

MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY
EDUCATION PACK – PART A



CYRANO

BY
VIRGINIA GAY
AFTER
EDMOND ROSTAND

24 SEP–29 OCT 2022
SOUTHBANK THEATRE, THE SUMNER

MELBOURNE
THEATRE COMPANY

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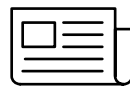
Throughout these notes, look out for these icons for opportunities to learn more:



Activity



Discussion



Reading



Video

Notes prepared by Nick Tranter **Design by** Helena Turinski

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Melbourne Theatre Company acknowledges the Yalukit Willam Peoples of the Boon Wurrung, the First Peoples of Country on which Southbank Theatre and MTC HQ stand. We pay our respects to all of Melbourne's First Peoples, to their ancestors and Elders, and to our shared future.

ABOUT MTC



Southbank Theatre, the Sumner; photo by Benjamin Healley

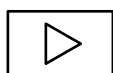
MTC is Melbourne's home of live storytelling, producing an annual mainstage season of plays, and a suite of signature programs including the NEXT STAGE writers' program, MTC Education, First Peoples Young Artists Program, Cybec Electric play reading festival, and more artist access programs.

MTC is one of the major performing arts companies in Australia, and one of the largest theatre companies in the English-speaking world. Founded in 1953, MTC is also the oldest professional theatre company in Australia, and is a department of the University of Melbourne.

As Australia changed, MTC has changed with it. We like to think that we have frequently been at the forefront of Australian culture, introducing new ideas and new ways of looking at our lives, our society and the world; helping to explain a swiftly evolving landscape as we moved through it. Today, with Southbank Theatre as our performance home and our headquarters in Sturt Street, Southbank, MTC strives to present Melbourne audiences with the best drama from Australia and overseas to the highest standards.

Our Vision: To enrich lives with understanding and empathy through the storytelling power of the finest theatre imaginable.

Our Artistic Purpose: To produce classic and contemporary Australian and international theatre with style, passion and excellence in order to entertain, challenge and enrich audiences.



Southbank Theatre Virtual Tour

Explore the theatre where you'll see *Cyrano* in this virtual tour. Go backstage, see under the stage, and climb up to the fly tower to investigate this venue's potential.

CAST AND CREATIVES

3 Holly Austin

Cyrano Virginia Gay

2 Robin Goldsworthy

1 Milo Hartill

Yan Claude Jabbour

Roxanne Tuuli Narkle

Director Sarah Goodes

Musical Director & Additional Composition Xani Kolac

Set Concept & Design Elizabeth Gadsby

Costume Designer & Set Design Realisation Jo Briscoe

Lighting Designer Paul Jackson

Sound Designer Kelly Ryall

Assistant Director George Lazaris

Assistant Lighting Designer Amelia Baker

Intimacy Coordinator Amy Cater

Roller Skate Choreographer Belle Hadiwidjaja

Stage Manager Whitney McNamara

Assistant Stage Manager Zsuzsa Gaynor Mihaly

Production Photography Jeff Busby

Rehearsal Photography Charlie Kinross

ATTENDANCE INFORMATION

This production contains coarse language, sexual references and mature themes. For detailed information about the production's content, visit our [production content guide](#).

DURATION

Approximately 90min, with no interval.



Read the programme

Download the programme for this production to read about the cast and creative team, and see more photos from the rehearsal room.



Tuuli Narkle, Claude Jabbour, Milo Hartill, Robin Goldsworthy, Holly Austin and Virginia Gay

ABOUT THE PLAY

Cyrano is the most interesting person in any room – a wordsmith, a charmer, a ruthless fighter. She works twice as hard and runs twice as fast as any of the pretty boys, because she’s deeply ashamed of something about herself. She’s fallen hard for Roxanne, the brilliant, beautiful new girl in town with a penchant for poetry and a way with words. Just like Cyrano. But Roxanne’s only got eyes for Yan: hot, manly Yan; all-brawn-and-no brains Yan, who’s dumbstruck around Roxanne – probably shy, right? Until suddenly he starts saying the most amazing things. But it’s not Yan writing these perfect love scenes, it’s Cyrano.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHTS

VIRGINIA GAY

Virginia Gay is a WAAPA graduate. Her theatre credits include *Vivid White*, *Minnie & Liraz*, *The Beast*, *On The Production of Monsters* and *Gaybies* (Melbourne Theatre Company); *Calamity Jane* (One Eyed Man Productions); *The Wharf Revue* (Sydney Theatre Company); *Cautionary Tales for Children* (Arena); *High Society* (Hayes Theatre); *Mame* (Neglected Musicals); *The Producers*, *Jerry’s Girls* (The Production Company); *La Clique* (Famous Spiegeltent – Leicester Square). In addition to writing *Cyrano* she also wrote *The Boomkak Panto*, which will premiere in December at Belvoir and which she will also co-direct. Her film credits include Mirrah Foulkes’ *Judy & Punch* (Sundance), and the short film *Paper Cut* (Tropfest 2018), which she wrote and directed. Her television credits include series regular on *All Saints* and *Winners & Losers* (Channel 7); team captain on *CRAM!* (10); *ABC Book Club* (ABC); *Good News Week* (10); *In Gordon St Tonight* (ABC). Virginia won a Sydney Theatre Award for her role in *Calamity Jane*.

