

Beanstalk bloomin' good fun

Jack And The Beanstalk

416-872-5555

Traditional fable directed and choreographed by Jeff Hyslop. Musical direction by David Warrack. Lighting by Steve Ross. Until Jan. 4 at the Elgin Theatre, 189 Yonge St. ★ ★ ★ ★

BY GEOFF CHAPMAN
DRAMA CRITIC

Fee Fi Fo Fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman.

I say. Steady on. That's a bit much. This is the 1990s. Where's the race-relations police when you actually need them?

I want to report this vile, 20-foot-high giant person, who was noisily roaring these racist remarks right from the start at Thursday's opening of a Christmas family musical, *Jack And The Beanstalk* at the Elgin Theatre.

Righteous folk might intone it's a conflict of interest for a humble scribe born over the pond to rant about stuff like this, but, hey, His Hugeness was clearly in a Howard Stern mood. Kids fled along the aisles when he started up, to the accompaniment of thunder and lightning.

You want to know about the rest of this cheeky, provocative show? It's delightfully ramshackle, hopelessly incorrect, huge fun — one of the best beanstalk stews you've ever tasted.

The hearty concoction has been compiled by pantomime addict Ross Petty. His dish has heady romance, pratfalls,



BAD SEED: Ross Petty delightfully boo-able as giant's evil henchman.

cartoon villains, choreographed dance numbers with ragged if enthusiastic execution, slapstick, super sets, a comic actor impersonating an aged female of ample proportion, songs and loud audience cheers but much louder jeers.

That's not to mention every imaginable element of farcical fantasy, with nursery rhymes, daft doggerel, in-jokes, out-jokes, groanworthy chestnuts, political jokes, topical jokes, theatrical jokes, ad-libs and ever-so-slightly risqué jokes.

Pantomimes are the last vestige of the Victorian music hall, though their history goes back much further, incorporating strands of commedia dell'arte and a basic fairy tale.

Don't expect performances to be subtle or sophisticated, though there are some neat quips scattered throughout a constant buzz of bedlam whose origin is usually the youngest audience members.

Besides, if you don't get the joke, or don't find it funny, the cast will repeat it for you. As Canada's Lord High Farceur, Heath Lamberts — in the role of Dame Trot — put it: "We don't write them, we only say them." Yet everything Lamberts does is a hoot, his patented bellow, fake tap dance and cavorting a comedic benchmark.

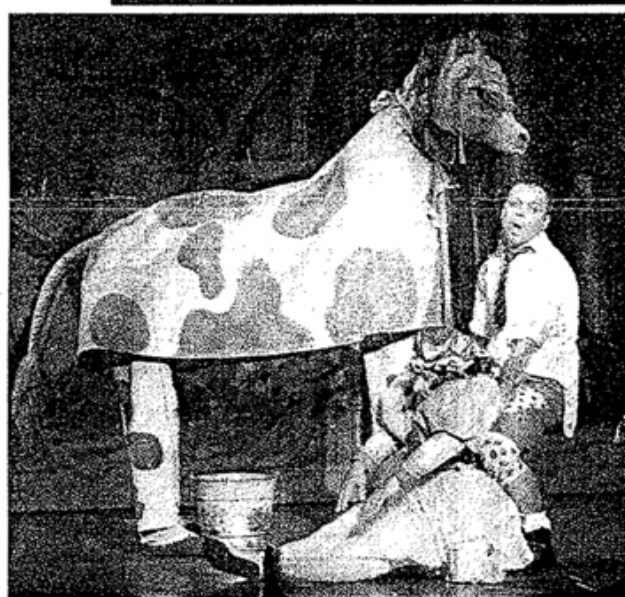
Petty takes a basic silly story and makes it even sillier. The land terrorized by the giant is ruled by King Crumble (Bruce Dow), who pledges cash and the hand of his daughter, Princess Apricot (Camilla Scott), née Apricot Crumble, to a giant-killer.

Poverty-stricken Jack Trot (Jeff Hyslop), scion of the Great Dame, sells the family's last possession, the cow Ger-tie (one of the better hoofers of the night) for magic beans, from which spring a mighty beanstalk. Jack, protected by Fairy Lola (Mary Ellen Mahoney) and hindered by batty Simple Simon (Simon Bradbury), swarms up said stalk to battle the giant (Randy Ganne) — to whom "let's do lunch" means you personally are on the menu — as well as to rescue the princess from



PHOTOS BY RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

FAIRYTALE: Fairy Lola (Mary Ellen Mahoney) resists blandishments of Killjoy (Ross Petty).



CHEEKY ANTICS: Simple Simon (Simon Bradbury), above, cavorts with Mrs. Trot (Heath Lamberts); Jack (Jeff Hyslop) cozies up to Princess Apricot (Camilla Scott).



the large one's dessert trolley.

If Lamberts is still the master of exaggeration, Petty — who plays the giant's earth-bound agent, Killjoy — still knows how to become the most hated man on lower Yonge St. within minutes. He has the nasty role down pat, generating deafening boos even when in deep disguise.

This production is cast to the hilt, but at times it stubbornly refuses to glitter, precisely because there's so much crammed into this good-hearted 2½ hours.

Scott (of *Crazy For You*, *Due South* and her own talk show) gets to emote a bit with "Don't Quit While You're Ahead," and "I'm Trotty" is a

fine caper for Lamberts. Petty gets to spoof showbiz with "Gimme A Spotlight," "Egg On My Face" is fun for all and Hyslop (*Phantom*, *Kiss Of The Spiderwoman*, TV's *Today's Special*) works hard. But other songs get washed away in the bedlam despite the best efforts of a 10-piece orchestra.

The ensemble clicks with a slice of *Riverdance*, some strobe-lit leaping, a darklight spectacle and a splendid fashion show. Other unusual moments include a stage sighting of Barbara Hall, ex-mayor of Toronto "soon to be renamed North York," a tap dance duel, a cow-milking extravagan-

za and audience singalongs. And some very clever jokes — "You can lead a horse to water, but a pencil must be led" (think about it).

Even if you don't laugh all the time, it's a whole lot more fun than most of the material inflicted on showgoers by post-modern misery-makers, the sort of people noted by writer H. L. Mencken as possessed by a fear that someone, somewhere is happy.

But I still want to know about this white, male Englishman's blood thing . . .