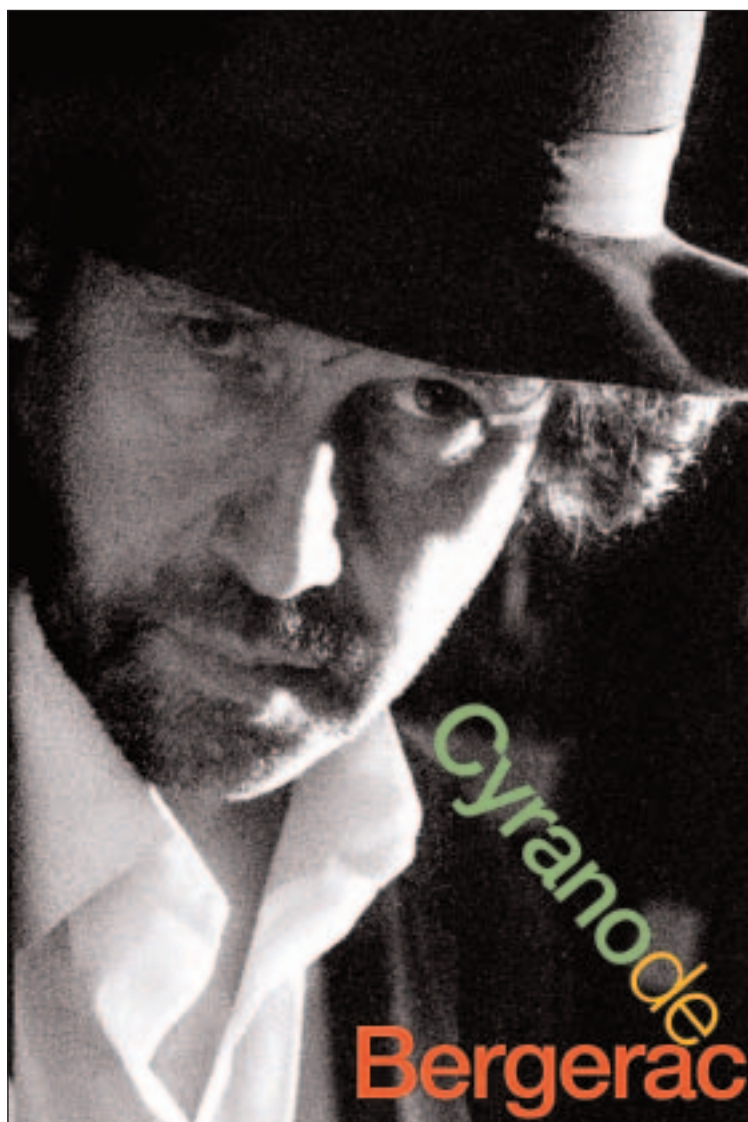


## Cyrano de Bergerac Workpack

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**Cyrano de Bergerac**  
by Edmond Rostand in a new  
version by Derek Mahon  
Poster photograph by  
Stephen Cummiskey,  
designed by Michael Mayhew

**Further production details:**  
[www.nationaltheatre.org.uk](http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk)

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# The play

## Background

Edmond Rostand (1868-1918) was a French playwright, born in Marseilles in the south of France. The son of an accomplished journalist and translator, Rostand wrote from an early age and at 22, upon marrying the French poet, Rosemonde Gérard, presented her with *Les Musardises*, his first published volume of poetry. He wrote several other plays, including *The Romancers* and a verse drama, *The Faraway Princess*, which he wrote for the actress Sarah Bernhardt, before writing *Cyrano de Bergerac* at the age of 29. Rostand wrote his 'heroic comedy' as a reaction against the social realism that dominated the late 19th-century French theatre. He wanted to inspire a return to the great French verse dramas of the past. The play premiered on 28 December 1897 and was such a success that it ran for 500 performances. Widely translated and performed ever since, the play famously introduced the word 'panache' to the English language. Rostand originally wrote *Cyrano* for a particular actor, Constant Coquelin. In his dedication of the play, which makes huge demands on the actor playing *Cyrano*, Rostand wrote: 'It was to the spirit of *Cyrano* that I intended to dedicate this poem. But since that spirit has passed into you Coquelin, it is to you that I dedicate it.'

Claire Price (Roxane) and  
Stephen Rea (Cyrano)  
photo Ivan Kyncl



Rostand's play drew on many aspects of the life of the real *Cyrano de Bergerac*, a 17th-

century poet and soldier, whose writing had fascinated Rostand since he was a boy. The real *Cyrano*'s writing covered many genres including poetry, love letters, political pamphlets, plays and a novel which was a mixture of science fiction and philosophy. He did join the Cadets de Gascogne under Castel-Jaloux, quarrel with the actor Montfleury and fight one hundred men at the Porte de Nesle. He was badly wounded at the battle of Arras, and killed many years later by a falling beam, which may or may not have been an assassination attempt. Several other characters in the play are based on real people: *Cyrano*'s cousin was called Madeline Robineau (*Roxane*'s real name in the French original is Madeline Robin) and she married a baron, Christophe de Neuville; De Guiche, Lignière and Ragueneau are all based on historical figures. Like Rostand's fictional *Cyrano*, the real *Cyrano* was a singular, freethinking man of integrity, who refused to conform. Rostand's central story, however, is pure invention, as indeed was the size of *Cyrano*'s extra large nose. *Cyrano*'s passionate, but unspoken love for his cousin *Roxane* and the ensuing love triangle between *Roxane*, *Cyrano* and *Christian* was entirely Rostand's creation.

## This Adaptation

Derek Mahon, a modern Irish poet, was commissioned by the National Theatre to write a new version of the play. Howard Davies gave him a brief to write an iconoclastic adaptation of Rostand's play which highlighted the politics and brought out the idea of *Cyrano* as artistic rebel. He could use references in the text from any period he chose and not be limited to the 17th-century, when the play was originally set. The majority of Derek Mahon's poetry is written in free verse, as is this adaptation of the play, which means that both the rhyme structure and metre of the lines are irregular.

