ALLEY
THEATRE

# CYRANO de Bergerac

by
Edmond Rostand
In the Brian Hooker Translation

## Teacher's Guide

Prepared by the Alley Theatre Literary Office
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## Introduction

*Cyrano de Bergerac* has become one of the most-produced plays in the dramatic repertoire since its premiere in 1897. It seems as if there is always a production of the play being performed somewhere. This year alone will see a production in Washington, D. C., a musical version on Broadway, and, of course, the Alley Theatre's presentation. It has been performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in London and is in the repertoire of the Comédie-Française in Paris. The reason it is so popular is simple: people love the soaring romance, exquisite swordplay, and even more exquisite wordplay of Rostand's comedy. And everyone can identify, at least in part, with Cyrano himself, whose great love for the beautiful Roxane must remain unrequited.

For this Teacher's Guide we have compiled information about the play, the playwright, the real Cyrano, and the historical periods of each. It is by no means exhaustive, but I hope it will be a jumping-off point for discussions and activities.

Though there have been several films of this play (including the updated, Americanized *Roxanne* with Steve Martin), it is essentially a story that belongs to the theatre. The play begins in a theatre and Cyrano himself is a kind of performer who is forced to play a complex, multi-facted rôle. With that in mind, I hope the occasion of seeing our production will be an opportunity to discuss the unique qualities of the theatre, how it differs from television and film, and why dramatic works — from those of the Ancient Greeks to Shakespeare to modern playwrights— have always been considered among the most important and enlightening examples of human creative endeavor.

Sincerely,

Christopher Baker
Dramaturg and Associate Director of the Alley's production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*

# Play Synopsis

## ACT ONE: A Performance at the Hôtel de Bourgogne

Prior to a performance of Baro's *La Clorise* at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, people from different walks of life gather to parade their wealth, sell their wares, seduce their lovers, play pranks, and critique the scene and its participants. The crowd is ripe with anticipation. The actor Montfleury has been forbidden by Cyrano de Bergerac, a poet and soldier, to appear on stage. Will he do it? And if he does, what will be the dire consequences doled out by Monsieur de Bergerac?

A new face in the crowd — Christian de Neuvillette, the newest Gascon recruit — spies the beautiful Madeleine Robin, or Roxane, as she is better known, and declares to his friend Ligniére that he is madly in love with her. The drunken Ligniére informs him of the Comte de Guiche's plan to marry her off to his friend, the Vicomte Valvert, so that he may seduce her himself. As Ligniére leaves, a cut-purse warns Christian that his friend's life is in jeopardy because of a poem ridiculing a nobleman; Ligniére will soon be ambushed by 100 men. Christian rushes out to save him.

Montfleury appears on the stage amid applause and jeers. As he commences to recite his lines (terribly), Cyrano threateningly steps out of the darkness and scares him away. De Guiche, bored by this show of Cyrano's wit, persuades Valvert to challenge him. After making a snide comment about de Bergerac's nose, Valvert is defeated by Cyrano during a duel accompanied by an improvisational ballade. The spectators leave the theatre, and Cyrano divulges his own love for Roxane, his cousin, to his friend, Le Bret. Roxane's chaperone enters with message from her charge —Cyrano's presence is requested the next day. Ecstatic with joy because of this message, he learns of the plot against Ligniére and rushes off into the night to single-handedly defeat the one hundred men lying in wait for the drunken poet.

## ACT TWO: The Bakery of the Poets

The next day, in the bakery of pastry chef and poet Ragueneau, Cyrano is applauded by the owner and his impoverished yet eloquent hangers-on. He composes a love letter to Roxane, but when she arrives, she tells him that she loves Christian. Broken-hearted, he hides his letter and agrees to protect the young cadet.

The pastry shop is flooded with people, all of whom wish to congratulate Cyrano on his skillful defeat of Ligniére's attackers. De Guiche even offers to be Cyrano's patron, but Cyrano refuses. Cyrano reveals that de Guiche was the man whom Ligniére offended, and the count storms out. The Gascony cadets beg Cyrano to tell the story of the previous night's battle. He is interrupted every other word by a cocky Christian de Neuvillette, who makes continual references to Cyrano's nose. Initially enraged, Cyrano discovers the identity of the young man and controls his anger for Roxane's sake. He soon can take no more of Christian's comments and orders

everyone but the handsome youth to leave immediately. Cyrano embraces Christian and pledges that he will help him in his courtship of Roxane. Christian tells Cyrano that he lacks the gift of eloquence, so Cyrano gives him the letter he has written to Roxane and encourages him to give it to her as if he had written it.

**ACT THREE: Roxane's Kiss**

Ragueneau is now Roxane's steward, following a suicide attempt from which Cyrano has rescued him, prompted by his wife's decision to run off with a musketeer. Cyrano enters and questions Roxane about her love for Christian, to which she replies that she is completely taken with the young man. Suddenly, de Guiche enters, causing Cyrano to hide. He tells Roxane that the Gascon cadets, of which he is the commanding officer, are being sent to besiege Arras the next day. He announces that this may be their last moment together. Concerned for Christian's safety, Roxane feigns romantic interest in de Guiche and begs him to keep the cadets in Paris, which would spite Cyrano's military pride and provide the count with a fitting revenge. De Guiche arranges for them to rendezvous at a local monastery and exits.

Christian arrives at Roxane's house and refuses to take any more lessons in eloquence from Cyrano. As he courts Roxane with his own words, he soon finds that they are inadequate for her desires. Cyrano remedies the situation by prompting Christian and eventually takes over the speaking of his poetry altogether, attributing Christian's change of voice to Roxane's ability to transform him into a different man. Christian climbs up to the balcony and kisses Roxane.

A monk from the monastery where de Guiche waits for Roxane comes on the scene with a letter. De Guiche will arrive soon in disguise to court her. She pretends that the letter contains direction for the monk to marry her and Christian immediately. She begs Cyrano to detain de Guiche for the duration of the ceremony. He does so by pretending to fall from the moon and explaining to de Guiche the many ways that one could fly to the lunar sphere. Roxane and Christian emerge from the house, wed, and de Guiche breaks his promise to Roxane by handing Christian the Guards' orders to go to Arras. Roxane entreats Cyrano to take care of Christian and to ensure that Christian will write to her every day.

**ACT FOUR: The Cadets of Gascoyne**

At the siege of Arras, the cadets, hungry and miserable, await their fate at the hands of the Spanish. Nevertheless, Cyrano bravely crosses enemy lines in order to deliver the many letters to Roxane that he has written for Christian. De Guiche brags of defeating a Spanish count, but Cyrano exposes him as a coward by presenting him with the white scarf that de Guiche discarded to prevent him from being recognized as a high-ranking officer during the battle. De Guiche informs the troops that they have an hour left to live because they are to sacrifice themselves in battle with the Spanish as a diversion while the Marshal de Gassion retrieves supplies from Dourlens.

A coach bearing Roxane and Ragueneau breaks through enemy lines. De Guiche insists that she must leave at once. She refuses, opting to die with her husband. De Guiche runs away, pledging to return. Roxane distributes the food that she has hidden in the carriage to the hungry cadets. She tells Christian that she would love him even if he were ugly. Christian reveals this to Cyrano and tells the poet that he must tell Roxane everything. He leaves them alone, but as Cyrano is about to tell her, Christian, mortally wounded, is brought in, and Cyrano chooses to keep silent as to the real author of Christian's letters. De Guiche takes Roxane away from the battle as the cadets launch into full scale warfare with the Spanish, bravely led by Cyrano.

**ACT FIVE: Cyrano's Gazette**

Fifteen years later, Roxane lives at the convent of the Ladies of the Cross in constant mourning for Christian. De Guiche comes to visit her and learns that Cyrano visits her every week to inform her of the court gossip and news. Le Bret interrupts his visit and shares his growing fears for Cyrano's life. De Guiche sentimentally states that he envies Cyrano for his ability to live his life to the fullest, whereas he possesses disgust for himself and all of his vain ambition. He warns Le Bret that he knows of a plot to kill Cyrano and exits. Ragueneau rushes in, exclaiming that this attempt has already taken place and that Cyrano is now unconscious in his room.

