**DRAMATURG’S NOTES** (includes spoilers!)

**What Makes a Good Story?**

When Ashlie and I first approached the playwright Christine Quintana with the idea of a commission, we knew we wanted a really good story. And it started with an interesting provocation: write a new adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac.* Edmond Rostand’s play from 1897—itself an adaptation of the life of the early 17th-century French novelist—is a masterpiece of language, plot, and above all, love. It tells the story of a deeply misunderstood romantic who is a master of words, is othered by his physical appearance, and who ghostwrites love verses so his best friend can win the girl. It skews our idea of the “hero” and the classical comedy structure which ends with a pair of lovers who finally get together in a conventional sense.

Framed this way, one might be able to discern the classical pedigree at the core of *Someone Like You* and in the journey of Isabelle. Yet *our* hero does not participate in an affirmative re-telling of an old narrative. She regularly thrusts a middle finger at expectation and spicily guides the play’s trajectory to flirt with anticipations of a familiar outcome. She claims a substantial autonomy from the heroes who came before her.

Like her, *Someone Like You* also goes its own way. Despite our initial prompt that this new play be an adaptation of *Cyrano,* properly speaking it does not function as an adaptation in that it does not overtly signal its relationship to *Cyrano*. For a work to operate *as* an adaptation, there needs to be a certain process experienced by the receiver. Engaging with an adaptation means also thinking about the source material at the same time so our attention oscillates back and forth in a regular process of comparison—we essentially enjoy two things at once. But we need to be invited to do this. *Someone Like You* does not extend this invitation in its text, it does not actively declare its relationship to *Cyrano,* and does not require us to know anything about it to enjoy this new work. It is exquisitely autonomous from its source. Like Isabelle, it has broken from its patriarchal legacy to carve out a new path.

MJ Kidnie in her influential book *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* describes a play not as something with a fixed, immoveable but as “a dynamic process that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users.” Perhaps this idea applies not just to a play but to a narrative—something that necessarily must bend and shift into new shapes and new scripts when different audiences and evolving sensibilities require it to do so. So, *Someone Like You* is the *Cyrano* that we need today.

Yet the play is not subversive without purpose; it does not completely thumb its nose at the past. In fact, the act of looking backwards is central to the play’s dramaturgy, as Isabelle “takes us back” to other times, shares her fond (and not-so-fond) memories, and invites us to reflect on our youth. Memory (and with it nostalgia) plays a major role in revealing the interiority of the character. Through flashbacks and her direct conversations we us, we enjoy a privileged access to Isabelle’s private world—which, in many ways, is the exact function of a soliloquy. Perhaps this is an unexpected way in which the play’s classical roots show themselves.

And to dig a bit further into the direct-address structure of *Someone Like You*, it’s valuable to see how Isabelle’s connection to us—her “Judgey McJudgersons”—develops over the play. In a narrative that hinges on renegotiating relationships (Isabelle to Harjit, Harjit to Kristin, Kristin to Isabelle), we get to participate in that process, too. The play starts with Isabelle calling us “you fuckers” and ends with her blowing us a kiss. The extended and evolving partnership between the audience and Isabelle serves to foster trust, empathy, love, insight, and understanding—and in doing so, these ideas manifest as results of both the themes and the structure of the play. The play does not just talk about these things—it is built around a dramaturgy that allows us to experience them. This is its gift.

Christine has written a play that takes a character who has long been relegated to supporting roles and placed her at the centre of the universe. Rather than yet again being an accessory to someone else’s narrative, Isabelle carves her own path—parallel to yet distinct from ones we already know. By refocusing a familiar narrative through a new lens, by repurposing and appropriating a source material to the point where we don’t actually need it anymore, we come to the story with fresh, open hearts: we understand Isabelle, we love her, and we see that (in many ways) we are her.

Now that’s a good story.

—Stephen Drover