



Montclair Local review: Opera Theatre of Montclair's 'La Cenerentola' brings real magic



Cornelia Lotito as Cinderella forgives her evil stepfamily in Saturday, Sept. 16's performance of "La Cenerentola." ADAM ANIK/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

'La Cenerentola' ('Cinderella')
By Gioachino Rossini

*Presented by Opera Theatre
of Montclair*

*Friday, Sept. 22, 8 p.m.
Saturday, Sept. 23, 4 p.m.
The United Way auditorium
60 South Fullerton Ave.*

operamontclair.org
973-202-7849

By GWEN OREL
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Note: All cast members refer to the Saturday night casts. As is the norm in opera, there are two casts who alternate performances.

There are big smiles in the audience during the Opera Theatre of Montclair production of Rossini's "La Cenerentola" ("Cinderella").

Yes, there's a happy ending coming. And it's a happy story.

But it's the sheer silly fun of what OTM has done that puts joy in the air like the aroma of something wonderful baking.

It's impossible not to smile as the pure sounds of the singers wash over you, after they hit the high ceilings of the United



Fernando Palomeque conducts the orchestra for The Opera Theatre of Montclair production of Rossini's 'La Cenerentola,' (Cinderella), in the United Way Theatre, at the Saturday afternoon performance, Sept. 16. ADAM ANIK/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

Way auditorium; or not to feel the excitement as the 20-piece orchestra tunes up, then keeps sweet, rhythmic pace, thanks to the sure conducting of Fernando Palomeque; or to laugh at some of the 1920s silent-movie conventions inventively put in place by Stage Director Nicolas Tamagna.



Eleanor Rose of Glen Ridge, 4, already an opera lover, according to her mother, in Cinderella costume watches Cinderella with rapt attention. ADAM ANIK/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

And then there is the charm of the 20 or so small children sitting on the floor, who can barely contain themselves when the carriage horses enter through the house.

Try not smiling. Your mouth will want to move. Yep, that's a smile.

This is the way all opera should be: fun, formal (well, semi-), gorgeous, glorious. This is how children should first experience it: there's no pressure. If they get bored, they can quietly play with their dolls. Playwright George Bernard Shaw learned to love opera by playing on the floor of his family's box.

And the music is wonderful. Rossini, the composer of "The Barber of Seville," writes happy, melodic tunes, some with fast patter, many with harmony.

Congratulations to United Way for making its theater available to OTM: it's the best space so far for the peripatetic opera company.

It's a minor thing, but it's also lovely to see homemade baked goods at intermission, and juice boxes for the children. Everything speaks of a production presented with love and care. You'll have more sheer fun here than at the Met — for one thing, the cast are often right in front of you, hamming it up and delivering those

exquisite notes. Hearing an operatic voice come from a person a foot away makes the gift so much more apparent than when it's high up on a faraway stage. It's a thrill.

Rossini's fairy tale here is more a masquerade than a story of magic (there are, in fact, no fairies): the prince (Alexey



Gustavo Morales as Dandini, the valet in disguise as the prince, in The Opera Theatre of Montclair production of Rossini's 'La Cenerentola,' (Cinderella), in the United Way Theatre, at the Saturday afternoon performance, Sept. 16. ADAM ANIK/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

Kukharskiy) sends his valet Dandini (Gustavo Morales), disguised as the prince, to the home of Don Magnifico (the evil stepfather, Nate Mattingly) to check out the daughters living there.

We know he's the "fake prince" because during the overture, the silent film director, who also plays the prince's tutor Alidoro (Cody Müller), holds signs over their heads: "fake prince," "real prince."

Evil stepsisters Clorinda (Mia Riker-Norrie) and Tisbe (Janette Lallier) fawn on the "prince," and are mean to pure-hearted Cenerentola (Cornelia Lotito).

Alidoro, pretending to be a beggar, meets Cenerentola, who is kind to him.

You know the rest. Rossini was an 18th-century Enlightenment writer, so there is no pumpkin nor mice, and the slipper here is a matching bracelet.

But there is smart, smart whimsy. Tamagna has the "film within a play" organize its film set during the orchestral overture



Cody Muller is the movie director, rolling film, and also plays Alidoro. ADAM ANIK/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

, so it's really two overtures at once. Joyce Korotkin's set design includes a clever antique film camera prop, and plants that come on to signify "castle" just as they did in old movies.

Alidoro (a posturing, smirking, utterly delightful Müller, whose booming bass shocks coming from his slender frame) takes out a tape measure for Cenerentola before whisking her away in his carriage.

"I didn't expect that," someone in the audience said quietly.

