

Roundabout Theatre Company

# CYRANO DE BERGERAC



*From Page To Stage Study Guide*

# CYRANO DE BERGERAC

by *Edmond Rostand*  
adapted and directed by *Frank Langella*

## STUDY GUIDE

written by  
**Margaret Salvante**, Education Director  
**Sarah Moore**, Education Assistant  
**Michael Paller**, Consulting Dramaturg

### WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

*"Everybody is Cyrano, everybody has about them something they feel is too damaging or too upsetting or disgusting or unattractive to someone else. And they use it as a defense against discovering more about themselves."*

- Frank Langella

Set in the age of Louis XIII, *Cyrano de Bergerac* is a story about romance. A valiant swordsman and gifted poet, Cyrano secretly adores his beautiful cousin, Roxane, but feels he is too ugly to win her. Although he describes his overlarge nose as "an appendage that I wear with great pride because a great nose is the emblem of a great man," he allows it to keep him from telling Roxane how he feels. Instead Cyrano stands by and watches Roxane fall in love with the handsome young soldier Christian, an attractive man who is intimidated by intelligent women, lacking the words to win their hearts. Cyrano's physical appearance contradicts his spirit, but in Christian he finds a mask which allows him to give free reign to his true nature. When Roxane asks Cyrano to look out for Christian, he takes his responsibility to her so seriously that he actually helps Christian woo the woman they both love.

Cyrano lives a poetic notion of life. We are drawn to him because he represents freedom, independence, nonchalance and impetuosity -

qualities hard to live by in the real world, but envied all the same. The subtle humor of the play makes it possible for us to go along with the romantic extravagance. And rather than presenting us with larger than life, heroic yet unbelievable characters, Rostand gives us characters that are full of complexities. They are human in our eyes and we are allowed to identify with them.

The play leads us to believe at first that with talent and personal panache one can compensate for a lack of physical beauty, but the ultimate irony of this story is in Cyrano's inability to rise above the insecurity that his appearance creates. Throughout the play we are constantly confronted with the idea that appearance is not always truth. Even Cyrano's apparent love for Roxane is unclear. Is he in love with Roxane, or is he simply in love with love? In Act I, scene ii, he argues his case to his friend Le Bret, saying, "To sing, to laugh, to dream, to walk in my own way and be alone, free, with an eye to see things as they are, a voice that means manhood. To cock my hat where I choose. To travel any road under the sun, under the stars. Never to write a line I have not heard in my own heart; yet, with all modesty to say: My soul be satisfied with flowers, with fruit, with weeds even; but gather them in the one garden I may call my own ... I stand, not high it may be - but alone!" To which his friend replies, "Alone yes! Go ahead, rail against the world - And then to me say very softly that she loves you not."

# WHO'S WHO

**CYRANO DE BERGERAC** (played by *Frank Langella*): a brave and valiant soldier, who has great flourish and panache with words and swords, which he displays with dexterity and showmanship. The physical characteristic of Cyrano that most stands out is his large nose. He is self-conscious about his flawed appearance, and therefore is very sensitive to the feelings of others.

**CHRISTIAN** (played by *Gabriel Macht*): a handsome young soldier with beautiful eyes. He is a brave soldier, but he is "a fool," and "paralyzed, speechless, and dumb" with any woman.