# The Play

## **This Production**

Stephen Rea and Howard Davies had been discussing a production of *Cyrano* for several years; Stephen had asked Howard to direct a production for Field Day, an Irish theatre company of which Stephen is a founder member. The idea behind that original production was to create a very rough and ready production with a minimal budget that would of tour to town and church halls throughout Ireland. They envisaged using a basic set and would try to place the audience at the centre of the action of the play so that events would happen around them, rather than creating a formal audience | performer relationship. It was later agreed that the play would be presented at the National Theatre, so they came to a decision that rather than do an 'all-the-trimmings' production, that they could include the play within the Travelex £10 Season, which limits the budget of a production in order to keep the ticket prices at £10. Howard and Stephen saw this as a way to be able to draw on their original ideas about the piece and create a rough theatre version of the play which would involve the audience fully in the story.

## **Rough Theatre**

In his book *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook writes about rough theatre: *'It is always the popular theatre that saves the day...the theatre that's not in a theatre, the theatre on carts, on wagons, on trestles, audiences standing, drinking, sitting round tables, audiences joining in, answering back'*.

The notion of rough theatre is that you create a piece of work which is exactly that – rough. Rather than create a literal world, set in the correct period with a realistic and exact visual palate, instead you suggest or evoke ideas. By doing so you place the text and the performers at the centre of the production and ask the audience to use their imaginations.

# The Play

## Synopsis of the Play

### The Theatre

An audience, made up of every aspect of society, academics, middle class theatregoers, thieves and officers – are finding their way into a theatre. A young man, Christian de Neuchateau, has recently moved to Paris, and arrives at the theatre with his friend Lignière, a journalist and distinguished drunk, to look for a woman he has seen and admires. He doesn't know who she is, but Lignière has promised to tell him her name. As they wait for her to arrive, Lignière meets his friends Ragueneau and Debray who ask where Cyrano is. There is no sign of him, but they fully expect him to arrive because he has declared that he will not allow the actor, Montfleury – who is due to appear that evening – to perform in the theatre for a month. The women arrive and when Christian points out the woman he loves, Lignière identifies her as Roxane, Cyrano's cousin. Lignière explains that the Count de Guiche, a nephew of Richelieu and a very powerful man, is also in love with Roxane and because he can't marry her himself intends to marry her off instead to Valvert, a complaisant and dim noble. Lignière has just published a newspaper article about this intrigue, and so hastily leaves the theatre when de Guiche arrives. A thief attempts to rob Christian, but Christian catches him and in order to be released, the thief tells Christian that de Guiche has arranged for a hundred men to ambush Lignière on his way home as revenge. Christian leaves the theatre immediately to warn his friend.

As soon as the play begins and Montfleury starts to perform, Cyrano appears in the audience and forces him to leave the stage. Cyrano challenges anyone in the audience to a duel, which all decline. The crowd is restless having been denied their play, and so Valvert, to impress both de Guiche and Roxane, steps forward to challenge Cyrano, by telling him that his nose is too big for his face. Cyrano humiliates Valvert by suggesting a multitude of other possible insults about his nose which Valvert might have come up with had he been more inventive. Against de Guiche's advice,

Valvert refuses to back down and so he and Cyrano duel. Cyrano declares that he will not only duel, but will make up verses whilst fighting. Cyrano mortally wounds Valvert.

Once the crowd leaves, Cyrano admits to his friend Debray that he is madly in love with Roxane, but dare not speak to her because he believes that she couldn't love him on account of his grotesque appearance. Roxane's confidante Geneviève arrives and tells Cyrano that Roxane wants to meet him early next morning, to tell him something important. Cyrano is filled with excitement at the thought that she could possibly return his feelings. Opportunely, Lignière arrives back at the theatre having received the message about the waiting ambush, to ask Cyrano for his help. Cyrano relishes the opportunity and sets off to fight the hundred men himself.

### The Bakery

The following morning, Cyrano arrives at Ragueneau's coffee shop, anxious and excited about meeting Roxane. Ragueneau's poetry group arrives with news of an amazing fight the previous night, during which a single man fought a hundred other men and won. Cyrano decides he is too nervous to speak to Roxane and writes her a letter, which he plans to leave for her to read. He has yet to sign it when she arrives. Roxane tells Cyrano that she is in love with Christian de Neuchateau, a young, handsome, cadet, whom she has seen at the theatre and who starts today with Cyrano's regiment, the Gascon Cadets. She asks him to protect the young man, as she fears he will be victimised by the other cadets because he is from the North. Cyrano, though broken hearted, agrees. Roxane leaves, requesting that Christian write her a letter.

### The Fencing Club

Cyrano arrives to great celebration about his magnificent fight with the hundred men. As he celebrates with his cadets, de Guiche arrives to offer Cyrano the patronage of his uncle, Richelieu. Cyrano refuses on the grounds that Richelieu would want to alter his work. De Guiche leaves and the cadets celebrate once

# The Play

more and insist that Cyrano tell them about the previous night's fight. The cadets warn Christian that under no circumstances should he mention Cyrano's nose. Christian decides that to prove his valour and bravery to his new regiment, he will constantly interrupt Cyrano's story of the fight with mention of Cyrano's nose. Cyrano asks the young man's name and, realising it is the man whom Roxane loves, clears the room of all the cadets. He tells Christian that Roxane is in love with him and that he must write her a letter. Christian despairs he is no writer and utterly unable to speak when around women. Cyrano suggests that they work as one, with Christian providing the beautiful face and Cyrano the letters and speeches, to win over Roxane.

## Roxane's Balcony

Several months later, it is a mid-summer evening at Roxane's house. Cyrano and Christian have been successfully wooing Roxanne, and she is in love with Christian. De Guiche arrives at her house to inform her that he has been sent to war, as have Cyrano's regiment. Worried about Christian, Roxane persuades de Guiche not to send the cadets to war. He agrees and, presuming that this means that she likes him, arranges to return to her later that night to see her alone. Cyrano arrives, and Roxane tells him that she wants Christian to come to her to talk about love. When Cyrano tells Christian, he refuses

Stephen Rea  
(Cyrano de Bergerac)  
photo Ivan Kyncl



Cyrano's help and goes to meet Roxane alone. He finds himself unable to speak and she leaves, very disappointed at his inadequacies. Cyrano suggests that they could salvage the situation if Christian hides under Roxane's balcony whilst Cyrano prompts him from the shadows. They start to woo Roxane, but Christian cannot hear Cyrano properly and so they swap over. Cyrano, under the cover of night, is able to tell Roxane for the first time that he is in love with her. Just as Christian ascends Roxane's balcony to kiss her, a friar arrives with a letter from de Guiche to say that he will be returning imminently for his promised visit. Roxane reads the letter and then reads it aloud to the Friar, pretending that it contains an instruction for the Friar to marry Roxane to Christian immediately. Cyrano stalls de Guiche whilst the marriage takes place, by pretending he has fallen from the moon. The couple are married and de Guiche takes his revenge by sending Cyrano, Christian and the cadets off to the war.