David Gillam's costumes included flapper headbands and argyle vests.

The supertitles are projected in a scroll design on the wall.



General Director Mia Riker-Norrie plays a mugging hammy silent film star, and sister Clorinda. ADAM ANIK/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

At one point, Clorinda, played by Riker-Norrie, sings an aria of self-pity, then breaks into a tap dance. This is the first time



Nate Mattingly as the evil stepfather Don Magnifico threatens Cenerentola. ADAM ANIK/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

that Riker-Norrie, OTM's founder and general director, has cast herself since the company's first full production in 2015. We hope she won't make us wait so long again: her face is perfect for silent movie makeup and mugging, and her voice soars with purity and precision. As Don Magnifico, Mattingly is delicious (if a little young), with a powerful bass-baritone voice. He shines in a drunken self-congratulatory song.

Morales, a baritone, plays a comical Dandini, who is having fun playing "prince." He also perfectly handles Rossini's tricky runs.

But without a strong Cinderella the production would falter.

Fortunately Lotito's sweet face is matched by her clear, strong soprano. You could hear sighs in the audience when she shaped a strong note that lingered.



Horses prance in time to the music to take Cinderella to the ball. ADAM ANIK/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

And then there are those horses, prancing in time, to take the princess to the ball. Just thinking about them raises a smile.

There's also Alidoro, at the top of Act II, who blows bubbles on the children in the audience, and the cast onstage.

Smiles for everyone. The cast, and everyone else.



Cody Muller as the Prince's philosopher/ magician in The Opera Theatre of Montclair production of Rossini's 'La Cenerentola,' (Cinderella), blows bubbles on everyone. ADAM ANIK/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL



Opera Theatre of Montclair: singing happily ever after, with horses



Conductor Fernando Palomeque, left, "conducts with his back," while horses prance down the aisle carrying Cinderella (Cornelia Lotito) to the ball. NEIL GRABOWSKY/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

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By Gioachino Rossini

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When the actors aren't sure of a line, they sing "something."

Or, explaining a stand-in prop, "this is a handkerchief."

The ad libs ring out in the high ceiling of the United Way auditorium.

The cast playing horses that take Cinderella to the ball are wearing their horse head masks for the first time.

Because the eye holes are in the horse nostrils, they hold their heads way up and back, making all the horses look endearingly nearsighted.

One of them places reading glasses over the horse eyes in the mask.

The horses prance to the music, one hop per beat, up the aisle of the United Way auditorium.

Actors not in the scene mimic them.

It's silly, but right in keeping with Opera Theatre of Montclair, whose 2016 production of "Abduction from the Seraglio" featured a large teddy bear and some not-very-scary pirates.

OTM, incorporated in 2013, held its first fully staged production in 2015.

Wednesday, Aug. 31, was the company's first day in the space to rehearse "La Cenerentola" (Cinderella), by Gioachino Rossini. The production opens next weekend, and will have four performances, concluding on Friday, Sept. 23.



NICHOLAS TAMAGNA

"Umbrella wheels should be low," Stage Director Nicholas Tamagna says, coaching the actors holding "wagon wheels," or twirling umbrellas. "Watch so that you and your neighbor are at the same plane."

When Cinderella enters the "carriage" — in reality, walking into the crowd of people acting as horses and wheels — she looks out the imaginary windows, and waves her hand like Miss America.

During a break in rehearsal, the horses boogie and dance.

It promises to be particularly silly: Mia Riker-Norrie, OTM's founder, is playing an evil stepsister — the first time she's performed with the group.

She's wearing a hat with rubber chickens on it.

HORSES AND CHICKENS

Joyce Korotkin, set designer for “La Cenerentola,” made the rubber chicken hat. It even has Montclair history: it started its



JOYCE KOROTKIN

life in a millinery store on South Park Street. It was adorned with large faux grapes, and the owner John Fidler called it his “Bacchus hat,” Korotkin recalled.

When she needed an outrageous hat for the stepsister, she decided to doctor up this hat, which she’d bought before the store closed in the late ’90s. Then her grandson begged her to take him to the toy store to buy rubber chickens.

What could be more ridiculous? she thought.

And so she adorned the character Thisbe’s hat with tiny rubber chickens.

Korotkin also made the horse masks by doctoring unicorn costume heads. She cut the top of the horns, and put in feathers, giving the horses a very regal look. “It’s pretty difficult to hot glue latex,” she said, adding that this production has a lot of comic antics. What it doesn’t have are a lot of supernatural effects.

“This is an Enlightenment opera. The Enlightenment was involved with reality vs. superstition, science vs. magic.”

