

Episode 26: Cinderella - Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girl Boss

A while ago this video popped up of James Corden, Camilla Cabello and a bunch of other celebrities stopping traffic in Los Angeles by doing a flash mob to promote the new Cinderella film. And the response from the public was a resounding "If James Corden interrupts your morning commute you are legally allowed to hit him with your car". To be fair, I'm of the opinion that if your morning commute is interrupted by anyone, including but not limited to James Corden, you are entitled to hit them with your car. But it really was a spectacular failure in the marketing department to think that anyone would want to have their drive interrupted by spontaneous musical theatre, let alone spontaneous musical theatre for another adaptation that absolutely no one asked for.

The Cinderella story is probably remade once a year in some form or another, often badly, but the flash mob signalled to me that this particular incarnation was going to be a very special kind of bad. The kind that would make me wish I could take back 90 minutes of my life. The kind worth investigating. So that's what we're gonna do.

I'm Alex. This is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about Cinderella.

Initially when I was thinking about

writing this episode, I thought that I would take a look at multiple adaptations of Cinderella throughout the years and maybe do a little bit of a compare and contrast between them. Because, like I said in the introduction, someone remakes Cinderella like once a year with varying degrees of success, so there's quite a lot of material to pull from. But the more I thought about this 2021 musical version, the more annoyed I became with the whole concept. See, this particular iteration of Cinders is really going for a "what if Cinderella was a girl boss?" vibe. And I hate it.

Now, obviously the beauty of folk tales is that we adapt and change them to fit our ever-shifting social environments and moral landscapes. That includes numerous subversive adaptations dating back to the late 19th/ early 20th Centuries, and a whole slew of feminist adaptations from the 1970s onwards. I don't have a problem with changing the narrative. I'd be foolish to – it would defeat the entire purpose of folk tales in the first place. What I do have is very limited patience for is the "everything's fine as long as the CEO is female" versions of feminism that not only seem to plague basically every work place I've ever been in, but are also apparently the most palatable versions of feminism to shoehorn in to block buster films that want to appear like they're doing something more than

just rehashing the same story we've all seen hundreds of times before.

I hate the cynical cash grab, is what I'm saying. So, I thought today we could look at the origins of the Cinderella tale and how it's evolved over time before mercilessly shredding this recent travesty and its bland, marketable attempt at being feminist or whatever. I've been trapped indoors for like 10 weeks. There isn't a single piece of media that could make me happy right now, let alone a half-arsed Cinderella reboot with a butchered Broadway version of Queen's Somebody to Love in the middle. Let's get into it shall we?

So, the conventional Cinderella that most of us can recite off the top of our head at this point follows a heroine who lives with her wicked step mother and two ugly step sisters and works her little fingers to the bone. One night the prince invites all the maidens in the land to a ball. Cinders isn't allowed to go, but after her step mother and sisters leave, Boom! Fairy god mother shows up, makes her beautiful (on the condition that she be back by midnight) and she goes to the ball where the prince is enchanted by her. She's having so much fun she forgets to look at her clock and ends up having to flee at the stroke of midnight, leaving behind her glass slipper. The prince, a budding foot fetishist, vows to seek out the maiden who had so enchanted him. Luckily for Cinders, no one else's feet are a small (or as large, I guess?), and when the prince finally finds her, he immediately proposes and they live happily ever after.

As with all folk tales, Cinderella has

many incarnations that differ slightly between cultures. The oldest known version is the story of Rhodopis, which originated around the late 6th Century BC, and featured an eagle stealing the sandal of a slave girl to be dropped at the feet of a King in Memphis, who eventually tracks her down and marries her. There are a number of other versions that pop up throughout Europe and Asia, which have a revolving door of cultural flourishes, including magical fish, magical bones, wedding shrouds, biscuits with gemstones baked into them and transforming doves. But there are a few key consistencies – a lowly or abandoned girl who is mistreated, a prince, and an eventual transformation.

There's also a Grimm version, which has the German gore we all know and love – specifically, the step sisters slice off their own toes and heels to fit into the glass slipper (the prince only notices that this is the case when the overflowing blood starts to drip on him) and then Cinderella has her army of doves peck out their eyes as punishment. But the version of Cinderella that most of us are familiar with draws from Charles Perrault's 1697 version, published under a French name which I looked up and could theoretically attempt to pronounce for you, but I'm not going to. This is the version with the features that we all acknowledge as classic now, like the fairy godmother, the magical pumpkin carriage and the all-important glass slipper. Yes, even though this story was rattling around for eons and the prince was a known foot fetishist in other iterations, this is the first version to make the shoe itself glass.