EDMOND ROSTAND

Born in Marseille in 1868, Edmond Rostand was a French playwright whose work is associated with neo-romanticism. His most enduring play, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, was first performed in Paris in 1897. The romantic style of Rostand’s verse drama was in contrast to the naturalistic theatre that was in vogue at the time. Nevertheless, Rostand went on to become one of the most popular French playwrights of the period. Rostand also wrote *L’Aiglon*, based on the life of Napoleon II, for actress Sarah Bernhardt, in which she played the title role as a ‘breeches’ part (male role played by female). The 1960 Broadway musical comedy *The Fantasticks* is an adaptation of Rostand’s 1894 play *Les Romanesques*. Rostand died in Paris in 1918 as a victim of the flu pandemic.



Tuuli Narkle, Virginia Gay, Holly Austin, Milo Hartill and Robin Goldsworthy

CONTEXT

CYRANO DE BERGERAC

Cyrano is Virginia Gay's adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand.

In Edmond Rostand's original *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Cyrano is a French soldier with a very large nose. He is in love with Roxane, who shares his love of words and poetry, but thinks himself so ugly that he must be unlovable. When the handsome but prosaic new soldier Christian falls for Roxane, he asks the wordsmith Cyrano to help him win her over. Cyrano agrees, and Christian woos Roxane with Cyrano's poetry. Roxane quickly falls for Christian, and eventually admits to him that she is so beguiled by his words that she would love him even if he were ugly. Christian tells Cyrano and insists they reveal the truth, saying he wants to be loved for the fool that he is. Cyrano doesn't believe Christian until Roxane tells him the same, but before Cyrano can reveal the truth, Christian is killed and Cyrano resolves to preserve Roxane's memory of him as a poet. Years later, Roxane discovers the truth but Cyrano denies this to his death. At the play's end, the protagonists are either unhappy or dead.

In Virginia Gay's meta-theatrical adaptation, Cyrano is a woman and the play has a happy ending. The original play's extensive character list is condensed into six parts: Cyrano, Roxanne, Yan (an abbreviation of Christian) and a chorus of three. This band of players gather in a theatre to tell a classic story that they've told many times over, but this time it will be different. Like the original, Roxanne falls for Yan (because he speaks Cyrano's poetry), but when she exclaims that she could fancy anyone who spoke those words, Yan has an existential crisis. Roxanne soon discovers the truth and confronts Cyrano, angry at the deception. As the play continues, Cyrano and the players critique the classic and rewrite their story, with a happy conclusion for all.

ADAPTATIONS

Versions of Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* have been performed many, many times since its 1897 premiere. Recent decades have seen almost annual productions around the world, including the London production by The Jamie Lloyd Company starring James McAvoy (which inspired Virginia Gay to write this version). Rostand's story is frequently altered and adapted in its various reincarnations, often with new music. Christopher Plummer won a Tony for his performance in a 1973 Broadway musical adaptation, and an upcoming musical drama film directed by Joe Wright (*Atonement*) will star Peter Dinklage (*Game of Thrones*) as Cyrano (itself based on the 2019 Off Broadway musical also starring Dinklage). On stage there have also been gender-swapped productions, a multilingual version set in 1930s India, another set in Manila on the cusp of World War II, various parodies and operas. Notable movie adaptations include the 1987 film *Roxanne*, a comedy starring Steven Martin and Daryl Hannah, and the 2020 Netflix original *The Half of It*, which features a queer female Chinese-American teenager who earns cash writing homework papers for her peers.

Why do we keep telling classic stories like that of Cyrano? Virginia Gay suggest 'because they're classics and because their sense of familiarity is calming, and I think that following such a time of chaos, that feeling of familiarity is even more comforting.' However, she also asks what responsibility we have when re-staging classics, noting 'they're a product of a different time, with different social mores ... I don't believe in those old narratives, I don't believe in those old gender roles. I believe most of us don't. So let's have storytelling that reflects that.' The MTC production of *Cyrano* is therefore a direct response to the question Covid-19 has presented the world: how do we find a better way of doing what we did before?

ISOLATION AND CONNECTION

Virginia Gay's script for *Cyrano* has been developed throughout the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and its various lockdowns. As Gay was writing *Cyrano*, she saw parallels between her experience and that of Cyrano. 'As I got months into having not touched another living human being, this sentence came to me. This sentence, which I had up on my wall, was: how do you reach for something that you know you cannot touch? That sense of suspension is what the entirety of 2020 felt like; that's what lockdown felt like, that's what the relationship between Cyrano and Roxanne felt like.'

