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## Theater: *Cinderella* Magical Enough as it Hits Broadway

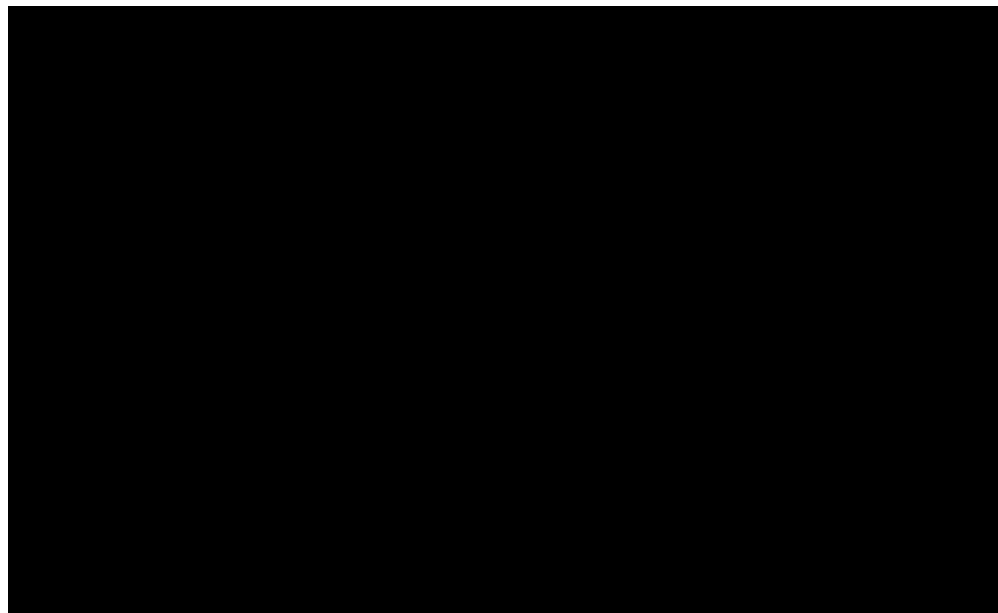
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RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN'S CINDERELLA \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
BROADWAY THEATRE

When Rodgers & Hammerstein created *Cinderella* for a live television event in 1957, they were the most popular names in musical theater, with *South Pacific* a few years earlier and *The Sound of Music* just ahead. It starred Julie Andrews -- then the toast of Broadway for *My Fair Lady* -- and became the most watched program in TV history, with more than 100 million people tuning in. Two more TV productions were created, one a perennial from 1965 starring Lesley Ann Warren and a 1997 version starring Brandy that was also a blockbuster. Which leaves you scratching your head. Why has it taken so long for one of the most popular musicals by one of theater's most bankable names to come to Broadway?

Whatever the reason, it will probably be a good long while before midnight strikes. This *Cinderella* has a pleasingly old-fashioned touch, a strong cast (including two very appealing leads) and a score that may not be the absolute peak of R&H but which is more tuneful and enjoyable than most shows could hope for.



Mind you, a girl who longs only for a pretty dress and wins happiness via made-to-order footwear doesn't strike quite the right note anymore. So this *Cinderella* has a substantial new book by Douglas Carter Beane. In this version, a French firebrand named Jean-Michel (Greg Hildreth) is trying to get the prince to realize the poor need his help. He's also in love with Gabrielle (Marla Mindelle), one of Cinderella's sisters. Gabrielle wears glasses and wouldn't mind helping out in his soup kitchen but her overbearing mother (a solid Harriet Harris) won't hear of it. She plans to push Gabrielle into the arms of the Prince, with the aid of the somewhat scheming royal adviser Sebastian (Peter Bartlett). So Cinderella must develop a social conscience, convince the Prince to pay attention to the poor, unite Gabrielle with the socialist man of her dreams, show pity on her stepmother and look glorious at the Ball. Whew!

If this sounds a bit too modern (right down to the town crier voiced well by Phumzile Sojola who heralds the news and then says he'll be back with sports and weather later), never fear. These modern touches are not overbearing and the central romance remains intact.

It begins with the show's weakest touch: the Prince (Santino Fontana) and his knights defeating some sort of mythical tree creature that looks like an extra from *The Lord Of*

*The Rings*. It's not a terribly elaborate or effective creature (essentially, it's a guy on stilts) but you worry this show will be ginned up for kiddies who liked *Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark*. Far more effective is watching the Prince kill an offstage dragon. Prince Topher (his name another modern touch) shoots it out of the sky with a slingshot and when it crashes to the ground the prince and all his knights jump up in the air as if the dragon's body has sent a tremor through the earth.

