**At Gloucester Stage, a “Cyrano” longer on panache than proboscis**

By Carolyn Clay

Gloucester Stage serves a double scoop of panache in “Cyrano,” Jason O’Connell’s and Brenda Withers’ sparky, streamlined meta-theatrical adaptation of Edmond Rostand’s 1897 swashbuckler about a nasally challenged Gascon soldier who wields both rapier and rapier wit while flexing a heart as big as his famed proboscis. Here Cyrano de Bergerac’s trademark flamboyance is matched by that of acclaimed area actor Jeremiah Kissel, whose insouciant if lovesick hero is, in jeans and a cape, shlubbier than dashing but who nonetheless burns with both smart-alecky charisma and tamped-down yearning.

Everything but the emotion gets shrunk in O’Connell’s and Withers’ whittling down of Rostand, which is in its New England premiere (through August 11). Let’s start with the nose: as the result of an ostensible offstage accident that precedes the launch of Rostand’s drama, Kissel the actor both injures his beak and addles his brain, making for a Cyrano whose face is centered not by a hideous olfactory monstrosity but by a Band-Aid and whose derring-do is not just dizzying but dizzied. Moreover, the new adaptation – one of a pack that has ranged from Anthony Burgess’s to Steve Martin’s – squeezes Rostand’s epic romp through misplaced love and battlefield heroics in 17th century France onto a small stage inhabited by just five actors playing multiple roles.

Not that the swordplay gets short shrift – not with ace fight director Robert Walsh at the helm of a production whose handful of perpetrators doubles as a small but mighty Gascon brigade clanking weapons across a craggy promontory to an explosive soundscape. But it is Cyrano’s noble, death defying, self-sacrificing adoration of the beauteous Roxanne that is at the center of this distilled version of Rostand’s enduring tale of courtship by proxy.

At the beginning of the play proper, set in a theater where Cyrano will soon display his panache in an impromptu rhyming put-down of a bad actor, Roxanne and handsome newcomer cadet Christian fall in (superficial) love at first sight. But Christian is as inarticulate as he is good-looking. And Roxanne is even more moved by a well-turned phrase than she is by a well-chiseled countenance. So when she tells pal Cyrano, who secretly loves her, that she has fallen for Christian, Cyrano sets out to both help his rival secure the lady and carry out his own stealth courtship by ghost-writing Christian’s love letters. Comedy and tragedy ensue, and by the time Roxanne realizes it is the poetic soul and not the hot body that she craves, it’s too late for all but a regret-ridden denouement.

What is trickiest about the Gloucester Stage production is that, despite the broadening of Rostand’s comedy and the dwindling of its poetry into prose, the play’s unabashed romantic essence remains intact – especially in Kissel’s performance, which is both physically and verbally nimble, flamboyant yet self-effacing and poignantly pained.

Whether Andrea Goldman’s Roxanne is worth all that burning yearning is another matter. The object of Cyrano’s unrequited love is, in Goldman’s portrayal, ebulliently sensual but perhaps shallower than she might be. By contrast, James Ricardo Milord’s Christian, though a simpleton in the language department, is likeable, open and sincere. Erin Nicole Washington plays Cyrano’s compatriot in mockery, LeBret, with tough, jollying frankness. And Paul Melendy both brings great good nature to the doggerel-strewing baker Ragueneau and supplies a Count de Guiche so hilariously foppish that he practically gargles his lines. Of course, even de Guiche turns noble in the coda as soaked in tear-tugging sentiment as it is in the finally felled hero’s blood.