

Bad Cinderella

Andrew Lloyd Webber music
David Zippel lyrics
Emerald Fennell, Alexis Scheer book
Imperial Theatre, New York 17 Feb – 4 June 2023
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Grace McLean as the Queen with a questionable past; Linedy Genao rebels in the title role of Lloyd Webber's musical; the ensemble in one of many set-pieces

Some productions are so ill-conceived that not even a fairy godmother could wave a magic wand and save them. Such is the case with the Grimm mess that is *Bad Cinderella*, an overproduced, undercooked fairy-tale update that defies all rules of logic and taste. The book, credited to Oscar-winning screenwriter Emerald Fennell (with a post-London 'adaptation' by Alexis Scheer), presents a muddled version of our heroine, a supposed rebel against the looks-first mentality of her native land of Belleville. But this is a 'bad' girl who nonetheless cheerfully continues doing domestic work for her stepmother and stepsisters in her own family home.

Far from the ugly outcast the townfolk claim, Linedy Genao's Cinderella is a stunner whose greatest sin against traditional beauty standards appears to be her choice of a punky up-do, a smoky eye, and a tunic top in non-primary colours with an asymmetrical hem (costumes by Gabriela Tylesova, who also designed the elaborate storybook sets).

Her status as a protofeminist icon is continually undermined by a narrative that drives her to head-scratching choices which rob us of any sympathy for her. It's obvious that she has a thing for Sebastian, the shy, nerdy 'spare' prince suddenly thrust into heir-to-the-thronedom when his favoured-son older brother is declared missing in action on an overseas trip. But since she's already found her match, and since Sebastian too professes his interest from the get-go, that leaves a lot of seriously dumb plotting to keep them apart until the final curtain. (Jordan Dobson may not have the physical presence of his older brother Prince Charming, but he's an utter charmer as Sebastian – particularly on the plaintive 'Only You, Lonely You.')

At least the couple get some decent songs to sing – and Andrew Lloyd Webber has whipped up his best score since 1993's *Sunset Boulevard*, full of earwormy power ballads, peppy choral numbers, and a spiky duet for the stepmother (Carolee Carmello, savouring every barb) and the Queen (Grace McLean), in which the two deliciously needle each

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other over their equally questionable pasts. (Frequent Lloyd Webber collaborator David Zippel also delivers some witty lyrics, at one point rhyming 'nondescript' and 'ripped'.)

Speaking of ripped, this is a fairy-tale land that seems to share a border with *Love Island* – full of racially diverse but impossibly toned gym bunnies whose crass idea of a happy ending is all too clear from numbers titled 'Buns 'N' Roses' and 'Hunks' Song'. It's no wonder that JoAnn M Hunter's choreography

seems to have been powerlifted from *Magic Mike*, with her best moves reserved for the pecs of Cameron Loyal, the hunky Prince Charming whose late appearance highlights his chiselled chest muscles in a twisty, backstory-filled showstopper. (Never mind that Loyal bears absolutely no resemblance to the statue of Prince Charming that the Queen unveils – and that Cinderella mysteriously vandalises, Banksy-style – in the show's opening scene.)

While Lloyd Webber's tunes can be lovely distractions from the mess of the story, too often they are just that. Characters walk onstage and just start singing without any dialogue set-up so that songs come (and go) without situating us in the larger narrative – or doing any work to advance it.

That's particularly true of the Act One finale, in which we meet Christina Acosta Robinson's Godmother, an awkward mash-up of celebrity stylist, plastic surgeon and the Witch from *Into the Woods*. Director Laurence Connor has no sense of pacing, or of narrative momentum; the show lurches from set-piece to set-piece with all the subtlety of a Michael Bay film.

The cast is also hampered by one of the worst sound mixes in recent Broadway history (by Gareth Owen) which renders everything overloud and treblesome, as all the female singers sound both tinny and shrill, especially in their upper registers. You could argue this is a deliberate choice for the show's various villainesses, but the effect undercuts Genao's appeal as Cinderella. It's enough to make you want to hurl a glass slipper at the stage in frustration.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Linedy Genao, Jordan Dobson, Carolee Carmello, Grace McLean, Christina Acosta Robinson, Sami Gayle, Morgan Higgins, Cameron Loyal *et al*
Direction Laurence Connor
Musical direction Kristen Blodgette
Choreography JoAnn M Hunter
Lighting Bruno Poet
Sound Gareth Owen
Set, costumes Gabriela Tylesova
Hair, wigs Luc Verschueren