It's a simple and effective gag and this is the tone that the rest of the show happily adapts. All the effects are notably old-school from the very simply handled transformation of Cinderella to the wires that take her Fairy Godmother aloft. It's the charming and right choice, letting this show stand out from special effects extravaganzas; wit and imagination is always preferable to animatronics.

After killing the creatures, Prince Topher immediately launches into "Me, Who Am I?", a song cut from *Me & Juliet* and smoothly inserted here that nicely captures his indecision. The Prince has spent his life in boarding schools and is vaguely aware he should be paying more attention to matters of state but isn't sure where to begin. (The other two additions to flesh out the score were cut from *South Pacific* and are similarly welcome.)

What kind of king does he want to be, Topher is asked. "The good kind?" he answers tentatively. Fontana is a very talented, appealing actor albeit not the obvious choice for a square-jawed Prince. But Topher isn't your obvious Prince; he's an affable, slightly befuddled character and Fontana brings a great deal of charm to the part and a solid singing voice that benefits from our wanting him to succeed. (You forgive him not having a booming powerhouse of an instrument because you like him and want him to succeed.) Laura Osnes as the earnest, plucky Cinderella is an excellent prod. Stories like this have very little tension, so the real pleasure comes in watching what you want to happen unfold. And these two have chemistry so their falling in love is both inevitable and sweet, especially that first time they tentatively hold hands and begin to dance at the Ball. Osnes has her own Fairy Godmother in Kathleen Marshall, who helped pluck Osnes out of the crowd in the reality TV competition *Grease: You're The One That I Want!* Marshall's faith is fully confirmed here, with Osnes delivering an uncomplicated, sweet turn that's never knowing or modern.

As the actual Fairy Godmother, Victoria Clark tosses off the tongue-twisting of "Fol-De-Rol" and "Impossible" with ease. The costumes by William Ivey Long walk a fine line most of the show. The ball gowns for the other characters are slightly garish so Cinderella will shine all the more. Fair enough. And when the Fairy Godmother transforms from the old crone "Crazy Marie" into her sparkling self, I assumed the ungainly look was due to that particular switch. But later in the show the Fairy Godmother appears again and her costume still looked like it had a bolster or seat cushion of some sort jutting out on either side which was particularly unattractive and awkward looking. She also has a weird set of antennae sticking out of her head; all of this is easily fixed and should be.

The scenic design by Anna Louizos is generally strong as well, with a striking forest creating the fairy tale mood and an arch of greenery framing the stage throughout as a gentle reminder this is a story. Cinderella's home, the woods and the grand staircase leading to the ball are all solidly rendered, though for some reason I found the moon rather banal. The hair and wig design by Paul Huntley hints towards the comical but never quite goes there, happily.

Ann Harada does go there as Cinderella's other sister, the blunt Charlotte. The amusing "Step-Sister's Lament" -- which wonders why the Prince always falls for those annoyingly pretty girls -- is as close to a show-stopper as this gentle production gets. Of course, Osnes charms with the standout "In My Own Little Corner" and she and Fontana spark on the romantic duet "Ten Minutes Ago." Toss in "Loneliness Of Evening" (cut from *South Pacific*) and "Do I Love You Because You're Beautiful" and the winning numbers begin to pile up.

Some nice touches via the new book and director Mark Brokaw can be found throughout. Cinderella and the Prince are joined in their loneliness by having him join in on "In My Own Little Corner," though of course she is sitting by a cold fire and he's sitting on a throne. Later, the memories of the Ball in "When You're Driving Through The Moonlight" (another very strong moment for Osnes) and "A Lovely Night" allow the stepmother to forget herself for a moment and show a little affection for Cinderella, even though normally she insists on referring to her biological children as the "daughters that count" and so on. This lets the happily ever after extend to everyone, including a democratic election for the people in which the scheming Sebastian is co-opted rather than punished and even the stepmother hears the three kindest words Cinderella knows: "I forgive you."

