of the Holy Roman Empire and Austria. For most of the war, Catholic France refrained from open hostilities. In 1635, France (ruled by Catholic Cardinal Richelieu) entered the war in support of the Protestant cause, seeking to undermine the political and military hegemony of the Habsburgs.

FRANCO-SPANISH WAR – 1635-1659, an extension of the Thirty Years’ War. Richelieu’s France extended the war to Catholic Spain, also ruled by Habsburg monarchs, in an attempt to break the Habsburg’s strategic encirclement of French territories. The wars end with the eclipse of Spanish and Habsburg supremacy and the eventual ascendancy of Louis XIV, the apogee of French power prior to the French Revolution.

Further Activities

Portland Center Stage’s Stage Door Program seeks to provide all young people with opportunities to experience and directly participate in the art of high-quality, professional theater in a context that supports their education. This section contains activities to help students explore themes found in our production of *Cyrano*. We encourage you to choose the most appropriate activities for your group and adapt as needed.

GOALS:

- To encourage personal connections between the students and the major themes of the play.
- To excite students about the story and introduce the theatrical elements of the production.
- To engage students using the actors’ tools (body, voice, imagination).

KEY CONCEPTS:

- Identity & Perception
- Power of Language

Theater Etiquette

Please share the following points with your group of students. Encourage the students to practice these points throughout the workshop. Going to see a play is very different from going to the movies. During live theatre, the audience is as important a part of the experience as the actors.

- Live response is good! If you’re telling a story to a friend, and they really respond or listen, it makes you want to tell the story better—to keep telling the story. So, the better an audience listens, laughs and responds, the more the actors want to tell the story. In this way, the audience (as well as the actors) can make a performance great.
- The actors can hear you talking. If an audience member is not paying attention, the actors know it. Have you ever had a conversation with someone and felt that they’d rather be someplace else? This is the EXACT feeling actors get when people in the audience are talking

- The actors can see you. Even though actors are pretending to be other characters, it is their job to “check in” with the audience in order to tell the story better. This is another way in which theatre greatly differs from the movies. Film actors can do a take over and over to try to get it right. Theatre actors have one chance with an audience and want to make sure they are communicating clearly. Imagine trying to tell a group of fellow students something only to see them slouching, pretending to be bored, or sitting with their eyes closed in attempt to seem disinterested and “too cool” for what you had to say. Think about it...
- Cell phones, beepers, candy wrappers, loud gum smacking. Please turn off all cell phones and do not eat or chew gum inside the theater. These things disturb the people around you as well as the actors. As much as you might be tempted to text a friend how cool the play you’re watching is, please wait until after it is over to send any texts.

Thank you to Montana Shakespeare in the Parks for these excellent etiquette suggestions.

Activity I: Warm-up: *Agree By Degrees!*

The goal of this activity is to loosen up the group utilizing the actors’ tools, and to highlight opinions held by group members as they relate to themes in Cyrano.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Everyone stands in a shoulder-to-shoulder line, facing the same direction.
- The span of the line is divided and named, from “Strongly Agree”, to “Agree”, to “Disagree”, to “Strongly Disagree.”
- Students are read statements, and will respond by standing on the span of line that reflects their level of agreement.

SAMPLE STATEMENTS:

- “I say what I want, when I want.”
- “There’s somebody for everybody.”
- “Friendship is the most important relationship.”
- “How you say it, is more important than what you say.”
- “Take care of yourself, everyone else can take care of themselves.”

- “Who you see is who I am.”
- “People pretend to be more than they are.”
- “What people post online is pretty close to who they are in real life.”
- “I edit the photos that I share with others.”

SAMPLE FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS:

What informs our opinions on these points?
What might change your opinion in five years?
How important is it that who we are on the outside reflect who we are on the inside?
When/With whom are we most comfortable to share our most important thoughts?

Activity II: *Dubbing*

Students will use tableaux and titling to improvise dialogue and action. By providing the dialogue for a silent scene, the dubbing activity highlights the individuality of language, collaborative storytelling, and role-playing.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Four actors needed in each iteration – two actors to improvise the action onstage, and two actors to improvise the dialogue from offstage. Decide which offstage actor will provide the voice for which onstage actor.
- Onstage actors never speak, just accepting the dialogue as true and playing honestly. Offstage actors only speak, providing the language that makes sense of the onstage actors’ gestures and expressions.
- The goal is for the actions and the dialogue to match, and enrich the scene. Efforts to derail the scene, or embarrass any of the actors should be discouraged as counterproductive.
- Two actors onstage step up first, close their eyes, and strike poses that embody a specific feeling (adoration, sorrow, horror, frustration etc.), creating a tableaux of shared or contrasting emotion.
- Two offstage actors, crouch down by the footlights, prepared to supply all the dialogue of the scene for their respective onstage counterparts.
- The onstage actors open their eyes, and the scene begins.

TIPS:

- To give a starting point, scenes can be given a title/theme before beginning, or after the initial poses have been struck.
- Scenes should progress and not get bogged down in argument. Stubborn characters in scenes should be encouraged to reveal the “why” of their standpoint.
- Dull characters should be encouraged to, “show us how that information affects you.”
- Wacky characters should be encouraged to react honestly; “what would your real reaction be if you were in this situation?”

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

Give an example of a time when you’ve spoken for someone else, or they have spoken for you. Would you say you are more careful or more reckless with words you post, email or text? Who would you trust to speak on your behalf, or post on your behalf?

Activity III: 7 Words

This activity highlights the potency of language, by making every word count. Students will improvise dialogue in two-person scenes, with the verbal restriction of: each line of dialogue must be seven words or less.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Pair up students. Pairs stand in a circle. Each pair will perform in turn, while the others are audience.
- Starting with the first pair, crowd source a suggestion of a relationship, location, or title of the scene.
- Using the suggestion as a jumping off point, actors will improvise the dialogue (as naturally as possible), only using seven or less words per line of dialogue.
- The instructor should keep count and call, “SEVEN” when the actor says the seventh word in the line.
- End scenes that exceed seven words, and move on to the next pair.

TIPS:

- Allow for many shorter scenes so students can learn and improve on a second try.
- Early scenes may stumble as actors focus on counting their words. To encourage focus on other aspects of the scene, encourage actors to, “accuse, admit, apologize, confess, or conceal.”

- To move scenes along, title them before they begin, ex., “Outside the chapel,” “Burglars in the getaway car,” “Finally home.”
- Interjections and Exclamations often contain fewer words, thus more emotionally charged scenes may sound more natural with fewer words per line.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

How would you communicate the most important information? How would you communicate the most personal information? What is it about a card received in the mail that makes it so special? How does an unlimited ability to communicate electronically, increase or decrease the value of a message?

Wrap-Up/Discussion:

The world of *Cyrano* prizes gusto, honor, and love. Language is Cyrano’s sharpest weapon, and his strongest shield. Set in a time of horseback, crossed-swords and gallantry, love exists face-to-face or drips off a quill. Above all, the measure of a man was in his words and deeds.

Although the setting is different, modern values of loyalty, friendship and authenticity connect the characters to the audience. Amidst a technological age with infinite conversations, the potency of direct communication is still reserved for our most important thoughts. Bravery and courage are rewarded now as in Cyrano’s time, with highest marks for those willing to boldly be themselves.

Sources

Dramaturgical Notes by Avital Shira, Assistant Director and Dramaturg for this production.

Stage Door Resource Guide by Nicholas Kessler, Teaching Artist for this production.