

## **Reflections on "Cyrano de Bergerac" by Stuart Fernie**

This is not intended as a full literary review, but simply a page of thoughts and reflections on the characters and themes in one of France's most popular pieces of literature.

### **Background**

First produced to instant (and lasting) success in 1897, Edmond Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac" has been filmed several times (most recently and most successfully with Gérard Depardieu in 1990), and has been constantly revived in the theatre (including a season in 1989 starring Jean-Paul Belmondo). Cyrano was recently voted France's favourite literary character, beating Jean Valjean and D'Artagnan by a considerable margin.

On a personal level, I can attest to Cyrano's efficacy as a romantic and tragic figure, and to what extent he has been taken to the hearts of the French public. At the end of a showing of the Depardieu film (in France), a lady in the row behind me was quite incapable of moving from her seat as she was sobbing into her arms, so moved was she by the final scene.

### **What is it about?**

Cyrano is heroic (though anti-heroic at times), tragic, spirited and ebullient, but above all else he is human, and shows human failings as well as strengths. At the time of the setting of the piece (1640-1655), patronage was the norm. Writers, actors or musicians all required a patron to ensure success. There was no system of national grants, benefit or welfare. If success required funding, one had to find a benefactor – usually a wealthy individual who may well expect some kind of payment in return. At least this is Cyrano's fear. Fiercely independent and insisting on the freedom to do, say and think whatever he pleases, Cyrano rejects the very idea of patronage since it would come at too great a price.

The principal themes of poetry (or the expressive arts in general), independence, and love are intertwined, with each integral to the other, and so it is virtually impossible to discuss one without reference to the others.

### **Poetry**

As a work of art and a tribute to the beauty and glory of poetry and the arts, it is only fitting that "Cyrano" should itself be in the form of a poem – an extended poem whose rhymes, apart from being pleasing to the ear, allow and facilitate the elaboration of feelings and emotions, and the connection of ideas, allowing language and ideas to flow and run into one another by means of association of words and sounds.

Cyrano is clearly devoted to poetry and the beauty and clarity of expression it engenders. He interrupts Montfleury as he embarks on "Clorise" at the start of our play because he

thinks Montfleury is an awful actor who delivers lines badly, and because he thinks the play itself is worth less than nought. His devotion to words will not allow him to listen to what he considers poor quality poetry.

When Valvert tries to insult him and Cyrano embarks on the famous “tirade du nez”, it is to give a lesson in wit and “wordsmithing” to someone he considers inferior and who should learn how to express himself before embarking on such a task as to try to belittle a wordsmith like Cyrano.

Later on, when de Guiche offers him patronage and the opportunity to have his work corrected by none other than Cardinal Richelieu, Cyrano refuses point blank, not only because of the implied loss of independence, but because of his pride and belief in his own work.

When Cyrano helps Christian write letters to Roxanne, it is not simply to help Christian achieve his purpose. Cyrano is immensely proud of the beauty and clarity contained in these letters. They contain his soul, his thoughts, and his feelings. The letters are his gift (of himself) to Roxanne.

### **Independence**

Cyrano’s insistence on independence can be seen on a number of occasions – most notably at the start when he interrupts the performance of “Clorise”, showing confidence in his own abilities and judgement, and his unwillingness to bow to position and reputation. He is willing to take on and argue with the entire assembly – including members of the “Académie Française” who are present, and of course de Guiche, whose protégé Valvert somewhat unwisely challenges Cyrano to a verbal duel. Cyrano justifies his actions, giving reasons for his dislike of both the play and the principal actor, showing to what extent he is a free spirit and thinker.

Later on, when de Guiche offers Cyrano his patronage, Cyrano launches into a speech listing his reasons why he would never accept such an offer, listing the advantages of (moral) freedom and the freedom to express himself as and when he pleases.

Cyrano displays great strength of spirit and independence in terms of courage, skill with a sword, and in his literary work. However, love and a total lack of confidence in his physical appeal to women, leave him open to self-doubt, and he finds himself embroiled in a scheme to win the attentions of his beloved Roxanne for the attractive but dim-witted Christian, therefore losing a great deal of his independence, which he is willing to lose if it leads to Roxanne’s happiness.

