

Oberlin Opera Theater stages an enchanting *Cendrillon* (March 8)

by Daniel Hathaway



Whether you know her as Cendrillon, Aschenbrödel, La Cenerentola, La Cenicienta, Soluschka, or, most likely, Cinderella, the story of that downtrodden stepchild is an irresistible fairy tale.

It's been turned into many operas, but perhaps most magically by Jules Massenet in his *Cendrillon*, beautifully produced by Oberlin Opera

Theater last Wednesday evening at its opening performance in Hall Auditorium.

Supported by winning staging by Jonathon Field, a strong cast of singers told the archetypal story of Cinderella with exceptional charm and flair. Framing the production, the colorful set by Laura Carlson-Tarantowski backed up the story with fairy-tale calligraphy in French. As an added touch, both a kitchen fireplace and an enchanted oak tree sported Art Nouveau details.

Clear and elegant of voice, Elana Bell was completely engaging as Cendrillon (also known as Lucette). Her persecutors, Madame de la Haltière and Madame's awkward but privileged daughters Noémie and Dorothée, were brilliantly characterized



by Jesse Mashburn, Amy Weintraub, and Alexandra Prat.

The scene where the daughters are being decked out for the ball in costume designer Chris Flaharty's outrageous gowns was a hoot. A droll moment for Madame came in the second act when she proudly read out her family tree, including a Doge, bishops, and abbesses, and on its less exalted branches, royal mistresses.



As La Fée (the Fairy Godmother), Victoria Ellington dispatched impressive volleys of coloratura both in the kitchen of the Haultière household and from her penthouse in the oak tree, while waving a glistering wand. Ruby Dibble was vocally splendid as Le Prince Charmant, although *Cendrillon* is one show where the trouser role tradition really stretches the imagination.

Other solo roles were ably covered by Cory McGee (Pandolfe, Lucette's father), Perry Bleiberg (Le Roi), Santiago Pizarro (Le Doyen), Shawn Roth (Le Surintendant), Simon Nam (Le Premier Ministre), and Thomas Chevrier (The Herald).

Adding to the luminosity of the production were the six fairies who twinkled so brightly during the second act as they formed a wall to prevent Lucette and Prince Charming from seeing each other.



And for this show's special touch, Jonathon Field introduced four Imaginary Friends who act as Lucette's confidants and comforters. Decked out in fantastical costumes, Matteo Adams, Carolyn Anderson, Helena Colindres, and Sequan Mack filled the stage with affecting empathy.



Rounding out the production musically were the fine chorus, prepared by Gregory Ristow, and the Oberlin Chamber Orchestra under Christopher Larkin, who expertly realized Massenet's score, touching it with a special variety of fairy-dust.

Most Americans will come to *Cendrillon* with images of Walt Disney's cartoon version dancing in their heads. With its beguiling production, Oberlin Opera Theater left only its own vivid pictures in mind after the final curtain fell — a production that many regional opera companies would be proud as punch to have pulled off.

Photos by Yevhen Gulenko.

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