Anyway, the general moral backbone

in each of these is that kindness and forgiveness are both virtues which will serve you well. Cinderella has had a pretty shitty run of it, but she's kind to everyone from the littlest mouse all the way up to the step family that's trying to actively sabotage her. And she doesn't lose that when things start to go her way. Instead, she's still nice to her terrible step family, even after she suddenly finds herself in a position where she could ask everyone involved in her former misery to be guillotined. Except in the Grimm version, which goes full vengeance with flesh-eating doves and the eyeballs. But you know... there's always one outlier. In and of themselves, kindness and forgiveness aren't terrible morals, although they're a little meek for my blood.

But as time has passed, and particularly as Cinderella gets more and more big screen adaptations, the focus of the story has really shifted to romance. The reward good little girls get for their kindness and forgiveness is less about being rewarded with a life away from their horrible circumstances, and more about being rewarded with the prospect of true love. Which is why in later adaptations, you'll often get Cinderella characters who, at the very least, fortuitously meet the prince a couple of times before the big night so they're not just falling in love at first sight. In the 1997 version, for example, the prince wants to be with the common people, so he spends his time in disguise in the market, where he meets Brandy's Cinderella and they flirt a little. This version was squarely aimed at the children's market, but the more adult adaptations also give the Cinderella character a little agency – for example,

1998's *Ever After* has Drew Barrymore's Danielle (the Cinderella character) as a quick-thinking lover of books, and her interactions with the prince are more extended, having them grow closer over time.

The romantic elements of the Cinderella story make for much better watching in a big-budget Hollywood context, because the sudden raising of social status through snappy and fortuitous marriage has long gone out of fashion as a nice little treat for good girls. It also smacks of "the monarchy is good and benevolent, actually" which Americans don't gel with. But that's beside the point. The main thing is that true love – especially one where you're recognised as unique and special – is a much more desirable contemporary reward. All the wealth of a kingdom is just an added bonus. That's kind of where Cinderella is at cinematically – story itself is pretty simple, so I wouldn't say that any of the existing adaptations have given an incredible feminist overhaul. All the better adaptations give her some brains, a say in her future and true love as a reward, and the rest are musicals that are just rehashing Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Which is why it's so fascinating that the 2021 *Cinderella*, a jukebox musical no less, is trying to shoehorn lean in feminism into what could just be something fairly straightforward. So, in this version, Ella is living in her step-mother's allegedly dingy basement. For a basement, it is surprisingly well lit, and decorated in the manner of a faux-rustic Target display. Ella dreams of being a dressmaker so she can make her own way in the world. Her stepmother says that doing so would

be an embarrassment and forces her to make tea. This is the kind of cruelty we're dealing with here. Just barbaric. Meanwhile the Prince is being lectured about his inability to commit to his princely duties by marrying well. The king threatens to give his title to his sister, who keeps popping up throughout the film to discuss her New Green Deal, and generally seems like a competent public figure. In a last-ditch attempt to appease his father and find true love they agree to throw a ball and invite everyone in the kingdom. At the announcement he sees Ella being mouthy and decides he's in love, goes undercover as a peasant by tying a scarf around his head in order to meet her, and then convinces her to come to the ball as a networking opportunity for her dress making business. Ella initially isn't allowed to go to the ball, but gets her magical transformation from the Fabulous Godmother (played by Billy Porter) and manages to network, get a job offer AND fall in love. But when the prince tells her to stick around so they can get married she chooses her dreams. Some pining ensues, but eventually the kind gives him permission to choose her too, and he gives up his kingly duties to follow her around while she makes dresses for a queen from elsewhere.

While that all probably doesn't seem like such an egregious update to the plot, and the film is definitely working with other, probably more significant crimes – like James Corden's head on a mouse body, or Camila Cabello's non-voice having to go up against Broadway belters like Billy Porter and Idina Menzel – all together it has the overwhelming feeling of an attempt at a fashionably conscious statement without wanting to do any of

the heavy lifting, or even really knowing how. There's lots of small examples of this – all the female characters are transformed by brains or generic "my dreams were crushed" backstory in order to give them the illusion of agency – but I think it's most on display at the ball.