## The Battle

The Gascon Cadets are besieged in the middle of battle. They are starving to death and on the verge of mutiny, unable to get any provisions. However, Cyrano is still managing to slip through the enemy lines twice a day to send letters to Roxane, without Christian's knowledge. De Guiche arrives and tells the cadets that they have been selected to hold off an attack by the enemy's forces. He has arranged this through a double-agent as a diversion, which will enable another regiment to go for supplies, but means almost certain death for the cadets. Roxane arrives at the battle in a cart with Ragueneau, desperate to see Christian since he sent all of his heartfelt letters to her. She has brought food and drink for the men. Roxane tells Christian that since the night under her balcony when he spoke to her in a new voice, she now loves him with a new devotion, that she loves him only for his soul and not just because of his beauty. Christian realises that she in fact loves Cyrano and orders Cyrano to tell Roxane everything and let her choose whom she loves. He leaves them alone to talk about it but is killed by the



# The Play

first bullet fired. Cyrano resolves never to tell Roxane the truth. As de Guiche carries her to safety, Cyrano leads his men to defend their standard, Roxane's lace handkerchief.

## The Convent

Fifteen years later, Roxane lives in a convent, still mourning Christian. Cyrano visits her weekly. On this day de Guiche has come to visit. He meets Debray, also visiting, and warns him that Cyrano may be attacked because he is making so many enemies with his writing. Ragueneau arrives whilst Roxane is showing de Guiche out, and tells Debray that Cyrano has in fact been attacked, by someone who dropped a concrete block on him in the street. They both run off to take care of him. Despite his mortal head wound, Cyrano arrives to see Roxane and, because he is dying, asks to read Christian's last letter. He starts to read it a loud and Roxane, recognising the voice from the night below the balcony, realises that it was Cyrano all along whom she loved. Debray and Ragueneau return to find their friend dying. Cyrano refuses to die sitting and instead seeing all his old enemies coming towards him, and he stands to fight with them. He dies in Roxane's arms.

Stephen Rea (Cyrano) and  
Claire Price (Roxane)  
photo Ivan Kyncl



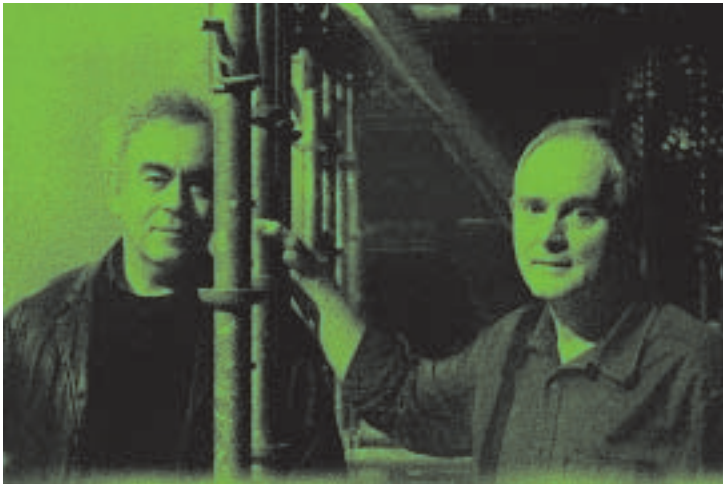
# Interviews

## The Director Howard Davies

### ***What drew you to this play and what were your original ideas about it?***

I'm not quite sure what drew me to the play. Most of the plays I've done, I haven't seen other productions of. I hadn't seen *Mourning Becomes Electra* or *All My Sons*, I'd only read them. I'm disinclined to do plays that I've seen. But on this occasion, I had seen a Terry Hands production – which I thought was fantastic – and the Dépardieu film. The Terry Hands production was elegant and sort of expressionistic, whereas the Dépardieu film was fantastically muscular, and I was reluctant about the play because I thought, Well I've seen two good versions. I couldn't find my voice on it. But Stephen Rea asked me to consider it five years ago for Field Day. He said then that it would be a piece of rough theatre because they would be travelling round to village halls and town halls. There would be no budget and simply the financial constraint that he was imposing made me feel that, if I were to accept, I would have to think of the play as vibrant and improvised. I remember a company coming over from France years back and performing a production at the Roundhouse about the French Revolution, called *1789*. It was a promenade production – the audience were moved from place to place

William Dudley and  
Howard Davies  
photo Stephen Cummiskey



and the action happened in and around them – and I thought, If I can do it like that, it would be fun. Sword fights in and out of the audience, 'round and through them, almost making the audience flee from the battle scene or be present at the wooing scene, so that they would become participants in the play. Of course, doing it at the National Theatre as rough theatre is quite hard because it's a sophisticated building and a sophisticated audience. I felt that I would try it, nonetheless, as part of the £10 Season, which would provide us with that feeling simply because there's no budget to stage it on a big scale. I would try my best to do something iconoclastic in the way that Stephen had described.

It was a slow process, but I began to feel that I could give the play a certain improvisatory vigour which was obviously missing in a film set in the period it was meant to be set and also in a stage production set in that period. I wanted to liberate it from that period and make it much more to do with the class structure of the late Victorian era. I also began to like the play for what it said about Cyrano, who became for me an artistic rebel. The play was about how you speak out through your art, through your poetry, through your whole demeanour, and through your attitude to both your life and work when you find yourself in opposition to the standards of the day, to the government of the day and to the values that you see exhibited in the society around you. I started to see Cyrano as someone who was oppositional, who gained his energy by being in a state of perpetual opposition. In other words, it's rather young. I think what happens when you are in your teens or early twenties is that you define yourself by being opposed to what you see around you, opposed to the rules of the system that you're working in, be it school or university or college, or to the rules that your parents set down. You define yourself by breaking those rules, by challenging those rules. It's as if Cyrano has never really grown up. It's admirable in a way but he's also only gone through half of his development; and I thought that he had a kind

# Interviews

of vitality and spirit that started to appeal to me a lot.

