



On Colleen Moore's "Ella Cinders" (1926)

By Kathleen Rooney

An oppressed, abused, and forsaken girl finds her meager circumstances suddenly changed to extraordinary fortune through ascension to the throne—literal or metaphorical—by way of marriage. That's Cinderella for you, a folk tale with thousands of variations throughout the millennia and around the world.

After persevering through obscurity and neglect, which the audience is always given to understand are short-sighted and unjust, Cinderella attains recognition and defeats her nasty competitors for love and status, resulting in a crowd-pleasing happily-ever-after. Little wonder, then, that Hollywood has served this beloved fairy tale to the masses time and again, beginning in the silent era. Perhaps the dizziest, fizziest, and most madcap pre-synchronized sound version arrived in the form of "Ella Cinders" in 1926.

In the title role, Colleen Moore—also known in her day as the "Flaming Youth" girl and the "Perfect Flapper"—shines as one of the most charming people ever to stick her feet into the fairy tale character's ineradicable glass slippers; or, in this case, her pretty satin flapper pumps.

Everybody can relate to a Cinderella story, for who has never felt under-appreciated, worthy of more? And everybody can tell from the title that this is one. The narrative is based, of course, on the ancient story, but filtered through the popular comic strip of the same name by William Conselman and Charles Plumb, which ran in the Los Angeles Times and was syndicated from 1925 into the early 1960s. Moore's brilliant and volatile producer husband John McCormick (their marriage was the inspiration behind the plot of "A Star Is Born") noticed the strip and negotiated the rights to the story.

He believed this jazzy new approach would be a perfect vehicle for his comedienne wife, not only because the role would showcase her signature vim, vitality, and comic timing, but also because it put a Hollywood spin on the familiar proceedings, being a story about not just moving upwards in life but breaking into Hollywood.

The film's wacky 51 laugh-a-minute minutes focus on the titular Ella, stepdaughter to a family in the every-town USA of Roseville, played with impeccable pluck and girl-next-dooriness by Moore. Ella's dyspeptic stepmother, Ma Pill, and two odious stepsisters, Lotta and Prissie, treat her with all the contempt and snobbery we know to expect from such a family dynamic. Poor Ella in her tattered rags and bobbed hair labors her days away on their behalf, enduring their laziness and cruel behavior, while dreaming of something more.

As she gamely cleans the furnace and gives a slapstick rolling pin massage to her stepmother's shiftless limbs, Ella is buoyed by little besides the affection of her unexpected suitor, the local ice man, one Waite Lifter, and the prospect of a beauty contest offered by the Gem Film Company. The winner will receive a cash prize, an all-expenses-paid trip to Hollywood, and a role in a picture.

Played by the amiably handsome Lloyd Hughes, Waite is the only one—besides us—who sees past Ella's tatterdemalion appearance and into her true beauty and heart of gold. Hughes—with whom Moore also appeared in 1923's "The Huntress," 1925's "Sally and The Wall Flower," and 1926's "Irene"—and she have a winsome chemistry. From the moment we see them together, we want them to stay that way forever, which is key to the happily-ever-after we are intended to root for.

Former vaudevillian Mervyn LeRoy co-wrote the script, and he stuffs it like a turkey with bit after bit. As Moore later recalled, LeRoy insisted on being known not as a “gagman”—the common epithet—but rather as a “comedy constructor.” Such a title sounds pretentious, at first, but watching the film, it feels correct and earned. Although easy to dismiss as inferior to drama, light comedy with this deft and airy a touch is not easy to write, set-up, or deliver. Moore and her fellow actors execute LeRoy’s constructions with unparalleled joie de vivre.

As Ella pursues her opportunity to escape from nowheresville and onto the silver screen, her antics are amusing unto themselves, and also deliver piquant critiques to the dream factory’s foibles. With the dual dawn of the motion picture industry and the profession of movie star as a possible career for young men and women across America came an attendant boom in the publication of guidebooks for starry-eyed hopefuls.

One of the earliest is “How to Write for Moving Pictures: A Manual of Instruction and Information” by Margeurite Bertsch, published in 1917. In it, Bertsch observes:

“We all have our favorite literary characters who stand with us, sit with us, and walk beside us. Cinderella weeps in the mind of a child. The tears that fall are real, real enough to wet and turn muddy the ashes they fall on. Her amazement at the sight of her fairy godmother makes her eyes glisten even as do the eyes of the little one who sees her as he hears her story. Always one might run his fingers through her hair, or pinch her cheeks and find them flesh and blood.”