Sources: *Cyrano de Bergerac* review – James McAvoy is fierce in radical reboot of romantic classic (2019) by Michael Billington on [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com); *MGM Lands Peter Dinklage-Led 'Cyrano' Musical Adaptation* (2020) by Mia Galuppo on [hollywoodreporter.com](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com); Review: Peter Dinklage Tackles 'Cyrano' Without the Nose (2019) by Ben Brantley on [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com); *Roxanne* (1987) on [imdb.com](https://www.imdb.com); *The Half of It* review – charming Netflix teen comedy takes on Cyrano (2020) by Benjamin Lee on [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com); *A Nose by Any Other Name* (2021) by Melanie Sheridan on [mtc.com.au](https://www.mtc.com.au)

AN INTERVIEW WITH VIRGINIA GAY



Virginia Gay

The script is a very self-aware celebration of live theatre, and live audiences, that taps into something deep that people have been missing. It's a powerful reaction to 2020, from a creative point of view.

'I love that that's how it reads for you because that's exactly what it felt like to me. I pitched it to Sarah Goodes just before the apocalypse started. And during those first couple of weeks, as the whole world was changing, we continued talking about it and I could see how even more resonant it was becoming.'

Can you elaborate?

'I was in Los Angeles for the first six months of the apocalypse, and Melbourne was doing its very intensive lockdown. In both places you had to keep yourself isolated as much as possible. I'd also just had my heart broken in America so I was existing in this extraordinary suspended state of hyper-longing: I had a broken heart and to connect with people during that time seemed so important and yet it was also the thing that was most rife with danger.'

As I was writing *Cyrano*, I realised that this is the embodiment of what Cyrano says: 'connecting with me will somehow destroy you; there's something rancid about me, so you can't touch me. But I want, I need to connect. I also want you to be happy. How can I facilitate this but not corrode you with my love.'

As I got months into having not touched another living human being, this sentence came to me. This sentence, which I had up on my wall, was: how do you reach for something that you know you cannot touch? That sense of suspension is what the entirety of 2020 felt like; that's what lockdown felt like, that's what the relationship between Cyrano and Roxanne felt like. So I talked a lot with Sarah about how we evoke that feeling of hyper-longing and the recognition that connection is the most important thing but, for a series of reasons, cannot be acted upon.

So it does seem to me to be very much a show about the feelings that we all had in 2020. The beginning of *Cyrano*, the original, starts in a theatre and it's a very self-aware piece because it's all about authorship and control and awareness of the roles that we play and the roles that we cast ourselves as. I remember thinking that we could start it with a direct conversation with the audience, acknowledging that we haven't been in theatres for so long. If you are in the room, with the pheromones of somebody whose heart is breaking and whose heart is taking the courage to re-knit, it's a different experience to watching Netflix at 4am alone in your kitchen.

My friend said to me 'You're talking about this play like it's the very first piece of theatre that will be back in that theatre. Is that the case?' And I was like 'No. No, it's not. But I think it is one of the first pieces of theatre that has been written exactly about that time. It was created entirely out of the extreme isolation and extreme desire for connection that we were all experiencing, and so it has a sort of holistic or unified frame of reference, and particularly for Melbourne because you went through one of the harshest lockdowns in the world.'

You mentioned that you pitched the play just before the pandemic began, so it wasn't the initial inspiration. Can you elaborate on what was?

'Number one is that I saw James McAvoy's *Cyrano*. It was the last piece of theatre that I saw in England before the apocalypse started. I remember thinking: good luck, you handsome movie star, to embody this. Good luck! He did it without a nose – and we're also doing it without a nose – and when there's no nose, what you see so transparently is someone who has decided that they are unworthy of love. You see their self-doubt, and their self-hate.'

So I got about a scene and a half in and I realised I had to play this role. This is a story that is so familiar to my teenage self, to my early 20s, when I thought I was saving people from the horror. But I also remember thinking so clearly that this is the story of a queer body; this is the story of a body that at some point has been made to feel and think 'there's something about me that is not good enough for you.' It's that idea of there being something about these bodies that somebody has told us won't satisfy you, and we've internalised that language.'

It's a play that has a strong tradition of adaptation and modernisation. Where does your version fit?

'One of the things that I'm really interested in – and I think it's a really interesting question within mainstream theatre companies particularly – is why we keep telling the old stories. And what responsibility do we have if we are going to tell the old stories? We tell them because they're classics and because their sense of familiarity is calming. And I think that following such a time of chaos, that feeling of familiarity is even more comforting. But they're also a product of a different time, with different social mores. And if you keep telling the old stories unexamined then you're not helping to advance our cause.'

The stories that we tell have enormous importance. My responsibility as a writer is to do what I call ‘how you hide your vegetables’. It’s about how you try to change the world but through a corker of an evening so people don’t feel lectured, so that they feel like the change is blossoming out from within rather than being fed to them, and so that they go home thinking ‘that was such an indulgent and lovely and ridiculous dinner’ and then a couple of days later they go ‘wait a minute, there was zucchini in that!’ I don’t think entertainment and fighting for something more are mutually exclusive; if you can do them both at once, then that is the sweet spot.

