

Cyrano

“Cyrano de Bergerac,” a 1897 French drama by Edmund Rostand, has had dozens of iterations with its evergreen tale of unrequited love. Its latest movie version stems from a recent (2018) stage work by Erica Schmidt (wife of Peter Dinklage) that was, in turn, crafted into a musical, with music and lyrics by Aaron and Brian Dessner. The result is a touching romance with good roles for the leads. For this reviewer, its musical overlay is less convincing

The film, set in mid-17th C. France, has a can't miss allure. The multi-talented Cyrano de Bergerac (Dinklage) is a poet and Gascon cadet who dazzles in both elaborate wordplay and brilliant swordplay. Cyrano adores from afar the beautiful Roxanne (Haley Bennett) a cousin with whom he has grown up. Even with his matchless wit and courtliness, Cyrano is convinced that his dwarf stature means that Roxanne could never love him, so he adamantly refuses to declare his feelings for her.

Roxanne, in turn, has fallen in love at first sight with the handsome soldier Christian (Kelvin Harrison Jr.), a member of Cyrano's regiment who she has never met. At her request, Cyrano intervenes for Christian—no poet—to woo Roxanne, but he must stand in (unseen) for his friend in a balcony scene by using his own words to charm her.

This subterfuge continues when both Cyrano and Christian are sent off to fight against Spain, with the former sending a stream of glowing letters as if they came from Christian. When Christian dies in battle, Cyrano keeps up the pretense for years while Roxanne retires from life to a Paris convent until the peerless soldier, near death after an accident, comes to see her in a poignant finale.

Handsomely mounted in Sicily, this play/film version offers a major change from the original plot in that Cyrano's physical defect is not his massive nose, but his stunted stature, making for some filmgoers a cringe-worthy situation. Dinklage, however, carries off the role with a touching yet forceful performance, exuding the piquant and thoughtful intelligence that the character is known for. His orotund voice and his bushy brows over an expressive face make his creation the more effective.

Haley Bennett makes for a fine co-star, she of innocent bearing yet real verve, along with credible intelligence. Handsome Harrison. Jr. does his job as a physical paragon who lacks the spark of wit. He is no dummy, though, just a fellow who lacks the literate touch (for example, he is quick to realize whom Roxanne truly favors).

English director Joe Wright has crafted lush period-pieces before (e.g. “Pride and Prejudice” and “Anna Karenina”), and this time he has the gorgeous

backdrop of Sicily to display. Two prime locations stand in for 17th C. France: the southern Sicilian town of Noto, a picturesque Baroque gem, destroyed by an earthquake, but handsomely restored, and the volcanic landscape around Mount Etna to convey the battlefield scenes. The whole film resonates with exquisite settings seconded by rich costuming bathed in glowing light, all achieved by production designer Sarah Greenwood.

This “Cyrano,” it should be remembered, is a musical comedy, but, for this viewer, the score by the Dessners, though sweet and lyrical, is not that memorable. Cyrano’s big solo number, an aching, soft lament, tries hard but has to fight against Dinklage’s raspy murmur. Bennett, a professional singer, fares better. The infrequent tunes are not ones that are going to accompany you on the way back home.

(The film, which opened on January 28 in local theaters, is rated “PG-13” and runs 124 minutes).

(January 2022)