After Le Bret and Ragueneau leave, Cyrano staggers in, late for the first time in fifteen years. After telling Roxane the news of the court, he requests to see Christian's last letter. He reads it aloud, even in the darkness of twilight. Roxane realizes that he wrote the letter. Cyrano denies it, claiming that Christian's love for her was genuine. Roxane mourns that she has now lost the only man that she has ever loved — twice. As he nears death, he holds aloft the symbol of his unspotted soul: his white plume.

## Edmond Rostand

**Edmond Rostand**

Edmond Rostand was born April 1, 1868, to Eugene Rostand, a bourgeois poet, scholar, and economist. A bright youth who was being groomed by his father to become a lawyer, Edmond attended the Collége Stanislas in Paris, where he studyied French literature, history, and philosophy. While there, he found that he was most interested in poetry and theatre, but still earned his degree in law. He won a prize from the Académie Française in 1887 for a paper about Honoré d'Urfé and Emile Zola.

His first play was an unsuccessful farce: *Le Gant Rouge* (*The Red Glove*) written in 1889. With the appearance of his play *Les Romanesques* (*The Romantics*), upon which the Off-Broadway musical *The Fantasticks* is based, in 1893, and the publication of several popular volumes of poetry, his fame as a literary figure spread throughout France. He soon became associated with the actors Benoît Constant Coquelin and Sarah Bernhardt. Eventually, he would become romantically involved with Bernhardt, who was 23 years his senior and who played many of his leading female roles.

In December of 1897, *Cyrano de Bergerac* triumphantly premiered at the Theatre of Porte Saint-Martin, with Benoît Constant Coquelin as Cyrano. Between December 1897 and March 1899, the play was given 400 performances. For his achievement Rostand was made a Knight of the Legion of Honor. When the production toured to America in 1900, Sarah Bernhardt joined the cast as Roxane. That same year Rostand fell ill and moved to Cambo in the Pyrenees, where he would spend the rest of his life. Rostand was elected to the Académie Française on May 30, 1901, following the success of his play *L'Aiglon* (*The Eaglet*), which featured Bernhardt in the title role. It would be ten more years before he would complete another play, the allegorical *Chanticler*, which, compared to *Cyrano*, was unsuccessful.

**Coquelin as Cyrano in 1897**

In 1913 *Cyrano* attained its 1000th performance, and an operetta by Walter Damrosch entitled *Cyrano* premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The next year World War I broke out, but Rostand's failing health prevented him from participating. Rostand died in 1918 of the Spanish flu. Four years later, his posthumously performed play *La Derniére Nuit de Don Juan* (*The Last Night of Don Juan*), premiered and failed. In 1938 *Cyrano de Bergerac* entered the repertoire of the Comédie Française.

**Drawing of Cyrano by Edmond Rostand**

## The Real Cyrano: Madman or Genius?

**An Engraving of the Historical Cyrano de Bergerac**

Savinien de Cyrano was born in Paris on March 5, 1619. Later, he would add de Bergerac (a village in the valley of Chevreuse, where his family possessed an estate), to his name. A member of the *noblesse de robe* (a class of magistrates who had attained nobility through the possession of offices in the Parisian *parlement*), he studied at the Collège de Beuvais. Finding his instructor unsatisfying, he enlisted, with his childhood friend Henry Le Bret, as a cadet in the regiment of the guards of Captain Carbon de Castel-Jaloux (1639). Cyrano participated in the campaigns of Champagne (he was injured from musket fire at the Siege of Mouzon) and of Picardie (1640). It was during the last campaign, at the siege of Arras, that he received a cut from a sword across his throat.

Abandoning the army in 1641, Cyrano attended lectures in philosophy given by leading intellectuals of the day and became a free thinker. During these lectures, he probably met Molière. An ardent student of science, Cyrano became intrigued by the ideas of René Descartes. It was also during this time that his reputation as a fearsome swordsman was cemented when he engaged in a fight with 100 rogues at the Porte de Nesle.

In 1647 Cyrano's first written works were published: the play *Le Pédant Joué* (*The Pedant Outwitted*) and a collection of his *Lettres*. Though *Le Pédant Joué* was never staged, Molière "borrowed" at least one scene from Cyrano for his own play, *Les Fourberies de Scapin.*

In 1649 he wrote the first part of his *Autre Monde: l'Histoire comique des Etats et Empires de la Lune* (*Another World: The Comic History of the States and Empires of the Moon (Voyages to the Moon)*); then in 1650, *l'Histoire comique des Etats et Empires du Soleil* (*The Comic History of the States and Empires of the Sun* (*Voyages to the Sun*)). The first part would not be published until 1657, and the second not until 1662, through the care of Le Bret, who censored the text. The unexpurgated text would not be published until 1921.

During the Fronde (a civil war in France between Cardinal Mazarin, chief advisor for the young Louis XIV, and the aristocracy seeking to limit the power of the King), Cyrano sided against Cardinal Mazarin, whom he censured in *Mazarinades*. Soon however, he changed camps and

became the protégé of the Cardinal. In 1653 two volumes of Cyrano's works were published, and in 1654 his tragedy *La Mort d'Agrippine* (*The Death of Agrippa*), was performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The perceived impiety of certain lines caused a scandal and the play was quickly pulled from the bill.

Following the publication of *La Mort d'Agrippine*, Cyrano fell ill after an incident in which he was struck on the head by a falling wooden beam. The details of the affair are unclear as to whether this was an accident or attempted murder. He stayed for a time with his aunt, Catherine de Cyrano, and his cousin, Mme. de Neuvillette (Madeleine Robineau), at the convent of the Ladies of the Cross. He died at the Sannois residence of his cousin Pierre de Cyrano on July 28, 1655.


**The Historical Cyrano's Family Crest**

Strangely absent from most biographies of Cyrano de Bergerac is any mention of his relationship with his cousin Madeleine Robineau (part of the inspiration for Roxane). One work does suggest that Cyrano was indeed in love with his cousin, but that their relationship came about after her marriage to Christophe de Champagne, baron of Neuvillette (the basis for Christian), when she decided to prepare him for society. This biography mentions that their relationship ended abruptly when she realized that Cyrano was in love with her. No other biography mentions this matter.

During his lifetime and in the period immediately following it, Cyrano's works were denounced as the writings of a madman by such literary figures as Voltaire and Tallemant des Réaux. During the eighteenth century, his work all but dropped out of sight. It wasn't until the nineteenth century that he was revived and became the legendary hero of Rostand's play. During the twentieth century, Cyrano has been praised as the first science fiction writer and the first aerospace engineer, prompting his works to gain much reconsideration among academicians.

However, today it is Rostand's character that first comes mind when Cyrano de Bergerac is mentioned. This heroic man of poetry overshadows the real Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac.