Anyway as I got out of interval of the McAvoy production, all I could think was that this was the perfect role for me. This asks everything of me that I can deliver as a performer. But it ends with terrible war and everybody dying. Roxanne, in various productions, either becomes a nun or a whore. And of course Cyrano dies moments after professing his love, confirming that assumption that ‘this love is not for you.

I left afterwards and called Sarah and said: ‘I don’t know how we can do this play, because it contributes to the “kill your gays” trope and I don’t ever want to be a part of a narrative that says a queer love is impossible, or that queer bodies are expendable or sacrificial as standard, unexamined narrative tropes.’ And she said, with such casualness, ‘well it’s out of copyright. You should write your own.’ Just like that.

And then the world shut down, so I tried to think of it as an aggressively enforced writer’s retreat. There was no other way to get connection so it was just me writing the connection that I needed. That we all needed. It was me writing the conversations that I wanted to have, that I needed to have. And this feeling I had as I was thinking about Melbourne – this feeling of having the courage to go outside again, the courage to hope for something better, to reach for someone – it led to this idea about the courage that it takes to jump the tracks of the traditional narrative and to actually say: I don’t accept that; I don’t accept that tiny portion of living; I don’t accept that I have to fall on my sword; I don’t accept that.’ So I’m going to risk it and I might fail but I won’t keep doing the same old narratives over and over again, because I don’t believe in those old narratives, I don’t believe in those old gender roles. I believe most of us don’t. So let’s have storytelling that reflects that.



Holly Austin and Virginia Gay

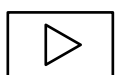
I also remember saying to Sarah in one of our early conversations that this show is about the move from the safety but terrible loneliness of isolation back into the mess and the fuss of living. Sarah and our designers Elizabeth Gadsby and Joe Briscoe have just done such extraordinary work in how we allow the theatre itself to wake up, and how we say you’re in this mess with us too – because this is a communal event. The stage is in an almost sterile state at the play’s opening but by the end I would love for it to be littered with mess. It will be a stage manager’s nightmare and I apologise in advance to the assistant stage managers who will be responsible for cleaning up the mess each night.’

Excerpts from interview with Melanie Sheridan



Read the extended interview

Visit the MTC website to read more of this interview with Virginia Gay.



Virginia Gay discusses *Cyrano*

Watch a video where Virginia Gay discusses the big ideas in her new play, and why make *Cyrano* a woman.

CHARACTERS



Claude Jabbour, Tuuli Narkle and Virginia Gay

CYRANO

‘Cyrano is a contradiction. Cyrano is someone who is not happy in their body, but to play Cyrano you have to be a theatre animal who is a spectacular show-person, a person who really uses every facet of their body and their voice. I think Cyrano is beloved by so many actors because this is what actors do all the time, they take their own trauma and turn it into something sparkly and fabulous, and that’s what Cyrano is doing in this.’

– Virginia Gay

ROXANNE

‘[I’m excited by] her appetite, her hunger for life. In the original, and this one, she is highly intelligent but it never feels like an intelligence that keeps anyone out ... And she also has the love interest with Cyrano and that is a queer love interest. Virginia made it so that Roxanne is a woman of colour, so there are these beautiful little nuggets of a really multifaceted human being that I really latched on, being someone who is mixed race, who is queer.’

– Tuuli Narkle

YAN

‘Yan is a character who comes from a lot of privilege and things going quite easily for him, he’s got a pure heart and a real naivety on the other side of the coin. That appeals to me: to try to find the elements of Yan that we have in all of us, and hopefully try to communicate that through the character.’

– Claude Jabbour

1

'1 is the nurturing character, caring so dearly and deeply for Cyrano and Roxanne in the journey the play takes, and using food and music as a tool in doing this. Throughout the action, 1 becomes pretty exhausted by the hurt Cyrano inflicts on herself, acting as a friend trying to talk her out of the dark place. 1 is an affectionate friend who gives to those around, serving their best interest in the story throughout. She can however be pretty stern and tough, which often leads to a laugh with the other chorus members in the show!'

– **Milo Hartill**

2

'He's a traditionalist. He's driven by an intense need to protect the story of Cyrano from the evils of modernity. He's convinced that there is a purity, a nobility, a weight and a worthiness found in sorrow and loss. Lean into the pain and be bettered by it. Evil is epic and inevitable and just straight up HEAPS more fun. He's also distractingly handsome.'

– **Robin Goldsworthy**

3

'In 3's opening line she admits she's always felt small. Whilst Cyrano and other characters in the show struggle to truly be who they are, it's 3 from the outset that has the courage to say how she feels, the same courage that is required in love, as Roxanne say's "... love is the only thing where you have to go in, again, for the first time, every time... you have to go in an innocent" 3 is an innocent, she's naïve. Cyrano calls her 'an idiot', however it's 3 who risks everything to offer a new perspective. She dares to ask the simplest questions of Cyrano. It's because of 3's bravery that she changes the course of the play and is ultimately rewarded by becoming a named character.'

