



BWW Review: Ross Petty's CINDERELLA is Good Ol' Fashioned Family Entertainment

ALAN HENRY
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RACHAELMCCAIG

Jeff Lillico and members of the Ensemble in Cinderella

Ross Petty's annual pantomime has become, if anything, a tradition and staple in Toronto of the holiday season. As downtown storefronts are transformed from "pumpkin spice" to "naughty or nice," the cast and creative team at Ross Petty Productions work on their whimsical, magical, and hilarious takes on traditional children's stories.

I'm pleased to report that 19 years in, this year's production of Cinderella is a marvelous success. The Second City's Reid Janisse has crafted a story focusing on a feisty, passionate Cinderella - who is focused on getting the people of Toronto to eat healthy foods as opposed to processed and junk foods. Janisse's books works most of the time, even if the first act runs a little long. The second act picks up the pace, and brings laugh after laugh from both the adults and children in the audience.

Audiences will recognize Danielle Wade, of CBC's Over the Rainbow and Mirvish's The Wizard of OZ fame, in the title role. Wade has grown immensely as a performer since her time in OZ. In Cinderella, she is able to show off her unique, quirky style; something Canadian audiences fell in love with during her time on the CBC reality series. While Wade exudes girl next door charm (something her Dorothy was full of), her Cinderella is embedded with just enough ingénue qualities that it shows off her versatility - especially while playing opposite Jeff Lillico (Max Charming).

Cleopatra Williams and Bryn McAuley play the wicked stepsisters Shakiki and Nastine respectively. Both characters are incredibly annoying, loud, and pop-culture obsessed - and your kids will love to hate them.

Jeff Lillico plays the charming pop-star, Max. He has a fantastic singing voice, and great comedic timing. I don't think we're seeing all of his talents used in this production - and I'd have liked to see more of him throughout the evening. Then again, the show is called Cinderella - so even if we don't get enough of Max Charming throughout the evening, his time on stage is used well and he's delightful to watch.

Ross Petty returns to the stage in a dress (would we have it any other way?) - as Cinderella's evil stepmother. Greeted by a loud chorus of "booing" at each entrance - audiences have come to love Petty's evil characters year after year. In this pantomime, Petty's character is a "cougar" who is set out to steal the fortune of Max Charming and enslave southern Ontario using mind controlling potato chips.

Returning to the Elgin theatre for a 5th time is Dan Chameroy's iconic character Plumbum. In Cinderella, Plumbum is Cinderella's whacked out fairy godmother. Plumbum will make kid friendly Bieber jokes one minute - and then another joke "adult" enough moments later that it will go right over any child's head. The Ross Petty team continue to find an excellent balance in that regard. Chameroy has also mastered leading large production numbers, as he steals and stops the show multiple times throughout the evening. Some parents in the crowd might recognize him as "Bobby" from Theatre20's production of Company. Is there anything this man can't do?

Special mention must be given to Ben Chaisson and Beth Kates for their stunning projection design - filling in much of the stage exquisitely where physical sets would be impractical. While the annual pantomime doesn't operate on the budget of a Broadway blockbuster - it continuously provides stunning visuals. When Cinderella made her entrance in her dazzling ball gown and was whisked away to the ball in a horse-drawn carriage (with real horses), my heart skipped a beat.

Once again, Ross Petty has demonstrated he is the king of family friendly holiday entertainment. The show makes for a great introduction to the theatre for young audiences, where participation is encouraged and a lack of theatre etiquette may be permissible. Take the whole family, and make your way down to the Elgin Theatre for a night of sheer delight.