

**REVIEW: Cinderella, Cambridge Arts Theatre**

**Paul Kirkley is enchanted by a winning mix of fairytale magic and knockabout jokes.**

If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise... specifically, an Extinction Rebellion protest against Prince Charming's plan to sell the forest off for development. Which is a cause Cinderella, the people's princess, can get behind – even if her Ugly Sisters, Melania and Ivanka, have no time for swotty do-gooders like “Greta Thunderpants”.

“It's very political this year, isn't it?” asks Cinders' faithful friend Buttons, knowingly, as the jokes about Boris, Brexit, Corbyn, Trump and the Woking branch of Pizza Express fly thick and fast. Maybe that's what you get when you hold a General Election in the middle of panto season...

But don't worry: if you're looking for Cambridge Arts Theatre's production of Cinderella to provide some blessed relief from the real world, you won't be short-changed. Topical gags aside, this is proper fairytale stuff, sparkling with magic and mischief, love and romance, and a heart as big as Ivanka's outsize bloomers. (My 11-year-old son firmly declared it the best panto he's seen – and believe me, he's not a natural fan of stories of about princesses...)

Returning to Cambridge for a second Christmas, dance legend Wayne Sleep has been teamed with Arts panto mainstay Matt Crosby to give us two dames for the price of one. As the Little and Large of Ugly Sisters, they make a winning pair, Sleep pirouetting nimbly on to the stage like the former Royal Ballet principal he is, while Crosby makes a less gainly entrance on a spacehopper, and promptly begins shaking his moneymaker in (very) stretch lycra to the strains of Physical, by the city's own Olivia Newton-John.

They are, of course, unspeakably mean to Cinders, played with winsome charm by Charlotte Kennedy, an alumni of Les Misérables in the West End, with the singing chops to prove it. As Prince Charming, Emily Squibb leans fully into the thigh-slapping principal boy routine, and strikes up a fun double act of her own with Dandini, played with a cheeky wink by Nancy Hill.

Stage and screen veteran Liza Goddard brings a touch of extra stardust to the Fairy Godmother while, as Baron Hardup, Coronation Street legend Kevin Kennedy – aka Curly Watts – maintains an impressive volley of dad jokes (“I'm teaching my dog to speak a foreign language?” “Espanola?” “No, it's a Labrador,” etc). But I suspect the audience's hearts (if not Cinders') really belong to Isaac Stanmore's adorable, scene-stealing Buttons.

Some of the jokes in Al Lockhart-Morley's script are definitely NSFW; one particular pun – “it would make my whole week” – prompted an audible gasp from the audience, though of course such saucy seaside postcard humour sails safely over the heads of the little 'uns. There's plenty of local content, too, with riffs on everything from cyclists on the pavement to the new Eddington development (“It has a Sainsbury's and an Argos, but no people”) and, of course, the now traditional poke in the eye for Cambridge United.

Memorable set-pieces include Crosby and Stanmore performing a hilarious “Dance of the Sugar Puff Fairy”, complete with an un-cooperative balloon, before Sleep comes on to show them how it's done with a tap routine demonstrating that, at 71, he can still hoof it up with the best of them. The best of them, in this case, being Tamsin January's well-drilled dance ensemble, and the fabulous “panto babes”, showcasing a wealth of local young dance talent.

And, of course, there is the much-anticipated, slip-sliding “messy scene”, this year set in a spa that's anything but rejuvenating for Buttons and Ivanka, Crosby (literally) throwing himself into it with his usual pratfalling enthusiasm. Thank goodness he's well padded.

Cinders' transformation from scullery maid to belle of the ball is suitably magical, while her flying horse and coach – and I mean an **\*\*actual\*\*** flying horse and coach – is as spectacular a piece of stagecraft as I've seen at the Arts, and was met with a spontaneous outbreak of applause. It really does have to be seen to be believed. And having seen it, I'm still not sure I can believe it.

The songs are well chosen, too, particularly the use of Take That's soaring classic (shut up, it is) Rule the World as Cinderella and her prince's love theme.

About that prince thing: it's all well and good that, having started out as an entitled property developer, Cinderella was able to bring out HRH's woke side. (Not that he was exactly enjoying the privileged life: is it a coincidence that this prince, who wants to break free from the constraints of his royal title and “find a purpose”, is played by a redhead...?) But, in the end, Cinders still invests all her happiness in finding a man, which isn't very feminist of her.

Worse than that, she still ends up (spoiler alert) marrying the prince, when in a **\*\*real\*\*** fairytale, she'd surely fall in love with dear, devoted Buttons. I guess social mobility hasn't quite reached the panto world yet. And besides, there's only **\*\*so\*\*** much tinkering you can get away with in a well-loved classic like Cinderella – even during an election.