

Graham Abbey co-stars in latest Christmas pantomime in Toronto

Snow White and the Magnificent Seven — new 'fractured fairy tale'

TORONTO (CP) — "He's behiiiiind you!"

They may never have set foot in a theatre before, but it takes kids all of five seconds to work out what they have to do. They are responsible for booing the villain, cheering the good guys and warning the clean-cut hero of impending danger.

Welcome to the wacky world of English pantomime where, according to custom, the leading man is a woman, the Dame is absolutely nothing like a dame and everyone — well, nearly everyone — lives happily ever after.

Thanks to the tireless work of Ross Petty, the Christmas pantomime is now firmly established as a Toronto tradition alongside such staples as the Santa parade and the 20 or more versions of Handel's Messiah.

This year's offering — Petty's 15th production of "fractured fairy tales" — is called *Snow White and the Magnificent Seven*. It opened Thursday at the Elgin Theatre and runs until Jan. 6.

The latest Petty panto doesn't quite conform to the pattern. Unlike last Christmas, when Sheila McCarthy played the title role in *Peter Pan*, our hero is a man (the dashing Graham Abbey, fresh from playing Prince Hal this summer at the Stratford Festival).

The newly brunetted Melissa Thomson is the lovely Snow White. And Petty himself will be all dolled up in drag to play Snow White's evil stepmother.

"It's my first time in drag and people ask me how my wife (prima ballerina Karen Kain) feels about this," says



Melissa Thomson is Snow White and Graham Abbey is the Prince in *Snow White and the Magnificent Seven* at the Elgin Theatre. CP Photo

Petty. "Well, she did my make-up for the photo shoot, so I guess she is in approval."

And does he like being booed all the time?

"Of course. Are you kidding?"

The hissable villain is one of the key ingredients of pantomime and he/she always enters from the left side of the stage, the "sinister" side. The forces of good, meanwhile, enter from the right side.

It's a tradition that dates back to the medieval miracle plays when the entrances to heaven and hell were located

stage right and stage left.

English pantomime grew out of the Italian commedia dell'arte, with its array of stock characters such as Harlequin and his true love Columbine, the foolish, overprotective father Pantaloon and his servant Pulchinello (who lives on today as Mr. Punch in *Punch & Judy* shows).

The famous pantomime clown Joey Grimaldi made his first appearance in 1800 and became panto's first superstar. He also pioneered the concept of cross-dressing, creating several important Dame roles.

From then onward, the favourite comedians of the day played roles such as Widow Twankey in *Aladdin* or Dame Trott in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. In the early 20th century, the undisputed star was the comedian Dan Leno, who created the Dame role in *Mother Goose*.

The Pantomime Dame has been called "a study in eccentricity" and should be a believable, even sympathetic comic creation. Among the exceptions are the Ugly Sisters in *Cinderella* who have the delicate task of being funny as well as the nasty bullies who make life miserable for Cinders.

Most pantomimes also feature animals, or to be more precise, actors dressed as animals. This year's *Snow White* carries on the tradition with a character called Howler who is half-man, half-cat, played by popular children's performer Fred Penner, who has adapted several of his songs (including, of course, *The Cat Came Back*) for the show.

Petty's interest in panto dates back to 1982 when he watched his soon-to-be wife, Karen Kain, playing the Genie of the Lamp in an otherwise all-British production of *Aladdin*.

He watched a rehearsal and "was taken aback at what I had seen, this dog's breakfast of entertainment."

But everything changed when he saw the show in the evening: "The audience was the missing catalyst and the show was suddenly bang, against the back wall."

Snow White, which has a budget of about \$1.2 million, is the sixth show Petty has mounted at the Elgin and the last two, he says, "made a respectable amount of money back. But I will never get rich doing these shows."

That doesn't stop him from caring deeply about the show.

"It would be so easy to say, 'let's grab this and slap it on the stage.' But we don't. A lot of hard work goes into these shows."