

## The Hamilton Spectator

Aladdin is Great Fun

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Gary Smith

I don't care what they call it, a pantomime is a pantomime. And thank goodness for that. Let's not meddle too much with tradition, I say. Whatever you choose to call it, Ross Petty's Family Musical Aladdin is one of the most ingratiating holiday shows for some time. For one thing, Ted Dykstra, this season's pantomime director, has smartened things up a lot with fast-paced modern twists. Picture Aladdin on a skateboard. Picture his friends giving us red-hot booty-shakin' moves. There are still plenty of blue-as-lavender jokes to keep parents from falling asleep. And there's always cute little Adam Brazier, an endearing Aladdin offering plenty of good-natured pluck. Ross Petty easily retains his title of villain supreme, earning catcalls and boos. He's still the guy you definitely love to hate. Sexy Jennifer Dale gives men in the audience plenty that's eye-popping to look at, having great fun with her dual role as a local librarian and as the sexy Sheherezade.

Derek McGrath makes a wonderful, down-home, hoser-type dame, singing the socks off some Barenaked Ladies' songs. And wrestling icon Bret 'Hitman' Hart has fun as the muscle-bound Genie of the Lamp. This Aladdin is ingratiating fun for the whole family, two hours of perfect holiday entertainment.

## The Toronto Sun

Hart: 'I'm resurrected'

Wrestler hits theatre stage in 'Aladdin'

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By John Coulbourn

The casting of Bret "The Hitman" Hart in a Christmas stage production might set visions of Santa smackdowns -- and not sugarplums -- dancing in your head. But think on it a bit more and there's a delightful sense of serendipity in the casting of the retired Canadian pro-wrestling legend in Aladdin: The Magical Family Musical -- Ross Petty's annual Christmas panto, which opens Thursday at the Elgin Theatre. A case could be made that pro wrestling and panto -- a uniquely British, low-brow, holiday stage production -- might just be where the worlds of theatre and sports come together. Both are rooted in histrionics, hyperbole and audience participation.

With Hart in the white trunks and Petty (who plays the traditional panto villain) in black, it might be hard to tell where wrestling stops and theatre takes over.

The challenge now, of course, is to see if he can put a Yuletide spin on that frenzy as he tackles the role of the Genie in the bottle in this fractured tale.

Three weeks and more into rehearsal, the 44-year-old Hart is quietly but firmly optimistic, despite his lack of "legit" theatrical experience. "I think the hardest part was the first few days," he says. "Despite everything I've been through, the very first time I opened my mouth on stage, I felt very inadequate." This kind of work -- acting -- is not totally unfamiliar to him, of course. For 23 years he was a pro wrestler, not an Olympic wrestler. As ultimately the most famous of Calgary's legendary Hart wrestling family, Bret held the WWF World Title five times, Intercontinental Title twice, co-held the Tag Team Title twice, the U.S. Heavyweight Title twice, and was the 1993 King of the Ring.

"I think of some of the matches I had where I wrestled for an hour or more," the soft-spoken Hart says. "And the thought that went into that had to be as intense as anything Laurence Olivier did. "No second takes," he adds

with a laugh. So how did he wind up with this role? He caught the attention of Ted Dykstra, Aladdin director, while performing in a tribute to Mordecai Richler two years ago. And then there was his work on CBC's Greatest Canadian series, in which Hart advocated for Don Cherry. It helps, of course, that the character of the Genie in this production is pretty familiar.

"It's Bret 'The Hitman' Hart brought back to life in a different way," he says of the panto role that was created for him. "For me, there's a sentimental appreciation that, in a funny kind of way -- and I mean funny -- I've been resurrected." There's a deep resonance to his use of the word "resurrected." Two years ago -- just a few days after that Richler tribute, in fact -- Hart suffered a stroke that has left him with less than full use of the left side of his body. His doctors have told him he will never regain full use. "I go in once every six months and we chat -- but I'm about as recovered as I'm going to get," he says. "When I had my stroke, I sadly confessed to myself that my acting days were over -- but it's never over 'til the fat wrestler sings."