### **Love**

Love is seen in several shapes and forms in the play. Valvert is interested in Roxanne because he sees her as a means of social advancement, being both beautiful and considered witty and charming. De Guiche, although married to a relative of Richelieu,

would happily see Valvert and Roxanne together so that he might ply his influence and embark on a sexual relationship with Roxanne. This is seen quite clearly later when de Guiche propositions Roxanne. With Christian the attraction is mainly physical, though Roxanne would like to believe there is more to it and even loses interest in Christian when she feels he may not be as bright as she anticipated. Cyrano's love for Roxanne is perhaps the purest – spiritual love and respect for her character, charm and wit. However, Roxanne clearly feels the need of both the physical and the spiritual, so Cyrano feels inadequate and sets about making Roxanne happy by helping Christian fulfil her requirements.

It is interesting to note that Christian and Cyrano both feel inadequate, and indeed form one complete being when they work together – Christian being the physical, and Cyrano the spiritual. Separated, each “half” is insufficient, but together they are one. Yet, in the long term Roxanne discovers that what is important, and what touches the heart is the spiritual.

Cyrano loves Roxanne to the point where he is willing to sacrifice his own happiness and fulfilment. He gains satisfaction from knowing that the words and sentiments in Christian's letters (which mean so much to Roxanne) are his own.

The play is beautifully crafted, combining drama, tragedy and comedy. Rostand manages to combine entertainment with emotion, and touches the heart of his readers/viewers.

Even at the time of its first production, Cyrano's place as a valued piece of literature was challenged. Personally, I find it vastly entertaining, touching and beautifully constructed, but I do find it very specific to Cyrano and his particular circumstances and problems. Although feelings of unreciprocated love will be familiar to readers, the very wit and ebullience which we find so attractive in Cyrano are also quite intimidating. We feel we can never attain his standard of wit nor his level of devotion to Roxanne. Somehow Cyrano's story offers no solutions to similar problems we may have.

Great literature contains imagery and inspirational stories which are pertinent to our own lives - they give us food for thought, or even guidance. Personally, although I find "Cyrano" admirable, touching and entertaining, I find it difficult to see its relevance to others' lives in terms of guidance or solutions to life's problems.

As for the Depardieu film written and directed by Jean-Paul Rappeneau, I thought it was a superb rendering of the original. I thought all the actors played their parts beautifully (especially Depardieu and Weber), but the sets, costumes, and of course the music by Jean-Claude Petit, all made a significant and essential contribution to the overall success of the film.

## **Addendum**

In 1990 Jean-Paul Belmondo starred in a revival of the play (at the Théâtre Marigny, directed by Robert Hossein). I was in France at the time, and I have always regretted not making the effort to go and see him in it. However, I recently managed to obtain a DVD of the show (on e-bay, and not without considerable difficulty!), which has forced me into reviewing my thoughts and feelings about the Depardieu film.

In the film, Cyrano often appears curt and angry. He is independent to the point of being unapproachable, even unfriendly. Then there are times when he swings from anger to something bordering on self-pity in places (in manner, if not in his words).

As a result of watching the theatre version, I became more aware of the speed and manner of delivery of all the actors involved, though especially Depardieu. While his delivery is ebullient and attractive in its own way, his style tends to accentuate the rhyme and rhythm of the words, rather than the words themselves. I also came to think that the cinema version overplays, perhaps, the period richness and detail. While it is sumptuous and beautiful to the eye, I now see that it may detract from the story itself.

Curiously, I have never been especially moved by Cyrano's death scene in the film, though clearly others find it profoundly moving. I have always felt it was laboured, overdirected and overplayed. I might also say that while I admired and sympathised with Cyrano, I'm not sure I ever really warmed to him, exactly because there always seemed to be a lack of warmth and compassion in him.

In the theatre version Cyrano seems more human. He is less driven by anger, and perhaps as a result of this we become more aware of the theme of independence and individual strength.

Here we have a more controlled performance with slower delivery (the film's running time is 2 hours 15 minutes, compared to the 3 hour theatre version), as a result of which the lines have greater impact, while the resultant altered emphasis develops the impression of character and humanity. These elements are aided by the simpler theatrical presentation, adding intensity to scenes which are, perhaps, ill-served by the flamboyance of the film.

Opposite Belmondo we have Béatrice Agenin as the lovely and intelligent Roxanne. It is somewhat ungallant of me to suggest that she was perhaps a little old for the part, but her confidence and experience add much to the part and make her character more thoughtful and attractive than the younger and at times flighty Roxanne of the film.

In writing this, I feel a sense of guilt and disloyalty as I thoroughly enjoyed the film and it has so much to commend it. In the end, however, I wonder if its weaknesses are due simply to the fact that Cyrano belongs to the theatre and the medium of the cinema brings with it certain demands which do not serve Rostand's tale as well as the medium of the theatre.