

A TIMELESS FAIRYTALE, A 75-YEAR-OLD TRAGEDY, AND A SHOW 20 YEARS IN THE MAKING

New Adventures Artistic Director Matthew Bourne Discusses All Things *Cinderella*

As his *Cinderella* returns to the Ahmanson Theatre February 5 – March 10, 2019, director and choreographer Matthew Bourne talks about its many inspirations, from the Prokofiev score and the classic films he loves to his own family history.

The most striking aspect of this retelling of the Cinderella story is the setting. Why did you choose to set the world's most famous fairy tale during the London Blitz in 1940?

Matthew Bourne: I first fell in love with Prokofiev's score through watching Frederick Ashton's version of the ballet for The Royal Ballet. Although composed as a fairy-tale piece, in the style of the great Tchaikovsky ballets, such as *The Sleeping Beauty*, it has Prokofiev's particular 20TH century musical personality stamped all over it. True, it has Grand Waltzes, Fairy variations, mazurkas, and "national" dances, in the manner of Tchaikovsky's most famous ballet works, but lurking beneath the fairy-tale magic, there beats a darker heart with real emotions and dramatic longing. These are the features of Prokofiev's music that keep you coming back for more and insinuate their way inside you with every listening.

Prokofiev's *Cinderella* was premiered at the Bolshoi in 1946 and Ashton's much performed version followed in 1948, but I was intrigued to hear that Prokofiev had actually written the score during the Second World War, and this got me thinking. Was this dark period in our history somehow captured within the music? I felt that it was, and the more I delved into the Cinderella story, it seemed to work so well in the wartime setting. Darkly romantic in tone, it speaks of a period when time was everything, love was found and lost suddenly, and the world danced as if there was no tomorrow.

Do you use the entire Prokofiev score?

When I first created the piece in 1997, I attempted to choreograph the entire three-act score with no re-ordering or cuts. This was in no small part due to the fact that Prokofiev's artist son, Oleg, had asked if he could come to rehearsals and sketch the dancers. Although I was wary of making any changes to his father's music whilst he was in the room with us, he, of course, turned out to be a delightful man, full of enthusiasm for what we were doing, even saying how much his father would have loved our interpretation. I have since made a few small cuts and revisions, to help our story, but am proud to say that our Act Three remains completely intact, full of wonderful music that Ashton had cut from his famous version.

Your love of classic films is well known. Were there any particular movies that inspired this re-telling of the story?

My guiding light with this production has always been the incredible Powell and Pressburger classic *A Matter Of Life and Death* (1946) starring David Niven and Kim Hunter. Niven's character, Peter Carter, an RAF pilot, miraculously survives almost certain death when his plane crashes into the sea. It soon becomes clear that he has cheated death and the heavenly agents and angels have made a mistake. He hovers between life and death, but guided by a male guardian angel and the woman he loves, he is given a second chance. In essence he is saved by the power of love. My *Cinderella* does not tell this exact story, by any means, but its fanciful, and particularly English whimsy and romance is, I hope, captured in our story of wartime love and conflict. Our "Angel" is also male, rather than the usual "Fairy Godmother," but he is based more on Cary Grant (*The Bishop's Wife* 1947) and Fred Astaire, who played a dancing angel on several occasions.

Look out also for glimpses of other classic movies in the production, such as Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard from *Brief Encounter* (1945) in our final railway station scene, and the prostitutes from the Vivien Leigh and Robert Taylor classic *Waterloo Bridge* (1940) in our London Underground sequence. I must also pay tribute to one of my favorite '40s actresses, Joan Crawford, who inspired Lez Brotherston and myself to create Sybil, our glamorous Stepmother.

How historically accurate is your Blitz in *Cinderella*? Does it refer to any actual incidents that took place in London at the time?

We have tried to be as accurate as possible; Lez Brotherston, the company, and I have spent many hours researching the period and characters through old movies, documentaries, and public information films. I will admit here to at least one historical inaccuracy, though. We do have a GI American soldier character called "Buster," who I couldn't resist putting in for the sake of variety. The Americans, however, did not enter the war until the beginning of 1942.

The crucial incident for us is the famous bombing of the legendary Café de Paris on March 8, 1941. On this particular night, the club received a direct hit, killing or seriously injuring nearly 100 dancing couples, cabaret artists, and staff, including the 26-year-old bandleader, Ken "Snake-hips" Johnson. Our magical Act Two bombed ballroom, with its ghostly dancing couples and the haunting waltzes of Prokofiev, owes much to this tragic night. It represents Cinderella's dream, as well as her nightmare.

Your regular collaborator, designer Lez Brotherston, won an Olivier Award for his original *Cinderella* designs in 1997. Has the concept changed substantially for this new production?

The "war-time" setting has obviously been retained, but our original production has been completely lost, and Lez and I have had a chance to take a fresh look at the piece from every angle. This is essentially a new production created to tour throughout the UK and beyond. It is designed very much like a silver screen classic in black and white (and gray!) and the magic and color is added through the lighting designs of Neil Austin. Lez is always very thorough when it comes to period designs, and therefore our costume designs are a mix of the everyday wear of ordinary Londoners and servicemen and women, as well as the more flamboyant designs of 1940s movie stars. It beautifully captures the realism of our "darkest hour" along with the escapism and glamour of Hollywood.

Tell us about the innovative idea of presenting this production in "surround sound"?

As I have said, my original idea to create this Blitz *Cinderella* came from the particular power, foreboding, and magic of Prokofiev's score. I was also drawn to its cinematic quality and how this related to the films that were inspiring the project. I wanted both the power of a full orchestra, along with the sounds and feelings of a full cinematic experience. I spoke to our sound designer, Paul Groothuis, on how we might achieve this, and he suggested that we present the production in surround sound. We both figured that much of our audience are so used to the best where sound is concerned; both at home, with the new generation of HD TVs, at the cinema, and even watching musical theatre and arena concerts. To create that cinema experience we felt that *Cinderella* was the production on which to experiment with this exciting idea.

Earlier this year, our regular conductor, the brilliant Brett Morris, guided an 82-piece orchestra through a beautiful and highly theatrical new interpretation of the score, which will be heard in the theatre much like you would hear a great score at the cinema. Add to this the sounds and atmosphere of war-torn London and we have a thrilling aural as well as visual performance.

Even though the events depicted in *Cinderella* happened over 75 years ago, the Blitz experience will still resonate with many audience members as part of their family history. Do you have your own family connections?

I dedicated the original production of *Cinderella* to my grandparents, who kept their families together, in London, during the Blitz. My parents, living streets away from each other in the East End, survived the nightly onslaught, I'm happy to say, and they both loved to tell me stories from this time: the excitement, the fear, and the friendships made. Now they are all gone, but I hope that the spirit and courage of not just my family, but of everyone who made sacrifices, or who found or lost love during this time are captured in this piece, which has been made in tribute to them.