

# The cast may be multiracial but the messages are still mixed

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In many of the old fairy tales-simple, innocent children's stories such as "Cinderella"- the moral was enough to give you nightmares.

A woman- if she is beautiful, and she is young- can escape the horrible life forced on her by uglier people and be rescued by a prince, handsome and tall, and live happily ever after as royalty, far above the worthless common folk.

Plus, the young, beautiful woman had to be white.

Tonight, ABC's \$12 million, "Cinderella" (at 7 on channel 10) makes a well-intentioned attempt to reconcile Western culture's prime rags-to-riches story with 1990's sensibilities. Sad to say, it ends up with so many contradictions, it can still give you nightmares.

And ultimately, with all its new talk about finding the beauty within and not being a victim, the moral amounts to: A young, beautiful woman can escape the horrible life forced on her by uglier people and be rescued by a handsome prince, to live happily ever after as royalty far above the common folk.

One reason may be that those are 1990's sensibilities. Still. Another is that our myths are so ingrained they are impossible to shake. In either case, even this well-meaning, modernized, multicultural "Cinderella" shows how much sexual stereotyping exists and how little room society gives to women.

Before we get too far down that path, let's detour to the pure Hollywood side of the ledger. The cast members largely live up to their stellar potential. They include Whoopi Goldberg (the queen), Whitney Houston (the fairy godmother), Jason Alexander (a new character, the prince's valet), Brandy (Cinderella), and Bernadette Peters (the stepmother). And the two-hour movie, despite a few slow spots, is an entertaining remake of the classic children's tale.

But ABC and "The Wonderful World of Disney" have said for the months that precisely because it's a children's tale, they have an obligation to tweak it enough to send out enlightened messages. And, in one of those unfair Catch 22s, by bringing up the subject, the producers invited close scrutiny of their messages.

This "Cinderella's" most enlightened feat is to create a multiethnic, completely colorblind fairy tale- although like much of the network television, Latino characters are almost non-existent.

Still, the queen (Goldberg) is African American, the king (Victor Garber) is white and together they have a Filipino son (Paolo Montalban). Cinderella (Brandy) is African American, making her one of TV's few non-white fairy tale stars.

In an interview with reporters recently, the producers talked about their intentions.

"We wanted everybody who watches to be able to say, 'That's my story, I can identify with people on that screen.'" Said Neil Meron, an executive producer.

"It was one of our main concerns," said director Robert Iscove, "to make sure that the story had some relevance to a '90s audience. We're trying to empower all of these ladies to realize that the beautiful dress and the externals are inside you, that every girl is a princess and they can bring that out."

Iscove said both Cinderella and the prince underwent small but substantive character changes. Cinderella is no longer just waiting to be rescued. At the end – before the prince finds her – she decides to leave her stepmother’s house and salvage her life on her own.

And the prince, in theory, is looking for a soulmate, not the winner of the Miss Kingdom pageant.

“He’s not the typical ‘I’m holding out for the pretty girl’ (prince),” said Montalban. “This is more of a rebel prince who just wants to be a regular person, and he’s looking for the person who will complete him.”

On paper, that sounds fine. On TV, however, the prince falls in love with the beautiful woman at the top of the stairs before he’s even spoken to her. So much for soulmates.

To be fair, we have to accept a few contradictions because this is, after all, a fairy tale. Or, to quote Alexander in the beefed up role of Lionel, the prince’s valet, “Who dances in glass shoes?” (By the way Alexander told reporters that when he was offered the part, he was a little hesitant because he “didn’t remember the valet as being pivotal.”)

So, on faith and with out regard to logic, we don’t ask why one glass slipper didn’t dissolve at midnight with the rest of the clothes and the carriage; why the prince needed help from a shoe to recognize his true love; why Cinderella’s family didn’t recognize her at the ball; or how it was that no other woman in the kingdom had the same shoe size.

But, unfortunately, there are real contradictions and harmful messages in even this “Cinderella” that should not be taken on faith. Here are some of them: