

'Cyrano' is fine drama anywhere

BY DOMINIC P. PAPTOLA, Pioneer Press, Nov 2, 2004

It's one thing to see a good play. It's another thing entirely to watch the transformative power of theater demonstrated right in front of you, and that's what happened at the opening of Ten Thousand Things' "Cyrano de Bergerac."

Though Ten Thousand Things stages performances for the paying public, it does the majority of its shows in prisons, urban community centers and other similar places to reach audiences at the margins of society. Its "opening nights" generally take place at the VOA Regional Corrections Center for women in Roseville.

There, one afternoon last week, the company told the story of Cyrano: Possessed of a wit as sharp as his sword, he skewers his enemies of falsehood, compromise and hypocrisy. The one enemy he can't defeat is himself; his immense nose makes him feel unworthy of the love of his life, the lovely Roxane. When an attractive-but-inarticulate young suitor, Christian, comes courting, Cyrano decides to befriend and coach him.

Near the end of the first act, Roxane stands on her balcony, as Christian woos her with Cyrano's words. It's a scene played with broad and effective humor: Sonja Parks' Roxane stares into the darkness, drinking in the words of love. Below, Steve Hendrickson's Cyrano is engaged in a furious game of charades, trying to give the well-meaning but hapless Christian (Ron Menzel) the words he so desperately needs.

Two residents of the VOA facility sit a few feet away from the scene. Without the formal boundaries of "proper" audience members, they're hooting and hollering at Cyrano's antics. When Roxane at last invites Christian up for a kiss, the women turn their cheering up another notch.

And it's here that Hendrickson delivers Cyrano's heartbreaking speech about the strange weight of the



Steve Hendrickson and Sonja Parks

heart and being consigned to stand outside a lovers' feast. The women, momentarily caught up in Roxane and Christian's kanoodling, are still chuckling away, but eventually their attention turns to Cyrano's quiet misery. As the speech continues, their laughter quiets and their smiles fade. In a minute or so, they've gone from hysterics to the brink of tears.

That kind of powerful transition speaks to the astounding skill, presence and emotional integrity that Hendrickson brings to the role — you'd willingly follow this tragic hero into whatever battle he took you — but also to the overarching sense of immediacy that director Michelle Hensley and the rest of her company bring to this staging.

Ten Thousand Things productions are always small-scale and intimate, but this one is so close in it makes your bones vibrate. Parks' Roxane radiates both external and internal beauty, leavened with want and just a bit of naiveté. Menzel's Christian may not be a smooth talker, but he's no dummy, either, and you can feel his desire for Roxane warring with the knowledge that he doesn't really deserve her.

Terry Hempleman plays the Comte de Guiche, a nobleman with ill will both toward Cyrano and Christian. This could easily be a caricature of a role, but Hempleman breathes a sense of forthrightness — and, eventually, humility — into the character.

Even the comic roles — Maren Ward's double-duty as an overstuffed actor and an inebriated baker; Darien Johnson's multiple roles as maid, warrior and poet; Matt Sciple's eerily humorous cameo as a monk — have a sense of abundance about them.

This is drama in the best sense of the word: It's reality heightened to poetry, without losing a scintilla of its humanity in the elevation. No matter where you reside on society's ladder, "Cyrano" has something to teach you.