***This new adaptation of the play by Derek Mahon is quite different in style to many of the more traditional adaptations. How did you arrive at it?***

The idea of having a poet write the version rather than a dramatist was an accident rather than design. It was arrived at in discussion both with Stephen Rea and the National. I felt that as an Irishman Derek Mahon would write in a manner that suited Stephen's voice. But I also felt that it would be quite interesting to see how a poet would handle the original verse format of the play. In several other versions I have read, dramatists who can't handle the verse tended to put most of it in prose and only the higher points of the play in verse. In other words they decided that most of the dialogue can just be said naturalistically and in contemporary terms. I thought it would be very ambitious to do what the original play had done, which is to do the whole play in verse. The deployment of Derek with his poetic sensibility was a risk because he's not a dramatist, but I think it has paid off because the verse is really, really striking. My brief to him was that I wanted it to be iconoclastic. I described my feeling about Cyrano being a rebel and I wanted the play to be about the artist as rebel, rather than about the artist as decorator or flatterer, or just reflector of society; of somebody who was absolutely defining themselves in opposition to it and speaking out, come what may. I didn't know this at the time, but I suspect, now that I've got to know Derek, that actually I was appealing to something in him: his understanding of Cyrano was very acute.

***What do you think have been the biggest challenges for the actors in rehearsing this play?***

The verse. I think it is very hard. Also, I spent ten years working at the Royal Shakespeare Company, avoiding doing Shakespeare because I didn't trust myself with verse drama. I wanted constantly to make Shakespeare socially realistic, I wanted to make him modern and contemporary and what I did,

whenever I did Shakespeare (and I didn't do much of it), was to avoid the verse at all costs. I think there is a natural habit amongst actors and directors to hope that the verse will stand up for itself, in the hope that they don't have to concentrate on it. Well that is untrue, it won't. They have to get their heads around it. It's been extremely difficult for some of the younger members who've got huge talent and huge energy, but lacked experience in that area, but they've done a fantastic job. Some of the more experienced people, like, Stephen (Rea), Malcolm (Storry), Anthony O'Donnell or Claire Price knew how to handle it. That was the hardest part of it and of course typically I didn't address the verse. I did what I've done in the past, which is to hope that somehow it would miraculously get there by itself. So when I say that's been the hardest part of it I'm sort of lying, because that implies that I worked at it, which I didn't. It's been the hardest part because it was the most dreaded part, rather than occupying all my time.

***What have been the specific directorial challenges of this play for you?***

Well, I set myself a challenge over and above the play, which was to break a few rules. I took the idea of a fencing school from the Dépardieu film, and a few other French movies I've seen. I briefed Bill Hobbs (the fight director) and Christopher Bruce (the choreographer), that I wanted to have a fencing practice with 22 people on the stage, that went from the regimented discipline of sword-fighting and would break invisibly and subtly into dance, and then break back again. There was no particular reason for it – it's not in the play – but I just liked the idea of messing with the audience's expectations, and I also felt that fencing is very much like a sort of dance, it's very beautiful to watch, people move extremely gracefully, very, very lightly on their feet, and it's fantastically dextrous. There is only one difference from dance: the intention is to kill somebody. That idea seemed to correspond with the idea that what you have in Cyrano is a poet, a swordsman, a philosopher and a wit. He's Renaissance man, capable of doing anything, but the paradox is that he is a poet and also a killer. So I set up big hurdles for myself to achieve and it's not



# Interviews

as if I achieved them, it's the people I've asked to collaborate with me who are doing most of it. But I had to keep an eye on it and monitor the taste and the style, and the demeanour and the attitude, and that made me sweat a lot halfway through rehearsals because I thought, This is such an ambitious idea, will we ever make it work?

I also found that the structure of the play is not easy. There is an opening scene in the theatre which is chaos, I mean deliberately chaos, as written by Rostand. But to present chaos in a way that is recognisable as chaos and not just a mess is very difficult to stage, and sometimes I look at it and think we haven't achieved it. There is a battle scene which, if you look at it on the page is almost unreadable - you don't know who's speaking when and where and who's addressing what – and I think we've pulled that off much better, I'm actually very proud of that.

What is brilliant about the play, is that Rostand takes a leading character who is ugly and who, despite his panache, despite his apparent confidence, actually doesn't really believe in himself. He certainly doesn't believe in himself in relation to the woman he loves and cannot possibly believe in himself as having any worth. All that is very original and rather wonderful and that's what makes it so durable and popular, because it's wildly romantic. But in the middle of all that you have characters who come on, who are from a tradition of French writing. What's difficult for a director and for the actors, is that there are such characters as Ragueneau, who belongs to a tradition of the French comic pastry chef, I suppose the most recent and recognisable form of which would be the Swedish chef from the Muppets. There is something about the Europeans who find chefs very comic; they are usually regarded as portly, generous, friendly and fat. But Ragueneau is sort of underwritten. He comes on in the second scene, he is a friend of Cyrano's and someone Cyrano can rely upon, but after that scene you hardly see him again until the last scene of the play. He turns up in the battle with Roxane and again

that's a comic entrance where they arrive in disguise. In the original, they arrive in a carriage having driven through the enemy lines. The carriage has lots of contemporary parallels, a car stuffed with bombs today in Israel or Iraq. Actually it is stuffed with food and they have gone through their own lines to provide the starving troops with food. That's meant to have lots of brio and bravura and be very witty, and the French would have applauded and loved it, but belongs to a tradition that we don't recognise in this country. I also think that there is an inherent problem in the last scene, the death scene, when Cyrano finally reveals that he is the true lover of Roxane, and the writer of all the letters that she has fallen in love with. That's very romantic, very painful, very emotional and very moving. There then follows an extremely long death scene. If I were doing a film I would probably just cut that in half, but out of respect to both the actor and the version, I have let it be intact. But our instinct, once we spot the fact that he's dying, is to say, 'well, die'. Die romantically and die well, but what we don't want to hear is his own obituary, and yet that is what he gives us. Again that's part of a tradition of writing that doesn't sit easily with us now. There are problems with the play, but that's the case with any play from any period. For example there are huge problems, for instance, with how you finish off Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* which suddenly goes on to a completely different tack.

