

CHAPTER 3 - Cyrano, Rostand, Coquelin

In Chapter 3 of "The Ways of Men," the narrative delves into the significance of Edmond Rostand's play, "Cyrano de Bergerac," painting a vivid picture of the drama's impact when translated into English. Despite a weak translation, the original's charm—its humor, emotion, and satirical sharpness—shines through, much like good wine unaffected by the quality of its container. Richard Mansfield's dedication to presenting the play in its unaltered form, adhering closely to Rostand's vision and the play's aesthetic details, earns him admiration for preserving the integrity of this masterpiece, thereby allowing the English-speaking audience to appreciate the extensive effort Rostand and the esteemed actor Coquelin invested in the original production.

The chapter recounts the author's visit to Paris, where the immediate priority becomes witnessing "Cyrano de Bergerac" at the Porte St. Martin. After the performance, a visit to Coquelin's dressing room provides a personal glimpse into the actor's vibrant energy and dedication, contrasting sharply with the exhaustive effort of performing. The narrative then transitions to a private setting, Coquelin's apartment, where the focus shifts to the genesis of Rostand's play, highlighting Coquelin's foundational role in its creation and production.

Coquelin narrates his initial encounter with Rostand, who was then recognized for his lesser-known works, elaborating on how Rostand's talent for storytelling and dramatic interpretation of lines captivated him from their first meeting. This admiration led Coquelin to commit unconditionally to any of Rostand's future works, a rare gesture of faith in the playwright's potential. This promise culminated in the development of "Cyrano de Bergerac," spurred by Rostand's sudden inspiration from the historical figure's life and poetry, illustrating the unpredictable nature of creative inspiration.

Despite initial skepticism regarding the play's setting in a historically worn-out epoch and the challenging integration of a grotesquely oversized nose on the protagonist, Rostand's blend of poignant and comic elements, complemented by his conviction in the play's potential, ultimately sways Coquelin. The chapter vividly recounts Rostand's relentless dedication, his withdrawal from Parisian society, and his exhaustive yet passionate approach to refining the play, demonstrating a pursuit of artistic perfection that borders on obsession.

The rehearsal process unveils another facet of Rostand's character—his tireless energy, meticulous attention to detail, and his respectful, uplifting engagement with the cast, underlining his leadership and vision in bringing the play to life. The premiere of "Cyrano de Bergerac" emerges as a monumental event in Paris's cultural scene, marked by an overwhelming response from the audience, signaling not just a personal triumph for Rostand and Coquelin, but a landmark moment in theatrical history.

This deep dive encapsulates the confluence of talent, vision, and unwavering dedication that characterizes the journey of "Cyrano de Bergerac" from conception to stage, affirming the transformative power of authentic, passionate theater.