

Cinderella – the Ballet

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One of the oldest and most popular fairy tales in the world, *Cinderella* first appeared in opera and then made its way to ballet as opera and ballet split into separate companies towards the end of the 18th century. The first documented full length ballet version of *Cinderella* was performed in 1813 at the Kärntnertor in Vienna. Based on Charles Perrault's *Cinderella* story it was choreographed by Louis Antoine Duport who had been appointed ballet master in Vienna in 1812.

London's first complete three-act *Cinderella* (*Cendrillon*) ballet, closely based on Perrault's story, premiered at the King's Theatre in March 1822. It was choreographed by French dancer and ballet-master François-Ferdinand Decombe (Albert) to music selected and arranged from other ballets by Spanish guitarist and composer Fernando Sor, with only a part of the score that was original. Albert also danced a leading role as Prince Rainir. The ballet received good coverage in the press and generally favourable reviews. Albert's "*Cendrillon*" premiered in Paris in March 1823, going on to be performed some 100 times.

Such was its success, that Albert's ballet was chosen for the grand opening gala on the 6th of January 1825 of the new Bolshoi theatre in Moscow, the previous wooden theatre having burnt down during Napoleon's invasion. Sor accompanied guest ballerina Félicité Hallen-Sor to Moscow, where she danced the title role. The production was repeated in full the next day as a conciliatory gesture towards those who had previously failed to gain admittance.

Cinderella was to have been Pyotr Tchaikovsky's first ballet score. In October 1870, Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Modest "*Among other things, think that I took it upon myself to write music for the ballet Cinderella and that the huge four-act score must be ready in mid-December!*". The same month, he wrote to Anatoly Tchaikovsky "... since I have concluded an agreement, I can't go back on my word, although there are only two months remaining, and I've only started." Tchaikovsky never finished his commission and no musical sketches for it are known. Likely he just did not have the time to complete the commission and withdrew. The ballet project was resurrected a year later by the Board of the Imperial Theatre with Julius Reisinger invited to Moscow from Leipzig, where he had been Ballet Master for some 8 years, for the choreography and Yuli Gerber commissioned to compose the music. Once again for unknown reasons there was change and the music for a ballet of 5 acts and 13 scenes was eventually provided by German composer Wilhelm Mühldorfer. The ballet premiered in March 1872 but was not well received.

A new three-act *Cinderella* after Charles Perrault premiered in the Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg on the 17th of December 1893. Initially planned to be choreographed by Marius Petipa, because of illness he only contributed the general plan and certain details with Enrico Cecchetti responsible for Acts I and III and Lev Ivanov responsible for Act II. The music was by aristocrat Boris Fitinhof-Schell and costumes by Ivan Vsevolozhsky. An original draft libretto by Countess Lydia Pashkova has survived but did not make the stage, Petipa and Vsevolozhsky heavily revising her draft. For details of Pashkova's draft and the ballet synopsis see: <https://petipasociety.com/cinderella/>

As the new *Cinderella* ballet followed Petipa's *The Sleeping Beauty* of 1890, which was set in France, grumbles again arose about French stories being used and not Russian. All was forgiven when an unknown Italian ballerina, Pierina Legnani, (who was described as dowdy and of humble appearance when she arrived on the 16th of November after rehearsals for *Cinderella* had already begun), shocked her fellow dancers and created a sensation on her debut before a Russian audience by executing 32 *fouettés*, whipping her raised leg around while without travelling from her spot. She managed another 28 as an encore at the premiere (she later famously inserted 32 *fouettés* into *Swan Lake*). The actual witness reports of the number executed vary, presumably because no one thought to count until she had already completed a dozen or so and thus the counts are likely all estimated from memory.¹

With smooth flowing movements and extreme musicality, critic Sergei Khudekov dubbed Legnani "*the choreographic chronometer*" and attributed the success of the ballet solely to her. Nadine Meisner in her biography of Marius Petipa writes: "*Since everybody wanted to see Legnani, ticket prices were raised for the second performance. The ballet remained in the repertoire for four years, after which it was transferred to Moscow*" (by Ivanov in 1898). When Legnani departed from Russia in 1901 the ballet was retired from the repertoire.

