



ON WRITING
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A lengthy yearning is finally requited

An obsession with the National focused the writing of a musical and led to the movie *'Cyrano.'*

I REMEMBER THE first time I heard the song “Terrible Love” by the band the National. My husband said, “You have to hear this,” and then he played it loud. I became obsessed. I listened to everything they had ever recorded; I listened when I ran, I listened in the car. “Is this the only music you listen to now?” Yes. The words are yearning, despair and the heartbreak of unrequited terrible love, and the music itself is desire.

I was working on adapting Edmond Rostand’s play “Cyrano de Bergerac” into a stage musical; I called the producer Michael Gennaro and said, “I want the National to do the music and songs!” and he laughed pretty hard and then said: “That would be amazing, but it’ll never happen.”

I wrote to the National: Matt Berninger (vocals, lyrics), Bryce Dessner (multi-instrumentalist, composer) and Aaron Dessner (multi-instrumentalist, composer). I wrote about how much I loved their work and how right it was for “Cyrano”; I wrote that I wanted to create a through-composed stripped-down cinematic musical without a big nose. I wanted to get at the universal self-doubt — to cut all the references to his nose; oh, and I wanted to stage a flour ballet in the bakery scene. Matt responded, “Never underestimate a big

nose. Let’s talk.” A collaboration began.

It took time to convince Aaron and Bryce. Meanwhile, Matt shared with me a folder of their unpublished music “sketches.” I rewrote, adapting Rostand to fit the sound. Their chief reservation, said with humor, was: Will it be good? For me, in theater, this is a question with no answer. You work really hard to make something beautiful, you trust that it will go as planned every night with a million variables, you pray that someone out there in the dark is moved by it and also that you don’t get terrible/mean reviews humiliating you publicly. They weren’t

convinced. So I invited Bryce to hear my draft read aloud while I (shaking and sweating) pressed play on 24 sketches of unreleased National tracks that he and Aaron had written.

Because Bryce was coming over to our house and I’d been talking about my new rock star friend Matt too much, my husband (Peter Dinklage) asked if he could read the role of Cyrano. I have to confess I was very reluctant to say yes. When your life partner goes through megawatt success and celebrity, everything has a way of becoming about them, and I was holding on to my separate identity with my work. But Peter is enormously, deeply, hugely talented, and I love him, so I said yes. And when he read it, I knew that Peter was exactly right for my raw, nose-mask-free Cyrano. It was as if I’d adapted it for him: his wit, his outsized charm, his self-deprecating, self-protecting social walls, his scorn, his heartbreak, his poetic soul.

Bryce and Aaron said yes.

We spent two years building the songs. I remember the first time I heard “Madly.” (The song that Cyrano sings about loving Roxanne: “Have you ever loved someone madly?”) Matt put his headphones on my ears at Aaron’s studio, and I was lit up.

I directed a workshop production at the Goodspeed. Peter played Cyrano

and Haley Bennett played Roxanne. Joe Wright came to the show, and after it was over he asked me if he could direct a film of my vision of “Cyrano” and would I write the screenplay? I’d been working in theater for decades; I’d never pursued film work or writing screenplays, but I was really excited by the idea, so I called Matt and Bryce and Aaron. We four agreed to say yes to everything: the film and continuing to develop the stage version for an off-Broadway run.

While I hadn’t written a screenplay before, I’d been living inside Rostand’s terrible love for years, and I was eager to dig deeper into the world to make it breathe in close-up, to keep writing for Peter and Haley; to imagine big dance sequences and visual story for the National-“Cyrano” songs and action sequences for the fights and the war.

Joe wanted me to keep the intimacy of my pared-down stage version and the bare-bones modern dialogue that I’d built to match the lyrics but locate it in lavish period settings with a Baroque style and scale. On stage, I had cut most of Rostand’s first act with its large cast spectacle of high society at the theater. Now I needed to restore that and create a cohesive tone. What followed was two years of the hardest work on the steepest, thorniest learning curve I’ve ever had the privilege to climb.