

## *Cinderella* Dramaturgy Note | Cumberland Valley High School, 2020

*“Impossible things are happ’ning every day”* – Fairy Godmother, *Cinderella*

On Sunday, March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1957, at the stroke of eight, the sound of trumpets heralding greeted the American public. People across the country were tuning in to watch *Cinderella*, a musical adaptation of the French fairy tale *Cendrillon*. At the center of this production was a young Julie Andrews, who, in order to perform the title role split her time between rehearsals and performing 8 shows a week as Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* on Broadway. In that same year, the original Broadway productions of *West Side Story* and *The Music Man* were opening to audiences for the first time.

The hosts of the live television broadcast were the writers: famed writing team and kings of Broadway, composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II. Their legendary partnership had been cemented in the American musical theatre history 14 years prior to the date when their first collaboration, *Oklahoma!*, opened at the St. James Theatre on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1943. Rodgers and Hammerstein introduced the concept of an “integrated book musical” to the American theatre—a musical in which all of the songs are written to advance the plot. *Oklahoma!* was the first hit for Rodgers and Hammerstein; what followed was a series of commercial successes consisting of *Carousel*, *South Pacific* and *The King and I*. Then, in 1957, Rodgers and Hammerstein aimed even higher by bringing their adaptation of *Cinderella* to CBS. This was their attempt at topping NBC’s successful live musical production of *Peter Pan* starring Mary Martin in 1955.

The CBS broadcast had a budget of \$385,000 (NBC’s 2013 live broadcast of Rodger and Hammerstein’s *The Sound of Music* starring Carrie Underwood carried a budget of around \$9 million) and a 33-piece orchestra (an abnormality today with shows such as *Dear Evan Hansen* utilizing a 5 piece onstage band). Pre-empting Sunday night shows *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *General Electric Theater*, *Cinderella* was watched by at least 107 million people – the only thing comparable to that today is the Super Bowl. Letters had been sent to principals of public schools, urging them to encourage their students to watch the show with their families; the viewers that watched *Cinderella* would have filled a typical Broadway theater seven nights a week for 165 years.

The critics raved – “It had a gossamer beauty, a tender grace, plus the incomparable sheen of a child’s dream world,” wrote Harriet Van Horn in the *World-Telegram & Sun*. However, because videotape had not been perfected, the show couldn’t be rebroadcast. In 1965, CBS produced a much inferior videotaped version starring Leslie Ann Warren to be rebroadcast annually over the next decade. In 1997, ABC reimagined *Cinderella*, starring Brandy and Whitney Houston as Cinderella and the Fairy Godmother respectively.

It was not until 2013 that *Cinderella* finally fulfilled Rodgers and Hammerstein’s wish of getting the show to Broadway (over a quarter of century after both of their passings). The splashy new production featured a new book by Douglas Carter Beane, costumes by William Ivey Long, and a scenic design by Anna Louizos. After 56 years, it seemed proof that impossible things *were* still happening every day.

In that same way, Cumberland Valley High School invites you to believe in the magic of theatre as they grant your every wish, proving as they do every year, that “it’s possible”.

Frederick D. Miller, Dramaturg  
CV Class of 2018

Sources:

Purdum, Todd. *Something Wonderful*. Henry Holt and Company. New York. 2018.