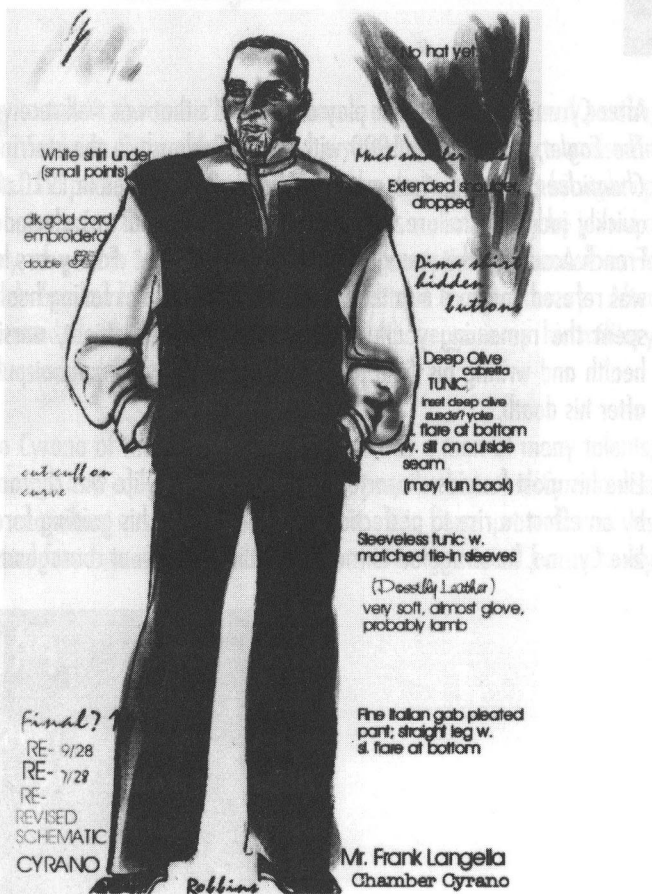
**ROXANE** (played by *Alison Mackie*): Cyrano's cousin. She is a beautiful young woman with many admirers, who appreciates both appearance and intelligence in men.

**DE GUICHE** (played by *Shawn Elliott*): a rich and powerful Count who is a Colonel in the Guards. He uses his power to his advantage by being manipulative and underhanded to achieve his goals. De Guiche is Cyrano's chief rival.

**RAGENEAU** (played by *Terry Alexander*): a friendly and good-natured pastry cook and owner of a neighborhood bakery. He is also a poet and a singer, who has a tendency to drink large quantities of wine.



Costume sketch of Roxane by Carrie Robbins



Costume sketch of Cyrano by Carrie Robbins

**LE BRET** (played by *George Morfogen*): a close, loyal and trustworthy friend and confidante to Cyrano.

**LISE** (played by *Lisa Leguillou*): "a woman of ordinary appearance" who works for Rageneau. She is quiet, sympathetic and understanding, and is captivated by Cyrano's theatrics and sensitivity.

**CARBON** (played by *Rod McLachlan*): an assistant and soldier for de Guiche.

**VALVERT** (played by *Armand Schultz*): an agreeable and spineless friend of de Guiche, who allows himself to be completely manipulated by the Count.

**MONTFLEURY** (played by *Adam LeFevre*): an actor whose benefactor is de Guiche. Because of Cyrano's rivalry with the Count, Cyrano hates Montfleury and forbids him to play for three weeks.

**MARGUERITE** (played by *Mikel Sarah Lambert*): Roxane's guardian, servant and friend.

**A PRIEST** (played by *Marcus Chait*)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Edmond Rostand (1868 - 1918)



## THE REAL CYRANO



### DIRECTORS NOTE:

"I am staging this production of *Cyrano* as if it were a sweet, sad little story that takes place inside a village of people. There are only twelve people in this production. All of them will know what's going on and will in some way have a reaction to it and be part of the story. And I felt that if I could do the play that way — I've shortened it considerably and lessened the number of characters, seventy to twelve — I thought if I could do that that I would be better able to focus in on the triangle and the intimate love story as opposed to what usually happens with *Cyrano* which is that you see costumes and plumes and lots of music and crowds and soldiers and noise. They're all gone. What you have now are the protagonists, the main characters, *Cyrano*, *Roxane* and *Christian*. And then you have around them the group of people in the town who are aware of the story. And you'll travel with all twelve of us from beginning to end, because all twelve of us will be intimately involved in the story."