## Historical Personages in the Play

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| CYRANO DE BERGERAC | Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac (1619-55); French novelist and playwright renowned for his free thinking, humor, and burlesque romances. Author of pamphlets criticizing the aristocracy and clergy. He also composed accounts of voyages to the moon and the sun, regarded by many authorities to be the first science fiction writings in history. |
| ROXANE | Inspired by two people: Madeleine Robineau (1610-57), cousin of Cyrano and wife of Christophe de Champagne, and Marie Robineau (no relation to the former), who was known in society as Roxane. |
| CHRISTIAN DE NEUVILLETTE | Inspired by Christophe de Champagne, baron de Neuvillette, who was married to Cyrano's cousin Madeleine Robineau and who died at the Siege of Arras. |
| COMTE DE GUICHE | Antoine de Grammont, nephew by marriage to Cardinal Richelieu. |
| MONTFLEURY | Zacharie Jacob (1600-67); actor in the Bourgogne. Second only to Bellerose, he performed many tragic roles, often acting as a foil to Floridor, who was selected to replace Bellerose. |
| BELLEROSE | Pierre le Messier (1592-1670); leader and most important actor of The King's Players, the resident company of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. He was accused of affectation of roles by critics, but was considered a fine comic and tragic actor who brought new dignity to the theatre as the trend towards farce was lessening in France. |
| RAGUENEAU | Cyprien Ragueneau (1608-54); poet, chef, and comedian who was employed by Molière in 1653. |

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|---|---|
| JODELET | Julien Bedeau (1600-60); popular farce actor. Many dramatists, including Molière, wrote plays especially for him. Noted for his flour-whitened face and portrayals of the comic valet type of character. |
| LE BRET | Henry Le Bret; lifelong friend of Cyrano, who wrote a short biography of Cyrano in his preface to the posthumous publication of de Bergerac's *Voyages to the Moon and Sun*, which he also edited and abridged. |
| LIGNIÉRE | François Payot de Ligniére (1628-1704); poet and libertine. His life, including the Porte de Nesles incident, is recorded in M. Emile Magne's *Chevalier Ligniéres*. |
| D'ARTAGNAN | Charles de Baatz (1611-1673); officer with an outstanding military career. A character in Alexandre Dumas' novel *The Three Musketeers* bears his name and is modeled on him to a certain extent. |
| MOTHER MARGUERITE DE JÉSUS | Founder of the convent of the Ladies of the Cross. |

## Seventeenth-Century Historical Overview

The seventeenth-century was a period of enormous political intrigue. The Counter-Reformation was in full force, pitting Protestants against Catholics, the latter suddenly filled with religious fervor and determination to destroy all traces of such groups as the French Huguenots. The Hapsburg family, in both the Austrian and Spanish branches, claimed the rights of the Holy Roman Empire and controlled much strategic territory in the name of the Church and used its power to expand the borders of Catholic territory. The Thirty Years' War erupted in 1618 as a violent extension of this religious strife, finally ending with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This agreement ceased the supremacy of the Holy Roman Empire and recognized the sovereignity of states (such as Germany and the Netherlands) which formerly were its subjects. It also gave Protestants and Catholics equal rights. With the breakdown of these large governing entities, nationalism among states increased and individual identity within political boundaries finally began to be established.

**King Louis XIII**

French King Henri IV, having renounced his Protestantism in order to claim the throne, had granted freedom of worship to the Huguenots in order to stop a period of civil war, claiming that "Paris is well worth a Mass." This decision gained him many enemies and reduced the respect of many of his courtiers towards their monarch. He was assassinated in 1610, at which time his son, prince Louis, was only nine years old. The regency was bestowed upon the boy's mother, Marie de Médicis, who in turn transferred her powers to her Italian lover, Concino Concini. At the age of sixteen, the prince, as Louis XIII, seized the throne, had Concini and his wife murdered, and exiled his mother and her chief advisor, Armand du Plessis, a bishop and duke of Richelieu. Though Louis distrusted this man, who was made a cardinal in 1622, it was Richelieu who had reconciled him with his mother, thus ending her exile. The King appointed him to his royal council in 1624.

Cardinal Richelieu thrust France into the latter part of the Thirty Years' War not out of spiritual conviction-as a clergyman, but as a clever statesman wishing to confine the political strength of the Hapsburgs and increase that of the French monarchy. Even after the Treaty of Westphalia, France and Spain continued their disputes until 1659. Not only did Richelieu surpass his goals

**Cardinal Richelieu**

of crushing the powerful Hapsburg family, restoring the nobility's sense of subservience to the monarchy, and eliminating the special privileges that the Protestants had acquired under the rule of Henri IV, he came to be seen as the true power behind the throne during Louis' reign.

The division of social classes in the seventeenth-century was of prime importance to the distribution of wealth and political power during the regency of Louis XIII and his successors. Most people involved in this separation of castes had inherited their titles as part of their family legacy, usually derived from past military service. The clergy, as were the other orders, was classified in a hierarchical manner, with cardinals at the top, then declining down through primates or patriarchs, archbishops, bishops, priests, deacons, subdeacons, acolytes, exorcists, readers, porters, and finally the monastic brotherhoods. The nobility is subdivided, from above downward, into princes, chevaliers, dukes, marquises, counts, barons, castellans, and the gentilhommes, or gentlemen of significant bloodline. The third class of commoners included such professionals as doctors, theologians, philosophers, lawyers, judges, and financiers on the top rung of the societal ladder belonging to the commoners. Below them stood merchants and craftsmen, who were followed by manual laborers. At the nadir of French society dwelled vagrants and beggars.

Richelieu died in 1642, followed that same year by Louis XIII. The prince, now Louis XIV, was, like his father before him, too young to wear France's crown, so his mother, Anne of Austria, claimed the regency. She also relied upon the advice of a clergyman, Cardinal Mazarin, who would follow fiercely in his predecessor's footsteps to make France as powerful a kingdom as it could be. Dubbed "the Sun King," Louis became a symbol of everything grand to which France could aspire. When Mazarin died in 1661, Louis took complete control of his rule, and his will became law. He commissioned the construction of the incredible palace at Versailles in order to house not only himself and his family, but the members of his aristocracy as well. A brilliant move on his part, these accommodations permitted Louis to keep a close eye on his court, preventing any unpleasant surprises within the intricate workings of his administration.

Seventeenth-century France witnessed not only the emergence of these powerful regents, but also of masters in the fields of science, philosophy, and the arts, placing France at the forefront

of the world's intellectual scene. Cardinal Richelieu was one of France's most prominent patrons of cultural enterprises during his day. He founded the Académie-Française in order to codify the country's language and literature. He also commissioned the construction of magnificent theatres and frequently graced the Parisian dramatic scene with his presence. Three of France's most renowned playwrights, Molière, Corneille, and Racine, all wrote within this one-hundred year span.

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, better known as Molière, famous for his farces and comedies of character, became a permanent fixture in French theatre as an actor, manager, as well as a dramatist. His plays ridiculed the excesses of society and criticized the abuses of power by certain groups, such as the clergy. Pierre Corneille's works focus around tragic situations based on heroes of indomitable will who choose death over dishonor. His plays are linked strongly with the triumph of the neoclassical ideal in French drama, a prime example of which is his play *Le Cid*, which sparked a controversial debate over traditional structure and the unities of time, place, and action. Established as rules in 1570, the unities demanded that a play contain a single plot, take place within a twenty-four hour period, and be limited to one locale. Jean Racine's classical verse tragedies were influenced by Corneille but are regarded as superior works. Racine concentrated his writing around the themes of passion and moderation, crafting situations with dynamic women as their protagonists, which provided actresses of his day with significant, thought-provoking roles. In 1680 the Comédie-Française was established in Paris as the world's first national theatre. Opera and ballet were also given public support by Louis XIV, who was himself a dancer.

In the area of science, astronomical advances and mathematical theories shaped not only man's view of the physical world, but of the metaphysical one as well. René Descartes believed that all human knowledge could be known with mathematical certainty on the basis of indisputable first truths. He went further to propose that mind and matter constitute the fullness of reality, which meant that the thinking self alone could create worlds in and of itself, hence his famous maxim, "I think; therefore, I am." Because he lived in the same time frame as such minds as Galileo Galilei, the Italian astronomer whose findings led him before the Inquisition on charges of heresy, Descartes' ideas threatened acceptable views of God and His universe, even though they in essence supported seventeenth-century deistic perceptions of the "Prime Mover." Like Descartes, Blaise Pascal, a mathematician known for his theories of probability, was engulfed in a struggle between his deductive reasoning and his emotions and soul. Some have regarded him as a groundbreaking force in the philosophical concept of existentialism. Following his conversion to Christianity in 1654, he wrote a series of his thoughts, the *Pensées*, in which he deter-

mined that there are more things in this existence than can be perceived through the senses and that the secrets of God's will cannot be deduced in the same manner as a geometrical equation. And, finally in the area of seventeenth-century science and philosophy, a soldier and poet named Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac penned the world's first science fiction novels (which contained logical models for the rocket and the hot-air balloon) and blazed a path to literary immortality with the incredible legends surrounding his life.