## ***Did any of your ideas change during the course of rehearsals?***

I did change my mind about certain things. For example, there is a piece of doggerel verse when Cyrano is introducing his cadets to the Comte de Guiche, and the verse smacks of insubordination and suggests that he is being rather rude. He's being rather street smart in his response and I thought that it would be clever to do that as a rap, a pastiche of something contemporary. Only in the preview week did we cut that out, because it just looked as if the production or I, as the

# Interviews

director, was trying to be too clever. I had to be quite ruthless and ask, What does that add to the play? A lot of what we've added to the play is very entertaining, but it also has to move the story forward, and there are a couple of moments which risk not moving the story forward, that we've kept in the production for pure entertainment. Like the fencing school – it doesn't move the story forward, but I think people enjoy it. That balance between narrative structure – which you have to observe – and entertainment value, is a difficult balance to achieve and hopefully we've pulled it off.

Howard Davies  
photo Ivan Kyncl



# Interviews

**The Designer**  
**William Dudley**

## ***How did you and Howard arrive at this design?***

Well, we talked a lot with Stephen Rea. He had a strong idea – which Howard agreed with – that it should be a very physical production and not about huge costumes. The period of ‘D’Artagnan and the Three Musketeers’ is a period of big hats, big boots and big beards, which would cover up the actors too much. You can only really get away with that in film. Howard then said, Find a set that we can run about on and be physical, climb, and fight on and that has a lot of zest.

The Olivier is based loosely on a Greek amphitheatre which is what many parliaments throughout the world have as their preferred shape because it’s seen to be more democratic. I think that France was the first country in modern times (at the time of the French Revolution), to use that semicircular classical shape. So I thought, Well, the French style of acting in classical theatre is very grand and very expressive, and I imagine the French deputies – their version of MP’s – are much the same. I thought, Well this is right, we should make this a thing of oratory; let’s think of the shape of the auditorium as a natural French shaped place for argument.

From that we started to develop the main elements of the set. When someone speaks in that world, they go from their seat on the semicircle to the dais to speak to the delegate, so I thought, Well we only have two audience aisles that the audience upstairs cannot see, so I designed two walkways which give a very focused position for anyone entering or leaving.

The other big element, naturally, is the scaffolding wall. We were looking for an emblematic notion of a teeming, vigorous city, as Paris undoubtedly was at any stage in the last millennium, really. We wanted a notion of people and encounters at street corners;

people bumping into each other, and a band that wanders through. We knew we were going to have an itinerant band very early on. And we knew that these people are, in modern parlance, street people. Cyrano lives on the street, he’s got a tiny bed-sit somewhere, but he’s really out with his friends, fighting and writing. I’d found a picture of a painting by a Polish artist, which was actually given to me by Roman Polanski, and the artist was someone he knew quite well. I had found it separate to my work on the show. It looked like – without actually going into every detail of every window and cornice and decoration – it had a sense of what an ant heap, or a teeming city is and those houses in France that are about six storeys high, often with concierges. The way they lived was much more ‘vertical’ than in England at the time, and I thought, Well, if you strip away all the decorative features, that’s what you’ve got there really; you’ve got a teeming, rabbit warren, all those things that suggest creatures living too close to each other. I thought it also looked like the knuckles of fingers, which is what that artists style is: it’s a bit like H.R. Giger, the man who painted ‘Alien’. I thought of the scaffolding I’d used for a couple of shows that I’d designed inside a shipyard in Glasgow. It’s a good, flexible system, so I conceived of this wall of scaffolding that had a sense of a labyrinth within, so people could go up, and upon. It would be regular, you’d know where the next grip was and it would have a kind of rhythm to it. It’s not like traditional scaffolding, which has clamps at each corner: this cup and clip system means there’s a regular pattern of clips. The fastenings look like an articulated joint, or like a backbone. It gives it a kind of Gigerish, animalistic feel, and by making it asymmetrical with different holes and apertures and ledges, you can – with lighting and by spreading the cast all over it – give it a teeming sense of Paris, without getting into creating Parisian buildings or cobble-stoned streets.

We knew from Derek’s translation that it was a scatological and iconoclastic script, that was determinedly anti the rather fey romanticism

# Interviews

that the piece has or can have, and it was trying to find a more vulgar and vigorous setting, because our modern perception of a poet is not the same as Rostand's. I'd just seen the film 'Gangs of New York' which morally I sort of loathed, but I had to admire the calibre of the design and I thought, Well, we're in a world like that. I suggested that we chose a slightly later period than the film, and we opted for the 1880's, the Fenian period, the Molly McGuire's and various Irish movements with all the anger that flew up with Parnell and the chance of a united independent Ireland was dashed. You'd get a tension that could lead, as it did in the 1880's, to running street battles. So we started to model up the wall.

## ***How does using the revolve alter the way that you design a show?***

Well, any revolve is interesting because it turns a piece of scenery into a sculptural installation, except that the audience don't walk round it, it circles in front, so they get an exploration of pure form. For me, one of the triumphs of this production is its sculptural quality, taking the entire Olivier space as a dancers' and an actors' space and paradoxically to that, having a large bridge shape which they could dance or flow through. I thought it looked like old London Bridge or the older bridges in Paris or the bridge in Florence, as they swept through it, evoking a city, not describing it, nor 'dotting

Stephen Rea (Cyrano)  
photo Ivan Kyncl



the i's and crossing the t's'. This leads to the notion that it is, in effect, a kind of Shakespearean set. Having worked with archaeologists on the site of the Rose, and on various advisory panels when the Globe was built in response to the Archaeological discovery of the Rose, I started thinking about Elizabethan and classical theatre. Also, if you look at any prints or paintings of the Commedia dell'Arte, which directly relates back to Roman and then to Greek theatre, you have the frons scaenae. Frons scaenae is the back wall of the stage in these amphitheatres with five entrances – one central entrance, two adjacent to it and then two at the very edge, often at right angles. I was looking at the Cyrano set model and I thought, Well, blow me down, I've actually given myself a frons scaenae in scaffolding, because it touches those balconies at the sides of the auditorium, which we call the ashtrays. It links up and you suddenly have both the French senate and a classical theatre, with its scenai. It is crucial to link it up to the ashtrays so that you've got a shaped classical space for oratory. I can't say that I actually planned it, it was just natural to have five entrances, five gaps at street level.