-Frank Langella

Rostand was born in 1868 in Marseilles, France, into a wealthy and distinguished family. His mother was the granddaughter of one of Napoleon's marshals and the cherished memories of French glory that surrounded Rostand made a lasting impression on him. An intensely quiet child, the young Rostand was an avid reader who worshiped Napoleon and the Scottish author, Walter Scott. He developed an early love for nature, and throughout his life he continued to draw from the strength and solitude he found in it. His greatest joy as a child was playing with the puppet theatre that he built in his home, constructing the stage sets and costumes and putting on productions for his family. During his high school years, Rostand was an outstanding student who excelled in literary studies, but he was unsure about his future career. He attended law school in Paris more to satisfy his father's desires than his own, and throughout his studies he tried his hand at writing, publishing his first volume of poetry at age 20.

Rostand's fame peaked in 1898 with a triumphant production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. With France's most famous actor, Coquelin, in the title role, the first performance was greeted with a standing ovation and applause that lasted into the night. The production ran for over 500 performances, making a great impression throughout France, Europe and the United States and living on to become one of the most widely performed plays of all time.

After *Cyrano*, the only other play of Rostand's that was well received was *The Eaglet*, produced in 1900 with Sarah Bernhardt in the starring role. *Chanticleer*, an allegorical, experimental drama, opened in 1910 and was quickly judged a failure. At 33 years old, Rostand was elected to the French Academy, the youngest member at that time. Four years later he was refused entrance into the French army because of failing health. He spent the remaining years of his life in semi-retirement, nursing his health and writing his final play *The Last Night of Don Juan*, published after his death.

Like his most famous character, *Cyrano*, Rostand's life was characterized by an effort to rise to perfection. His ideals were his guiding force, and like *Cyrano*, he struggled to meet life's disillusionment courageously.

Rostand's *Cyrano* is actually based on the life of a real person, Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac, a seventeenth century swordsman and poet. Born in Paris in 1619, the real *Cyrano* was brought up by a country priest in a small private school. As a young man he joined a company of guards and soon established a reputation for himself as *le demon de bravoure* by engaging in several acts of foolish bravery. After being wounded at the Siege of Arras in 1640, he gave up his military career to study philosophy and science.

Like the *Cyrano* of the play, the real *Cyrano* was a man of many talents, high courage and equally high spirit. And, yes, the historical *Cyrano* also had an enormous nose which he gloried in. His fierce protection of his intellectual freedom and the contempt that his work showed for authority

made him many enemies; including the actor Montfleury who, like his dramatic counterpart, the real *Cyrano* banned from the stage. In 1654 he was wounded by a piece of timber dropped from a window and sent to recuperate in the country. During the year of convalescence that preceded his death in 1655, attempts were made to convert him to Catholicism, but it is likely that he died an atheist.

*Cyrano*'s work inspired a number of later writers and his character became the basis of many romantic but unhistorical legends. His *Letters* show him to be a master of Baroque prose, marked by bold and original metaphors. His plays include a tragedy, *The Death of Agrippine*, which was suspected of blasphemy, and a comedy, *The Pedant Imitated*, which served as inspiration for Moliere's play *The Cheats of Scapin*. His two best works, *Voyage to the Moon* and *Voyage to the Sun*, are stories of imaginary space journeys that satirize 17th-century religious and astronomical beliefs.

Rostand was doubtless drawn to the real *Cyrano*'s wit and valor, and used many events from his life and personality to create the *Cyrano* of his play. Like his namesake, Rostand's *Cyrano* strives to meet life with idealism, grace, and heroism, despite an often mean reality.

### PRINCIPAL WORKS:

- 1894 - *Romantics*
- 1895 - *The Princess Far Away*
- 1897 - *The Woman of Samaria*
- 1898 - *Cyrano De Bergerac*
- 1900 - *The Eaglet*
- 1910 - *Chanticleer*
- 1921 - *The Last Night of Don Juan*

# FRANCE IN THE 17th CENTURY

Life in the time of Cyrano, between approximately 1615-1650, was quite precarious. There were revolts within France (and throughout Europe) and wars against other countries. There was economic instability, and a strong religious presence that had enormous political and social influence. At the same time, there were great advances being made in the sciences and the arts.

