

# RECORD REVIEW

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*“Cyrano” cast members Britney Simpson as Roxanne and Jason O’Connell as Cyrano  
Photo credit: T. Charles Erickson*

## Review: ‘Cyrano’ is big on wit and dazzle

by Abby Luby

A good story can be told a thousand times and successfully withstand each new version. Such a tale is “Cyrano de Bergerac” and its latest rendition, “Cyrano,” is now being performed at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival.

The original and scintillating script is written by writers and actors Jason O’Connell and Brenda Withers, and serves up witty and vibrant prose, poetry, lyrical rhymes and wistful romantic soliloquies. Every word truly seduces the audience.

The story of Cyrano de Bergerac has been adapted to numerous movies and plays performed world-wide. The original 1897 play by Edmond Rostand was a fictionalized story based on a real person, Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac (1619 – 1655), a French libertine novelist, playwright, and duelist. Rostand’s story adhered to Cyrano’s brilliant wit and dazzling swordsmanship, but burdened him with a bulbous nose, a protuberance that deemed him vulnerable and too embarrassed to profess his love to the beautiful Roxane. Against the backdrop of 19th century Parisian life style of waxing poetic on stage and consuming rich pastries en masse, was the harsh reality of the war between France and Spain. Roxane falls for Christian, a handsome new cadet in Cyrano’s regiment, but the love-struck and inarticulate Christian depends on Cyrano’s eloquent words to woo Roxane. The pretense of putting words in Christian’s mouth energizes the story’s charade. Director Meredith McDonough presents a stripped-down version of “Cyrano” typical of HVSF shows, and at her disposal is a stellar cast. Playing Cyrano is the multitalented Jason O’Connell, who brilliantly molds his Cyrano to be effectively cocky one moment and deeply compassionate in another. A smart, passionate, saucy Roxane is played by Britney Simpson whose convincing and growing appetite for Cyrano’s words become our desire as well. Nance Williamson plays Cyrano’s friend and confidant, La Bret, with her own brand of jocularly. Ms. Williamson and Mr. O’Connell are HVSF veteran actors, both exuding a delightful chemistry redolent of earlier HVSF performances and one that makes “Cyrano” an exemplary production. Luis Quintero is the goofy but loveable Christian but as he learns the truth of Cyrano’s love for Roxane, his transition to maturity is totally credible. Stealing the show, however, is George Merrick as the stuffy, villainous Count DeGuiche. Merrick hysterically puckers his lips, puffs out his cheeks, speaks through his nose to create the perfect aristocratic caricature. As Ragueneau, the baker who idolizes poets and writes all his recipes in verse, Merrick is delightfully silly.

The play's timing is exquisite and many of the original lines are gems that whisk by. Cyrano's sense of morality compared to the feckless DeGuiche prompts, "I love contempt. It's the one passion that can't be foiled by rejection." Love is expressed with poignancy; "My heart will still be beating, stirring the soil, spinning the earth, for you." On the battleground, Cyrano eases the soldiers' suffering and starvation by telling them, "Food comes and goes, its faith we're truly hungry for," as he launches into a rousing ode praising the beauty of France, its countryside, cities and culture.

Cyrano is the one character that holds the truth throughout the play, and part of the story line is how the other characters come to realize what Cyrano and the audience have known from the beginning: the sacrifices for love and country are endless. At the end of the play when a wounded Cyrano presents the day's news to a mourning Roxane, he summons the energy to tell all in a sing-song rhyme evoking Dr. Seuss-like lyrics. Although the play closes with tragic overtones, the dying but still playful Cyrano poignantly brings a smile to our lips when he claims, "Vanity—you snuck up on me and forced my hand," and, taking his last breath, he admits his greatest achievement is his 'panache.'

This performance boasts an enduring theme that repeatedly inspired Shakespeare — that a keen sense of morality is bolstered by truth. This relevant and timely message speaks to Cyrano's credo that one must have the strength to speak openly and from the heart.

"Cyrano" runs until August 30

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