

Review: New 'Cyrano' misses by a nose in Mountain View

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San Jose Mercury News

Posted: Mon Apr 11 10:00:00 MDT 2016

"Cyrano" has an ear for wit and the heart of a lion, but the quixotic fellow simply has no head for romance.

Alas in TheatreWorks Silicon Valley's new take on the classic theme, the man with the gargantuan nose also struggles with his comic timing.

Michael Hollinger and Aaron Posner's modern twist on Edmond Rostand's picaresque yarn has many charms, but it lacks the gusto and bravado that should propel this period romp. Although it's artfully appointed with sumptuous costumes and peppered with moving performances, the tale of rogues and rascals too often feels stilted when it ought to be rollicking. It's a pity, because the adaptation tries hard to be less mannered and pretentious than other adaptations of the fable, but much of the comedy falls flat.

Director Robert Kelley infuses the story of the 17th-century Parisian swordsman with whimsy, but the theatrical warhouse runs a longish two hours and 40 minutes. The lavish costumes (Fumiko Bielefeldt), sparsely inventive set (Joe Ragey) and tender final scenes are worth the wait, but there's not quite enough swash in this buckler to make the production truly swoon-worthy.

For the record, the fencing itself is on the nose. Jonathan Rider choreographs the show's lusty swordplay as if it were a ballet with blades giving the fight scenes a nice sense of flourish and sweep. One epic battle in particular, in which the man with prominent protuberance takes on 100 brigands, is a lark, setting capes and cloaks awlirl.

But too often the adaptation lacks the panache that Cyrano prizes above all else. While Hollinger ("Opus") and Posner ("Stupid [Expletive] Bird") have distilled the cast to nine actors playing all the parts and streamlined much of the flowery language to a more modern tongue, this "Cyrano" still sags over the course of its two hours and 40 minutes. The cheeky meta-theatricality of the production, with actors dashing in and out of costumes stored onstage, doesn't pay off in pizzazz.

To be sure, there are many magical moments as he of the long proboscis (a thoughtful J. Anthony Crane), a soldier with more courage than cunning, woos the beautiful Roxane (a tart turn by Sharon Rietkerk) under the guise of the dim-witted cavalier Christian (Chad Deverman). Braggadocio is the spirit of the day, which rubs both Cyrano and Roxane the wrong way, but there is more to amour than ideals. She melts in Christian's arms as Cyrano pines.

Crane perfectly straddles the line between elegance and swagger, giving Cyrano a gravitas that elevates the piece. He is entirely believable as a poet as well as a hero, a man whose fatal flaw is integrity in a tawdry world. He also gilds the rambunctious ballad of the Gascony Guard with guts and grit.

Unfortunately, the actor proves less nimble wielding the punch lines, and too many of the laughs don't land throughout the show. The bits of drunken schtick and the foppish gags also fall a little flat.

Comedy is a fickle creature, and too often here, the wisecracks seem clever but not giggle-inducing, which contributes to the dragginess of the first act with its long and deliberate exposition of archetypal characters who need little introduction. A heightened sense of tomfoolery would have sharpened the tragedy of the ending, with its subtlety and restraint.

Make no mistake, there is much to tip the hat to here, from the swordplay to the acting, but this "Cyrano" just doesn't tickle the funny bone enough to win us over.

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'CYRANO'

Translated by Michael Hollinger, adapted by Hollinger and Aaron Posner from the novel by Edmond Rostand, presented by TheatreWorks

Through: May 1

Where: Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts

Running time: 2 hours, 40 minutes, one intermission

Tickets: \$19-\$80; 650-463-1960, www.theatreworks.org

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