## Excerpts from the Play

In the first act, Cyrano disrupts a theatrical performance at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Unimpressed by the poet's actions, one vain member of the nobility, the Vicomte de Valvert, attempts

**José Ferrer as Cyrano in the 1950 film**

to insult Cyrano by stating, "Your nose is very large." Cyrano, just as unimpressed by Valvert's blunt mediocrity, replies with playful sarcasm:

CYRANO

Ah, no, young sir!
You are too simple. Why, you might have said —
Oh, a great many things! Mon dieu, why waste
Your opportunity? For example, thus: —
AGGRESSIVE: I, sir, if that nose were mine,
I'd have it amputated—on the spot!
FRIENDLY: How do you drink with such a nose?
You ought to have a cup made specially.
DESCRIPTIVE: 'Tis a rock—a crag—a cape—
A cape? say, rather, a peninsula!
INQUISITIVE: What is that receptacle—
A razor-case or a portfolio?
KINDLY: Ah, do you love the little birds
So much that when they come and sing to you,
You give them this to perch on? INSOLENT:
Sir, when you smoke, the neighbors might suppose
Your chimney is on fire. CAUTIOUS: Take care—
A weight like that might make you topheavy.
THOUGHTFUL: Somebody fetch my parasol—
Those delicate colors fade so in the sun!
PEDANTIC: Does not Aristophanes
Mention a mythological monster called
Hippocampelephantocamelos?

Surely we have here the original!
FAMILIAR: Well, old torchlight! Hang your hat
Over that chandelier—it hurts my eyes.
ELOQUENT: When it blows the typhoon howls,
And the clouds darken. DRAMATIC: When it bleeds—
The Red Sea! ENTERPRISING: What a sign
For some perfumer! LYRIC: Hark—the horn
Of Roland calls to summon Charlemagne!—
SIMPLE: When do they unveil the monument?
RESPECTFUL: Sir, I recognize in you
A man of parts, a man of prominence—
RUSTIC: Hey? What? Call that a nose? Na na—
I be no fool like that what you think I be—
That there's a blue cucumber! MILITARY:
Point against cavalry! PRACTICAL: Why not
A lottery with this for the grand prize?
Or—parodying Faustus in the play—
"Was this the nose that launched a thousand ships
And burned the topless towers of Ilium?"
These, my dear sir, are things you might have said
Had you some tinge of letters, or of wit
To color your discourse. But wit—not so,
You never had an atom—and of letters,
You need but three to write you down—an Ass.
Moreover,—if you had the invention, here
Before these folks to make a jest of me—
Be sure you would not then articulate
The twentieth part of half a syllable
Of the beginning! For I say these things
Lightly enough myself,
But I allow none else to utter them.

Later, in the third act, Cyrano shows a gentler side of his personality as he becomes Christian's courting proxy in the darkness under Roxane's balcony. In a scene reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*, Cyrano is finally able to speak his heart to the woman he loves, even if it is in the guise of another, less eloquent suitor.

CYRANO
A kiss. The word is sweet—
What will the deed be? Are your lips afraid
Even of its burning name? Not much afraid—
Not too much! Have you not unwittingly
Laid aside laughter, slipping beyond speech

Insensibly, already, without fear,
From words to smiles...from smiles to sighs...from
sighing,
Even to tears? One step more—only one—
From a tear to a kiss—one step, one thrill!

ROXANE

Hush—

CYRANO

And what is a kiss, when all is done?
A promise given under seal—a vow
Taken before the shrine of memory—
A signature acknowledged—a rosy dot
Over the i of Loving—a secret whispered
To listening lips apart—a moment made
Immortal, with a rush of wings unseen—
A sacrament of blossoms, a new song
Sung by two hearts to an old simple tune—
The ring of one horizon around two souls
Together, all alone!

# Cyrano de Bergerac: Science Fiction Writer

Cyrano's First Attempt

Many of the scientific theories that Rostand's Cyrano formulates during the course of the play are based upon the historical Cyrano's writings. The comical scene in the third act between Cyrano and de Guiche in which M. de Bergerac claims to have fallen from the moon is derived from his book *l' Histoire comique des Etats et Empires de la Lune* (*The Comic History of the States and Empires of the Moon*), written in 1649. This book, one part science fiction novel, one part social, political, and religious satire, involves the poet's adventures after he and several of his friends debate the possibility of life on the moon and the philosophical implications if this is the case. Cyrano, determined to find the truth of the matter, consults books of science and alchemy and theorizes methods of ascension to the earth's mysterious satellite. His first attempt propels him heavenward, but nevertheless he plummets back to the ground before he can reach the moon. Due to the earth's rotation (a theory surrounded by the Inquisition's charge of heresy in Cyrano's time) he lands in, of all places, the French colonies of North America. He describes his unplanned journey to Canada in the following manner:

> I fastened all about me a number of little bottles filled with dew, and the heat of the Sun drawing them up carried me so high that I at last found myself above the loftiest clouds. But, since this attraction caused me to rise too rapidly and instead of my drawing nearer to the Moon, as I desired, she seemed to me further off than when I started, I broke several of my bottles until I felt that my weight overbore the attraction and that I was falling towards the earth. My opinion was not wrong; for I reached ground sometime later when, calculating from the hour at which I started at, it ought to have been midnight. Yet I perceived that the Sun was then at the highest point above the horizon and that it was midday. I leave you to conjecture my surprise; indeed it was so great that not knowing how to explain this miracle I had the insolence to fancy that in compliment to my boldness God had a second time fixed the Sun in Heaven to light so glorious an enterprise. My astonishment increased when I found I did not recognise the country I was

> in, for it appeared to me that, having risen straight up, I ought to have landed in the place from which I had started. Encumbered as I was I approached a hut where I perceived some smoke and I was barely a pistol-shot from it when I found myself surrounded by a large number of savages. They appeared mightily surprised at meeting me; for I was the first, I think, they had ever seen dressed in bottles. And, to overthrow still more any explanation they might have given me of this equipment, they saw that as I walked I scarcely touched the ground. They did not know that at the least movement I gave my body the heat of the midday sun-beams lifted me up with my dew; and if my bottles had been more numerous I should very likely have been carried into the air before their eyes. I tried to converse with them; but, as if terror had changed them into birds, in a twinkling they were lost to sight in the neighbouring woods. Nevertheless I caught one whose legs without doubt betrayed his intention. I asked him with much difficulty (for I was out of breath) how far it was from there to Paris, since when people went naked in France and why they fled from me in such terror. This man to whom I spoke was an old man, yellow as an olive, who cast himself at my knees, joined his hands above his head, opened his mouth and shut his eyes. He muttered for some time but as I could not perceive that he said anything I took his language for the hoarse babble of a dumb man.
>
> Sometime afterwards I saw coming towards me a band of soldiers with drums beating and I noticed that two left the main body to reconnoitre me. When they were near enough to hear I asked them where I was....
>
> They carried me towards their main body...and I learned from them that I was indeed in France, but not in Europe, for I was in New France.

After returning home, Cyrano makes several more attempts to reach the moon. He finally succeeds and finds many wonders, among them the Garden of Eden, where he encounters Enoch and Ezekiel of the Old Testament. In another part of the moon, he is captured by bestial natives, given into the custody of a cruel master, and paraded as little more than a side show freak. One day he meets a visiting being who claims to be the Demon (or inspirational muse) of Socrates and who was born in the sun. They entertain themselves with scientific quandaries, and Cyrano is given a lesson in open-mindedness:

> All these things he explained to me aroused in me the curiosity to question him about his birth and death; if in the country of the Sun the individual saw the day by the means of generation, and whether he died through the disintegration of his mind or the

> breaking down of his organs.
>
> "There is too little connection," said he, "between your senses and the explanation of these mysteries. You imagine that what you cannot comprehend is spiritual or that it does not exist; the inference is false, but it is a proof that the universe contains perhaps a million things, to know which you would require a million different organs. Thus, I conceive through my senses the cause of the loadstone's [magnet's] turning to the north, the cause of tides, and what an animal becomes after death; but you cannot rise to these high conceptions because there is nothing in you related to these miracles, any more than a child born blind can imagine the beauty of a landscape, the colouring of a picture, the tints of the rainbow; rather he will imagine them at one time as something palpable, then as something to eat, then as a sound, then as an odour. So if I tried to explain to you what I perceive through senses which you lack you would conceive it as something which can be heard, seen, touched, smelled or tasted, when it is nothing of the kind.

