

Theater Review

Taking a new look at the Cinderella myth

By Jeffrey Borak

STOCKBRIDGE

The Cinderella concocted by Anne Bogart and Jeff Halpern in their exuberant and highly imaginative reconstruction of Massenet's opera, "Cendrillon" — and the folk tales by the Brothers Grimm and Perrault that inspired it — is, needless to say, not the Cinderella of Walt Disney. Nor is it quite the splashy, colorful world of Massenet.

The piece, entitled "Cinderella in a Mirror," owes as much to modern psychology as it does to its more historic origins. That is precisely what Bogart and Halpern are after.

I suspect opera purists are going to have a very difficult time with this piece. Bogart and Halpern have taken Massenet's opera apart and put it back together again in a one hour and 20 minute package, sprinkled with just enough English dialogue along the way to keep us up to date in the Cinderella story and performed by a cast of only eight and a chamber orchestra consisting only of keyboard and cello.

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Bogart and her set designer, Victoria Petrovich, have cut the Citizens Hall playing space in half. The walls are a smooth, unadorned off-white and the audience, seated on risers, is pushed almost straight up against the playing space, marked by a vibrant red curtain and false proscenium in gold trim; a pattern that is repeated when the curtain rises and we are confronted with, in effect, two more prosceniums, one of them an oversize hearth.

The second proscenium also surrounds a crimson gauze curtain in front of which stands the melancholy figure of Le Prince (Peter Gillis), his head framed in a tight light, singing of his loneliness, followed soon by the arrival of Cinderella's family — her social-climbing mother, her two vain sisters, and a hen-pecked stepfather. Periodically, throughout the prince's lament, the lights behind the crimson screen creep up to reveal a reclining Lucette (Joan Elizabeth) in sleeplike suspended animation. The prince is not yet reality; only a dream.

For the rest of the evening, the Cinderella story unfolds, only not quite in its expected manner. Here is Lucette, the girl of the cinders, the scullery woman to whom attention is not paid. And there is Lucette's other self, Cendrillon (Lauren Flanagan), blonde, voluptuous but in graceful, 19th-century manner, decked out in a red ball gown. At one point, divided by a bench that wings out from the inner stage, Lucette and Cendrillon move slowly up and down, gazing at each other as if they were mirror images but also more than mirror images. They are two sides of one being and for a moment, more than a moment, perhaps, the question of which one is real and true floats like a whisp on the air.

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At one point, at what seems to be just about the halfway mark, the music breaks off and Lucette, in a dazzlingly played, brilliantly vocally

CINDERELLA IN A MIRROR. Based on an opera by Jules Massenet and the tales of the Brothers Grimm and Perrault. Co-conceived and directed by Anne Bogart. Co-conceived with musical adaptation by Jeff Halpern. Text by Wendy Kesselman. Set design by Victoria Petrovich; lighting designed by Carol Mullins; costumes designed by Gregg Barnes. Through Aug. 23. Music-Theatre Group at Lenox Arts Center, Citizens Hall, Interlaken, Stockbridge.

Lucette Joan Elizabeth
Cendrillon Lauren Flanagan
Pandolfe Henry Stram
Le Prince Peter Gillis
Madame de la Haltiere Mary Stout
Fairy Godmother Elisabeth Van Ingen
Noemie Allison DeSalvo
Dorothee Theresa McCarthy

orchestrated moment by Joan Elizabeth, delivers a remarkable stream-of-consciousness rendition of the Cinderella story. It is almost as though Lucette's own concept of reality has been thrown into question.

This is not, Bogart and Halpern suggest, simply the story of a young kitchen maid dreaming, con-

templating about an inner, more radiant self. This theatrical piece is itself a mirror through which all of us in the audience are asked to regard this Cinderella, as though each of us had, deep within, some inner self yearning to get out, not simply to be swept away by a wonderful Prince — or Princess — Charming, bit to some plane that is a bit more romantic, perhaps, and adorned than our everyday lives. It is the conflict many of us feel, from time to time, between the aspect of ourselves that we don't like and the person we would like to be; the person we believe ourselves to be and the person we imagine we would like to be; not necessarily more glamorous — merely different.

Bogart uses the Citizens Hall space inventively and the fact that much of this is in French — while it may mean the loss of some subtle nuances — is no hinderance to understanding what is going on. This is not a piece about language. It is about ideas and feelings expressed in music, motion and silences.

Joan Elizabeth — who was in Bogart's "Between Wind" last summer at the Lenox Arts Center and who appeared more recently in Enid Futterman's "Yours, Anne" at the Cohoes Music Hall — brings a radiant presence to the stage as Lucette in a remarkable performance. There are dark edges, spirits that haunt the more playful and buoyant aspects of her Lucette, qualities that add intriguing shadings to an already colorful performance.

The rest of the ensemble — and this is very much an ensemble — is superb, especially Mary Stout as Madame de la Haltiere.

"Cinderella in a Mirror" is considered by Bogart and Halpern to be a work-in-development but, clearly, at this stage of the game, it is already a wonderfully inventive and provocative piece of theater. In true Music-Theatre Group fashion, it challenges our notions of what theater is, pushing the boundaries a little bit further with each production. How wonderful to be invited along for the ride!



Cai Joppu

A MOTHER comforts her daughters before a royal ball in this scene from Anne Bogart and Jeff Halpern's "Cinderella in a Mirror" at the Music-Theatre Group at Lenox Arts Center. Seated at left are, Theresa McCarthy, left, and Allison deSalvo as, respectively, Dorothee and Noemie. Behind them is Mary Stout as Madame de la Haltiere. Looking on at right is de la Haltiere's henpecked husband, Pandolfe, played by Henry Stram.