



New Cinderella trades in her glass slipper for a girl power tiara

By Erika Milvy
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

The course of true love never did run smoothly. Still, if you're a fairy-tale princess, a fairy godmother can certainly help smooth out the edges. And yet, in this worldly-wise age of savvy parents and hip kids, edge is in fact in.

Smoothing it out is a snore for new-world parents and teenage-before-their-time older youngsters.

Ever since the fractured fairy tale "Shrek" became a cross-over hit for big and small (like "The Simpsons"), pale imitations, including "Hoodwinked" and "Happily N'Ever After," have been combining the classic with the irreverent. Novelist Gregory Maguire ("Wicked") wrote even darker revisionist texts skewering Cinderella, Snow White and other storybook icons for adult palates.

His Wicked Witch (and not Glinda the Good) gets the happy ending. In "Shrek," the ogre — not the prince — gets the girl. With complexity out of the closet, the throwing of wrenches into children's fairy tales is de rigueur.



Walt Disney Video

"Cinderella III: A Twist in Time" starts off with a reversal of all that the fairy godmother did.

Latest 'Cinderella' is no lesson on love

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But how can Disney jump on this bandwagon? The wrench is, of course, utterly blunt. Disney's attempt at this revisionism stuff means tampering with its own entrenched archetypes — and thus, tinkering with time itself.

So, Disney's latest in the assembly line of repurposed brand content is "Cinderella III: A Twist in Time," a time-traveling direct-to-DVD title that has the distinction of being, not a sequel, not a prequel — but Disney's first ever alterna-quel.

The original 1950 Cinderella set afoot the fantasy that launched a thousand precarious expectations. Its forgettable sequel, the slight medley that was 2002's "Cinderella II: Dreams Come True," slapped together three stories about Cinderella's adjustment to palace life and her duties as a royal hostess.

Since unadulterated Cinderella is really all about the dress, the rags-to-riches transformation and the romance of instantaneous true love, "C3" wisely returns to the scene of its initial glory: the dreamy magic of prenuptial wonderment.

To jazz things up a bit, "A Twist in Time" takes us neither forward nor backward, but to a parallel universe, 24 hours before — and just to the left of Cinderella's Happily Ever After.

In its own edgeless take on "Shrek" ("What if the wrong guy woke up the Princess?"), Disney asks, "What if the slipper didn't fit?"

In Cinderella redux, the cruel stepmother steals the fairy godmother's magic wand and bibbidi-bobbidi-boo! Time is reversed.

(Not that a 5-year-old even gets time travel. But they're so busy tracking the pretty trail of glitter from the wand, they're not contemplating narrative integrity anyway.)

With Cinderella still locked away upstairs and the Grand Duke just now knocking at the door, it's time for a cosmic do-over. The shoe magically fits Anastasia's ungainly foot and

Prince Charming's memory of the ball is wiped clean, guaranteeing that their wedding goes off without a hitch.

If Cinderella is going to re-nab her Prince and secure her happy ending, she's going to need more than pumpkins, godmothers and magic to make it happen. She's going to need that extra ingredient Disney started supplying (to appease exasperated parents) in the later part of the 20th century: girl power.

It makes perfect sense that Cinderella has its roots in a ninth century Chinese fable and was born of the dainty foot fetishism that led to Chinese foot binding. Dainty beauty was still front and center in Disney's 1950 version, in which Cinderella is even mousier than the mice who procure her getaway.

But the modern princess requires spunk and pluck. She's still full of feminine grace, modesty and beauty in spades, but her sugary composition is spiced with a smidge of spirit. (Personally, I prefer Princess Fiona, who is zaftig and fiery and commands respect — like Effie White in "Dreamgirls.")

Ostensibly, the late-model Disney gals have more on their mind than just marriage (even if that's always their reward). Belle is a bookworm and rejects the village stud muffin. Mulan impersonates a man to join the army and save her people from the Huns. Pocahontas saved her people (temporarily, at least) from the English. Jasmine, too, busts out of the palace straightjacket.

But no cigar. These are not the most beloved princesses. They don't deliver that pure-grade euphoria that gets little girls hyperventilating. All that horse riding, Hun killing and canoe paddling doesn't hold a candle to the ballroom dancing, the dreamy transfixed mutual staring of time-honored courtship rituals.

"A Twist in Time" attempts to mix things up with some cardiovascular adventure and empowerment. With her fairy godmother turned to stone, Cinderella, this time around, does not rely solely on the kindness of mice.

She must sneak into the palace through the servants' quarters, hide and lie and eventually slide down a banister. All windswept and tousle haired, she straddles a speeding pumpkin and hightails it around craggy cliffs, whacking the evil stepkitty Lucifer into the sea with a tree branch. It doesn't approach Fiona's boldness of enterprise (implosioning a mama songbird to snatch her eggs), but it's enough to make Walt Disney turn over in his icebox.

Listen, when you've got a girlie girl who hangs on every princess' batted eyelash, the role modeling of sneaking, hiding and banister sliding is a welcome morsel of gumption.

"C3" may seem to offer spirited semi-traditional female role models, but it's all carefully calibrated, like a Hillary Clinton media moment. The girl prowess is tempered with magic and ball gowns and weddings (oh my).

In another break from tradition, the ugly stepsister plays nice eventually. Moments away from hoodwinking the Prince and sealing the deal, the oafish but not wholly horrible Anastasia opts out. "I want someone to love me for me," she realizes as her mother fumes.

The ugly sister's spontaneous moral backbone and self-respect may well go over the heads of the kindergarten set, (along with the time travel). It's certainly a watered-down simulacrum of "Wicked" and its blurring of the lines betwixt good and evil. Or the "Wicked" suggestion that the wicked may be misunderstood — or the product of bad parenting.

21st century Disney provides a perfunctory message of enterprising go-getterism. Still it's a mixed message: the force more potent than either perseverance or magic is the power of true love. It's a love forged in an instant with a dance — and aided and abetted by fine frockery and high-heeled glass.

Not actually fracturing (or even spraining) the immutable mythology of Cinderella, this refurbished version gets little girls no closer to learning what real love is.