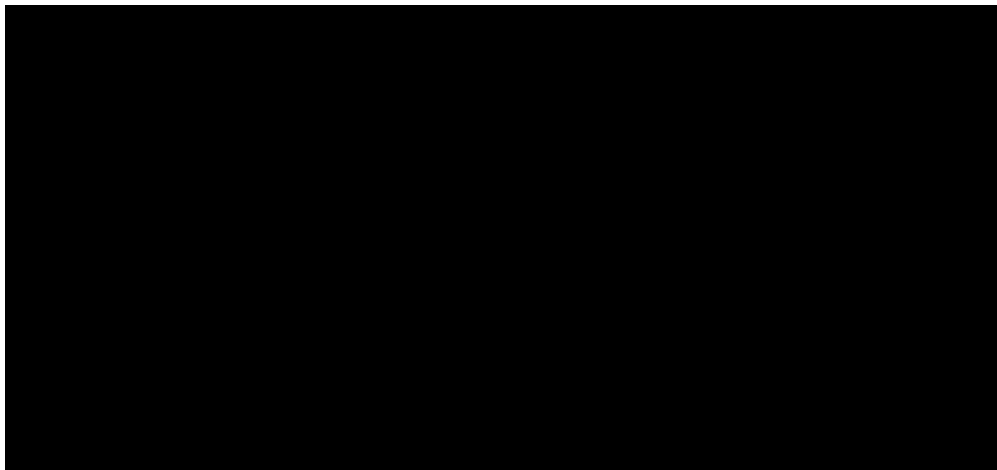
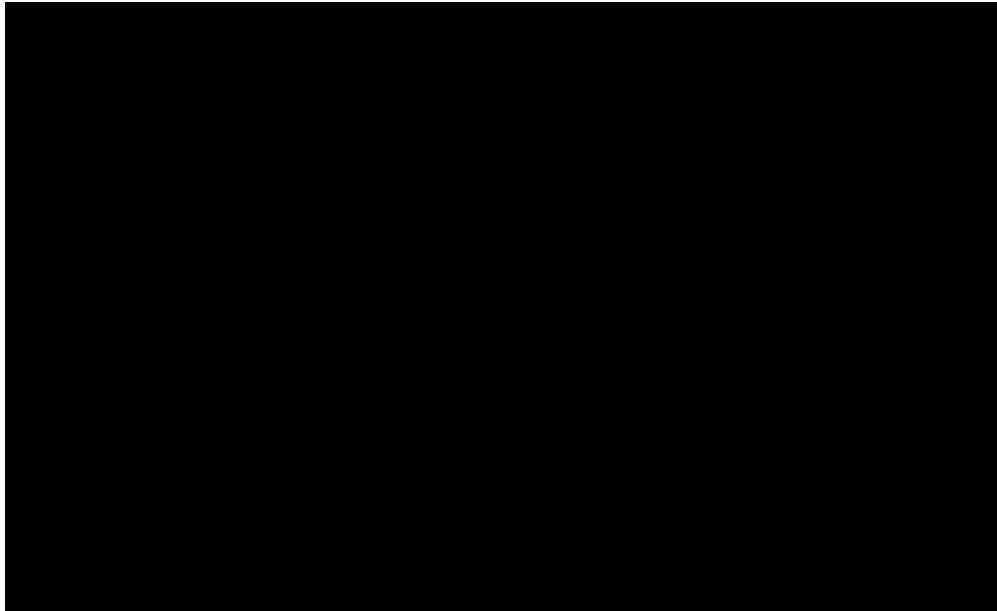
Let's be clear, this is a slightly generous three stars that is rooted in a sweet score and a cast that delivers these modest goods. This sort of professional, solid show shouldn't be over-praised or undersold. With only seven musicals debuting on Broadway until the end of the season in May, it's hard to not to want every single one to be a blockbuster home run. This *Cinderella* may prove to be that commercially; it's

certainly off to a strong start. Veterans like Harris and Clark and Bartlett are pros and it shows, Harada has fun in a comic turn and Osnes and Fontana prove they can carry the weight of a major musical with charm.

And the modern touches mostly add a little humor or stay out of the way. I'm not sure having Cinderella intentionally leave her glass slipper is any more empowering than having it slip off accidentally: she still waits demurely for the chance to slip her toes in it and to claim her prize Prince. So how does that justify her Fairy Godmother insisting Cinderella has triumphed when she might have just stopped and told him who she really was in the first place? But does it matter? Sometimes old fashioned endings work just fine.

**SCRIPT DOCTOR:** I do hope they'll keep tweaking this show. It could easily be in much better shape a month or two from now than it was on opening night. And if it means the terrific Santino Fontana (so good in dramatic roles) and the appealing Laura Osnes become bankable stars, all the better. First, fix the Fairy Godmother's ungainly costume and get rid of those antennae that sprout out of the top of her head. Then there's the climax with the shoe. It doesn't have quite the romance and girl power attitude they're going for. When no one fits into the slipper, the Prince gets desperate and asks if everyone has tried it on. instead of stepping out of the crowd for her fitting, why not have Cinderella boldly say, "Do you want to pick your Queen based on her shoe size or based on your heart?" The Prince could immediately beam and say, "It's you!" Her stepmother or Sebastian could bleat out, "But she hasn't tried on the slipper!" and the Prince could respond, "She can go barefoot for the rest of her life if she wants. This is my Queen!" Then an attendant could slowly start to take away the glass slipper until Cinderella speaks up at the last minute and says, "On the other hand, they are awfully pretty." And the Prince would respond, realizing even an empowered girl can still like her shoes, "It would be a shame to let them go to waste. Recycling and all that. After all, you're the only one they fit!" Then he can take the shoes and slip them romantically on her feet. Just a thought.

