There have been more than 14 film adaptations of Edmond Rostand’s famous play but Jean-Paul Rappeneau’s Gerard Depardieu-starring *Cyrano De Bergerac* from 1990 beats them all by a nose, and not a normal sized nose at that. This is quite literally one of those momentous films which becomes responsible for defining cinema history, and one with an extravagant and luxurious aesthetic; a film that is keen to regularly and rigorously demonstrate its high-art credentials in its performance, its production and its persistence.

Jean-Paul Rappeneau’s tour-de-force film was responsible for, amongst other things, a veritable and booming revival of French period cinema in the 1990s, entering into such great company as Claude Chabrol’s *Madame Bovary* (1991), Jean-Jaqueline Annaud’s *The Lover* (1992), Patrice Chéreau’s *La Reine Margot* (1994) and Rappeneau’s own *Horseman on the Roof* (1995). It is fair to say that history is a key source of inspiration for French cinema in particular and the enormous success of Rappeneau’s film was key in turning French attentions back towards period settings, proving that, not like the *Cinema du Papa,* that these films can be young, cool and thrilling. Rappeneau’s adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac* does not attempt to refigure the 100 year old story as do other modern takes such as Fred Schlepisi’s small town America comedy, the Steve Martin starring *Roxanne* (1987) or Michael Lehmann’s gender reversal with two women clamouring for the attentions of a heartbroken photographer, *The Truth about Cats and Dogs* (1996). Jean-Paul Rappeneau’s masterpiece, quite on the other hand, is extraordinarily authentic, somehow more genuine, is raw, is frenetic and is passionate. This film, so driven by its dedication to the spectacle of production and to creating the overwhelming sense of wonder that sells the love and honesty at the film’s heart, still remains more faithful in keeping with the incredibly poetic Anthony Burgess translation and adaptation of Rostand’s enormously influential work, Burgess of course, also proving the English language subtitles for the film, a testament to the director’s own sheer dedication to the legitimacy of his work.

The film was wildly successful but crucially, it was incredibly well received on a global scale. It was so well received outside of France in fact, that it did the quite unthinkable in that it broke through the ‘Best Foreign Language Film’ category to be nominated for four additional Oscars in Best Actor; Best Art Direction; Best Makeup and winning for Franca Squarciapino’s striking and intricate work for Best Costume Design. Whilst Rappeneau was beaten to the ‘Best Foreign Language Film’ by Xavier Koller’s Swiss film, *Journey of Hope,* in addition to the ten César award award wins, and further nominations still, *Cyrano de Bergerac* did win the Golden Globe for ‘Best Foreign Film’.

Beginning with the detailed costumery, the Seventeenth-century France which Rappeneau has painstakingly recreated for his audience is an elaborate but quite magnificently realised spectacle. From the outset, presented with the lavish theatre and the resplendent riverside scenery, right through to the more grime filled, lacklustre and drab realism of the French streets which echo Cyrano’s own slow, sober and sombre decline before his untimely death.

Similarly elaborate, was the film’s relatively astronomical budget, which at the time produced the most expensive film in the history of French cinema, a title more recently stolen away by the likes of Luc Besson. Rappeneau’s film had a 100 million Franc budget (roughly £13 million) with 10 million francs spent on sets, 4.5 million francs for costumes for its more than 2000 extras, and with what roughly worked out as a staggering £78,500 spent on shoes alone. Ridiculous as this may seem, it genuinely has contributed to dedicated aesthetic which generated a great deal of the film’s resounding charm. The scale of this film is a headline in itself but not one which detracts from the over two hours of tragicomic wonder, a renowned and illustrious narrative and brilliant performances all round.

This is a thoroughly memorable film which has set into film cannon many definitive elements of the original play, first performed only seven years shy of exactly a century before. Outside of the pure lavishness and scale of the film’s production, the biggest take away is from the tireless Gerard Depardieu in the titular role. Rappeneau is no stranger to directing stars, having worked with some of the biggest and best names which French cinema has ever had to offer in Jean-paul Belmondo, Yves Montand, Catherine Deneuve, Isabelle Adjani, Juliette Binoche and so many more. Working with such powerful and significant talent is a marker of the director’s success. These actors, so keen to work with one of the great European maters, were his from which to choose his *Cyrano de Bergerac.* His choice of Depardieu for the role here, however, was inspired, and contributes in a major way to the success of this film. This is a definitive performance by an actor described as, unquestionably the biggest non-English-speaking film star that the European industry has to offer. An actor around whom the solar system that was the French film industry of the 1990s revolved. Astonishingly, this is Depardieu’s only Oscar nominated performance, and yet, it was so well performed that it has become the definitive Cyrano, casting a mould which others dare not, or at least ought not, challenge. Jose Ferrer, of course, did win the Oscar for his portrayal of Cyrano in the 1950, Michael Gordon directed film, but Ferrer’s work, whilst sophisticated in its own right, took a different approach and has not one tenth of the energy, pace, attack nor grace of what Depardieu injected into the role exactly 40 years later. As ambitious as the film’s scope and scale is the titular hero’s performance of vigour and sheer dynamism; at one moment deliberate, sombre and poetic and the next, high paced, raucous and swashbuckling. In the opening sequence, following Depardieu’s delivery of Cyrano’s monumental speech to the Viscount de Valvert, explaining in great detail the better ways in which he could have worded his insult of Cyrano’s infamous nose, the audience are left just as equally floored as the poor Viscount himself, fatally wounded.