Soon afterwards Cyrano is put on trial by the citizens for the heresy of claiming that the earth (their moon) is inhabited and that it is from thence that he traveled. During the trial, the theories of Aristotle that he uses as his defense are dismissed by his examiners in a cleverly satirical fashion:

> "Aristotle," said they, "fitted principles to his philosophy instead of fitting his philosophy to principles. And at least he ought to have proved these principles to be more reasonable than those of other sects, which he could not do. For this reason the good man must not complain if we agree to differ from him."

Cyrano finally returns to earth and boards a ship to France. As a final thought upon looking into the night sky on his journey home, he ponders humorously (if not a little bit vainly):

> At the port I inquired when a ship would leave for France and when I was embarked my mind was wholly occupied in ruminating on the wonders of my voyage. A thousand times I admired the providence of God, which had placed those naturally impious men [inhabitants of the moon] in a situation where they could not corrupt His chosen [inhabitants of earth], and had punished them for their pride by giving them up to their own self-conceit. And I do not doubt that so far He has put off sending someone who preached them the Gospel, because he knew they would abuse the occasion and that this resistance would only serve to make them merit a harsher punishment in the next world.

# Theatre During the Times of Cyrano and Rostand and Theatre Today

## The Theatre of Cyrano: Seventeenth-Century French Theatre

The 1600s were a period of rebirth in French theatre in many ways. In the years preceding the seventeenth-century, the main sources of theatrical entertainments rested in court ballets, spectacles, and plays derived from Greek and Latin models. The public theatre, aside from traveling players whose repertoire was composed of religious drama and farces, was almost nonexistent. Until 1629 no permanent theatre companies were even allowed within the city limits of Paris without express order by King Louis XIII. But that year a troupe was permitted to settle in the Hôtel de Bourgogne; this company would soon become a symbol of seventeenth-century theatre. In 1634 the Théâtre du Marais was converted from a tennis court (a common occurrence at the time) and became the Bourgogne's main source of competition. Actors allied themselves with specific troupes and rarely switched from one to the other, which created serious rivalries between companies. Audiences frequented theatres occupied by a particular company in order to cheer their favorite resident performers, who generally portrayed similar character types from play to play and adopted distinctive mannerisms unique to their private acting style. The ultimate triumph in the development of French acting organizations came in 1680, with the establishment of the Comédie-Française, the world's first national theatre.

Actors were considered to be pagans by many people during this time and, as in the case of Molière, were often refused the rites of Christian burial. However, theatrical companies flourished in this century because of the patronage of the King and his chief advisor, Cardinal Richelieu. Both showed considerable interest in the arts (the Cardinal was himself a poet and playwright), and French culture strode forward in these years because of the influential precedents of subsidizing theatres. The Palais-Royal, which was the first proscenium stage in France, was originally built in 1641 as Richelieu's own private playhouse. The Cardinal heralded in a new era of design in French theatre by commissioning architect LeMercier to pattern this building after Italian models. His successor, Cardinal Mazarin, followed his example by hiring Giacomo Torelli, an Italian scenic designer, to remodel the theatre by installing a chariot-and-pole system to shift scenery. Although Mazarin and Louis XIV possessed more of a penchant for opera and ballet, during their reigns such writers as Racine and Molière prospered. Molière's troupe eventually came under the sponsorship of the king.

Apart from scenic design, another Italian import to French theatre was the *commedia dell' arte*. Literally, "comedy of professional players," *commedia* is an improvisational theatre style based

upon stock character types and scenarios whose origins are in the Roman Atellan farces. The plots centered around comic or romantic situations. Popularized in Italy during the Reniassance, companies of *commedia* actors toured throughout Europe. Their influence in seventeenth century French drama, especially within the plays of Molière, was considerable. In fact, Molière patterned many of his plays after these models in order to survive financially against the fierce competition of the touring companies of Italian actors. Acting styles for performance included highly stylized physical humor and the use of masks. The characters in *commedia* generally fall into one of the following types: young lovers, braggart warriors, meddlesome, miserly old men, doctors, and interfering servants with clever gifts of repartee. Of these, Harlequin is the most famous character of the *commedia* troupe. Punchinello was another famous character who

***Commedia* Actors — Engraving by Jacques Callot**

possessed a huge hooked nose, a humpback, and wore a long pointed cap. Some other popular character names are Cassandre, Isabelle, and Léandre.

The overshadowing concept of the French 1600s, in society as well as the arts, was that of verisimilitude (the appearance of being true or real). Dramatic structure was bound by the unities of action, time, and place. Further, the neoclassical idea of decorum demanded that limits of propriety be adhered to on the stage. Despite the affectedness of social graces and clothing typical of the era, moderation in all things was the rule of the age. In the plays of Jean Racine, for example, sinful thoughts are as unforgivable as sinful actions. Often plays and playwrights that pushed the limits of these "rules" were censored. Both Molière and Corneille faced closings of plays that are now considered masterpieces

Theatre-going was as much a social event in the seventeenth-century as it was one of entertainment. Performances occurred during the day because regulations demanded that audience

members be allowed enough time that they could be in their homes before dark. Since starting times for performances were indefinite, spectators arrived hours early so that they could obtain good seats and so that they could see (and be seen by) the rest of the crowd. Seating was available in the tiered galleries on either side of the stage, but most of the people watching the production stood in the pit directly in front of the stage. Members of the aristocracy were even known to disrupt the play by demanding to sit on the stage itself. Food and drinks were sold by vendors. Armed with swords and daggers, patrons commonly found themselves in the midst of fights.

### The Theatre of Rostand: Late Nineteenth-Century Theatre

With the emergence of such dramatists as Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, and Emile Zola, the late 1800s were a time of experimentation in realistic and naturalistic styles of writing and performance. Plays such as *Ghosts, Miss Julie, The Cherry Orchard*, and *Thérèse Raquin* forced audience members to confront social problems (such as syphillis and mental illness) that previously had been ignored and left outside the theatre doors. The ultra-realism of nineteenth-century life and the triumph of new scientific theories that displaced man's previous feelings of dominance over the world around him soon merged with his art. Similarly, scenic design was catapulted into the realm of realism by André Antoine and his Théâtre Libre. Antoine felt that each particular production demanded its own unique setting, one which could exist as easily in the building down the street from the Libre as within its walls. The ideas of Charles Darwin and Henri Bergson became as commonplace in the playhouses as they were in the laboratory. Darwin's studies in biology convinced him that all living things, man included, evolve (or change) from lower forms to higher ones. He postulated that the driving force of behavior was instinct, or "survival of the fittest." This angered many religious leaders and their followers because Darwin seemed to have eliminated God's providential hand from the workings of the universe and the biblical view of creation now had a logical, scientific alternative. Bergson, a scientist and philosopher, believed that there is a impelling force (the *élan vital*, or life force) on the cellular level which not only drives cells to divide and function in certain ways, but determines human and animal behavior as well. This meant that man's actions and emotions were nothing but chemically-induced reactions. With the ideas of these and other thinkers, man was transformed from the humanistic master of his own fate to little more than an animal, severing his divine link to God as the paragon of creation.

Yet, a school of writers still existed who were determined to hang on to the romanticism that theatre had provided audiences for generations. Following in the footsteps of Victor Hugo,

**Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet**

whose *Hernani* in 1830 was a marvelous tribute to spectacle and an incredible deviation from the neoclassical unities of the early 1800s, a group of Neo-Romantics in the last years of the nineteenth-century composed dramas centered around fantastic heroes and lovers. Often based upon pseudo-historical figures or allegories, the plays of the Neo-Romantics reacted against the scientific and philosophical theories that reduced man to a mere chorus member on life's stage. Their larger than life characters mirrored the actors that played them, for the nineteenth-century was a period of starring performers who often delegated the repertoire of the theatres they acted in. Writers created characters especially for the likes of these titans of the boards, such as Sarah Bernhardt and Benoît Constant Coquelin. Bernhardt was famous for her portrayals of tragic roles, which included cross-gender interpretations of such male characters as Hamlet. One such playwright was Edmond Rostand, whose poetic dramas contain swashbuckling heroes, moonstruck lovers, and metaphorical passages of wit and beauty.


