



Star Chilena Kennedy (second from left) and the rest of *The Little Mermaid* cast presented an evening of swimmingly good family entertainment at the Elgin Theatre.

# A fine kettle of fish

Petty's highly enjoyable *The Little Mermaid* could very well be the finest Christmas panto he has yet staged

**JOHN COULBOURN**

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It's going to take Santa a bit of time to figure things out at a certain Toronto household this Christmas.

One can picture him, in fact, pacing the living room of the Ross Petty home, trying to figure out whether the head of the household has been naughty or nice.

But if the jolly old elf were to ask me — and that's highly unlikely — my best advice would be to lay on an extra sleigh and fill the house, for while Mrs. Petty's little boy is currently being mighty naughty, it's never been nicer — and fans of the annual Petty Christmas panto are reaping the benefits.

This year's edition of the made-in-Toronto stage Yule tradition is titled *The Little Mermaid: Ontario's O-FISH-al Family Musical*, and as usual, the closest it comes to the Disney Classic with which it shares a certain titular resonance is the Broadway-bound production of *Aladdin*, playing up the street and, between us, looking rather lacklustre by comparison.

In fact, this year, Petty

doesn't just hook a winner, he nets a whole school of 'em.

First off, there's Chilena Kennedy in a memorable turn in the title role, playing Angel, an environmentally aware mermaid concerned about her future in Toronto Harbour, ground zero for a casino planned by the evil Ogoogo, played with — ahem — his usual villainous flair by Petty himself.

Then there are bang-up performances from regulars like Eddie Glen (as Sponge Bill Triangle Pants) and the gender torturing Dan Chameroy, once again channelling his feminine side as Plumbum and proving once again that in nature, at least, there is nothing like his dame.

Meanwhile, to label performers like *So You Think You Can Dance*'s Jordan Clark, *Canadian Idol*'s Marc Devigne and the very gifted Lana Carillo mere supporting players seems to diminish their fine work — and happily, director Tracey Flye and choreographer Marc Kimelman give each of them every opportunity to shine.

But in the face of such a barrage of talent, the real star of the show this time out just might be Reid Janisse,

who not only does some giddy on-stage work as Carl, the Clownfish, but in his off-stage guise as writer, demonstrates an impressive understanding of what makes a good panto tick, and as a result, turns in a script that runs like a Swiss clock. That, at two and a half hours (with intermission) that clock runs a little long is a niggling complaint, considering the laughs he's packed into the show — for every age.

Set designer Michael Gianfrancesco and videographers Ben Chaisson and Beth Kates meanwhile come together to create an amphibian production capable of vibrant life either on land or under the sea, all dressed to impress by Erica Connor's swimmingly successful costumes.

In short, it's an impressive panto package, tied up with a pretty bow by musical director Steve Thomas, serving up a playlist of re-purposed tunes — modern pop to classic show tunes, with original work thrown in for good measure. In fact, this just may be one of the most memorable Christmas pantos Santa's ever found under the tree — wickedly naughty and as nice as can be.

**WE SAY:**

★★★★★  
out of 5