The Olivier is a problematic space. It pretends to be an amphitheatre, but it isn't, because the space doesn't thrust out into a true Orchestra. The amphitheatre was really a semi-circle in which the actors came out with the audience way behind them. It's not a warm intimate space. It's occasionally great for something ritualistic like Greek drama, but most designers are exercised to warm the space up and make a sense of intimacy. That upper circle is incredibly remote. My personal pleasure is that the walkways, even though we weren't able to use them nearly as much as I had hoped, mean that the audience in the upper circle are very close to the lead actors. They're getting the lead actors literally in their face without being disturbed: they don't climb over and exit up there, the exits are much more comfortable.

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***So this set was designed deliberately to benefit the upper circle?***

Yes, and it has been a joy because, having established such strong lines, the set and the show more or less designed themselves. I remember the two or three nights that we worked out the placing of the set, it seemed to design itself. If you go 'end on', you've got your leading lady pretty close to the dress circle, but not remote from the stalls, and the stalls have the true dynamic of looking up. In the stalls, you are down there with the men who adore her, and she seems unassailable, and beyond their reach. I thought, This is the right use of theatre dynamics. It doesn't necessarily have to be to do with set, but some audience members get a better look at the leading actors, because Stephen and Zubin are up there, but those who aren't close to the higher up actors, are able to experience the dynamic that the two characters go through. In a three-dimensional theatre like the Olivier, it's not a picture frame, though it's not truly a thrust, like the Swan at Stratford or the Crucible or indeed the Cottesloe. We've achieved it when we're at our boldest.



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## The Choreographer Christopher Bruce

### ***What were your initial discussions with Howard about how the choreography would work in this production?***

Howard said to me that he had an idea that the choreography would develop out of the direction and narrative and he would somehow turn something like the fencing school or the battle into dance – something which hadn't been done before, particularly with this play. I sort of sensed what he was saying, but neither of us quite knew how it could come about and it wasn't until we got into rehearsals and started messing about, that we developed the idea. The first week of rehearsal was a week of choreography, way ahead of time in a sense, before I knew the context. What we did he liked very much.

### ***Is that how you work, do you develop ideas as you are rehearsing?***

Well obviously I have ideas that I come into the rehearsal room with, but I make the actual choreography in the studio with the people; I bounce off the people I'm working with. I make things for specific people, specifically the three girls (dancers) on this production; I've worked with them lots, so I hope that I choreograph to their strengths.

Stephen Rea (Cyrano),  
Claire Price (Roxane) and  
Malcolm Storry (Count de  
Guiche) photo Ivan Kyncl



### ***Did having the set in rehearsal change the way you worked at all?***

Oh yes, one couldn't really have done a lot of the things I have done without the set being in the rehearsal room. Like the hanging figures at the end of the requiem sequence. It was very difficult to choreograph on the set and most of the choreography had to happen on the floor. I've used the set where I thought it was relevant, but I didn't want to use it for the sake of it.

### ***The movement is very integrated with the play as a whole, were you aware of making that happen?***

I was conscious that even if we were going to do a dance like the pastry dance – the Almond Tarts dance – I didn't want the play to stop. All of the dancing is there because it has a purpose, whether to develop and help the scene, to change the scene to another place, or to express what I felt the play was saying. What I have concentrated on is not making little ballets everywhere, but on staying very loyal to the 'rough theatre' concept and making choreography that was not too sophisticated, so that it felt as if it could have come out of what the actors were doing. For the most part you can't tell who are the dancers and who are the actors, and that was one of my main objectives.

### ***Do you approach choreography for theatre differently than you would for a dance piece?***

Yes, it's very different. To start with, when you are making a ballet, on your own the choreography is in a sense the writing, and you are also the director. You are very much in control. Whereas in a production like this, whoever I've worked with – Terry Hands, Michael Bogdanov, Richard Eyre and now Howard, they are the boss, I'm serving their vision in a sense. I had to make sure that I felt before I took the job that I could identify with Howard and, even if it all seemed very vague, that I could go with this production. You never

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know how it is going to turn out. But yes, you do approach it differently. I'm just one of the elements in the production and I'm collaborating with a lot of other people. In one sense that is a bit frustrating because I'll have ideas I want to push. But where Howard has been so wonderful, is that he has asked me for my thoughts, he's asked me for my notes and taken on board quite a lot of little ideas I've suggested. I haven't collaborated that deeply with most of the other directors. You're always conscious that when you're in charge of a production you can't have someone nibbling away at you all the time. I didn't want to be interfering – if I wanted to say something to the actors, I spoke to Howard about it first – so you're very much part of a team. It's also wonderful not carrying the total responsibility. And although I said it can be frustrating, I've found this a very enjoyable production to work on. It doesn't feel like I've done much; there's not much dancing in the show; it's about a quarter the work of a ballet and it's not particularly tough choreography. It's about making appropriate choreography and making it tone in with everything else and not stand out. In a sense what we're trying to do is stop the audience applauding and keep the play moving. My instinct is always to do that, even in my ballets I've tried not to make applause points.

***How did you arrive at creating the characters that appear at the end of the theatre scene and did you know they were going to link to characters that appear in the battle?***

Well, I didn't want to make the dance separate. We had to make the Commedia dell'Arte dance part of the scene change (out of the theatre scene) and the characters are Cyrano's spirits. He is a clown in a way, and they are symbolic of a side of his character – those playful, witty asides, like the Commedia dell'Arte character playing the fool but very knowing, like a Greek chorus commenting on the whole thing. They are all sort of kindred spirits of Cyrano. He likes his musicians and he loves his artists and dancers, so the idea of

this Commedia dell'Arte troupe came out of the script. They began to rehearse behind the scene and it just made sense to make them kind of comment as if they are saying 'look he's going to fight', it's like children commenting and I hope that, even though they don't have swords, it works like that. I don't want to make a lot of irrelevant movement which has nothing to do with the soul of the piece. So in a sense that limits what you do choreographically, you just have to do the essential movement. When I make a ballet, too, I limit myself in the vocabulary I use, just picking certain colours and a certain vocabulary.