Having done a fun little song and dance number, Ella is able to gaslight, gatekeep, girl boss her way through the ball, which she's treating like her own multi-level marketing Herbalife party, but for dressmaking. She's approached by Queen Tatiana, who tells us that she committed some sort of murder (or military coup, it's unclear) in order to take the throne. She's impressed by Ella's dressmaking skills, and offers her a job as her personal dressmaker while she travels around attending lavish events. Working for a monarch who violently overthrew their predecessor! Every girl boss's dream! Also, this is apparently the only woman with enough agency in this film universe to be able to rule a nation, and she had to get it through ruthlessly spilling the blood of her predecessor in order to do so. And once she's at the top, her role as monarch is reduced to someone who goes around attending parties and buying fancy clothes. This is the kind of garbled messaging we're working with here.

Lindsey Ellis did a great video called 'Woke Disney', which points out that the recently revamped and rehashed live-action versions of the cartoon classics are working so hard to avoid the actually complex racial and sexual politics of their past that they will often simply invent issues to address in order to appear like they're doing something. She uses

Dumbo as an example, where of all the issues Disney could wrestle with – most obviously the racist caricatures of the crows who sing When I See An Elephant Fly, one of which is actually named Jim Crow and who are all voiced by white actors doing minstrel show voices – they choose to tackle animal cruelty and P.T. Banham for some reason by having the circus go animal-free at the end, and returning Dumbo and his mother to the wild. These films need a reason to exist, so they insert some form of marketable change that makes them appear engaged with criticism. Racism goes in the too hard basket, but a couple of tweaks to get Dumbo flying free at an elephant watering hole – simple. Fast. Adjusting animal cruelty is nice – good even – but definitely not something anyone asked for.

I think the same thing is happening with Cinderella. A lot of the criticism levelled at the Cinderella stories, has actually already been dealt with cinematically in some way by other. Ever After made her smarter and stronger; Whitney Houston's Cinderella made it less overwhelmingly white; A Cinderella Story gave it some modern flourishes, including a college education on the line. There've been versions with men in the Cinderella role, versions told from the perspective of the stepsisters, versions told from the perspective of the step mother. It's been picked at, unpacked and retold endlessly. No one was looking at the original Cinderella folk tale and thinking, "My god, if only Cinders had enough entrepreneurial spirit and girl boss energy to become the CEO of her own company, thereby enacting some sort of weird trickle-down feminism where

every other woman in the kingdom is uplifted by her musical theatre version of Jennifer Lopez's Let's Get Loud and is suddenly able to pursue their dreams". It just seems like they decided that they needed to be really Doing Something with it in order to justify remaking it, and that this thing was going to be Women Can Do Anything Especially Be CEO.

Now I'm obviously a little biased here because Lean In feminism – which says that women should pursue their ambitions and focus on what they can do rather than what they can't, at least in the realms of corporate America anyway – is, in my opinion, a load of horseshit. It only serves individuals – it never moves the needle on big-picture issues, and it notably leaves behind people who are already likely to be at a disadvantage in the corporate spaces its catering to (like people of colour, poor people, and working mums... or people who fall into all three categories). But the book Lean In sold 2.25 million copies worldwide, which makes it just the right brand of "don't rock the boat" girl power to shoehorn into a movie that wants to appear engaged without actually engaging. And my question is, "Why?" You could have just had a fun jukebox musical, which I would have hated anyway, but for reasons almost entirely related to the fact that nobody should ever cover Queen.

You might be listening to this and thinking that I'm being unnecessarily cynical – it is, after all, a movie that is pretty squarely directed at kids and their millennial parents who are going to sing along with the What a Man/ Seven Nation Army mashup and want their daughter to take something other than 'I

love princesses' away from the film. But like I said, folk tales adapt to their times, and I just think it's depressing that we're at the stage where the way we want that folk tale to play out is "Female CEOs fix everything actually".

Well, that was my Cinderella take. I got so infuriated by the whole gaslight gatekeep girl boss aspect of it that I didn't even get to talk about the other wildly annoying features of it – like the fact that Camilla Cabello has the acting range of a brick, or that the prince's character might as well be a cardboard cut out for all that he adds to the story. Look, it's not great, but the 6 year old in your life will probably love it. Just make sure you monitor them after to ensure that they don't express interest empowering women through the joys of network marketing. If you want to talk flexible hours and how you too can work from anywhere, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub babe. I've got a great opportunity for you. Oh god. I'm kidding. Just buy me a glass of wine and we can talk about literally anything else. Peace!

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Theme tune by Wes Fahey. ([Soundcloud: lee snipes](#))

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