

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## A Cinderella Reinvented

Sylvie · Tuesday, March 24th, 2015

Don't say there are no second chances. Or no fairy tales. Just ask Douglas Carter Beane (*The Nance, Sister Act*). When *he* was asked to write a new book for the Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein *Cinderella* that starred Julie Andrews on TV (1957), then Lesley Ann Warren (1965), and later still Brandy with Whitney Houston as the fairy godmother (1997), he rejected the idea out of hand.

Did anyone really need another revival of this piece?

Luckily, Carter Beane changed his mind and, in doing so, took the project several steps further than anyone had envisioned. The *Rodgers + Hammerstein's Cinderella*, now at the Ahmanson, is not a straight revival. Carter Beane did not take his cue so much from the Hammerstein book, but from the original 17th century Charles Perrault fairy tale. He reinvented it enough to bring to it a 21st century sensibility. No pallid self-righteousness here. He then pilfered the Rodgers and Hammerstein songbook for songs that, for one reason or another, the two men had discarded from earlier shows and that came in handy here.

So this cut and paste iteration of *Cinderella* is not just enchanted, but enchanting, also much more vivid and alive in the now, and intended not just for the kids and grandkids. It will seduce every grown-up who's still a child at heart.



Paige Faure as Cinderella on her way to the ball...

Gone are the meek and mild Cinderellas of yore. This reimagined tale of the scullery maid Cinderella (a lovely Paige Faure, in the role she created on Broadway) is a lot smarter and grittier. Her handsome prince Topher (short for Chris-topher) is not just good-looking (although actor Andy Huntington Jones is very easy on the eyes and ears), but also benevolent and socially aware — the kind of dude we could use in Congress, if Congress had a prince.



Fran Drescher as Madame, the evil stepmother...

Cast as the evil stepmother, here renamed Madame, Fran Drescher (*The Nanny*) seems to be reaching for a Joan Rivers impersonation in a performance that brings a little more attention to itself than is required. Her infamous daughters Gabrielle (Kaitlyn Davidson, in a role with a split-personality, but mostly more pleasant than not) and the tantrum-driven Charlotte (performed with

unrestrained relish and verve by the plump Aimee Garcia) keep us pleasantly amused by being more fleshed out and more directly involved in the overall story than they have been in past versions.



Aimee Garcia, Center, cracking wise as Charlotte in *Rodgers + Hammerstein's Cinderella*

The vocal standout in the production is the terrific Kecia Lewis who unleashes some down-home humor and an operatic voice that could break glass as Cinderella's fairy godmother. A close runner-up in this vocally talented cast is Antoine L. Smith as Lord Pinkleton, protector of the young prince, whose booming baritone is surely the reason he is charged with broadcasting court decisions to the villagers at large. Not to be overlooked is David Andino as Gabrielle's hapless suitor and would-be social activist Jean-Michel, in a cuddly and winning performance. Pulling it all together is the direction by Mark Brokaw.

Singing prowess aside, the other real stars of this production are the men and women of its technical team — chiefly Anna Louizos for her evocative, big-stroke, fairy tale settings, and the unstoppable William Ivey Long, whose costumes here go well beyond being right to becoming, as needed, astounding jumping-jack quick-change mechanisms in a show that requires several.

Paul Huntley's humorous wigs also deserve a mention (in particular Aimee Garcia's, which looks like it's ready to set sail), Kenneth Posner's lighting and, of course, all of the musical artists who bring the beautiful Rodgers and Hammerstein score to admirable life. Among them are music supervisor and arranger Danny Chase, orchestrator Danny Troob, music director and conductor Jay Alger, and sound designer Nevin Steinberg.



Andy Huntington Jones and Paige Faure in *Rodgers + Hammerstein's Cinderella*

It is a rather unusual coincidence that, at the same time that the stage musical livens up the Ahmanson stage, the entirely unrelated Disney live-action film based on the Cinderella story is playing in local movie theatres (with Lily James of *Downton Abbey* in the title role). The productions differ, even as do elements of the story they tell, the Disney being a good deal more one-dimensional and predictable, but each one has its charms.

This is one time when you can safely be encouraged to enjoy both.



*Top image: The ball at the palace in Rodgers' + Hammerstein's Cinderella.*

*All photos by Carol Rosegg*

**WHAT:** *Rodgers + Hammerstein's Cinderella*

**WHERE:** Ahmanson theatre, 135 North Grand Avenue Los Angeles, CA 90012.

**WHEN:** Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2& 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Through April 26. Exceptions: No performance March 25, no evening performance April 26, added 2pm performance April 23.

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**HOW:** Tickets \$25-\$150 (subject to change), available online at [www.centertheatregroup.org](http://www.centertheatregroup.org), or 213.972.4400 or in person at the CTG box-office.

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