

THE CHARMING MODERNIST

Sleeping Beauty - Theatre Review

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When I was very young, I lived a life devoid of glamour. I yearned for rhinestones and lipstick and drama but lived with bowl cuts and knee socks and science fairs. In other words, I was a very average ten-year-old who wanted to be Miss Piggy.

Around Christmas of that year, though, my mother let me dress up in my Sunday best (I remember admiring my shiny new patent leather shoes) and took me downtown. I knew we were going to see a show and braced myself for the usual ballet / opera / Shakespeare that my parents usually dragged me to, calling it “culture.”

Instead, what I saw was pure magic.

Jeff Hyslop (from *Today's Special!*) sang! And tap-danced! Karen Kain, the most exquisite ballerina, pirouetted across the stage and cracked jokes, like Miss Piggy but better. Instead of sitting quietly and politely, I was told that I should boo the hilariously evil villain and cheer for the good guys as loudly as I wanted. And there were more sequins on stage than I had ever seen in my life. This was unbelievable! For the first time in my life, I was watching a show that was geared unapologetically to me.

That was *Aladdin*, one of the very first holiday pantomimes produced by **Ross Petty**. More than twenty years later, the annual spectacular is still thrilling kids with its over-the-top, kid-friendly fairy-tale extravaganzas. The celebrity guests stars are still there and the sequins are as sparkly as ever. But I now realize that what was pure anarchic hedonism to my ten-year-old self has plenty of sly wit, improvisational comedy, and topical references to appeal to my adult self, too. It was hard to know who was having more fun – the six tweenagers I sat beside, bopping

along to every musical number, or me. I think I can safely recommend this show to all ages.

The fairy tale production this year is *Sleeping Beauty*, but let me be honest with you – the story doesn't matter. It's cheerfully twisted out of shape to give the cast of thousands as many one-liners as can be squeezed into a two-hour show. The King and Queen of Torontonia (**Laurie Murdoch** and **Lisa Horner**, who, for me, shall forever be the “Start the car!” lady from a certain Ikea commercial) invite four fairies to gift their newborn Princess Rose with harmony and light. But alas, they forgot to invite the wicked Malignicent. Rose is cursed to prick her finger on a needle and fall into an enchanted sleep, but thankfully for the audience, we get follow Rose on a psychedelic journey through Dreamland (complete with sentient sheep and aging hippies) instead of watching her sleep. Rose manages to find a way back to the real world by using her brains and her heart, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Of course, the story is only a frame on which to hang ridiculously opulent musical numbers and campy scenery chewing. **AJ Bridel** is utterly charming as the compassionate and thoughtful Princess Rose, and **James Daly** makes a sweet and respectful love interest (with some slick dance moves). **Paul Constable** (the Canadian Tire guy!) and **Eddie Glen** remind me of something an old professor of mine used to say; there's just something really funny about a great big guy and a tiny mouthy guy together on stage. As the good fairy Sparklebun (my inner ten-year-old finds that name incredibly hilarious) and evil minion Egg, they make quite the dynamic duo. The dance ensemble are fantastic - colourful, energetic, and dressed in some very snazzy Chucks – but the show belongs to its villain. **Hilary Farr** (from *Love It or List It*) prowls and sneers and slinks across the stage, dripping with sparkles. She's part evil 80s soap opera schemer and part wannabe Darth Vader, and she is fantastic. With a commanding stage presence and a rich, purry, poshly-accented voice, Farr is the villain everyone loves to hate. Go ahead and boo – it's incredibly satisfying.

If you couldn't tell, I enjoyed myself immensely at *Sleeping Beauty*. I wondered, though, if I was letting my own nostalgia colour my experience too much. Was it the ten-year-old drama queen driving this review, or was it the older and wiser theatre reviewer? I turned to my partner, C., who accompanied me to this performance. I knew he'd be an impartial observer – he'd never seen a Ross Petty panto before.

“C.,” I planned to say, “are you objectively enjoying this show? Have I remembered it as being better than it is?”

Turns out I never needed to ask at all. C. couldn't answer me. He was laughing too hard, tears of mirth rolling down his face. If you want an escape from the realities of adulthood, take a trip to Dreamland. I think you'll find it most rewarding.