– **Holly Austin**



Cast interviews

Read extended interviews with the cast on the MTC website.



Milo Hartill, Holly Austin and Robin Goldsworthy

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHORUS

by Melanie Sheridan

In writing her thoroughly modern *Cyrano*, Virginia Gay has reduced the original's large ensemble of named characters down to just three, with an additional three unnamed chorus members. A smaller cast is more suited to our times, of course, but in relocating a large part of the play's action and narrative drive to the chorus, Gay has simultaneously given them significant agency in the story, on a par with that of Cyrano, Roxanne and Yan (Christian).

It's a function that's not always common with choruses. The Classical Greek chorus – which pre-dates theatre as we know it – comprised up to 50 individuals performing as one, in a passive role somewhat similar to that of a narrator: describing and commenting upon the action, usually through song, dance and recitation.

Initially, choruses performed at festivals known as Dionysia, held in honour of the god of wine and drama: Dionysus. They would sing hymns called dithyrambs, which told mythic tales of the god's life and exploits. That is, until poet and choreuo (chorus member) Thespis stepped out from the choral body and began reciting lines as an individual, and engaging in dialogue with the chorus leader. This innovation ultimately led to the birth of Athenian tragedy, and then eventually theatre as we now know it (and also gave us the word thespian).

Over the centuries, choruses have come in and out of fashion. Shakespeare used a singular chorus on occasion (in *Henry V* and *Romeo and Juliet*, for example). Today, they're most common in musical theatre, where song and dance achieves a similar purpose as it did in ancient Greece: to comment on the action from the audience's point of view, to express the fears and hopes of the characters, and to provide narrative structure.

In *Cyrano*, Virginia Gay is simultaneously interrogating the original play by Edmond Rostand and telling a new story. Although the original play didn't feature a chorus, Gay's inclusion of one in her version is just one of the clever ways she draws a line between old and new forms of theatrical storytelling.



Choral stories

Read more about the chorus on the MTC website and hear the cast speak about their individual characters.



Holly Austin, Milo Hartill and Robin Goldsworthy

DIRECTION



Sarah Goodes

Learn more about Sarah Goodes' direction for *Cyrano* in this Q&A.

What is the world of this play?

'Virginia Gay's version of *Cyrano* is set within a meta-theatrical world, a place outside of the usual confines of the characters and story of a play, instead living in a world where we acknowledge that we are putting on a play. When Elizabeth Gadsby [set designer] and I discussed the design for the piece, we wanted to expose the mechanics of this theatrical universe we were inhabiting, and so decided to set it in a theatre, with ways for the ensemble to manually control the action. We wanted to build upon the foundations that the Sumner theatre gives us to create a world where it felt that there had been some sort of rupture, so Elizabeth designed an abandoned old theatre set – our goal with this ruptured old theatre was to signify that something major had happened since the players had last been in the space. We wanted them to suddenly appear as if by magic, and feel as if they have existed within similar theatrical spaces many times over the years, but this time something was off. To build this ruptured world we relied on objects which exist in theatre spaces already, such

as road cases and props from old productions. Our goal was to create a world where the ensemble could feel they had some say about how this version of the story would be told, and as they gain courage to take the story in a new direction the theatre would wake up to reward them. At times we sit in a world where the ensemble debate which way the story will go, and these are balanced with the moments when we are inside the telling of the story.'

Why this play, why now?

'Virginia was very focused on exactly this question when writing this adaptation, and the play does focus on this struggle between tradition and the old way of telling stories like these, compared to the new stories which reflect our world as it exists today. At its core this play is about having the courage to embrace the new, taking risks, learning to love and as a result growing and changing. We spoke at length about whether or not, or even how to talk about the global pandemic we have all lived through and landed on the idea that metaphor and story are often the most interesting ways of dealing with collective events. Virginia was certain she wanted a happy



Sarah Goodes

ending and to welcome people back to the joy of theatre with the excitement of sitting together in an audience, taking risks to live and love again. We wanted the theatre to erupt into a euphoria, reminding us of the reasons we collect in groups to watch stories play out on stages. The question we kept returning to was why we keep telling the old stories – why we keep playing out lessons and heartache of prior generations in forms that we have outgrown. The job of this new generation of theatre is to talk to today and respond to the here and now, and our goal through this production has been to find the joy at the heart of the stories we choose to tell.’



Xani Kolac, Holly Austin & Sarah Goodes

How are the chorus (1, 2 & 3) used in the storytelling?

