

Swordfighting, poetry and humor fill 'Cyrano'

By John Orr, Daily News Arts and Entertainment Editor
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Here's a good bet: The regional premiere of "Cyrano," directed by Robert Kelley and opening in previews on Wednesday, is going to be a lot of fun.

This new translation of Edmond Rostand's classic story, translated by Michael Hollinger and adapted by Hollinger and Aaron Posner, received good reviews on the East Coast, and was lauded for its romance and hilarity.

Plus, there is swordfighting. Lots of swordfighting, including when the long-nosed hero fights 100 men at one time.

Actually, said fight coach and choreographer Jonathan Rider, Cyrano will only be fighting about six swordsmen at a time, all of whom, after being defeated, will run off stage, do quick costume changes, and run back out as other characters to continue fighting Cyrano.

It's J. Anthony Crane who will be on stage the whole time, carrying around that big prosthetic nose and fighting 100 opponents.

Exhausting.

"We've had an amazing kind of boot camp," said Crane in a recent interview. "It's been a trial by fire, running at these extravagant, athletic, circus like-fights that are just peripatetic, completely moving, kaleidoscopic. We're going through it all in a week -- it normally takes four weeks to create such a thing. There is a dangerous feeling of not getting something right. The choreography by its nature is meant to be meticulous, exciting."

Rider, who was fight choreographer for San Francisco Opera for years, and who has choreographed stage fights around the world, said Crane, and Kelley, have it covered.

"There's a huge fight, an amazing fight, a million moves," Rider said in an interview. "It's very hard to do. You need someone like Kelley who can keep track of this huge piece of work. And you needed Kelley and (casting director) Leslie Martinson to find Cyrano in the first place. He's in every scene. He has to have acting chops, athleticism, maturity, sword skill, before he gets to the show.

"Because they found Tony (Crane), it made my job easier, made it easier to get the fight on stage. He comes to the stage with a great understanding of the sword, is very intelligent ... He's sometimes about three steps ahead of me."

Rider and Crane both also sing the praises of Kit Wilder, who was Rider's roommate in college, and who is very active himself as a director, fight coach, playwright and actor.

"The quality of people in the show is fantastic," said Rider. "All have to be in top form to make it work. The timing on stage is so tight."

Rider said they could have "cheated" and repeated choreography for the fights, but instead have created individual "phrases" for each fight.

It depends on having people that "accept that amount of work," Rider said.

"Tony kept memorizing everything. The fights are mercurial and athletic and gymnastic -- seemingly impossible."

"We're super lucky to have Kit Wilder" in the show, said Crane.

"I have no idea what kind of shape I'm in," said Crane, who will be alternating between wielding a pen to write poetry and swinging a

sword to vanquish challengers for the entire show. "I've been rehearsing the fight at 50 percent power just to get the moves right. I'm pretty sure, when it comes at me full speed, it will be like surfing the north shore, like surfing Mavericks. I'm trying to stay in shape. It would be wonderful if I didn't look like a wet dog for the next four scenes" after the big fight.

Crane, who makes his home in New York and who has starred on TV and on stages all around the nation, said he has enjoyed working with TheatreWorks founder and Artistic Director Kelley, who is directing.

"Kelley is great," said Crane. "He has such an ear for the comedy, and an eye for the structure of the play. Most importantly, he really hears the poetry, and the beauty of the play."

Crane also likes the job done by Hollinger and Posner.

The play, he said, "is oh so funny. The writers get the poetry, but also give the audience access to the humor. It's so important to be telling the lyrical story as well as giving the humor. ... Some scenes are just written for classic comedy. A lot of ironic scenes, where someone knows something someone else doesn't know."

Everyone in the cast, said Crane, "has a deep store of talent," but singled out Sharon Rietkerk, a TheatreWorks favorite, who plays Roxanne.

"Beautiful Sharon," said Crane. "She's fantastic, exquisitely funny."

Rider, who started as a dancer, then became an actor, studied theater at Santa Clara University. He'd started studying stage fighting when he was in high school.

In addition to his globe-trotting work as a fight choreographer, he said he has two other jobs: He is a firefighter in the Bay Area, and is father to Fiona, 9-month-old daughter of him and his wife, Whitney Rider.

The firefighting, he said, gives him "an interesting perspective" for choreographing stage fights.

"We see everyone sick and dying. I've seen so many people die. Car crashes, shootings, stabbings, houses burning down. Grandma falls down, breaks her head.

"When you're doing fight choreography, you have to know what kind of reaction does the director want. If they want a realistic response, I can say, 'This is what happens when a foreign object (such as a sword) enters your body. All the muscles tense around the wound. When it goes in, move back; when it is pulled out, move forward.'

"The director can say, 'Here, I want the audience to be upset. Here, I want them to be entertained.'

"I can do that. I just have to take the intention into account."

Rider, who talks very rapidly, spilling ideas out in a torrent, said he "loves running into a burning building.

"Firefighting and theater are very similar. Both are about creative problem-solving and group dynamics, and both are necessary for society to move forward.

"Sparta was just about fighting, about the military life." Rider said. "But Greece had arts and culture. Sparta is now just weeds. Greece carries on."

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Theater

What: "Cyrano"

By: Edmund Rostand, translated by Michael Hollinger, adapted by Hollinger and Aaron Posner

Produced by: TheatreWorks Silicon Valley

When: Previews Wednesday through April 8 at 8 p.m. Opens at 8 p.m. April 9; 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays

Through: May 1

Directed by: Robert Kelley

Featuring: J. Anthony Crane, Darren Bridgett, Michael Gene Sullivan, Chad Deverman, Sharon Rietkerk, Stephen Muterspaugh, Christopher Reber, Peter James Meyers, Kit Wilder, Monica Cappuccini

Where: Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St., Mountain View

Tickets: \$19-\$80 (subject to change; discounts available); <http://theatreworks.org> or 650-463-1960

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