

Melissa O'Neil's first foray into the pantomime tradition is a success with her role as Bella in *Beauty and the Beast*. She's backed by a great team, director and producer, as well. Guest star Scott Thompson is a royal hoot as the queen, below.



This panto's a beauty, eh?

It might seem that putting together a Christmas panto is no more complicated than whipping up a batch of Grandma's eggnog.

You pull out a recipe and, after a bit of messing around in the kitchen, you've got the whole family rolling around on the floor.

And truth to tell, Ross Petty has got pretty good over the years at whipping up an intoxicating family brew for the holidays, and making it look terribly easy.

But it's not as easy as it looks. For proof, one need look no further than this year's edition: Ross Petty Productions opened *Beauty and the Beast: The Savagely Silly Family Musical* on Thursday at the Elgin Theatre.

And it's a *bona fide* hit, thanks in no small part to an experienced team that includes director Ted Dykstra (on board for his fifth show), choreographer Tracey Flye (panto No. 9, for those counting) and even Petty himself, who has cast himself as the panto's perennial villain, as well as its very seasoned producer.

The cast, too, has some familiar names. While this is Melissa O'Neil's first foray into this strange and delightful theatrical form, her Bella — the Beauty of title — shares the stage with many performers steeped in panto tradition, including Jake Epstein, returning from *Cinderella* to the dual roles of Prince Zack and the Beast.



Throw in panto vets Eddie Glen, Jake Simons and Meghan Hoople and you've got a team.

As for the book, this may represent a first effort for co-writers Nicholas Hune-Brown and Lorna Wright, but rest assured, they find their rhythm quickly. They have come up with a script in which the obligatory similarities to any other stage musical are purely intentional, disguised though they may be by pop-culture references, local jokes and a range of pop tunes that promise something for just about every generation.

Hune-Brown and Wright spin out the story of nerdy Prince Zack (Epstein), transformed into a beastly rock star as part of a dastardly plan cooked up by Baron Barnum von Cowell (Petty in full faux frightful flight) to usurp the kingdom. The hapless Zack agrees to it in large part simply to win the affections of the beautiful Bella (O'Neil), who lives in a little cottage on the edge of the woods with her inventive Aunt Plinky (Scott Thompson, doing his best to prove that there is indeed nothing like his dame).

Beauty and the Beast: The Savagely Silly Family Musical



Elgin Theatre

STARRING

The ensemble

DIRECTOR

Ted Dykstra

The Baron's plot not only threatens the careers of his other pop creations — the adorable Buskin Beaver (Hoople in an inspired, toothy sendup of Justin Bieber) and Lisa Lennox's Lady Baa Baa — but threatens to turn Zack's sad-sack advisers (Glen and Simons) into his full-time rhythm section as well.

In short, it's everything we've come to expect in a panto — and just the teeniest bit less, for in their eagerness to please, Petty's script writers overlook one of the lessons Petty has taught his audience so well: Rough edges on homemade Christmas gifts like this simply add to their charm.

So, while Hune-Brown and Wright strike all the obligatory high and low notes with comedy — the commercials

are not to be missed, the new mayor gets roasted just like the old one and Thompson crowns it all with a bit of delightful lese-majesty — it's all a little too polished.

Worse, in a season when childhood stretches all they way into senior-citizenship and beyond (and if you don't believe me, take a good look at this audience), a tad too many of the cultural references are aimed squarely at the under-30 demographic, and some of the musical numbers go on a bit too long.

But while this delightful seasonal brew might not be the nog Grannie whipped up, it's still a great glass of Christmas-cheer that gets

you where you want to be at this time of year, surrounded by those you love, all having a good laugh.

john.coulbourn@sunmedia.ca