‘The chorus roles in this show exist in many forms – sometimes they’re the Greek chorus, sometimes they have individual identities and wants and often they reflect Cyrano’s internal world, existing as the voices inside her head. Throughout rehearsals we had long discussions about how best to represent the chorus, and whether they work individually or as a group a majority of the time. Eventually we landed on balance – while the individual chorus members have goals and wants and needs of their own, there are moments, such as in the balcony scene, where they exist together, commenting on the action as a group and sharing similar opinions. Together they discuss and disagree about the different ways in which the story should be told and the paths forward for Cyrano and other characters.’

When developing a new work like *Cyrano*, how does a director know when a good idea surfaces in rehearsal?

‘It’s a very intuitive feeling – like the Turtle in *Finding Nemo* says “when you know you just know”. One of things I like to focus on the most in rehearsals is the saying a “good game is a close game,” which means that what I am looking for is action and intention to be fiercely engaged, with each party fighting hard to achieve their desired outcome. We shouldn’t be able to tell what is going to happen next – you want your audience to be leaning in and watching closely like they do at a sports match – no should know who has the ball!’

How do you think about/experiment with/manipulate rhythm when directing a play with songs?

‘I have been working very closely with our music director, Xani Kolac to build the sonic world of *Cyrano*, and one of the main areas we have been focusing on is how to run into and out of songs. By contrasting rhythms of songs and scenes placed next to each other, you can achieve very clear shifts and turns. This production needs to feel as if it’s constantly in motion, so when the feather of momentum and emotion comes down you want to then blow it up into the air again, carefully balancing the mood and emotion of the play. The songs chosen for this show have a jukebox feel by design, we use songs of different genres, time period and emotions coming out of a boom box to reflect the many worlds that have existed on this stage, and the many ways in which this story has played out before. This pulls us through to the end of the piece, where the theatre responds to the players and their commitment to a telling a new version of this story, with sound and music finally filling the space in its entirety.’



Elements of theatre composition

Annotate Sarah’s responses to highlight comments that relate to the elements of theatre composition, and make predictions about what you might see on stage.



Characters on stage

Make connections between Sarah’s comments and how each actor has described their character.

SET DESIGN

While Rostand's original script for *Cyrano de Bergerac* describes various locations (including a hotel, pastry shop, town square, and war-torn countryside) Gay's script simply describes 'an empty stage'.

In the creative team's artistic vision for *Cyrano*, it was important to create an intimate playing space to work within. The concept is meta-theatrical: the players are a travelling troupe of actors who magically arrive in the theatre. The ghost light flickers, and they appear. They turn off the ghost light, and begin setting up to tell this story as they have done for years. They pull things out of suitcases (props, costumes, etc.) to tell the story, and as the storytelling becomes more authentic, the theatre itself begins to respond and come alive.

Set designer Elizabeth Gadsby notes that the design needed the ability to step in and out of telling the old story, so her design declares the fact that theatre is a construction by presenting the audience with a theatre within a theatre. A crumbling proscenium arch frames a dark old playhouse stage on an angle. Road cases on the stage are labelled with titles for the scenes in which they'll be used, containing props for storytelling. The play begins with a ghost light on stage, echoing the Sumner Theatre's state of repose throughout much of 2020.

Movement is a motif and metaphor in the design – as seen in the road cases and a revolve in the stage floor – creating a sense of possibility after a period of stillness. Another metaphor is that of pressure being released, as seen in boiling kettles, steaming radiators, and beer cans that hiss when opened. All these elements crescendo to a sense of breaking out and finally being able to connect in the play's resolution.

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Elizabeth Gadsby

Learn more about the set design concept in this Q&A with Elizabeth Gadsby.

What is the world of this play?

'The design is a theatre within a theatre. During the design process Sarah [Goodes] and I realised that the meta theatricality of the script had multiple layers. They are actors playing actors playing characters. As scripted their "actor characters" have distinct character functions and so we wanted the space to reflect this.

Our constructed theatre also has layers that speak to the old story and the new. The "onstage" space is the only colour in the set, rendered as worn wooden boards. The rest of the space is offstage (wings, backstage, loading dock) theatre space. Black on black on black. Different sheen finishes of black. There is a sense of history in this black paint with patches peeling off, patches repainted in the wrong sheen etc.

The old theatre space is framed by a proscenium arch (perhaps once colourful, now painted ... black) that has a hole smashed through one side of it. Conceptually this hole speaks to the rupture in our storytelling as theatres all across the globe went dark in response to the covid pandemic. There is a very clear onstage and offstage space delineated through this finish in the design.

We begin the show with a ghost light on stage. It is an image that was happening in theatres globally in last year's first wave. The actors arrive with everything they need to tell the story of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, but they're not sure which version they're going to do. It's very much about watching them find the version they actually want to tell.'

Can you tell us about the ideas behind the theatre 'waking up' in this production?

