



CYRANO

Theater Review by Samuel Bernstein

Cyrano is the best reason to see the Fountain Theatre and Deaf West Theatre's retelling of *Cyrano*. Troy Kotsur is perfection as the title character in Stephen Sachs' new adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. It's a bravura performance, full of passion, integrity, and enough kinetic energy to power a city. That Kotsur is deaf has everything and nothing to do with it.

I had never actually seen a partially signed, partially spoken show before this one, and it is a very interesting form. Other characters speak for the actors who sign, and in theory it seems like it would be distancing, but it isn't at all. Having someone else speak as Kotsur signs (the very able Victor Warren) gives you a chance to concentrate even more fully on Kotsur's incredibly expressive face and gestures.

The way he signs, imbuing every finger flick and movement with specificity and heartfelt humor, makes someone like me, who doesn't read sign language, feel like I understand every word, every thought, every feeling.

I don't know if it is potentially offensive to the deaf community, or to Mr. Kotsur, whom I have no wish to offend, but I can't help but wonder just how big of a star he might have been in the silent era. It's so easy to imagine him in the Von Stroheim masterpiece *Greed*, or in Harold Lloyd's place, hanging off a clock on the side of a building, or dozens of other films. He conjures a whole universe without words. Kudos to Stephen Sachs and Deaf West for giving him that opportunity.

Sachs' adaptation places Cyrano in a coffee house poetry jam, turns the other man in love with Roxy (for Roxanne) into Cyrano's rock singer brother, and uses texting and email as the means to Cyrano's poetic ends. Instead of having a big nose, Cyrano is deaf. Which is the triumph of Kotsur's performance, and the impetus for utilizing this theatrical form, but is also the narrative problem at the heart of the adaptation.

The idea that Cyrano would choose to hide his true identity, out of the fear that a hearing woman would reject him for his deafness, falls flat. I don't believe for a minute that this Cyrano played by this actor would want to hide his identity. There is also the problem of adapting the flowery nature of poetry and the instant lightning strike of true love within a modern context. You expect one of the other characters to turn to Cyrano and say (or sign) "Chillax." Especially since there isn't really a flesh and blood woman for him to love. This is not to slight Erinn Anova, who plays Roxy. She is elegant, beautiful, and it's easy to imagine straight guys going gaga when they see her across a crowded room. But for the play to work as a truly modern piece, she needs to be a fully fleshed character. Instead, she is written as a plot device.

Cyrano's brother Chris is conceived as an aging rock and roller who is a tad disgusting. Paul Raci, who both signs and speaks, plays him with enthusiasm. Raci isn't afraid to gross people out, flicking his tongue suggestively, thrusting his pelvis every chance he gets, but when he actually embraces Roxy, it's kind of creepy—which has nothing to do at all with the original conception of the man Cyrano hides behind. We shouldn't want to cringe at the idea of Chris and Roxy being physical, yet we do. That she is attracted to him diminishes her in our eyes. Is she meant to be some kind of love junky, who will be with anyone as long as his poetry gets her hot?

The large cast is well directed by Simon Levy, though he doesn't quite find a way of believably staging Brian Danner's fight choreography. The pulled punches and studied falls diminish our enjoyment of the witty banter and of the progression of activities that Cyrano utilizes to win. Still, the multimedia projections (created by Jeffrey Elias Teeter) are among the best I've ever seen in a smaller theater, supporting and illuminating the piece rather than distracting from it. And Naila Aladdin Sanders has created believable, wearable costumes—especially for Cyrano, whose jaunty scarf and cape agreeably hearken back to the nineteenth century.

Whatever the technical and narrative strengths and weaknesses, this is a production that rises or falls by the central performance. And Kotsur is more than up to the challenge. Near the end, when Cyrano believes he has lost Roxy forever, Troy Kotsur falls to his knees and wails. It starts as the somewhat guttural sounds of a man unused to using his voice. It ends up as the sound of all of humanity, deep in the anguish of loving yet not feeling loved.

Presented by the Fountain Theatre and Deaf West Theatre at the Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., L.A. April 28–June 10. Thu.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. (323) 663-1525 or www.fountaintheatre.com.