

# Poof! From Hitman to genie

Whether in the ring or the panto, it's showbiz to Bret (the Hitman) Hart

BY DEIRDRE KELLY

Once upon a time in the east (that would be this side of Mississauga), a play was born by the name of *Aladdin* — all hail the genie in the bottle.

Its maker, Ross Petty, had the magic touch. He took that vessel in which lay a treasure trove of bad puns and pop songs, hammy acting and cross-dressing baritones, and he rubbed and he rubbed and he blew the house down — not to mention nearly all critical resistance to his silly brand of British-imported humour known as the Christmas Pantomime — to establish it as a holiday tradition, an annual boo-a-thon, the event parents actually enjoy taking their children to, if only to groan at the jokes (for many of them are over the kids' heads, aimed directly at the adults in the audience). For groan they will. This form of art is that predictable.

It is now almost 20 years since that inaugural production and not only is *Aladdin* still among us, it is touring — a rarity in Canadian theatre — across the country.

With backing from entertainment promoters Live Nation Canada, which took an interest in *Aladdin* for their Broadway Across Canada series after its success when it last played Toronto in 2004, the 17-member show got eyes rolling in early November in Vancouver and in Edmonton, where it played to sold-out houses amid jeers and cheers. It sparked the same good-natured derision when it travelled on, first to Saskatoon and Regina, and then on the weekend to Calgary, much of the jocularly no doubt spurred on by the presence of Bret (the Hitman) Hart, one of the Prairies' own. Hart, playing the show's Genie in the Bottle (and, by his own admission, loving every second), is consistently drawing a crowd, even afterward at the stage door.

The prodigal play returns to Toronto for a three-week run at the Elgin Theatre starting tomorrow, before heading off to Ottawa for the week following Christmas.

Petty is clearly rubbing things the right way.

As he said last month from his hotel room in the land of those

spoilsports, the Edmonton Oilers (it is his stock-in-trade to insult the hometown he is currently performing in as part of the fun), "I am proud of the fact that at 60 I can still run around like a maniac and keep up with the dancers."

In *Aladdin*, of course, the dancers are of the scantily clad variety, which allows one character to muse aloud to the in-the-know dads in the audience, "You never know when you need dancers," which is something of an in-joke itself, with Petty himself always surrounded by members of the pointe shoe community as the husband of Karen Kain.

So far, Petty isn't messing with the formula. *Aladdin* is still a fractured fairy tale that incorporates local references (Albertans got a heavy dose of Sir Ralph jokes, while Ontarians can get ready for jibes at the provincial Liberals) as well as slapstick humour of the Weenies and Beans variety (characters in the show) and sing-alongs that get the kiddies hitting those high notes on top of their screams.

In fact, not much has changed since the last time *Aladdin* cast its magic over Canadians. Any changes that do exist will mostly be imperceptible to the eye. Except for one person and that's the Hitman.

Talking from his dressing room and wearing on this night striped harem pants instead of the signature black-and-pink striped tights he used to wear in his wrestler days, Hart reminisces on what it was like the first time he played the genie in *Aladdin* just over two years ago.

The most famous son of a Prairie clan of wrestlers who once held the country in thrall, the 49-year old Hart had suffered a stroke in 2002. When Petty asked him to join *Aladdin*, he had not yet fully recovered control over his meaty arms and legs. He was scared because his first entrance was through the audience and as he strode the aisles, kids and adults heckling him as they are prompted to do, he could feel his body letting him down.

"Maybe it was a case of nerves, but my legs started to get stiff on my way to the ring, er, stage."

**"My farewell in wrestling was sudden and then it was gone. This play is resurrecting that wrestling character. It's got this great theme. It's about the hero."**

(It is a Freudian slip, a reminder of how much he misses his former life as a Canadian wrestling star and also how closely related what he is doing now in *Aladdin* is to his former life between the ropes. Both wrestling and the panto are showbiz.) "But I notice that, this time, I am more comfortable with my walk," he continues. "No one would probably notice the difference but me. But it shows me how far I have come and how far I still want to go."

*Aladdin* is part of the journey. "I was a real hero in wrestling," he says poignantly. "I got hurt and I was faded out very quickly. My fare-

well in wrestling was sudden and then it was gone. This play is resurrecting that wrestling character. It's got this great theme, it's about the hero."

And this leads him this story's most underrated participants — the children.

While the jokes aren't always for them, they're the main reason the show goes on and on (now across the country).

Says Hart: "When Ross asked me back, I didn't hesitate. I like to see the kids smile."

Adds Petty, "You know, over the years I have been criticized. But I say this. I am introducing children early in their lives to live theatre that hopefully will translate into a lifelong habit of theatre-going. If that's a mistake, then what can I say? Boo me."

*Aladdin* plays tomorrow through Dec. 24 at Toronto's Elgin Theatre and Dec. 26-31 at Ottawa's National Arts Centre ([www.rosspetty.com](http://www.rosspetty.com) or [ticketmaster.ca](http://ticketmaster.ca)).



Former wrestling star Bret (the Hitman) Hart and pantomime producer Ross Petty: 'I like to see the kids smile,' Hart says.