Now if you do not remember seeing 32 *fouettés* in any version of *Cinderella* you may have attended this is because none of the ballets mentioned above have survived. All modern productions (assuming they are a conventional interpretation) use music by Sergei Prokofiev, follow Perrault's tale (sometimes mixed with elements of the Brothers Grimm's story - particularly the magic tree), and are based on a three-act format: Act 1 is typically set in Cinderella's house showing her mistreatment, preparations for the ball and the magical reward of Cinderella's inherent goodness; Act 2 is the ball where she dances with the prince; and Act 3 covers the prince's search for the owner of the abandoned shoe. But the story details can vary as long as, under Christian influence, the story retains its essence - the triumph of good over evil.

In 1936, Prokofiev had returned to Russia permanently from America where he had largely begun his career as a pianist and composer. During WWII he composed the score with the ballet, choreographed by Rostislav Zakharov, having its premiere at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in 1945 and starring Galina Ulanova in the title role.

The ballet made its way to the West in 1948 when Frederick Ashton made a three-act version for Sadler's Wells Ballet, famously with he and Robert Helpmann dancing as the stepsisters; Helpmann as the taller, older domineering sister and Ashton as the shy, flustered character who stole the show. A pre-television audience found their antics hilarious but 21st century audiences exposed to a constant bombardment of entertainment are less enthused as the novelty effect is now missing and additionally their antics take away from Cinderella's own story. A new production of Ashton's *Cinderella* premiered in 2023 as a co-production

¹ I witnessed how unreliable memory can be when overhearing a discussion of WAB's upcoming 2024 season which was to include a revival of *La Bayadère*. One person having previously seen the ballet stated that some 30 dancers come down the ramp in the *Kingdom of the Shades* scene – the actual number for WAB's production is 19, with the three soloists immediately exiting the stage to leave a ballet corps of 16 dancers.

between The Royal Ballet and The National Ballet of Canada and was reprised in December 2024. Here the treatment of the stepsisters was reconsidered, treating them more as fashion victims, and to be danced by men and woman in alternate casts².

In 1986, Rudolph Nureyev created a radical new Hollywood version set in the 1920s and 1930s for Paris Opéra Ballet, again to Prokofiev's music.

Cinderella at WAB

In the light of the popularity of *Cinderella* overseas, the founders of West Australian Ballet (WAB), Kira Bousloff and husband James Penberthy, elected to stage a three act *Cinderella* for the company's second season in 1954, booking the Edwardian His Majesty's Theatre in Perth for a three-week run. This proved to be a far too an ambitious undertaking for the fledgling new company. According to "*Kira's Legacy*", the history of the company's first 21 years, Penberthy created modern music, but as musical scores were not available, he listened to early vinyl records and transcribed the music heard note for note until he had built up full orchestrations. He also cobbled together an orchestra from individuals and small groups of local musicians.

Bousloff was responsible for the choreography, helped by Marina Berezowsky who had come to Perth in 1950 and was teaching ballet classes locally. Berezowsky also added bright costumes and scenery. The company could not afford funds to buy material for the costumes which fell to the lot of the dancer's relatives.

Altogether *Cinderella* was done very quickly, and it did not work. At the first rehearsal the orchestra said they were unable to play Penberthy's music. Not surprisingly, at the premiere the audience did not like the music and the choreography was described as "*sparsely supplied with fanciful or imaginative touches*". Further problems arose when Morwenna Vincent who danced the fairy godmother suffered a nervous breakdown. Such were the problems that after just one week *Cinderella* was shortened to second place after the *Polovotsian Dances* from *Prince Igor*. As a result, although the season lasted the planned three weeks it attracted diminishing audiences. It was to be several decades before WAB would attempt *Cinderella* again.

In 2011, Ivan Cavallari, then Artistic Director of WAB, approached Principal Artist Jayne Smeulders to create a new full-length version for the company. Smeulders had danced the role of Cinderella in Simon Dow's 2005 production for WAB and had since choreographed several smaller pieces for the company so was an obvious choice for the task, despite her own surprise. Smeulders set the action for her version in the 1930s, as she much loved the glamorous costumes from this period and used a revolving mirror that served as an entrance to provide flashbacks to the 1920s. The choreography was a mixture of traditional

² Ashton had originally intended the roles be danced by women but changed his mind when his choice for the dominant sister, Moyra Fraser, took another engagement. Woman did take the roles in subsequent revivals.

classical and neo-classical dance with an emphasis on the female characters, although she gave Prince Charming two younger brothers who danced with the stepsisters at the ball providing comic antics.

