

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE EAST

This proto-feminist take on the fairytale favourite offers a feisty cross-dressing heroine and a spoonful of sweetened socialism

THREE WISHES FOR CINDERELLA

Václav Vorlíček; Czechoslovakia/Germany 1973; Second Run/Region 0 DVD; 84 minutes; 1.33:1; Features: filmed appreciation by Michael Brooke, booklet essay by Tim Lucas

Reviewed by Pamela Hutchinson

With Disney finally catching up to the idea that little girls might enjoy strong-minded, boisterous, independent heroines, even the kind that wield a bow and arrow, it's a joy to catch up with a Czechoslovakian film that set that template more than 40 years ago. *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (*Tri orisky pro Popelku*) is a wintry fairytale adaptation that asserts a little-spoken truth: there is more than one way to woo a prince.

Made in 1973, director Václav Vorlíček's *Three Wishes for Cinderella* belongs to Czechoslovakia's second wave of fairytale films, and is one of the most popular in the genre. It was a co-production with East Germany, shot in Prague, Bohemia and the Babelsberg studios, with a cast from both countries and released in both languages. It has now become a beloved fixture on the Christmas TV schedules of several European nations – stations have been known to receive complaints if it is not shown. In fact, however, its snowy setting came about by circumstance, because the German locations were only available in winter.

The English translation of the film's Czech title is 'Three Nuts for Cinderella' (Cinderella's 'wishes', each of which brings her a step closer to the prince, come from three magical hazelnuts), and the storyline differs from the widely told French version by Charles Perrault. There is no pumpkin carriage, fairy godmother or midnight curfew; there is a slipper, but although it is dainty it is not made of glass. The film is loosely based on a Czech version of the tale by folklorist Božena Němcová, which is itself a variation on the Brothers Grimm interpretation, but without its bloody mutilations.

Once upon a time in a feudal medieval village in the woods, a beautiful, fatherless young woman called Cinderella is kept as a domestic drudge by her vicious stepmother and vain stepsister (two hugely enjoyable turns by German-speaking actress Carola Braunbock and Czech Daniela Hlaváčová). As played by Libuše Safránková, who began her long career with a clutch of fairytale roles, Cinderella is pretty and winsome but also spirited and outspoken: she backchats her bullies and sweeps soot into their faces, and is bold enough to tease the charming but chipmunkish prince (Pavel Trávnický). From behind a pink veil at the longed-for ball, she sets him a riddle with her identity as the answer, a clear hint that she is far more of a prize than he is.

Although her stepmother sets degrading and difficult tasks such as picking peas from a



Dream come true: Libuše Safránková, Vítězslav Jandák and Pavel Trávnický in *Three Wishes for Cinderella*

bucket of ashes, Cinderella completes them with ease – she has an enchanted affinity with the natural world, and is assisted by a team of doves (animal scenes such as these exemplify the film's low-tech but efficient special effects). She is a skilled horsewoman and archer, too: long before she sets foot in a ballroom she has captured the prince's admiration with her accomplishments in the field. When she rides her beloved horse, an ecstatic montage of low-angled shots takes in the spectacle of her liberated smile and hair swaying in the breeze. On one occasion, she rides out in

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Safránková as Cinderella

boyish drag: a huntsman's outfit with a green feathered hat and hose, implying that this rags-to-riches heroine is as much a Robin Hood legend as a princess-in-waiting. It is hard to avoid ingesting a spoonful of sweetened socialism alongside the film's proto-feminism, with Cinderella as a symbolic worker rising to power, and her step-relatives the oppressive ruling classes.

Such politicised readings map easily on to this fairytale film, in the main because it was made in two communist states, but also because of Vorlíček's mostly realist *mise en scène*. There's no haze or sparkle to accompany the magic that hoists our heroine up the social scale. Cinderella's hair may be artfully pinned but her face is grimy and the stables and barns she skulks in are a mix of dull browns and greys. The film's most outré visual flourish is the deliciously elaborate costumes. The clothes worn by the upper-class characters, both the vile women who abuse Cinderella and the noble royals who welcome her, are outlandish concoctions of primary colours and glitter, which have understandably gained cult appreciation over the years. Cinderella's earthy garb is more in keeping with the wooded landscape, underlining her sympathy with nature. Her most glamorous get-up, her magical ballgown, is a pastel vision, suggesting comparative restraint and elegance – and perhaps also that she would rather be dressed for riding instead.

In this high-definition 4K restoration, the film looks fresh and detailed and ready to be enjoyed at many festive firesides to come. This edition also includes a vastly well-informed video appreciation by Michael Brooke and a similarly detailed essay from Tim Lucas. 🍷