**Drawing of *Ubu Roi* from the 1908 Paris Production**

Another movement in the world of the theatre in the late 1800s was that of symbolism, with which authors like Strindberg, Hauptmann,and Ibsen (in his later stages of writing) experimented in order to explore alternatives to realism and naturalism. Aurélian-Marie Lugné-Poë, who took over the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in 1892, produced antirealistic plays which incorporated reduced uses of scenery, stylized acting, and often grotesque characters. Such a play was Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, which premiered in 1896. Its title character is amoral and violent and presents a scathing indictment against the bourgeois society that Jarry despised. Jarry's *Ubu* plays are considered to be direct precursors to the twentieth-century Theatre of the Absurd. Technically, theatre artists were also experimenting with light and setting. Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig proposed that these elements should be as fluid and three-dimensional as performers. Craig further theorized the supremacy of the director and recommended that actors be as flexible as scenic and lighting elements, manipulated by the director with no will or ego of their own.

## The Theatre of Today

Theatre today can be identified by the tremendous diversity in styles that exists on the modern stage. From the glitziest Broadway musical to the most intimate avant-garde performance in a dark, renovated basement, theatre in the twentieth-century encompasses many different influences, production methods, and messages. The majority of new plays presented in the United States are rooted in contemporary realism. However, because of the evolution of film in the twentieth-century, the theatre has become more aware of its own unique conventions, such as the immediacy of performance, which involves live actors performing for a live audience during a specific moment in time and space. Film and television often portray realistic scenes and situations more accurately than they might be portrayed on a stage because of advantages like shooting on location. Contemporary writers and theatre artists, therefore, have placed an emphasis on their craft's inherent theatricality. Works which focus on the psychologically diverse elements of humanity, such as dreams and the subconscious, commonly exist side-by-side with realistic plays in the modern repertoire. In these works, situations and characters are not always what a person would see in the real world, but what a person might see in a fantasy or a nightmare. Some playwrights, like Sam Shepard, blend the two forms together in such a way that reality and metaphor are inseparable. In the middle of this century Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright whose works include *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *The Threepenny Opera*, developed theories that centered around the idea of alienating, or distancing, the audience so that it was always aware that it was witnessing a theatrical event. In order to do this, his plays utilized the practices of integrating songs into the play, extensive narrative, and the employment of scenic devices such as screens upon which captions of text were projected.

Brecht, like many current dramatists and designers, borrowed from many other cultures and nontraditional dramatic genres. American theatre is influenced by theatrical customs from countries all over the world. In particular, the theatre of the Orient, with its stylized speeches, dancing, music, singing, and elaborate costumes, has had a lasting impact on twentieth-century Western theatre. In the early 1900s Constantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre developed an ultra-realistic acting style in performances of plays by Chekhov, Turgenev, and others. American theatre artists traveled to Russia to be trained in these methods. Important organizations such as the Group Theatre and the Actors Studio are based in this particular technique of acting. In the southwestern United States, Mexican theatre, with its elaborate scenery, magnificent costumes, singing, and dancing, plays a major role in expanding the variety of American performance styles. Luis Valdez and his troupe, El Teatro Campesino, have contributed to the modern theatre by way of their short plays (called *mitos* or *actos*) which comment on the trials and tribulations of Hispanic life.

With incredible technology developing every day, stage scenery and effects have become incredibly advanced over the last century. Electricity and computers provide incredible versatility to scenery, lights, and sound in order to create almost magical environments on stage. An Army helicopter lands in the midst of a screaming crowd of Vietnamese citizens. Lasers create holographic images of characters which interact with live human beings. Effortlessly, quietly, and before your eyes, one elaborate set disappears to be replaced by an even more elaborate one, or even transforms into something completely different. People disappear into seemingly solid mirrors. Scenic artists also attempt to design the entire space, rejecting traditional theatrical configurations and incorporating the audience area so that it feels a part of the action on stage; in some cases, the border between the stage and the audience is impossible to determine.

## Glossary of Terms from the Play

HÔTEL DE BOURGOGNE — Full name: Théâtre de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne. Parisian town house residence of the Dukes of Burgundy (Bourgogne) in the 14th and 15th centuries. In 1548, when it had been partially demolished, a theatre was built on its site and named after the original building. The building fell out of use in 1873.

*LA CLORISE* — A pastoral play by Balthasar Baro.

LOUIS XIII — (1601-43); king of France. Son of Marie de Médicis and Henri IV. He forcibly withdrew his mother's regency and exiled her to Blois. During his rule, he became dependent upon his chief political advisor, Cardinal Richelieu. He violently opposed the Spanish and Austrian Hapsburgs. In 1635, he declared war on Spain and showed great strength and courage in defending Paris against attack. In 1638, his wife, Anne of Austria, whom he disdained, unexpectedly bore him a son (who would become Louis XIV) after 20 years of childless marriage.

BURGUNDY/ BURGUNDIANS — The Dukes of Burgundy, a section of France famous for its wine since the first century BC, whose progenitor was Philip the Bold. These Dukes dominated French politics in the 15th century. In 1465, the last reigning duke, Charles the Bold, challenged the power of Louis XI and lost. In 1477, the geographical area which contained Burgundy, ceased to exist and was absorbed into the crown lands.

ROTROU — Jean de Routrou (1609-50); playwright. Succeeded Alexandre Hardy as the principal dramatist of the Bourgogne. Adapted Spanish drama based upon the themes of love versus honor with few few characters of any depth. Rotrou offered Corneille his severest competition.

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| CORNEILLE | Pierre Corneille (1606-84), playwright. Linked to the triumph of the neoclassical ideal in French drama. After a controversial debate and subsequent trial over the structure of his tragedy, *Le Cid*, he was praised for his strict adherence to the unities of time, space, and action, even though the play is highly improbable. His dramas generally focus around a hero of indomitable will who chooses death over dishonor. |
| BALATHASAR BARO | (1600-50); obscure playwright and novelist. |
| *LE CID* | (Written 1636-37); Corneille's tragedy based upon the Spanish national hero El Cid Campeador, Ruy Díaz de Vivar. In one 24-hour period, the Cid falls in love, conquers the enemy army, kills the father of his lover, and is able to work out a happy ending. Brought before the French Academy for its violation of decorum and its controversial use (abuse) of the unities. |
| CADET | Nobleman serving as a common soldier or noncommissioned officer in order to acquire military experience and knowledge that he would later use as an officer. |
| L'EPY | Francois Bedeau; French actor and brother of Jodelet. |
| LE BEAUPRÉ | Madeleine Le Moyne; comedic actor at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. |
| MARQUIS | Nobleman of hereditary ranking below a duke and above a viscount. |
| MADAME LA PRÉSIDENTE AUBRY | Françoise de Villandry; noble woman who frequented the famous artistic, social, and musical salon at the Hôtel de Rambouillet. |

ACADEMY — Académie Française; formed in 1635 by order of Cardinal Richelieu and modeled after Italian models of academies, the Academy is made up of a limited group of 40 intellectuals dedicated to the study and codification of French language and style. Boudu, Boissat, etc., were among its earliest members.

MUSCATEL — Rich, sweet wine made from muscat grapes.

JACQUES CALLOT — (1592-1635); French artist known for his engravings of important social and theatrical events, most notably his dynamic illustrations of characters and costumes from the *commedia dell' arte.*

CARDINAL RICHELIEU — Armand Jean de Plessis (1586-1642); clergyman who possessed the true power behind the throne during the reign of Louis XIII. Political advisor to Louis's mother Marie de Médicis, he reconciled the two during her forced exile. A wealthy patron of the arts, he commissioned the construction of the Sorbonne, where he is buried, and dictated the artistic taste of his day by wielding his political power, which was felt in France until the French Revolution. He also commissioned the construction of his own private theatre, which would after his death come to be called the Palais-Royal.