For fans of the TV specials, here are Julie Andrews and Lesley Ann Warren singing "In My Own Little Corner."



**THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013** (on a four star scale)

*As You Like it* (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) \*\*\*\*  
*Chimichangas And Zoloff* \*  
*Closer Than Ever* \*\*\*  
*Cock* \*\* 1/2  
*Harvey with Jim Parsons* \*  
*My Children! My Africa!* \*\*\*\*  
*Once On This Island* \*\*\*  
*Potted Potter* \*  
*Storefront Church* \*\* 1/2  
*Title And Deed* \*\*\*  
*Picture Incomplete* (NYMF) \*\*  
*Flambe Dreams* (NYMF) \*\*  
*Rio* (NYMF) \*\*  
*The Two Month Rule* (NYMF) \*  
*Trouble* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Stealing Time* (NYMF) \*\*  
*Requiem For A Lost Girl* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Re-Animator The Musical* (NYMF) \*\*\*  
*Baby Case* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*How Deep Is The Ocean* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Central Avenue Breakdown* (NYMF) \*\*\*  
*Foreverman* (NYMF) \* 1/2  
*Swing State* (NYMF) \* 1/2  
*Stand Tall: A Rock Musical* (NYMF) \* 1/2  
*Living With Henry* (NYMF) \*  
*A Letter To Harvey Milk* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*The Last Smoker In America* \*\*  
*Gore Vidal's The Best Man* (w new cast) \*\*\*  
*Into The Woods at Delacorte* \*\* 1/2  
*Bring It On: The Musical* \*\*  
*Bullet For Adolf* \*  
*Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc.* \*\*  
*Harrison, TX* \*\*\*  
*Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck"* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2  
*Pink Milk* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2  
*Who Murdered Love* (FringeNYC) no stars  
*Storytime With Mr. Buttermen* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*#MormonInChief* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*An Interrogation Primer* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*An Evening With Kirk Douglas* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Sheherizade* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*The Great Pie Robbery* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Independents* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Dick and The Rose* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*Magdalen* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Bombsheltered* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Paper Plane* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Rated M For Murder* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Mallory/Valerie* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Non-Equity: The Musical!* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*City Of Shadows* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking* \*\*\*  
*Salamander Starts Over* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Pieces* (FringeNYC) \*  
*The Train Driver* \*\*\*  
*Chaplin The Musical* \* 1/2  
*Detroit* \*\* 1/2  
*Heartless at Signature* \*\*  
*Einstein On The Beach at BAM* \*\*\*\*  
*Red-Handed Otter* \*\* 1/2  
*Marry Me A Little* \*\*  
*An Enemy Of The People* \*\* 1/2  
*The Old Man And The Old Moon* \*\*\* 1/2  
*A Chorus Line at Papermill* \*\*\*  
*Helen & Edgar* \*\*\*  
*Grace* \* 1/2  
*Cyrano de Bergerac* \*\*  
*Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* \*\*\*  
*Disgraced* \*\*  
*Annie* \*\* 1/2

*The Heiress* \*\*  
*Checkers* \*\* 1/2  
*Ivanov* \*\*\*  
*Golden Child at Signature* \*\* 1/2  
*Giant at the Public* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Scandalous* \* 1/2  
*Forever Dusty* \*\*  
*The Performers* \*\*  
*The Piano Lesson at Signature* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2 (singing) \* (production) so call it \*\* 1/2  
*A Christmas Story: The Musical* \*\*  
*The Sound Of Music at Papermill* \*\*\*  
*My Name Is Asher Lev* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Golden Boy* \*\*  
*A Civil War Christmas* \*\* 1/2  
*Dead Accounts* \*\*  
*The Anarchist* \*  
*Glengarry Glen Ross* \*\*  
*Bare* \*\*  
*The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* \*\* 1/2  
*The Great God Pan* \*\* 1/2  
*The Other Place* \*\* 1/2  
*Picnic* \* 1/2  
*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2  
*Deceit* \* 1/2  
*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*  
*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson)* \* 1/2  
*The Jammer* \*\*\*  
*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2  
*Manilow On Broadway* \*\* 1/2  
*Women Of Will* \*\* 1/2  
*All In The Timing* \*\*\*  
*Isaac's Eye* \*\*\*  
*Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery* \*\* 1/2  
*The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County* \* 1/2  
*Much Ado About Nothing* \*\*\*  
*Really Really* \*  
*Parsifal at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Madrid* \* 1/2  
*The Wild Bride at St. Ann's* \*\* 1/2  
*Passion at CSC* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Carousel at Lincoln Center* \*\*\*  
*The Revisionist* \*\*  
*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* \*\*\*

*Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.*

**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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