Conventionally Smeulders utilised the music of Prokofiev, as she knew this music well, and the core of Perrault's tale but added some details from the Brothers Grimm's version of this story. These included a prologue of the young Cinderella at her mother's grave where she plants a tree, the use of magical birds representing Hope, Faith and Charity (rather than pigeons) that supply Cinderella with a beautiful gown and slippers to wear to the prince's ball, and the casting of Cinderella's stepsisters as beautiful, with fair faces, but with ugly and mean hearts inside. Smeulders placed such stress on this last detail in interviews that I have often wondered whether she did this to not offend her gorgeous fellow dancers when casting for the ugly stepsister roles rather than to strictly follow the Brothers Grimm tale. For she did not follow them faithfully as in their tale the prince's ball is not a one-night event, but a three-day festival and the tale ends with severed toes and heels and the pigeons plucking out the stepsister's eyes. Hardly fare for a family fairytale ballet.

The ballet premiered in May 2011 in Perth's His Majesty's Theatre and in November 2011, the ballet had a season in Canberra. The Canberra Times reviewer, with no links to Perth and thus with no reason not to be honest, thought the choreography "*scant and quite simplistic*" and that the Canberra Theatre, reputed to be too small for a large ballet production, seemed "*positively empty of dancing*". Fortunately, such was the ballets popularity with the public, the only opinion that matters, an extra show needed to be scheduled.

In November 2015, the ballet was reprised as WAB's Christmas family production under new Artistic Director Aurélien Scannella. The ballet was refreshed in terms of the choreography and a few costume changes made. Accompanied by the West Australian Philharmonic Orchestra the season was once again a triumph with 22 performances and several sellout shows. The ballet is currently scheduled to be performed again as the Christmas ballet in WAB's 2025 season.

In May 2023, Cavallari, now Artistic Director at Les Grandes Ballet Canadiens in Montreal, invited Smeulders to restage her *Cinderella* for his company in a more child-friendly two-act version. This was achieved by trimming and combining Acts 2 and 3. New costumes were fashioned and new scenery fabricated for this production. In addition, given the larger stage and bigger company than available for the original staging, the revised production was expanded by adding more *corps de ballet* into appropriate scenes.

Smeulders was fortunate to be aided in this task by Principal Dancer Anna Ishii and First Soloist Andre Santos of Les Grandes Ballets, both of whom had danced in the original 2011 Australian season for WAB. Ishii, at only 18, had debut in her first lead role as Cinderella in Canberra and Santos had danced the roles of Hope and as one of Prince Charming's younger brothers. Six performances of the revised ballet were performed in Montreal over three days in September 2023. This was followed by four performances at Pittsburgh Ballet in May 2024, marking the United States premiere of this production. Here reviews commented on "*how clearly the story is told, even without a word of dialogue. Dance, gesture, facial*

expression and musical cues conveyed every emotion and plot point with perfect clarity — and beauty”.

Cinderella – Story Origins

The story of Cinderella is clearly of Asian origin as assessing a woman’s beauty by how tiny her feet are is not a European tradition. The tale of Cinderella was current in China during the Tang Dynasty as a peasant folk tale. It was first recorded on paper by poet and writer Duan Chengshi in 853 CE. This Chinese story contains all the essential Cinderella elements: Ye Xian’s father dies leaving the family poor and cruel stepmother and lazy, spoiled stepsister treat Ye Xian as a servant, abusing her and burdening her with all the household chores. The spirit of an old man appears and grants Ye Xian wishes. When the stepmother and stepsister attend the New Year Festival, where young maidens meet potential husbands, Ye Xian is left at home. Ye Xian makes a silent wish and finds herself clothed magnificently in a silk gown and tiny golden slippers. She attends the festivities but leaves abruptly, fearing she has been recognised by her stepsister, and loses a slipper. The slipper eventually ends up in the hands of a powerful king who searches in vain for a maiden who will fit the tiny slipper. After many trials Ye Xian is identified as the slipper’s owner and wins the hand of the king. This tale of Ye Xian spread throughout SE Asia with variant stories from Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam³ and Tibet.