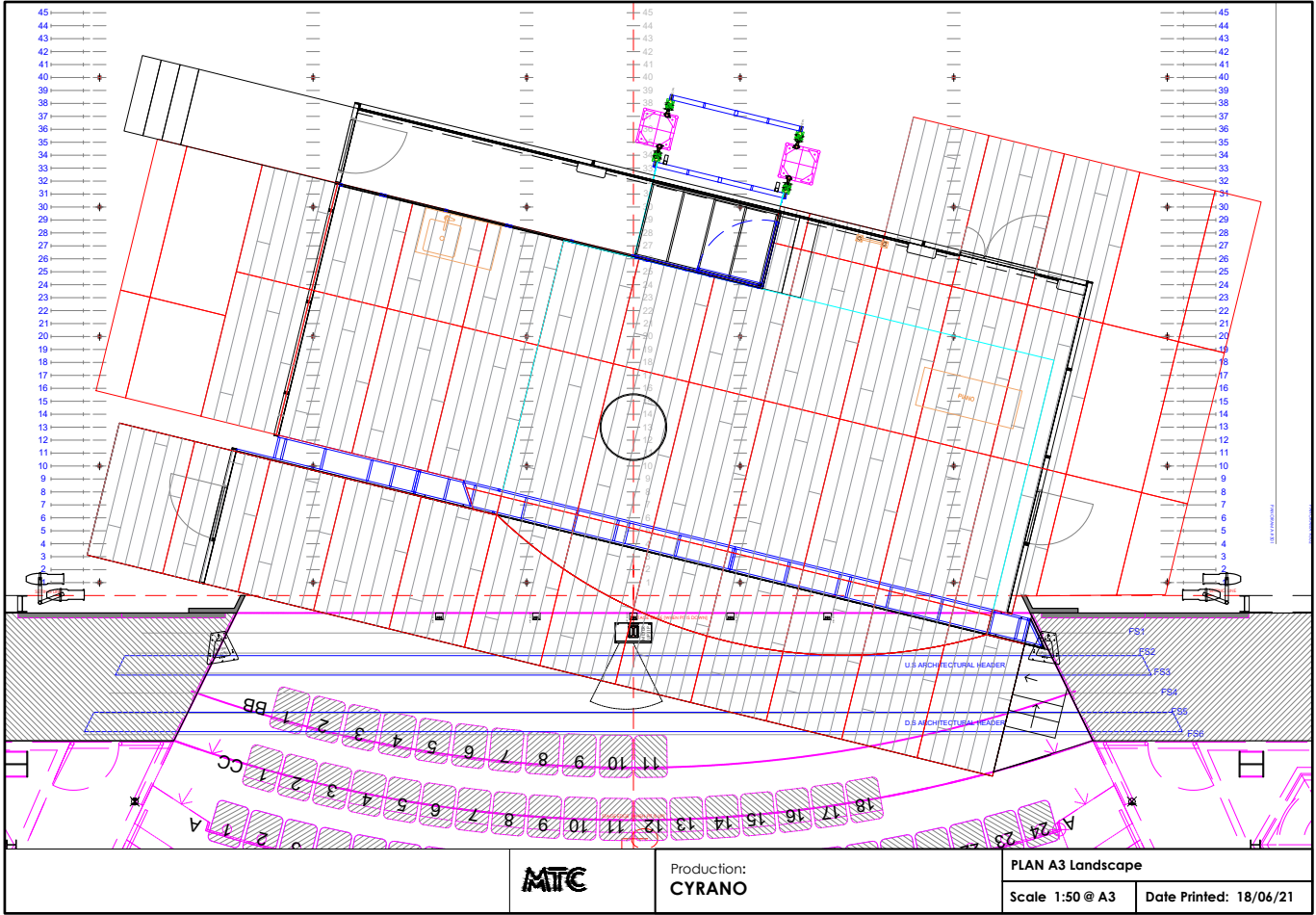
'From early on we spoke about the way that the theatre space was a character and through the attempt to tell an authentic story (rather than follow the script) the theatre creates a kind of magic of its own to meet the actors in their storytelling. It was based on the notion Virginia had in writing the play about why do we keep telling the same flawed stories? When we break the mould and attempt to tell transformative stories the energy that results from that storytelling is magic.'

Could you tell us more about the 'park picnic' design in the final scenes?

'This really came from the experience of Melbourne coming out of its long lockdown. Virginia [Gay] included it in the script as all she saw on her Instagram feed were pictures of people picnicking all over the place wherever they could find a space including verges. This idea of humans needing connection more than anything and the moment things began to ease how that manifested in these picnics.'



Set model by Elizabeth Gadsby.



Set design by Elizabeth Gadsby; CAD plan by Jacob Battista



Design predictions

Based on the information above, and the images of the set model and plan, discuss how these moments might be presented on stage:

- Yan enters, a rock star entrance, with music and a wind machine
- At Roxanne's balcony, Cyrano feeds Yan lines to impress her
- Roxanne confronts Cyrano about her deception



Themes

From your reading of the play's context, direction and design, what themes do you expect to be apparent in this production? Consider: beauty; connection; isolation; deception; truth.



Previous set designs

Research the set design of previous productions of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Compare and contrast with Elizabeth Gadsby's design for *Cyrano*.



