

CYRANO THE CHARMING

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THE New York theatrical season of 1925-26 was notable in many respects. For aside from the immense run of "Abie's Irish Rose," then completing its fourth consecutive year, there was "Craig's Wife," a first-rate American domestic comedy (or tragic-comedy) admirably conceived by its creator, George Kelly, and artistically produced by a perfectly balanced cast headed by that child of the theatre, the inimitable Crystal Hearn. There was Channing Pollock's war play, "The Enemy", which although trite in situation and moralistic in tone, was being effectively played to great audiences. There was "The Makropoulos Secret" owing its success to its "Fountain of Youth" *motif* and to the delicately sensitive interpretation of Helen Mencken, perfectly cast for the rôle. There was Franz Werfel's unusual piece, "Goat Song," enchantingly done by the Theatre Guild company. There was Eugene O'Neill's, "The Great God Brown", setting Broadway agog with its masks and mysticism. And there was Walter Hampden's revival of Edmond Rostand's immortal play, "Cyrano de Bergerac";—"What a gesture" it was! The author's tribute to Jean Coquelin who first played the part of Cyrano—for whom, indeed, the part was designed—might have been addressed with equal propriety to Walter Hampden: "C'est à l'âme de Cyrano que je voulais dédier ce poème. Mais puisqu'elle a passé en vous, Coquelin, c'est à vous que je le dédie."¹ Had not the spirit of Cyrano passed into Hampden, his vivid interpretation of the "romantic superman—a gallant, a poseur, a poet, a lover, a swordsman, a roisterer, a bold cavalier all rolled lavishly into one being" could never have been realized. And thus it came to pass that, in a machine age that employs prose as its normal vehicle of expression, an intensely poetic drama of the heroic type proved the triumph of a season unusually rich in its dramatic offerings. The realist may well ask: "How was the miracle wrought"? In any period, an overdose of realism results in an acute case of nausea. The Parisian audience of 1897 that witnessed the première of "Cyrano de Bergerac" on December 28, at the Théâtre Porte—Saint Martin, with Coquelin

1. "It is to the soul of Cyrano that I wish to dedicate this poem. But as long as it has passed into you, Coquelin, it is to you that I dedicate it."

This striking dedicatory statement, signed "E. R.", is usually found in editions of the play. The edition published by Librairie Charpentier et Fasquelle, Eugene Fasquelle, Editeur, Paris, 1916, is my source.

in the title rôle, had been so surfeited with "slices of life" by Antoine and his followers that they were sick of the Théâtre Libre and all its works. The reign of the French nationalists which had lasted for a decade (1887-1897) suffered a temporary eclipse with the dramatic emergence of Edmond Rostand—the principal romantic of the modern theatre. While he was by instinct and inheritance a romanticist, his marvelous technique reflects the best qualities of the great masters in the romantic tradition: Corneille, Racine, Molière, Coppée, and Musset, not to mention his decided indebtedness to Shakespeare, the greatest romanticist of them all. He had already created "The Romancers", distinguished by its indefinable charm and its delicate satire—a play which had won the Toirac Prize of 4000 francs, and "The Faraway Princess" with the divine Sarah Bernhardt in the leading rôle; before he thrilled the world with his masterpiece, "Cyrano de Bergerac".

Its first night, declares William Lyon Phelps, "was the greatest first night on any stage within the memory of living man". Even the critics, *mirabile dictu*, were unanimous in their praise. Emile Faguet, conservative French critic, exclaimed: "Mon Dieu! M. Rostand, how deeply I appreciate the fact that you exist"! And the play has not lost its fascination. Other dramas come and go, but "Cyrano" goes on for ever, because the spirit of the theatre goes in all times and in all climes quickly responds to a hero as sympathetic and ingratiating as Cyrano, however improbable the situations in which he figures. The inexhaustible wit, the delicate fancy, the sprightly movement, the gorgeous poetry are admirably designed to stir the blood and to fire the imagination. The drama gathers about the magnetic personality of the incomparable Cyrano. Those who are familiar with the play can readily picture the coloured opening scene in which Rostand with inimitable dramatic skill displays the gradual arrival of the audience for the play in the great hall of the seventeenth century Hotel de Bourgogne. The long, rectangular room is filled at length with a motley crowd of cavaliers, burghers, lackeys, pages, and fiddlers. The chandeliers are lighted. The general bedlam dies down. The play is beginning. Montflury, the star performer, has already declaimed his opening lines, when Cyrano, whose presence no one has as yet discovered, shouts from the middle of the pit, "Rascal, have I not forbidden you to appear for a month"? As everyone looks around to discover the identity of the speaker, "an arm holding a cane leaps above the level of the heads," then "the cane is wildly flourished", and after a short interval, "Cyrano appears above the audience, standing upon a chair, his arms folded on his chest, his hat at a combative angle, his moustache on end, his nose terrifying". The extreme effective-

ness of this ingenious method of introducing Cyrano in general and his grotesque nose in particular, which is, of course, the *pièce de résistance*, the real motif of this amazing comedy, is soon apparent. By Cyrano's nose the drama literally hangs, as the following full-length portrait clearly indicates:

"Hat with triple feather, doublet with twice-triple skirt, cloak which his interminable rapier lifts up behind, with pomp, like the insolent tail of a cock; prouder than all the Artabans that Gascony ever bred, he goes about in his stiff Punchinello ruff, airing a nose. . . Ah, gentlemen, what a nose is that! One cannot look upon such a specimen of the *nasigera* without exclaiming, 'No, truly, the man exaggerates' . . . After that, one smiles, one says: 'He will take it off' . . . But Monsieur de Bergerac never takes it off at all".²

Cyrano fancies his cousin, Roxane, but finds that the course of true love is, in his case, closed to him by the nose that juts out from his face like a promontory. Despairing of winning Roxane himself, he offers his services to the dull-witted Christian, a young gallant of good intentions and excellent character, but wholly incapable of turning a rhyme or of making any headway in the language of the heart. Cyrano, who "tapers to a point his wit like a mustache", helps the bashful Christian with his wooing so effectively that Christian eventually conquers the fair Roxane. Later, when Christian falls at the siege of Arras, Cyrano comforts him by convincing him that Roxane, in spite of her discovery of the trick, is still in love with him. During the whole fourteen years of Roxane's widowhood, Cyrano covers up his true feelings. It is only when he is dying that Roxane half suspects the truth, and even in the last moments he refuses to take advantage of the situation by making a declaration of his love, jesting instead whenever tears threaten. Very skilfully Rostand points his theme, demonstrating conclusively that a grotesque gallant may bear "the white flower of a blameless life"; that the homely exterior may house a noble spirit. Fated to watch others—his intellectual inferiors—win the prizes he so greatly desires, "despite of all, he carries forth unblemished and unbent. . . his plume"! Cyrano teaches us that a physical handicap may be largely discounted by nobility of character. Outwardly homely, inwardly noble, he finds joy in serving others, frequently when to do so can mean only the sacrifice of cherished personal ambitions. Had he been ignoble and base, he might have so *minimized* Christian in the eyes of his cousin, Roxane, that his "all-conquering physical charm" would have had no weight against his essential stupidity. To Christian, Cyrano

2. From Gertrude Hall's translation as found in Dickinson's *Chief Contemporary Dramatists*, Second Series, pp. 357-421, New York, 1921.

suggests pooling their qualities: . . . "Between us we will compose a hero of romance!—I shall be wit to you—you to me shall be good looks". What magnanimity of soul he displays—what superb control of his emotions he evidences in the love scene—one of the most moving in dramatic history! The cruel pathos of Cyrano's situation is unparalleled in lovers' annals. Under the shadow of Roxane's balcony Cyrano takes his stand, and while his own heart beats loudly, Christian climbs up to receive the coveted kiss. It is Cyrano who all the while, his voice cleverly disguised, furnishes the tongue-tied Christian with witty repartee and poetic phrase. It is Cyrano who so cleverly defines the kiss that another will take and the love that another will know:

Roxane (stepping forward on the balcony) "Are you there? We were speaking of—of—of a—

Cyrano. A kiss! When all is said. What is a kiss? An oath of allegiance taken in closer proximity, a promise more precise, a seal on a confession, a rose-red dot upon the letter *i* in loving; a secret which elects the mouth for ear; an instant of eternity murmuring like a bee; balmy communion with a flavour of flowers; a fashion of inhaling each other's heart, and of tasting on the brink of the lips each other's soul!"

It is Cyrano who from the depths of a great despair, ostensibly speaking for Christian, is actually speaking for himself:

Yes, that is love—that wind
Of terrible and jealous beauty, blowing
Over me—that dark fire, that music—

Yet

Love seeketh not his own! Dear, you may take
My happiness to make you happier,
Even though you never know I gave it to you—
Only let me hear sometimes, all alone,
The distant laughter of your joy!

