

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

# Review: Sutton Foster delights in Carol Burnett's role in 'Once Upon a Mattress' at the Ahmanson



Sutton Foster, center, surrounded by the cast of "Once Upon a Mattress."  
(Joan Marcus )

**By Charles McNulty**

Theater Critic

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To call Sutton Foster’s performance in “Once Upon a Mattress” physical would be a gross understatement. Rarely have feet played such a prominent role in the history of musical comedy.

Foster deploys them with the versatility of hands in her double-jointed portrayal of Princess Winnifred, the role that helped transform Carol Burnett into a national comedy treasure. These are not easy shoes to step into, but Foster spends much of her time onstage barefoot, pawing her way into the part with those dirty, bare-soled, hilariously expressive feet of hers.

Her agile lower extremities might lead you to believe that Foster is made of rubber. Her legs splay, tilt and leap readily into pratfall action. The effortless grace of her tumbling suggests a new branch of choreography.

A two-time Tony Award winner (“Thoroughly Modern Millie,” “Anything Goes”), Foster is a bona fide triple threat. In this New York City Center Encores! revival of “Once Upon a Mattress,” which

has arrived at the Ahmanson Theatre direct from Broadway, she approaches slapstick with the same dexterity she would a Cole Porter tap number.

“Once Upon a Mattress,” which had its Broadway premiere in 1959, might not be a great musical, but in the right hands it can be a giddily entertaining one. Lear deBessonet, who directed the magical 2022 Broadway revival of [“Into the Woods”](#) that came to the [Ahmanson](#) last year, succeeds once again in restoring the lustrous color to a vintage musical.

There’s no disguising that “Mattress” is a property from another Broadway era. The book by Jay Thompson, Marshall Barer and Dean Fuller, which infuses vaudevillian mirth into “The Princess and the Pea,” has been updated by [Amy Sherman-Palladino](#) to be more in keeping with contemporary sensitivities. But this genre of musical smacks of an earlier sketch-comedy age.

The humor still tickles, especially when the score by Mary Rodgers (music) and Barer (lyrics) accelerates the high jinks. The fairy-tale saga of a sweet yet stunted lonely prince trying to find a princess bride who will pass his cruel mother’s purity tests doesn’t

need much to deliriously take off. And the creative team pulls out all the silly stops.

Burnett, who went from starring in “Mattress” to winning an Emmy Award for her work on “The Garry Moore Show,” was born for this kind of physical comedy. The musical can be seen as preparing the way for “The Carol Burnett Show,” the legendary variety program that made musical comedy revue a staple of Saturday night television in the 1970s.

Foster has sometimes been compared to Mary Tyler Moore for her pixieish charm and dancerly elegance. In “Mattress,” she offers shades not only of Burnett but also of Imogene Coca. There’s a touching, lonely quality to her cockeyed clown portrayal of Winnifred, “the strangely energetic swamp girl,” who has arrived at the castle as a marital prospect for Prince Dauntless (Michael Urie) covered in mud and leeches after swimming the moat.

Her filthy appearance isn’t the only reason Queen Aggravain (Ana Gasteyer) spurns her. If the prince takes a wife, it brings the queen’s own reign closer to an end, a thought she cannot abide. And so she has infantilized her son, treating him like a hapless boy,

which is the state of his manhood until Winnifred awakens in him adult longings that spur his delinquent maturity.

Prince Dauntless demands that his mother give Fred, as she likes to be called, a chance to become his wife. His passion for her grows to such a pitch that he starts bounding up stairs instead of crawling over them like a mollycoddled toddler.

Urie is a key part of the revival's winning strategy. Adorably camp, he's both farcically innocent and suggestively naughty. He relates to Winnifred as both pal and prospective bedmate, and as their bond intensifies, his slightly weird familiarity with one of the male servants grows more brusque.

Gasteyer plays the villainous queen with wicked abandon. Her laughs come from taking the joke further than you might expect. But her over-the-top comedy is as fresh as it is broad. There's no room for subtlety, but the Freudian monster she creates hits her fiendishly funny marks.

David Patrick Kelly as King Sextimus the Silent spends much of his stage time engaged in a series of charades. Having lost the power of speech because of

a witch's curse, the king must act out what he wants to communicate. Spryly hilarious, Kelly lends the henpecked husband's subversive streak a bumbling gentleness.

Daniel Breaker and the cast of "Once Upon a Mattress." (Joan Marcus)

Daniel Breaker as the Jester is as droll a narrator as he is dreamy a singer. A master of side-eye, he gives "Mattress" a touch of "Pippin" and makes the show seem timeless whenever he's onstage.

I missed a few of the New York cast members, who didn't make the trip. The role of the Wizard, which was played by the singularly outlandish Brooks Ashmanskas, now is portrayed by Kevin Del Aguila,

who finds a different vein of humor, turning the character into a hack magician, desperate to resurrect his hoary act.

The role of Lady Larken, which Nikki Renée Daniels vividly fleshed out on Broadway, now is played by Oyoyo Joi. And Ben Davis has taken over the part of Sir Harry from Will Chase. Daniels and Chase brought more oomph to their characters' romantic entanglement, which has left Lady Larken happily if inconveniently with child, a springboard for the whole screwy marital plot. (No one can get hitched until Prince Dauntless ties the knot.) But Joi and Davis acquit themselves well in a company that seems to be having as much fun as the audience.

The musical has a few vibrant comic numbers. "Shy" is deservedly the best known, but "The Swamps of Home" and "Happily Ever After" have their own delectable fizz. There are some dead patches in the show, however. Lorin Latarro's antic choreography helps cover up the repetitive conclusion of Act I. But there's no hiding the overstretched nature of Act II.

No matter. The revival's inviting playfulness keeps us in good spirits. David Zinn's scenic design adopts a puppet theater jocularly and Andrea Hood's

storybook costumes are as vivid as a box of Colorforms.

But the real animation comes from the players. When Foster's Winnifred climbs down from the mountain of mattresses a tired wreck and walks into her surprise happy ending, it's hard not to share in the theatrical joy of a talented company hell-bent on entertaining us.

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## 'Once Upon a Mattress'

**Where:** Ahmanson Theatre, 135 N. Grand Ave.,  
L. A.

**When:** 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m.  
Saturdays, 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sundays; through  
Jan. 5

**Tickets:** Start at \$51.75

**Contact:** [centertheatregroup.org](https://www.centertheatregroup.org) or (213) 628-  
2772

**Running time:** 2 hours, 30 minutes, including  
one intermission

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### Charles McNulty

Charles McNulty is the theater critic of the Los Angeles Times. He received his doctorate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from the Yale School of Drama.