The political problems essentially began when Louis XIII assumed power at the age of nine in 1610. Because he was so young, he was strongly influenced by his mother, Marie de Medici. Marie had a manipulative religious and political advisor named Richelieu, who had designs to gain power in the Church, and make France great. With his easy access to the King, Richelieu was quickly and easily appointed Cardinal of the Catholic Church, a very prominent and powerful post, and soon after that in 1624, he was named Louis XIII's chief minister. Because of the Cardinal's hunger for power, he wanted to rid himself and his country of all rivals. This meant suppressing the Huguenots' (a loud and troublesome Protestant branch)

destroying the influence of the French nobility and spying on and arresting anyone who looked suspicious. His efforts to keep rival countries at bay ultimately led to a 30 year war with Spain. All of this fighting both within the country and against other countries led Richelieu to call for an enormous increase in the people's taxes. The people of France, and especially those in Paris, were very angry at their tax increase, and so they staged a revolt called the *Fronde* in 1648.

All of this meant that the daily life between 1624 and 1650 was rather unstable. Seeing soldiers in towns and cities probably happened on a regular basis. Because of the economic instability, the poor were not eating enough, the soldiers got a mediocre salary which meant that they were hungry also, and the rich were eating too much. The Catholic Church was an extremely dominant force in everybody's lives, especially with Richelieu's spies touring the country looking for traitors, so being an atheist was very unusual, and meant going against not only the Church and the King, but also possibly risking one's life.

Of course, despite the political and economic problems in France, the 17th century did see some progress. There was a new style of art, called Baroque, which encompassed paintings, sculptures, architecture and music. The Baroque style aimed to create spectacular, grand effects, but also represent reality. Painters at this time included Rubens, Rembrandt, Van Dyke and Velazquez, among others. In terms of music, this time period saw early compositions of concertos, sonatas and operas. In the theater, Moliere's comedies, which laugh at human failings, were very popular in France.



The Night Watch by Rembrandt

The grand style of the time also included the manner in which people dressed, especially soldiers and the wealthy, with clothes that were adorned with lace, large hats with feathers, broaches and buttons. The weapons of choice coincided nicely with the appearance of the soldiers, who used their swords and daggers like the feather in their hat, with flair and panache.

Since industrialization had not yet occurred, the fastest way to get from one place to another was either with a horse drawn coach, by foot, or by boat. This meant that the fastest way to send a message to anyone fairly nearby was by a courier, who normally went by foot, and although France did establish a parcel post in 1643, couriers were still very common. However, to communicate major news to the general population, there were many newspapers, such as the *Paris Gazette*, which was founded in 1631.

The 17th Century also saw major scientific discoveries. With Kepler, Newton, Harvey and Galileo figuring out laws of nature, and Descartes writing about mathematics, there was enormous scientific advancement. However, because of the great power of the Church, many of these discoveries were squelched.

All of this is to say that life in the time of Cyrano was filled with political upheaval and religious dominance. However, despite the oppression they faced, the people in France could not be stopped in their creative advancements.

# THE TRIUMPH OF ROMANTICISM

*“Panache is not greatness, but something that adds to greatness, and that moves above it. It is something to flutter about, excessive, and a little bit curly.”*

- Rostand

When *Cyrano de Bergerac* debuted in Paris 1898, it was greeted not only with great acclaim but with considerable surprise. Its genre, Romanticism, which upheld the individual genius, the existence of free will and a oneness with nature, had been dead for thirty years. It had been dealt a serious blow first by Naturalism, which placed its faith in science, objectivity and an exact reproduction of the physical world. A movement founded principally by Emile Zola in the 1860's, the Naturalists regarded heredity and environment as the most influential factors on human behavior. Naturalism's secular god was Darwin; free will and inner experience, it declared, were illusions. While Naturalism attacked Romanticism with science, the Symbolists came at it with mysticism. The Symbolists, who flourished in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century put *their* faith entirely on inner experience. To them, it was the physical world that was illusory; the vital aspects of life could be discovered only through contemplation. What Symbolism contemplated was, in the words of the early Symbolist Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, "great human anxiety before the enigma of life." Also on the rise was the Ibsenite social drama, which dealt with the burning questions of the day in a realistic idiom. And if all this wasn't enough to ensure Romanticism's passing, in 1896, Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu* announced the birth of the avant-garde. *Ubu* was a gigantic, gross cartoon peopled not so much with humans as with unleashed

appetites. Nothing could have been further from Romanticism's assertion of man's heroic nature than *Ubu's* infamous first line: *Merde*.

