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## **The show, especially in its jokes, caters to the grown-ups. The kids - with a couple of tearful exceptions - didn't seem to mind**

By Robert Cushman



Ross Petty's *Snow White* is his best panto in years. When it comes to theatrical self-awareness, or admitting that a show is just a show, Bertolt Brecht and his alienation effect have nothing on the "family musicals" that Petty has been peddling for more Toronto holiday seasons than most of us can count, as a Canadian spin on the traditional English pantomime. Actually, in this context, "admitting" is a weasel word; Petty's productions revel in creating a context and then blithely stepping outside it.

It's got so that this year's panto comments not just on itself but on its predecessors. The perennial Eddie Glen, chirpy music-hall comic reincarnate, bounds on at the beginning to inform us that this year's *Snow White* is the third show in the series with that name in its title, but also that it's the first in which it's the entire title. Usually we get *Snow White and*

*Something with Seven in it.* The traditional septet are apparently too politically incorrect to present though not, it seems, to mention; when the heroine in this version reaches the famous cottage she observes that it used to be owned by seven dwarves and wonders why they've vacated the premises. (Answer: It's the wicked queen's fault. Like everything.)

I'm getting ahead of myself. This time Snow White (Snowie to friends) is partnered by just one seven with two zeroes in front. In other words, meet Bond, James Bond; played by Abbey, Graham Abbey. It's an old Petty custom to insert a classical actor into one of his extravaganzas and have him let his hair down, but never before has it been taken so far or done so well. Abbey has in fact been here before, as Prince Charming, going with the flow; now he's Prince Charming's dad, more or less, and he pretty much directs the flow.

On one level, he's giving a first-rate impersonation of Sean Connery: cinematically the first Bond, probably the best, and undoubtedly the most imitable. Listen to him roll the Connery burr on his tongue. On another, he offers a commentary on the whole double-0 ethos, making most of his points with a modest somersault or a lithe forward roll. (Bond, in this incarnation, isn't as young as he was.) On a third, he's contemplating - with a kind of incredulous satisfaction - the idea of him with his Stratford résumé being there in the first place.

This leads to some particularly barbed banter with Petty, his co-star and employer, and with the small children brought up from the audience to render assistance at a crucial plot point. ("My agent," he told one aghast infant on the first night, "is wearing the same expression as you right now.") I don't know how many of Abbey's ad libs were truly spontaneous but they all sounded as if they were. On all levels he's having and giving a very good time. He's a trouper.

Of course, he isn't the whole story. The whole story is well underway before he even appears, holed up in the dwarves' former dwelling, managing his spy ops while surrounded by a bevy of beauties. Snowie turns up there because she's banished or is on the run from (it's rather confusing) the Queen, who is of course her stepmother and is also of course Petty. She, too, is surrounded by a bevy of beauties, though in her case they're male. They give her the admiration she craves, as she parades in a succession of gaudy outsize dresses, which is just as well as she doesn't get it from her jester (Glen, given and taking more opportunities than usual) or from her mirror (Dan Chameroy via hologram) despite the fact that that's what she pays it for. It insists, as it immemorably has, on telling the unpalatable truth about the Competition. It gets smashed.

Snow White (Melissa O'Neil) is really more of a Cinderella; she's the usual sweet thing, though with a belting voice and a commitment to veganism. She wants to be a vet, and in the meantime has made friends with some of the lowlier beasts of the field, including a skunk and a couple of raccoons. When she hits the road, they go with her, and soon they're joined by an assortment of characters from other stories: a device owing equal debts to *Into the Woods*, other pantomimes and *Shrek*.

The extremely fine bunch includes Red Riding Hood, whom Bryn McAuley hilariously renders as a bossy but supportive valley girl, Snow White's BFF action with a GPS, and One Little Pig, brilliantly incarnated by Reid Janisse as a porcine Don Cherry who keeps score of the story as if it were a hockey game, and goes into impromptu Coach's Corner huddles with Pinocchio (Billy Lake) who has fewer opportunities but does have an understandable thing about wood. The group is completed by Jack the Giant Killer who has become a pacifist, thus qualifying as Snow White's love interest. (He may of course simply have run out of giants.)

That's quite enough plot, except perhaps to note that the computer age gives a whole new meaning to the wicked queen's poisoned apple. The way-above-average script is by Rick Miller (*the* Rick Miller), Carolyn Bennett (not *the* Carolyn Bennett) and Malcolm Clarke. The program lists them in that non-alphabetical order, suggesting that Miller either did most of the work or has the toughest agent. There's a smattering of Rob Ford jokes, the last of which is very funny.

The smart direction is by Tracey Flye. The songs seem irrelevant, even by pantomime standards, but they justify their existence at the end, when heroine and villainess square off in a moral and physical beauty contest: a play-off that's also a sing-off. This has become a convention of Elgin pantos, along with the tense finding-a-hidden-object-in-a-bedchamber scene. They are the parts of the show that give equal pleasure to children and adults. Otherwise the show, especially in its jokes, caters to the grown-ups. The kids - with a couple of tearful exceptions - didn't seem to mind.

*Snow White runs until Jan. 5. For tickets and more information, visit [rosspetty.com](http://www.rosspetty.com) [<http://www.rosspetty.com>].*