A split-camera allowed Colleen Moore to perform various eye tricks resulting in one of the most spectacular comedy scenes in the film.

Fittingly, the most famous gag from “Ella Cinders” comes when Ella pilfers such a manual from her wicked stepsister and learns that “the greatest requisite to stardom is the eyes,” and that she ought to be practicing eye exercises, the better to deliver such emotions as flirtation, fear, and love. When she reads that “cross eyes—or the ability to make the eyes appear crossed have brought great fortunes to certain moving picture actors,” thanks to a clever split-screen camera trick, Ella performs a woozy ocular gymnastics routine, each eye appearing to engage in acrobatics independently of the other.

In another hilarious scene, Moore—having earned the three-dollar sitting fee through three nights of equally hilarious baby-sitting—tries and fails to project a serious and sophisticated magnetism while posing in a photo studio beset by a pesky fly.

Unflattering and absurd, the resulting portrait catches the eye of the local firemen who serve as the beauty contest judges. To the initial embarrassment of Ella and the ire of her stepmother, one of them explains that “Beauty means nothin’. The movies need newer and funnier faces.” The faithful Waite agrees, telling his as of yet unrequited paramour that “not everyone can make people laugh, Ella. Making people happy—it’s a great thing.”

No face is funnier in this film than Moore’s, and the rest of the picture is a romp from the train ride West—where she finds herself playing second fiddle to a car

full of Native Americans also on their way to Hollywood for a job—to her arrival only to find that the entire contest was a scam.

According to Vincent Brook in his 2013 book “Land of Smoke and Mirrors: A Cultural History of Los Angeles,” “Ella Cinders balanced a celebration of Hollywood’s romance with recognition of the potential pitfalls of its vanity and material wealth.” It’s a pleasure to watch Moore—by then a bona fide star and box office draw—play the part of an upstart in way over her head.

Directed by Alfred E. Green who started his career as an actor at Selig Polyscope in 1912 before moving on to directing feature-length films by 1917, the tone of the film is one of loving ridicule toward the studios and their would-be discoveries. He casts himself in the role of the Director here in the slapstick sequence where Ella, having crashed the gate, dashes through the studio causing havoc, including a delightful cameo by the comedian Harry Langdon.

Ultimately, Ella gets one over on the gatekeepers and attains her much-desired fame in spite of everything. The film can’t—or won’t—end there, though. Hollywood figured out early on, too, that romance plus comedy adds up to success, and thanks to the presence of its indelible star, “Ella Cinders” stands as one of the most daffily wholesome iterations of this enduring arithmetic.

“Ella Cinders” does not merely follow but rather establishes the imperishable formula of a popular rom-com from its focus on two one hundred percent lovable lead characters with whimsical jobs who meet cute to zany side characters and misunderstandings to epiphanies to betrayals to grand gestures to the inevitable happy ending. For meanwhile, back in Roseville, the humble ice man Waite is revealed to be George Waite, the heir to an enormous fortune and a former college football star to boot. His father insists that Ella will now only be interested in him in a gold-digging fashion, but George refuses to let go of true love.

In her “Film History” article “Good Little Bad Girls’: Controversy and the Flapper Comedienne,” Sara Ross notes that Moore consistently hit on “the ideal comic formula for reconciling the expression of sexual sophistication with a more fundamental innocence.” In the end, Ella—after living her movie star dreams—realizes that George is the man for her and in Cinderella fashion, accepts his hand in marriage.

Such a conclusion is expected, it's true, in the way that one plus one always adds up to two, but the effervescence with which the leads, the director, and the whole cast solve the problem, it's one for the ages.

Fittingly for a woman who would play many a Cinderella role over the course of her career, Colleen Moore adored fairy tales, so much so that she built a one-ton dollhouse or Fairy Castle decorated with their iconography and toured it during the Great Depression to raise both the nation's spirits and money for children's charities.

Today it resides in Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, enchanting viewers as its creator once did onscreen. And what do you think is in the Great Hall, not far from the chairs of the Three Bears carved from balsa wood, so small that each sits on the head of a pin, and the Goose who laid the golden eggs, along with a basket of eggs freshly laid? Cinderella's glass slippers, naturally, hollow, high-heeled, and adorned with red bows, made for her by a glassblower from Ringling Brothers Circus, the smallest glass slippers ever created and presented to Moore, the jazziest Cinderella of them all.

"Ella Cinders" (1926) was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2013.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Library of Congress.

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