Such was the theatre in Paris when *Cyrano* burst on the scene. If one substitutes for "inner experience" the word "soul", we can understand why *Cyrano* was the shocking, almost visceral, success that it was. Naturalism insisted on a physical world but excluded any notion of soul. Symbolism admitted soul, but vanquished any possibility of a physical world in which it could operate. *Cyrano* gave the Parisian audience a gigantic soul and a teeming world in which to act. *Cyrano* also restored to the French stage a workable notion of theatricality. The Naturalists wanted to reproduce on a stage the physical world exactly as it was, allowing no artifice at all. The Symbolists produced their plays in near darkness, cloaking everything and everyone in drapery, the better to disguise all corporeal being. Rostand crammed *Cyrano* with beautiful language, a vast range of emotion, exciting physical action and a sensuous seventeenth-century world that barely contained it all. Naturalism and Symbolism were, by their natures, small. What set *Cyrano* still further apart was its title character's *panache* — an untranslatable word best symbolized by the white plume of his hat. *Panache* is the generous spirit, the large, impossible gesture, a style forged from a combination of great soul and heroic action.

A production of *Cyrano* in our time suggests that it is not an old-fashioned play. It is, rather, a modernist's, or even a post-modernist's, dream. We live in an era of disillusionment and corruption; our primary mode of expression is irony. In its insistence upon a soul that triumphs even as the body is defeated, expressed in language that is definitely non-ironic, a production of *Cyrano* becomes the very thing it proclaims. *Cyrano* is...*panache*.

## ACTIVITIES:

- Before attending the play, consider the following questions: How does physical appearance affect a relationship? How do you think courtship is similar today to the way that it was in the 17th century? How is it different? Why?
- As you watch, think about the following: How do each of the main characters change from the beginning of the play to the end? How does Rostand use irony to make his point?
- After the play, consider what it means to be a soulful person. Write an essay about the topic and send it to the actors, care of Education Director, Roundabout Theatre Company, 1530 Broadway, New York, NY 10036.

## SOURCES:

Bermel, Albert, ed. "Romantics: E. Rostand." *Genius of the French Theatre*.

New York: New American Library, 1961.

della Fazia Amoia, Alba. *Edmond Rostand*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1969.

Dukore, Bernard F. and John Gassner, eds. *A Treasury of the Theatre*. New York:

Simon and Schuster, 1970.

James. Henry. "Edmond Rostand." *The Scenic Art*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1948.

Marowitz, Charles, trans. *Cyrano de Bergerac*. London: Smith and Kraus, 1995.

# WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

## What To Look For

The upper lobby of the Roundabout Theatre has a number of resources for your convenience. There is a refreshment counter where you can buy soda or a snack, but please remember that you will not be permitted to take these items into the theatre with you. Student discounts are available to those who show a student ID card. Roundabout's lobby is also an art gallery, so you might want to have a look at the paintings we have on display. Also, take the time to review the display about the show.

## Ticket Policy

As a student participant in *From Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

## Audience Etiquette

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

*Thank You For Your Cooperation  
And Enjoy The Show!*

*THE ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE FOLLOWING FOR  
THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF OUR EDUCATION PROGRAM:*

Axe-Houghton Foundation • BankAmerica Foundation

The Chase Manhattan Bank • Citibank, N.A.

The Samuel and Rae Eckman Charitable Foundation

The Educational Foundation of America • Fleet Bank, N.A.

The Heckscher Foundation for Children • IBM Corporation

Hale Matthews Foundation • New York City Department of Cultural Affairs

New York State Council on the Arts • Seth Sprague Educational and Charitable Foundation

The Travelers Foundation • The Michael Tuch Foundation, Inc.

**Roundabout Theatre Company**

1530 Broadway, New York, NY 10036 (212) 719-9393 • Fax (212) 869-8817