I never

Look at you, but there's some new virtue born
In me, some new courage. Do you begin
To understand, a little? Can you feel
My soul, there in the darkness, breathe on you?
—Oh, but to-night, now, I dare say these things—
I—to you—and you hear them!—It is too much!
In my most sweet unreasonable dreams,
I have not hoped for this! Now let me die,
Having lived. It is my voice, mine, my own,
That makes you tremble there in the green gloom.
Above me—for you do tremble, as a blossom
Among the leaves—you tremble, and I can feel

All the way down along these jasmine branches,
 Whether you will or no, the passion of you
 Trembling. . . .³

Cyrano fascinates, because most of us see ourselves mirrored in him. If it had not been for that ugly nose, he might have achieved—it was a fatal handicap. So with you and me. If it had not been for that unlucky investment, all would have been well. If I had enjoyed advantages of the right sort, things would have been different. Always the fatal “if” to hide behind! Cyrano is inspiring because he refuses to give way to a great misfortune—“It matters not—I fight!—I fight!—I fight”!

Disfigured by such a nose, Cyrano might have been forgiven had he elected to spend his days and nights in ale-house company, drinking sack from a beaker specially constructed to accommodate his huge nasal appendage. But not so Cyrano—he is more interested in championing the cause of the ineffective Christian who, despite his Apollo-like countenance, is wholly lacking in the poetic temperament so essential in the affairs of the heart. Honour was not in stout Falstaff’s scutcheon, but it was rooted in Cyrano’s nature. Sir John is “the cause that wit is in other men”, but Cyrano uses his nimble wit to the discomfiture of those who deserve it and to the advantage of those of duller mould.

Any serious attempt to account critically for the enduring charm of Rostand’s *chef-d’oeuvre* is more or less futile. Suffice it to say, the charm is there. From the moment the reader joins the slowly assembling theatre audience in the Hotel de Bourgogne until Cyrano takes his farewell of his friends in the mellow glow of an autumn day in the Convent garden, he will find himself moving in a world of romance—a new and glorious world, far removed from the ordinary routine of a placid bourgeois existence. Who of us does not welcome a romantic escape from reality, for it meets a deep need of the human heart? The events that transpire in this unreal atmosphere are wildly improbable—the hurly-burly charge of the Gascony cadets led by the reckless Cyrano “with eyes blazing defiance behind his stupendous beak”; the impossible journey of the lovely Roxane to the camp of the besiegers, have all the earmarks of a dramatic Arabian Nights’ Entertainment, but despite all our sophistication, they interest us mightily. We are sorry to have Cyrano finally expire, because his death means a sudden return to the stark world of real people and real happenings. Yet how human this man Cyrano appears! He is no fairy, but one in whom the elements are so strangely mixed that we recognize in him a man whom we

3. Of the half dozen translations of the play that have appeared since Gertrude Hall’s version (N. Y. 1898) Brian Hooker in his translation (N. Y. 1923) has come nearest to capturing the spiritual quality that distinguishes the original.

must admire. In the world that Rostand built, even the pastry cooks write verses, and the roistering cadets are the folk of romance.

Mr. Moses is well advised when he declares:—

I believe the spirit of the theatre goer, in all climes, thirsts for just such brilliancy, just such emotion.⁴

Ours is a scientific age—the days of the frontier have passed for ever, with their pioneers and their romance. It is no longer proper to be caught responding—in public at least—to poetic emotion, but the attraction of this lineal descendent of d'Artagnan and of Dumas's musketeers is still powerful. It is impossible and unwise to resist the type of man who expresses the "wish to die on a fine evening, under a rose-flushed sky, delivering myself of a good *mot* in a good cause!" . . . "Pierced with a noble weapon, by an adversary worthy of oneself, to fall upon a glorious field, the point of the sword through my heart, the point of a jest on my lips!" A fair enough wish, to be sure. But the gay swashbucker of the realm of high romance—Cyrano who has never been quite able to live down his nose—is fated to be killed "in a trap from behind, by a lackey with a log!" "In my whole life I have not had anything I wanted. . . . not even a decent death!" However, he is not snuffed out instantly, for his candle flickers slowly throwing many grotesque shadows before it gutters out in darkness. Cyrano's death, as done by Hampden in the 1927 revival, is in no sense the ordinary death, but in perfect keeping with the heroic life of the

Philosopher and physicist,
 Musician, rhymster, duellist,
 Explorer of the upper blue,
 Retorter apt with point and point,
 Lover as well,—not for his peace!

.....
 De Cyrano de Bergerac,
 Who was everything . . . but of no account!⁵

4. Montrose J. Moses, *Representative Continental Dramas*, p. 438.

5. Gertrude Hall's translation in Dickinson's *Chief Contemporary Dramatists*, Second Series. New York, 1921.