The exhausting, almost twenty-five-minute long opening scene in its entirety packs almost the biggest punch of the entire film and yet, the lyrical book-end, the film’s more muted and impeccably measured closing scene, delivered by both Depardieu and Anne Brochet with dramatic mastery, works hard to steal the show. There is very little to say about the other actors in this film as, as you might quite expect from a film named for its lead character, Cyrano steals the spotlight. Not to belittle the great work done by Vincent Perez as the object of Roxane’s affections, the shy but loving Christian de Neuvillette, but his role was written to be overshadowed by Depardieu’s performance.

Cyrano is a man of contradictions and paradoxes and this is precisely well-matched by the film’s exquisite form. The opening of the film is light, bright, fast and loud and is neatly offset by Rappeneau’s deliberate pacing where the film’s ending is slow, shaded, soft and moving. Many have described the film as a romance, even to the extent that it has been seen as the crowning glory of the cultural idiom, but that is only the upper most tip of the iceberg. Rappeneau weaves a much richer, more convoluted and more sophisticated tapestry. The film is an expertly crafted tragicomedy dealing on the one hand with some of the warmest and most heartfelt love and romance and then on the other hand, humour so sharp edged that it might match the sharpest of the many swords and sabres.

It remains to be said that Jean-Paul Rappeneau is far and away one of the cinema’s great rebels, not perhaps on the level of the Godardian *avant-garde* but certainly in his own unique approaches to film production. In an interview Rappeneau once said that his approach to filmmaking was in a sense, to resist the American monolithic contribution to the global cinema landscape as a whole and in addition to revitalise the medium itself. In reality, *Cyrano de Bergerac* could use this as its tagline because, simply put, it does both of these things and much more to boot. The film which put French cinema back on the global landscape and rebirthed the potentially radical period cinema piece.

At heart, Rappeneau is an author, a writer, and a distinctive voice who turned his talents to the pursuit of superb direction. The writing credentials of this film, nonetheless, are of the very highest calibre. The film is based upon the Anthony Burgess adaptation and translation and was co-written by both Jean-Paul Rappeneau and long-time Louis Buñuel collaborator Jean-Claude Carrière. This is the writer who was responsible for such eminent and well respected films as *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964)*, Belle du Jour* (1967)*, The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972)*,* Charlie Kaufman’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988)and much more, and as such, one can see in *Cyrano de Bergerac,* the same subtle, complex and compelling narrative strengths.

Carrièr’s approach to the writing of *Cyrano de Bergerac* was a research intensive one. Considering the pivotal sequence in which Cyrano painstakingly manages to cross, each day, through the besieging Spanish lines to deliver his own penned but ‘Christian’ signed letters of undying love, to Roxane, Carrière took to meticulously investigating French agricultural history. His research uncovered the surprising fact that 17th century wheat was much taller than it is today. He then went so far as to liaise with the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle in order to gain access to preserved ancient grains. An entire field of wheat was then sown with the sole purpose of filming in order that, months later, the film’s hero could escape, in romantic style, unseen, through now historically accurate, tall wheat stalks.

The other creative talents working on the film also lend weight to its great success. Music is used only very sparingly though astutely and deliberately by Jean-Claude Petit throughout the film, in order to give more foreboding and pressing dramatic weight to the lyricism and lilting rhythm that the dialogue itself, so well delivered, lends to the film’s pace, tempo and tension.

As a self-styled “filmgoer who makes films”, Rappeneau’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* channels a great deal of the filmmaker’s own clear passion for the magic of the cinema, demonstrating undoubtedly that Errol Flynn’s *The Adventures of Robinhood* (1938) is one of the films which the director best remembers as inspiring his love for the cinema at a young age. Six years after *Cyrano de Bergerac* Rappeneau’s next film saw him returned to classical literature with Jean Giono’s 1951 novel, *The Horseman on the Roof,* this time depicting a 19th century France but yet it somehow falls short of the director’s magnum opus. It has the strength of global star talent in Juliette Binoche, it has the lavish and ambitious period portrayals of a rich tapestry of French life, but it lacks the dynamism, the cadence and the mastery of *Cyrano de Bergerac.* Rappeneau is an absolute technician and whilst he himself thinks his 2003 film *Bon Voyage* to be his greatest ever work, I can and will confidently and defiantly disagree with the master himself and point my own rapier squarely at the nose of *Cyrano de Bergerac.*