THE PRINCESS WITH A THOUSAND FACES

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART of the popular Cinderella fairy tale?

When the pumpkin from her garden transforms into a golden carriage? When the eagle drops her sandal into the lap of the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichus? When her stepsisters are blinded by magical doves during her wedding to the prince? When she is drowned by her jealous stepsister but later reincarnated from a golden lotus? When Kermit the Frog explains that he could have saved everyone a lot of headaches and mistaken identity if only he had been asked in the first place?

Believe it or not, all of these details belong to the long history of the tale we know today as *Cinderella*, most popularly depicted in both the beloved 1950 Disney animated film and the many versions of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical—including this Syracuse Stage production.

Familiar elements that may be linked to the Cinderella narrative can be traced back to the 7th century BCE, and the various stories of Rhodopis, who worked as a slave alongside the Greek fabulist Aesop.

Over the course of the next two and a half millennia, archetypal stories of a downtrodden and abused young maiden whose natural beauty and purity of spirit ultimately are rewarded by her ascendency to a royal position and true love infiltrate the literature and legends of ancient and modern cultures, both Western and Eastern. Asian and Arabian renditions from the 9th to 14th centuries CE are replete with elements of murder, reincarnation, and cannibalism and do not always end happily for the protagonist.

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■ ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES PERRAULT'S *CENDRILLON OU LA PETITE PANTOUFLE DE VERRE*. CIRCA 1697.

Of all of these tales, the one penned by 17th century French author Charles Perrault in 1697, *Cendrillon ou la Petite Pantoufle de Verre* (Cinderella, or the Little Glass Slipper) contains the most familiar components that color our contemporary understanding of the tale: The fairy godmother; the pumpkin carriage; the glass slipper; the transformation of animals into her retinue. Itself a retelling of an earlier Italian version, Perrault's appears to be the first one specifically intended for children. Perrault also has the distinction of attributing the stories to "Mother Goose."

Despite the earlier legendary connection to Aesop, this version is the first to align the narrative with a series of morals about the true nature of inner beauty. In the end, Cinderella forgives her family for their cruelty and neglect – the beginning of a formal tradition of tales ending with "happily ever after."

In the early 19th century, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published a series of folk tales from oral traditions that contained their account of *Aschenputtel*. Unlike Perrault's, their version is darker and heavily Teutonic in nature, serving more as a dire social warning against immorality than a celebration of humanity's better angels. For example: in order to fit their feet into the golden slipper, the stepmother cuts off one of her daughter's toes and the other's heel. In the end, Cinderella's family suffers violent retribution and punishment for their inhumanity towards her.

Cinderella's story has been retold in every medium imaginable, from theatre and ballet to opera, film, and Japanese anime. The first film rendering occurred in 1899, directed by motion picture pioneer Georges Méliès. The Disney studios have produced no fewer than six versions between 1922 and the present.

Animated depictions of the tale have incorporated beloved characters such as Betty Boop, Elmer Fudd, Popeye, and Shrek. Feminist modernizations, such as the 1998 Drew Barrymore vehicle *Ever After*, have attempted to restore Cinderella's agency as the crafter of her own fate. It could even be argued that there are seeds of Cinderella in Molly Ringwald's Gen X character from the iconic 1984 John Hughes romantic comedy *Sixteen Candles*.

The story has also inspired its share of parodies in television and film, ranking with Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* as one of the most imitated tropes in American sitcoms. From Jerry Lewis's slapstick gender-reversed *Cinderfella* (1960) to Sesame Street's *CinderElmo* and Jim Henson's *Hey, Cinderella!* (1969), the story has been ridiculed, twisted, reconstituted, and lampooned, but always with love and affection—no matter how wickedly.

In 1976, Austrian-born child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim wrote his magnum opus, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, in which he uses Freudian psychoanalytic techniques to deconstruct several familiar children's stories. This book, acknowledged by musical theater composer Stephen Sondheim as one of the inspirations for his 1986 Tony Award-winning musical *Into the Woods*, which asks what happens *after* "Happily Ever After," interprets these tales as dark journeys into the psyche of children on the verge of adolescence.

Bettelheim's analysis of Cinderella leans heavily on the Brothers Grimm version of the tale and delineates the difference between the prepubescent protagonist and her stepsisters, who have already entered into the cycle of menstruation. This contrast is designed to explore the anxiety of the journey from innocence to experience and to critique the transactional value of marginalized female sexuality in a patriarchal society.

But regardless of their context, there is no doubt that these hundreds of versions of the classic fairy tale have propelled Cinderella into the collective consciousness as one of the most beloved and retold stories across the globe, and that it will continue to be reinterpreted for years to come, as long as young people can dream of a better life from their "own little corner of their own little room."

-Dr. Robert Lloyd-Charles, PhD

■ MLLE BARRAL AND COMPANY IN *CINDERELLA*. DIRECTED BY GEORGES MÉLIÈS, 1899.

■ ANNA MARIA ALBERGHETTI AND JERRY LEWIS IN *CINDERFELLA*. DIRECTED BY FRANK TASHLIN, 1960.

■ KERMIT THE FROG AND JIM HENSON ON THE SET OF *HEY, CINDERELLA!*. DIRECTED BY JIM HENSON, 1969.

■ DREW BARRYMORE AND DOUGRAY SCOTT IN *EVER AFTER: A CINDERELLA STORY*. DIRECTED BY ANDY TENNANT, 1998.