“La Cenerentola, ossia La bontà in trionfo” (Cinderella, or Goodness Triumphant) is based on the Charles Perrault fairy tale. Jacopo Ferretti wrote the libretto to the opera, which was first performed in Rome in 1817.

Korotkin teaches a required-for-all-seventh-graders opera class at Renaissance Middle School. And the kids love it.

There is no magic pumpkin, no mice transformed into horses. There are bracelets instead of a glass slipper. Apparently 18th-century audiences found women’s bare feet a little risqué.

Tamagna said that Rossini was gun-shy about trying for supernatural stage effects because the last opera he’d done that used them received unwanted laughs.

WHERE ARE THEY?

Since the beginning of August, the company had rehearsed in different venues, including venues in New York City.

Tamagna, who directed “Acis,” said that working in spaces without a raised stage made it tricky to visualize where everyone would really be.



FERNANDO PALOMEQUE

Conductor Fernando Palomeque, originally from Argentina and now a resident of Paris, said that he liked the reverberation in the room, although he was a little anxious about how loud the orchestra will sound when it arrives. Last Wednesday, the company was working with a rehearsal pianist.

It's challenging working with singers who are not always on the stage, Palomeque said. United Way's auditorium has a charming proscenium stage, which the company uses, but the actors also use the aisles and the area in front of the pit.

"We were talking about how to conduct with my back," Palomeque said with a laugh.

Nate Mattingly, who sings Don Magnifico, the evil stepfather, on Fridays, said that when you work that way "you can't lose focus at any point.

"It's inherently more interesting for the audience. They get to feel like they have more at stake in the story." Mattingly, who recently moved to Montclair from Texas to study with a voice teacher here, said he enjoys working this way.

"I don't think most companies would do 'Cenerentola' in in-the-round style," he said.

As always, Opera Theatre of Montclair will have supertitles so the audience can follow along. For "La Cenerentola," the cards will look as though they are title cards in a silent movie.

Rossini's music, with its rhythmic dance forms, gave Tamagna the idea. "We are adding physical, sharp gestures and grimaces," he said. "More and more we go in that direction."

Alidoro, "a kindly philosopher employed by the prince," is not really a fairy godfather. He does magic tricks that Tamagna described as "corny and silly."

Mark Watson, who sings Alidoro on Fridays (as is usual with opera, there are alternating casts), said "Alidoro is not magical.

"But he is fabulous."

Most of the company, including Riker-Norrie, were not very familiar with Rossini's opera.

But Cornelia Lotito, an MSU senior who sings Angelina (Cinderella) on Saturdays, said that it is one of her favorite operas



CORNELIA LOTITO

of all time.

“I’m obsessive. I’ve watched it 1,000 times. I’ll probably go home and watch tonight, any version on YouTube.”

Lotito loves the music, which she called “Rossini’s best,” but is also taken by the way Angelina is “such a genuine person.

“For a genuine person to be rewarded in this world, in opera where everything is the opposite of that, and in the end, is so forgiving—”

Lotito broke off, a little choked up.

“Something about that really touches me. Even when she’s being sassy, she’s true to herself. She doesn’t have an angle. She has no angle, she’s just trying to be here.”



MIA RIKER-NORRIE

“It’s very much happy ever after,” said Riker-Norrie, who said she hopes people will come with their families and talk about the different versions of the story.

“At the very end, when she has a chance to do all sorts of terrible things, she says everything is forgiven. It’s so uplifting. You cannot leave this opera unhappy. It’s just happy.”



*Opera Theatre of Montclair company rehearse ‘Cinderella’ at United Way on Wednesday, Aug. 30.
NEIL GRABOWSKY/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL*



Culture in brief: Opera Theatre of Montclair previews 'Cinderella' Saturday

 Opera Theatre of Montclair will preview its upcoming production of Rossini's "La Cenerentola" (Cinderella) at this Saturday's Montclair Center Stage, Aug. 26.

At 5:30 p.m., members of OTM's orchestra will serve as the "warm-up" act for the narrated performance. Among the cast is soprano and OTM founder and general manager Mia Riker-Norrie, singing the role of evil stepsister Clorina.

Montclair Center Stage is a free open-air weekly music stage at the corner of Bloomfield Avenue and Church Street.

The fully staged production of "La Cenerentola" will take place on Sept. 14 and 22 at 8 p.m., and Sept. 16 and 23 at 4 p.m., at United Way of Northern New Jersey, 60 South Fullerton Ave.

For more information or to purchase tickets, visit operamontclair.org or call 973-202-7849.