PHILIPPE DE CHAMPAGNE — (1602-74); artist famous for his portraits of contemporary political figures, especially those of Cardinal Richelieu.

CHANTICLEER — In animal fables, an arrogant rooster who is married to a nagging hen, Pertelote. His story has been immortalized in Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales.* Rostand also wrote a play based on this character.

PUNCHINELLO — A famous character from the Italian *commedia dell' arte* who possessed a huge hooked nose, a humpback, and wore a long pointed cap.

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| FLANDERS | At the time of the play, the French were fighting the Spanish for possession of Flanders, then part of the Spanish Netherlands. |
| ARISTOPHANES | (448-380 BC); Greek comedic playwright. Famous for plays such as *Lysistrata, The Frogs*, and *The Birds*, Aristophanes included in his plays scathing lampoons at other major writers of his time, such as Euripides and Socrates. |
| CHARLEMAGNE | (742-814 AD); Frankish king and Holy Roman Emperor. He initiated the intellectual, artistic, and ecclesiatical awakening known as the Carolingian Renaissance. |
| FAUSTUS | Figure from Renaissance legend and folklore. Faustus was said to have sold his soul to the demon Mephistopheles in return for magical powers. Goethe and Marlowe wrote dramas concerning Faustus, and Gounod wrote an opera about the tale. |
| "WAS THIS THE NOSE..." | An intentional corruption of a text from Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* which, speaking of Helen of Troy's beauty, reads in the original: "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships/And burned the topless towers of Ilium?" |
| BOEOTIAN | A barbarian from the region of Boeotia in central Greece. |
| LAUNCELOT | Famous French member of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table and adulterous lover of Queen Guenevere. |
| SPARTACUS | Died 71 BC; Thracian gladiator in Rome who led a slave revolt known as the Third Servile War. |
| CLEOPATRA/CAESAR/ BEATRICE/DANTE | Famous pairs of lovers from Roman history and Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*. |

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| MUSKETEERS | Members of a *corps d'elite* of the French King's royal personal guard armed with sabers and muskets. Commanded by the king in person, they were trained not only in the art of war, but in that of being valorous courtiers as well. |
| "SIC TRANSIT GLORIA" | Latin for "Thus passes glory" or "Fame is fleeting." |
| DUENNA | Elderly woman who acts as governess, companion, and chaperon to the daughter in a noble family. |
| MAHLERBE | Françoise de Mahlerbe (1555-1628); court poet under Louis XIII. Laid down the laws for purification of the French language. Mahlerbe sought to create a more literary language and one that rejected any hint of the provincial. His work typically was in the form of some kind of glorification of the king. |
| BACCHANTES | In Greek mythology, female worshippers of Dionysus, or Bacchus, usually depicted in a frenzied state of devotion, sometimes initiated by the consumption of wine or by divine visitation by the god. Having no will of their own, the Bacchantes (or Maenads) often performed acts of senseless violence, an example of which is the decapitation of Orpheus after his return from Hades, where he had failed to rescue his lover Eurydice from death due to his disobedience of the gods' commands. |
| ULYSSES/PENELOPE | After the Trojan War, as Ulysses was making his long, adventurous voyage home (as recorded in Homer's *Odyssey*), the hero's wife Penelope stayed faithful to her husband, despite discouraging rumors about Ulysses' fate. |
| BENSERADE | Isaac Bensérade (1613-91); opera librettist and poet. Commissioned by Cardinal Mazarin, Richelieu's successor, to write an opera with ballet sequences in which Louis XIV could appear as the primary dancer. |

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| SAINT-AMANT | Girard de Saint-Amant (1594-1661); French writer of the 17th century who converted from Protestantism to Catholicism. |
| CHAPELIN | Jean Chapelain (1595-1674); French Academy leader and poet who documented the trial of Corneille's *Le Cid.* |
| D'URFÉ | Honoré d'Urfé (1567-1625); French novelist whose heroes were taken as paragons of noble virtue and chivalrous manhood. |
| THEOPHRASTE RENAUDOT | (1586-1653); founded the first French newspaper in 1631, originally titled *La Gazette.* |
| GAZETTE | Generic French term for newspaper. |
| MARSHAL DE GASSION | Jean Gassion; famous Marshal for the French forces during the 1640s. |
| "AGRIPPINE" | *La Mort d'Agrippine* (*The Death of Agrippa*); a play written by the historical Cyrano. Its content was said to be heretical. |
| DON QUIXOTE | Title character from Miguel de Cervantes' classic novel of Renaissance Spain. The Don was a hopeless romantic who believed himself to be a knight-errant determined to restore the age of chivalry and find the fair maid Dulcinea. He saw every situation in the most positive manner possible and embarked upon many adventures and misadventures with his servant, Sancho Panza. One adventure featured Quixote jousting a windmill, thinking it to be a horrible ogre, the result of which was his unfortunate plummet into the mud. |
| *MERCURY* | An annual review featuring controversial, satirical pamphlets on every possible topic and personage in French society, focused on influencing public opinion in an age when there was no national press. |

NORMAN

Scandinavian pirates, who in the 9th century, plundered Europe. They settled in Normandy, France, and, under the leadership of William the Conqueror, raided England in 1066.

CHLORIS, PHYLLIS

Typical names of fair shepherdesses to whom pastoral poems and songs were addressed.

GASSENDI

Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655); French mathematician and philosopher. The real Cyrano is said to have studied with him.

D'ASSOUCY

Charles d'Assoucy, onetime friend of Cyrano; criticized Cyrano for his "false atheism" and morally reprehensible life.

CAPUCHIN

Roman Catholic religious order, begun by Matteo de Bascio in 1525 as a reform of the Franciscans. Characterized by the pointed hoods (*cappucino* in Italian) on their habits, their order is strict, revering austerity. They also wore beards. They played an important role in the Counter Reformation, particularly in the areas of preaching and foreign missions. In 1619, they became an independent order, the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin. In 1622, they were instrumental in founding the Congregation of the Propagation of Faith in Rome. One of the largest orders in existence today, they number around 15,000. Cappuccino, the beverage composed of espresso coffee mixed with frothed hot milk or cream and often flavored with cinnamon, is named after the likeness of its color to that of the hoods of the monks.

ARRAS

A city, now in France, which was captured by the French from the Spanish in 1640, when it was part of the Spanish Netherlands.

REGIOMONTANUS — Johann Müller (1436-76); German mathematician and astronomer who is said to have made a mechanical bird capable of flying.

PAGE — One employed to run errands or carry messages.

VOITURE — Vincent Voiture (1597-1648); fastidious poet who quested to transcend the commonplace language by utilizing metaphors and careful discrimination so as to avoid anything that would not lend refinement to one's thoughts and daily activities.

DIOGENES — (412-323 BC); Greek Stoic philospher, known for his eccentric behavior. He is said to have lived in a tub and paraded around Athens at midday with a lantern in search of an honest man. He believed only in practical good as the means to truth; freedom could be achieved by reducing needs to the barest minimum and happiness by returning to nature.

THE SIEGE OF ARRAS — Battle negotiated by Richelieu in order to display his (and France's) strength to the Spanish Hapsburgs; it lasted several laborious months and ended in a brilliant battle which delivered the town to the French on August 9, 1640.

DESCARTES — René Descartes (1596-1650); French philosopher and mathematician. He believed all human knowledge could be known with mathematical certainty on the basis of indisputable first truths. Matter and mind constitute the fullness of reality, which meant that the thinking self alone could create worlds in and of itself. Famous for the saying, "*Cogito ergo sum* (I think; therefore, I am)."

MOLIÈRE

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (1622-73); son of a prosperous court upholsterer and furniture maker, he became one of France's most prolific and popular playwrights and actors. Known primarily for his farces and comedies of character, Molière based many of his scripts on models of the Italian *commedia dell' arte*. His plays ridiculed the excesses of 17th century French society and criticized the abuses of power by certain castes, such as the clergy.