The first European reference to the story was in a sermon delivered in Strasburg in 1501 but the earliest full telling and first appearance of the story **in print** is credited to the Italian poet Giambattista Basile whose famous children’s book published in 1634 included the story *La Gatta Cenerentola* (The Cat Cinderella). In Basile’s tale the heroine (called Zezolla) is banished to the castle basement and forced into a life of servitude by her wicked stepmother who changes her name to Cenerentola. The name “Cenerentola” comes from the Italian word “cenere” (ash, cinder). It has to do with the fact that servants and scullions were usually soiled with ash at that time, because of their cleaning work and because they had to live in cold basements so tried to get warm by sitting close to the fireplace. However, the story version most widely known today (and popularised by Disney) was published in France by Charles Perrault in 1697 in his collection of literary fairytales called *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé*. Perrault added the fairy godmother and the glass slipper. In other story variants the slipper is made of different materials such as gold or is an anklet, a ring or a bracelet.

In recent years a claim has arisen that the Cinderella story did not originate in China but in Egypt, this claim given credence through the citing of ancient Greek sources. The first of these sources is Claudius Aelianus (ca. 175 – ca. 235 CE) who relates the tale of the beautiful courtesan Rhodopis in his *Miscellaneous History*. Whilst she was bathing and her

³ In the Cinderella version from Vietnam (Tám and Cám) for example, Cinderella is set the tedious task of separating rice from bran by her stepmother and thus making her too late to get to the king’s festival.

maids looking to her clothes, an eagle swooped down and snatched one of her sandals and carried it away to Memphis. There the eagle dropped the sandal into the lap of the Pharaoh Psammetichus who was sitting outside in judgement. Wondering at the beautiful shape of the sandal and the strangeness of the occurrence, he sent soldiers to all the nearby towns of the country in a quest to find the owner of the sandal. She was found in the city of Naucratis (a Greek trading colony city in the western Nile Delta) and brought up to Memphis and became his wife.

Now Aelian was a compiler of traveller tales and myths, and he copied this story from Strabo's *Geography Book XVII*, written at the beginning of the 1st Century CE, adding only the name of the Pharaoh.

Strabo's *Geography* hardly makes riveting reading being in the style of: "*On proceeding forty stadia from the city, one comes to a kind of mountain-brow; on it are numerous pyramids of which two are a stadium in height, are quadrangular in shape ...*" etc. Strabo mentions an expensive tomb, made of hard and difficult to work black stone brought from the mountains of Ethiopia, that the locals believed was built for the courtesan Rhodopis, and he goes on to relate the "*fantastic*" story he heard about quoted above. He adds that she was the lover of Charaxus, the brother of Sappho of Lesbos, who was engaged in transporting wine to Naucratis for sale. This last bit of information Strabo in turn copied from Book 2 of Herodotus' *Histories* so it is to Herodotus (484 – 425 BCE) we must now turn.

Herodotus was concerned with correcting the local belief that the temple constructed mainly with Ethiopian stone had been built by Rhodopis. He tells us that she was a Thracian slave brought to Naucratis for sale and where she was ransomed for a large sum by Charaxus, the brother of the poet Sappho. Once free, Rhodopis stayed in Egypt and being lovely acquired great riches for a person of her condition and became famous throughout Greece. When her brother returned to Lesbos alone, Sappho mocked him in an ode⁴. Sappho calls the courtesan Doricha and while it is possible two persons are being conflated here, given that Rhodopis means "rosy-cheeked" it is likely that Rhodopis was a nickname or Doricha's professional work name. Herodotus does not mention the "*fantastic*" story related by Strabo, but he does conclude his digression with the words: "*Now I have done speaking of Rhodopis*" implying that there was much more he could say.

Some brave souls push the tale back even further in time quoting from the D'Orbiney papyrus (now in the British Museum) acquired in the early 19th century and written by the

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?title=The%20D%27Orbiney%20Papyrus>

scribe Inena during the reign of Seti II (1214 – 1204 BCE). It concerns the dispute and reconciliation between two brothers and is known as "*The Tale of Two Brothers*". The older brother is Anubis, the god of the dead and embalming, the younger, the hero of the tale, Bata (or Bet) a pastoral god, primarily shown as a bull. It is a long and convoluted saga and

⁴ The ode has not survived although a fragment piece does contain the name Doricha. The famous Library of Alexandria held nine books (i.e. papyrus rolls) of her poems with Book 1 containing 1,320 lines of verse. Therefore, all nine books would have contained some 10,000 to 12,000 lines. Today by my count we have only about 350 full lines of verse (i.e. somewhere between 3.0% and 3.5%) plus a similar number of line fragments.

the details of the story need not concern us here. The material point is that the creator god Khnum, feeling sorry for the younger brother who had to flee after a dispute with his older brother, fashions a companion for him so he does not have to live alone. Made on a potter's wheel from clay and with the seed of every god in her she was more beautiful in her body than any woman in the land.