Theatre technologies

Brainstorm ways to solve the challenge of creating 'steaming radiators' on stage. Think about other aspects of the design that will include theatre technologies, e.g. the ghost light.



Tuuli Narkle

SOUND DESIGN



Kelly Ryall

Learn more about Kelly Ryall's sound design for *Cyrano* in this Q&A.

How would you describe the sonic world you're creating for *Cyrano*?

'As *Cyrano* is what you might call meta-theatre, the main sound design concept is to delineate between inside the story and out.'

What kinds of sounds are you using in this play?

'At the beginning of the show we use a ghost light, so I have based a sound around the sound of electricity, using old modular synthesiser to create tonal electricity. One of the other sound/music palettes is the instruments on stage, this is to accentuate the notion of theatrical players and chorus.'

In your opinion, what is *Cyrano* about? How does your design support the play's big ideas?

'*Cyrano* is about the disconnect between self-image, self-worth and how you perceive others see you. The sound and music in the piece work between the worlds of internal, abstract sound and outward-looking songs.'

How are you using spot speakers in your design?

'There are spot speakers [small speakers that localise sound as coming from specific places] all over the stage for this production: for a wireless radio, a portable music player, the kettle and radiators.'

How is your role as sound designer different to that of the musical director?

'On this show my role is to think about how sound and soundscape conceptually work within the piece. The musical director is arranging the songs and teaching the cast to sing and play them. Then we both are taking care of the score.'



Contrast and rhythm

Consider Kelly Ryall's comments above and how they relate to the elements of theatre composition, particularly contrast and rhythm.



Virginia Gay

THEATRE STYLES

ECLECTIC THEATRE

Cyrano is written in contemporary playful prose, while Rostand's original was written in verse. The meta-theatrical nature of the play can be seen in some epic theatre design elements, such as exposed lighting and indicative set and prop components. The audience are frequently directly engaged with, particularly by Cyrano, but there are also moments of naturalistic performance and pathos. The chorus demonstrates aspects of Greek chorus (e.g. commenting on the action with song, dance, and recitation), but they are not homogenous. Each chorus member has a distinct personality and function in the play. The production also incorporates some conventions from musical theatre and stand-up comedy.

MUSICAL THEATRE

This production is interspersed with musical numbers, but is perhaps better described as a play with songs than a musical. However, there are conventions of musical theatre in *Cyrano*, such as music driving the story forward, characters singing when speaking alone cannot express emotion, presentational acting style, and the use of a chorus. The collection of existing songs in this production could be compared to that of jukebox musicals like *Moulin Rouge*.

STAND-UP COMEDY

In a scene where Cyrano reacts to someone commenting on her nose, Cyrano delivers a sequence of big nose jokes in a rapid-fire stand-up comedy mode. This scene includes conventions such as direct address, and manipulating timing in response to audience laughter.



Xani Kolac, Milo Hartill, Robin Goldsworthy, Claude Jabbour, Holly Austin, Tuuli Narkle and Virginia Gay

ELEMENTS OF THEATRE COMPOSITION

The following questions, provocations and ideas are intended to help you experience and analyse *Cyrano* through the lens of VCE Theatre Studies.

COHESION

- The performers rarely leave the stage. Think about how this might affect cohesion.
- What role might the chorus play in making the play cohesive?
- Where might you identify unity and balance in the design elements?

MOTION

- Based on your knowledge of the story, in which moments might you expect to see more movement?
- When might parts of the set move? How will this affect the performance?

RHYTHM

- How might the songs manipulate the rhythm?
- Consider how Cyrano might manipulate rhythm in a scene with rapid-fire nose jokes.

EMPHASIS

- How might aspects of Roxanne's character be emphasised in her entrance? How might aspects of Yan's character be emphasised in his entrance?
- In the absence of a large prosthetic nose, how might it be made clear that Cyrano is self-conscious about her nose?

CONTRAST

- Do you expect to see contrast between the three chorus members? Why or why not?
- Predict how the set will look in the play's opening moments, and imagine a contrasting image for the final scene.
- How might contrasting sound and light be used to move in and out of the old story?

VARIATION

- How might variation be manipulated in transition moments between scenes?
- How might moments of tension be broken in the play?



Download Part B

After you've seen *Cyrano*, download Part B of this Education Pack to read more from the cast and creative team, see photos from the production, and respond to analysis questions.

PART B EDUCATION PACK

After you've seen *Cyrano*, download Part B of this resource for more information about the production including costume design. Learn more at mtc.com.au/resources.



SOUTHBANK THEATRE VIRTUAL TOUR

Explore the theatre where *Cyrano* will be performed in our virtual tour. Walk backstage, explore the lighting bridge and imagine how the space will be used at mtc.com.au/virtual-tours.

DIGITAL RESOURCES

Learn more about *Cyrano* in extended interviews with the cast and creative team. Explore the resources at mtc.com.au/education.