"SCAPIN"

*Les Fourberies de Scapin* (1671); a play based upon the manipulative tricks of the character, Scapin, who is derived from the *zanni*, or servant from Italian *commedia*. One scene, purported to have been stolen from Cyrano's play *Le Pédant Joué*, involves the repeated, senseless blusterings of the old man Geronte, in which he bellows, "What the devil was he doing there?!"

SOCRATES

(469-399 BC); Greek philosopher and teacher of Plato. Believing the highest meaning in life is attained through self-knowledge, he tried to convince his fellow men of the importance of self-analysis. He was convicted of impiety and the corruption of the young men who sought to learn from him. For this, he was made to drink poison.

COPERNICUS

Mikotaj Kopernik (1473-1543); Polish scientist and cleric. Theorized that the sun was the center of the universe, which opposed the geocentric view proposed by Aristotle.

GALILEO

Galileo Galilei (1564-1642); Italian scientist. Known for his advances in the field of astronomy, he was accused of heresy by the Inquisition when he questioned the theories of Aristotle and proposed the heliocentric Copernican model of the solar system, in which the earth revolves around the sun. The Church silenced him for the remainder of his life, but during his trial, after signing a confession that his theories were unfounded, he is reported to having exclaimed, "*Eppur si muove* (But the earth *does* move)." He invented the telescope, an invention which brought him fame, but also took away his eyesight due to his studies of the sun. His theories about falling objects contributed greatly to the studies of Sir Isaac Newton.

BENOÎT CONSTANT COQUELIN

(1841-1909); 19th-century French actor who originated the role of Cyrano in 1897 and to whom the play is dedicated. Known as Coquelin the Elder (to differentiate him from his son Jean, who originated the role of Ragueneau in *Cyrano de Bergerac*), he is regarded as one of the greatest actors of his day. He began acting with the Comédie-Française in 1860 and played all of the great roles of the repertoire. He left in 1892 and thereafter played at Sarah Bernhardt's Theatre of Porte Saint-Martin. A brilliant actor capable of reciting the longer *tirades*, or lengthy dramatic speeches, he collaborated with Rostand on *Cyrano*, conceiving the functions of certain scenes himself depending upon his tastes, abilities, or weaknesses.

## Note On Translations and Critical Overview

The critic Max Beerbohm praised *Cyrano de Bergerac* when he saw its original French incarnation by stating, "[if] not a classic, it is at least a wonderfully ingenious counterfeit of one." However, when he witnessed an English performance of *Cyrano* in 1900, he likened it to a séance in which there is no visitation by a spirit. He felt that all of the soul of the title character had been drained from Rostand's French. In 1923 Brian Hooker made a bold attempt to translate this masterpiece for a production starring American actor Walter Hampden. This verse rendering soon became the accepted English text and, in fact, became synonomous with the play's title to British and American audiences. It was this version which supplied José Ferrer with the text for his outstanding Broadway production and the motion picture which followed, garnering him an Academy Award.

In 1971 Anthony Burgess prepared an English adaptation for the Guthrie Theatre's production starring Christopher Plummer. However, not only did Burgess translate differently than Hooker, he also changed the five-act structure of the play, omitting scenes and modernizing certain passages so that a 1970s audience would feel at home viewing it in performance. In 1972 when Lowell Bair translated Cyrano into prose, he attempted to return to Rostand's original flair for allusion, which Hooker had altered in his attempts to remain faithful to the verse form, and to provide a text with literary references that English-speaking audiences would comprehend instantly. In 1975 Christopher Fry prepared an English *Cyrano* for the Chichester Festival revival production directed by José Ferrer. His version varies from its predecessors by adhering to the Alexandrine rhyming couplet form that Rostand's original French follows.

Relatively little critical attention has been paid to *Cyrano de Bergerac* in comparison to its immense popularity. Max Beerbohm, a critic and contemporary of the playwright, accurately predicted that *Cyrano* would become a standard fixture in the theatre. He observes:

> The part of Cyrano is one which, unless I am much mistaken, the great French actor in every future generation will desire to play. Cyrano will soon crop up in opera and ballet. Cyrano, is, in fact, as inevitably a fixture in romance as Don Quixote or Don Juan, Punch or Pierrot. Like them, he will never be out of date. But prophecy is dangerous? Of course it is. That is the whole secret of its fascination. Besides, I have a certain amount of reason in prophesying on this point. Realistic figures perish necessarily with the generation in which they were created, and their place is taken by figures typical of the generation which supervenes. But roman-

> tic figures belong to no period, and time does not dissolve them.
> (*Around Theatres*, p. 6)

The poet T. S. Eliot lamented that Rostand's comedy contains a lost rhetorical style, one in which characters are allowed to be larger than life. In his essay, "'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama," Eliot states:

> In sentimental drama it appears in a dramatic form, when we are evidently intended to accept the character's sentimental interpretation of himself. In plays of realism we often parts which are never allowed to be consciously dramatic, for fear, perhaps, of their appearing less real. But in actual life, in many of those situations in actual life which we enjoy consciously and keenly, we are at times aware of ourselves in this way, and these moments are of great usefulness to dramatic verse. A very small part of acting is that which takes place on the stage! Rostand had—whether he had anything else or not—this dramatic sense, and it is what gives life to Cyrano. It is a sense which is almost a sense of humour (for when anyone is conscious of himself as acting, something like a sense of humour is present). It gives Rostand's characters—Cyrano at least—a gusto which is uncommon on the modern stage....*Cyrano* satisfies...the requirements of poetic drama. It must take genuine and substantial human emotions, such emotions as observation can confirm, typical emotions, and give them an artistic form; the degree of abstraction is a question for the method of each author.
>
> (*The Sacred Wood*, pp. 83-4)

## Questions, Activities, and Discussion Points

**QUESTIONS:**

1. What does Cyrano's white plume symbolize? Explain its importance as a motif throughout the play.
2. It is said that appearances can be deceiving. How do physical appearances guide the actions of Cyrano, Roxane, and Christian?
3. What is Cyrano's motivation to help Roxane and Christian in their courtship of each other?
4. Is Cyrano a typical hero? Why or why not?
5. Is there a balance in the play between Cyrano's involvement in its action and that of the other characters? If Cyrano were not so prominent in the plot, how would that change the play?
6. How and why does Rostand use comic relief in the play?
7. At the beginning of the play, is Cyrano justified in his opinion that Roxane would laugh at him, were he to reveal his love for her? How does this affect the last scene?

**ACTIVITIES:**

1. Many film and television versions of *Cyrano de Bergerac* exist (Gerard Depardieu's French film and Steve Martin's *Roxanne* are recent examples), most of which are available on videocassette. The story of Rostand's play is also the basis for comic and romantic situations in other movies and television shows. View some of these versions and compare them with the original. In what ways are they the same? In what ways are they different? Write your own version of the story using modern situations and characters.
2. Make a list of social events of today that have a similar atmosphere to the theatre of Cyrano's time as seen in the first act.
3. Cyrano's science fiction writings contain many ideas (such as hot air balloons and rocket propulsion) which were centuries before their time. In his era, people considered him mad to think that such impossible concepts and inventions would ever work. Now some of them are common facts that aid us in our everyday lives. Read some current science fiction books. What writers of today are inventing imaginary machines, medicines, etc., which may become reality in the near future?

**Discussion Points:**

1. Compare/contrast the major characters in the play and trace their development from the beginning of the play to the end: Cyrano, Roxane, Christian, de Guiche, Le Bret, Ragueneau.
2. Discuss the idea of beauty as presented in the play.
3. Discuss the theatre of the seventeenth-century as it is described in the play.
4. Cyrano has been interpreted as a dark comedy with a tragic conclusion. Support/refute this interpretation.
5. Trace the theme of deception in the play and discuss its significance.
6. If you were going to direct *Cyrano de Bergerac*, how would you conceptualize it? Discuss how lighting, costumes, scenery, music, and acting styles would be approached. Be ready to defend your concept if someone were to ask you why you made certain choices.

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