One day, although forbidden to do so by Bata, she leaves the house to stroll under a nearby pine tree. The sea surges up behind her and as she flees the pine tree snags a lock of her hair. The sea carries this hair to Egypt and deposits it in the place that the launderers of the Pharaoh wash his clothes. The fragrant scent of the hair pervades the Pharaoh's clothes and after the cause of this is discovered the learned scribes of the Pharaoh tell him the braid of hair contains the seed of every god and is a tribute from another country. The Pharaoh sends his soldiers to every foreign country to search for the owner. The woman is discovered and brought to the Pharaoh who proceeded to love her exceedingly. One shudders to think that the reason a single lock of her hair was so heavily perfumed and why Bata had forbidden her to go near the sea was because having been fashioned from clay she was unable to bathe.

Promoters of this Egyptian tale as the origins of the Cinderella story invoke a theory of accretion. As a story is retold over many generations it evolves and accretes new details – a lock of hair becomes a sandal, and the story becomes associated with a real person. Certainly, we know of other examples of this happening: blood sucking creatures from ancient Persia become Medieval vampires and then become linked to the real person of Vlad III, better known to us as Vlad Dracula (Dracula being the genitive form of Dracul, his father, and meaning dragon – although in modern Romanian it has come to mean the Devil).

One must be careful when evaluating the merits of these Egyptian story links. While Cinderella is characterised as a person who suffers undeserved neglect and succeeds against all expectations this is the standard fare of every romance novel – an overlooked, poor or ordinary girl attracts the attentions of an older, powerful male, who is a prince, king, duke/earl, or nowadays a billionaire, werewolf or even vampire. If this is the only motif required, then is even Fanny Price of Mansfield Park a Cinderella figure?

Inena's Tale of Two Brothers cannot easily be evaluated by intertextual comparisons because of the scarcity of other Egyptian sources. It is possible that it may be a religious story to be narrated to the common people although one folklorist has suggested the story is the predecessor to the [Aarne-Thompson-Uther](#) tale type ATU 318, "The Faithless Wife". An alternative approach suggests that the story reflects an actual historical situation, likely a succession dispute between Seti II, the rightful heir to the throne on the death of Merneptah, but who was challenged by [Amenmesse](#), who ruled for at least a few years in Upper Egypt. In any event, no folklorist believes the tale has any relationship to the Cinderella story and the search for the owner of the perfumed hair is but a small incident within a much longer story.

Strabo's tale has no historical validity (there are no known Greek wives of Pharaohs and even the eagle was unknown in ancient Egypt before Greek ruling times) but there is some merit

in the claims made here. Strabo was famous in the ancient world and at a time when Chinese silk could make its way to Europe there is no reason why a tale of Strabo's could not be carried back the other way.

However, no folklorist believes Strabo's tale of Rhodopis has any direct link to the story of Cinderella despite the recent proliferation of sites and articles promulgating that Rhodopis is the original Cinderella. The only motif link to the Cinderella tale is the slipper that the Pharaoh uses to search for his wife. Rhodopis had been a slave sold into prostitution, which is as downtrodden as one can get, but at the time Strabo's tale begins she has been bought out from slavery by Sappho's brother and is an independent, rich woman with her own maids. There is no abusive stepmother, no cruel stepsister, no magical wish granter and no glamorous ball. The very most that could be argued is that Strabo's tale is a precursor tale that may subsequently have inspired the originator of the Cinderella story and been incorporated into it.

There have been claims for various other historic tales to be Cinderella origin stories but none of these claims are at all compelling and thus are not discussed further.

Regardless of the story variant, the traditional Cinderella story lies in the notion that no matter how humble your beginnings you can unexpectedly rise to your true position in life. But this will not happen based on how beautiful, how worthy or how good you are – it will only happen if you are saved by an outside agency such as a fairy godmother. Today this notion has little appeal, and modern retellings are more likely to suggest that it is possible to transform your life through your own actions, personal attributes, education and hard work and not require you to be rescued by an outside agency.

Attached below are links to English translations of the stories mentioned in the text above.

<https://bookcandy.typepad.com/files/Cinderella-variants.pdf>

<https://olli.gmu.edu/docstore/600docs/1506-603-Tale%20of%20Two%20Brothers.pdf>