***How did you work with the composer Dominic Muldowney? Did the music provide you with a lot of ideas?***

Yes. I already had the ideas but it was nice that a lot of the music ran parallel to my ideas, so that was a relief. We work well together, we've worked together on a big piece before and I know his work. Our minds are on the same wavelength and he's made some very inspiring stuff which has been easy and inspiring to work to. There were two or three possible pieces for the procession, and I chose this one because I felt the spirit was right. I liked the Irish references which are built into it because it gives the play another level which is very much built around Stephen and the fact that he's an Irishman. You can relate the fiction of the wars and the suffering to what has happened in Ireland, you can read it on several levels.

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## The Actor Claire Price

### ***Were you already familiar with the play before this production?***

Yes, but I've only ever seen it. I saw the 'Roxanne' film with Steve Martin, which I loved because it had a happy ending – I can't stand things that have a sad ending – and I also saw a theatre production with Anthony Sher playing Cyrano and Alexandra Gilbreath playing Roxanne, which came to the West End about four or five years ago, and was an extremely interesting evening for me. Lots of things were happening in my life at the time that all seemed to be played out in this play. So Cyrano has huge significance for me because of that night.

### ***Is that partly what attracted you to doing the play this time?***

Yes, absolutely, because it sort of encapsulates a situation I've been in – loving somebody who doesn't know for a long time – that was quite interesting for me. I also think it's a masterpiece. It's one of those one-off's that are brilliant, and you can't really fault it – it's one great idea, it's very simple and it means something to everyone who watches it. It's absolutely awash with love – that's what's so nice about it, everybody loving everybody else.

Zubin Varla (Christian) and  
Claire Price (Roxane)  
photo Ivan Kyncl



### ***Howard said that he thought that the most difficult thing for the actors has been the verse. Would you agree with that?***

Yes, it took us ages to learn and I don't know quite why that was. I'm not criticising Derek here because I think it's beautiful, but I think that it's not dramatic. It is poetry. There are sections that are dramatic and those are the sections that absorb very quickly, but quite a lot is as if it's not been written to be said, it's more as if it's been written to be thought. So it's quite difficult to get your head around it and to put it into your head in order. I know we all quite struggled with that. It's very peculiar poetry as well; it's not poetic in a classical, ordinary sense. It's more muscular than that. Last night we had a group of school kids in and they stayed with it, and I think it's because it's very contemporary in the true sense of the word. That's why they didn't take the mickey out of the love, or they didn't get uncomfortable or bored, because it's not difficult to follow.

### ***All actors work very differently. How do you approach developing a character?***

I don't think of Roxane as separate from me, if that makes any sense. So, I don't think that there's a character and I've got to collect pieces of information about her and work her out. I put myself in the centre of it and, this will sound like a cheat, I think the more you are yourself when you play things, the more interesting it is. I'm not sure about actors who try to mimic a different walk or create a different voice, though I've seen that and it can be very convincing. The more I put myself into things, the more genuine the response from people who've watched it, and I feel like a job has been well done – or more honestly done. David Mamet says that the most interesting person you can ever be onstage is yourself, and I do think that's sort of it. When we characterise people and we say, Oh she's noble, she's bitchy, or she's murderous – what does that mean? We can't say that about human beings, so how can you say that about

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people on a page? That, for me, is when it comes alive, when that combination of individuals on stage is doing it at that moment. Their characters have been given to them by the author. I don't have to make anything up because the author's done all the work. It would be a bit arrogant of me to say, Well, I don't think Rostand's got it quite right, so I'm going to contribute a few things. I can only let it come out.

## ***Are you able to do any preparation or research?***

I don't do that. I don't find it helps. My Dad was a big research actor and he'd read lots of books and take lots of notes. The thing that I find really helpful – and this is a Mike Alfred's trick – is to go through the script three times and write down what other characters say about your character, what your character says about the other characters and what your character says about herself. Each time you go through the script you get closer and closer to what the author has given you. So you start off with Cyrano saying she's a rose-scented trap, unconscious of her effect and then you end up with what she's actually saying about her own feelings, which of those things are really true, which are lies and what she really means. That for me is the best research.

## ***Your character is described in the play as a Precieuse; what does that mean?***

Well, I didn't know for a long time in rehearsals, I'll be honest. I asked someone for a literal translation and they said it meant 'the precious ones' and I thought, Ooh, so it means that they're slightly pretentious. Then Derek (Mahon) explained that it was a term given to very educated, forward-looking proto-feminist/early feminist girls and, as Lignière says about them, 'the smartest girls in town. Blue stocking wits, all that stuff.' So that put her in context for me, instead of being a slightly pretentious creature, which I thought she was, she's a sort of early Germaine Greer. These are very bright, very pretty girls who know how to speak up for themselves and

who are not flighty. But also the Precieuses believed romance had to be expressed in a certain way, which also explained to me why she's so devastated when Christian is bad at it and why she's so cruel to him: there is a set way of expressing yourself in love, and he's not doing it. So that's it, and that is why Cyrano has such a profound effect on her: he reconfigures all her romance co-ordinates. So she has to grow up and let go of all that courtly conceit.

## ***What is distinctive about the way that Howard directs?***

It's disconcerting because if it's good he doesn't say anything. I realized that he deals with the things that don't work and doesn't trouble with things that work. He works in layers so that one day something is good and the next time you come to it, he will have found a different layer to the scene so by that point what you're doing doesn't work anymore. He shifts in tiny steps, which is really hard. Adrian Noble, who I worked with previously on *Brand*, would shift things enormously at the start, and would say, Right, I want you to be absolutely at the edge of despair today, and you'd think, Oh dear, well I was only at the beginning of the road to despair yesterday. So it would have to be in a completely different place. Howard shifts line by line, so we didn't do any sitting 'round saying, Well this is the scene, this is where she is and this is what he's thinking. It was absolutely on the line, and so I suppose he works like I do, in that the character exists only as they're speaking. They don't exist outside of it. So that was good, but hard, because then there's something that he wants you to hit that almost comes down to not even a word, but almost the syllable of a word. You think, Oh God, I know I haven't quite got it. But I like working with people who give you something to hit from outside, that you have to map out emotionally inside. Adrian does that as well, and you think, Well alright, I'll do this from outside because if from outside it looks right to you then that's fine. Then a week

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down the line, emotionally you think, Oh, of course, I see why that makes sense.

## ***Is there any part of the play which you find particularly difficult?***

The section that I find hardest is the discovery of Cyrano's identity, who is really writing the letters. I had thought I would find that easiest – because I pride myself on my ability to be distressed on stage – but it's hard because it's done so quickly. There are no steps in between what she says but in real life you'd sit there for half an hour with your mouth open. But she gets it, and moves on to the next thing; gets that, moves on to the next thing; gets that: 'Okay, then we'll get married... Oh no, you're dying'. It literally happens within about five lines, so my temptation was to go through it very slowly to try to map something out. That was a moment where Howard said, Start higher emotionally. And of course it made all the difference because she works it out much more quickly than I would. There are other bits that are tricky, like losing patience with Christian when he's bad at wooing, but that's an element of the discipline of the play, the story is very clear. It's very clear what happens to her there: she's just like a kid, like a teenager: it was brilliant and now it's crap. It's that kind of thing. Whether it makes sense to my slightly slow brain is kind of irrelevant.



# For Discussion

1. When Christian dies, Cyrano decides that he can never tell Roxane he is in love with her and only tells her because he thinks he is dying.

**Why do you think he does this?**

**Why does Roxane choose to mourn Christian for the rest of her life?**

**It is often said that Cyrano and Roxane are in love with the idea of love. Do you think that is true?**

2. In the opening scene, Rostand includes a wide variety of social types in his scene: officers, academics, the social elite (represented by de Guiche and Valvert), a Bourgeois and thieves as well as actors, dancers and musicians.

**Why does he do this and what does it add to the rest of the play?**

3. What makes the play a tragedy?

4. Do you see Roxane as a feminist? What in her behaviour would make her seem like a feminist and what would make her seem less liberated?

Stephen Rea (Cyrano) and  
Claire Price (Roxane)  
photo Ivan Kyncl



# Practical Exercises

**1.** In the Balcony scene, Cyrano is hidden in the shadows and prompts Christian, telling him what to say in order to woo Roxane. This is at first very funny as Christian gets the prompts wrong, and then incredibly moving as Cyrano finds a way to tell the woman he loves how he feels for the first time. Working in groups of three, devise a scene based on the same idea but in a modern setting. For example; a live TV broadcast where one person is prompting another person through an earpiece.

**2.** In pairs, improvise a scene that we do not see in the play. For example: Roxane and Cyrano playing together as children, Cyrano and Christian practising to woo Roxane, or Roxane and Christian's wedding.

**3.** The set for this production is non-representational and stays the same for each scene. Therefore the different settings are created via the actors actions and words. In small groups, create a scene set in very specific place and time. The rest of the group must be able to guess exactly where and when the scene is set. For example: A wedding banquet in medieval rural England or a funeral at Highgate Cemetery in London in 1900.

**4.** In the battle scene there is a near mutiny because the troops are hungry and they have no way of getting provisions. Cyrano manages to deflect their attention by asking one of the men to play a tune which reminds them of home and makes them think of something else. As a whole group, improvise what it would be like to be in this situation. One person should be the Captain and another Cyrano. Invent a different way that he could distract their minds from their hunger.

# Written Work and Research

**1.** This production is based on many of the ideas of rough theatre. Read the chapter on rough theatre in Peter Brook's *'The Empty Space'* and discuss in what ways this production has attempted to create a piece of rough theatre and how successfully you think this production has been in achieving those aims.

**2.** Read a different translation of the play and in particular the theatre scene from *Cyrano de Bergerac* (the Anthony Burgess translation for the RSC is recommended). In what ways does this translation differ to it? Look in particular at the opening two pages and *Cyrano's* speech to Valvert which begins in the Derek Mahon version 'Mine is a moral elegance of the mind'. What do you think the production was trying to achieve with the new translation? Do you think these aims have been successful? What is the difference between a literal translation and a version of a play?

**3.** Roxanne and the other women who accompany her to the theatre are called *Precieuses*. Find out what a *Precieuse* was in 17th-century France. How does understanding this affect your reading of the play?

**4.** *Cyrano* and his cadets are from Gascony and this is mentioned many times in the play. *Christian* is from Toulouse and *Roxane* worries that the other cadets will victimise him

because of where he is from. Find out what is distinctive about these two regions, and therefore why it is so important that *Cyrano* is a Gascon.

**5.** In his interview the designer William Dudley talks about designing the stage to the classical model of both an amphitheatre and the Elizabethan stage. Find out about the design of classical amphitheatres and Elizabethan theatres and assess in what ways he has achieved this.

Stephen Rea (*Cyrano*)  
photo Ivan Kyncl



# Related Material

## Films

**Cyrano de Bergerac** (1990) directed by Jean Paul Rappeneau, starring Gerard Depardieu.

**Roxanne** (1987) directed by Fred Schepisi  
and starring Steve Martin.

**The Truth about Cats and Dogs** (1996) directed by Michael Lehmann,  
starring Janeane Garofalo and Ben Chaplin.

## Books

**Cyrano de Bergerac** translated by Anthony Burgess for the RSC (Nick Hern Books)

**Cyrano de Bergerac** (1975/1998) translated by Christopher Fry (Oxford World's Classics)

**The Man Who Was Cyrano: A Life of Edmond Rostand** by Sue Lloyd

(Unlimited Publishing: Bloomington, Indiana)

**Cyrano de Bergerac: (Cliff's Notes)** by Estelle DuBose, La Rocque DuBose

**The Empty Space** by Peter Brook (Penguin)

**Collaborative Theatre** published by Routledge (about Ariane Mnouchkine and the Theatre du Soleil, and the production of 1789, in Chapter 1: Towards a popular theatre: 1789)

## Other work by Derek Mahon

**The Bacchae: After Euripides** (1991), The Gallery Press

**Racine's Phaedra** (1996), The Gallery Press

**Selected Poems** (1990 and 1999), The Gallery Press