

THEATRE



Paula Wilson

Paula Brancati soars as Cinderella.

Cinderella and her fabulous fellas

'Sillylicious' panto is entertaining retelling of classic fairy tale



ROBERT CUSHMAN

As Busby Berkeley probably used to say, and as his songwriters certainly wrote:

"What do you go for.

Go see a show for.

Tell the truth, you go to see those beautiful Dames."

If the show is a pantomime, or as Ross Petty prefers to call it, a "sillylicious family musical," you certainly do. Petty's Cinderella, upping the traditional panto average, offers no less than three Dames, all of them beautiful in their own eyes if nobody else's. There's Petty himself, in full barrel-voiced-and-chested command, as Bertha Von Botox, Cinderella's scheming and tyrannical mother-in-law. In this show, which is unusually well-motivated for the genre, we actually see her trap Baron Hardup into marriage. (Usually it's a done deal before the curtain rises.) She does it partly through flower power -- she has an aphrodisiac purple petunia -- and partly through appealing to the Baron's thespian instincts. He's an ex-actor who puts on a funny accent when his passions are aroused. She herself boasts, or boasts of, a theatrical resume. She was in *The Sound of Music* (as an Alp) and was going to be at Stratford "until Des McAnuff found out I was Canadian," which is unfair but funny. Petty has mastered the art, which has eluded him in some previous years, of being convincingly female and convincingly villainous at the same time, at least as conviction goes in these parts. He takes no prisoners and despises those who do.

Then there are his daughters, the traditional Ugly Sisters: Dan Chameroy's Plumbum, who's mad about men, and Adam Brazier's Carnivia, who's mad about food but wouldn't mind a nibble at a Prince. Individually, each is a hoot; together, they're a pair -- make that a quartet -- of hooters, even if the script has them ringing a few too many changes on the same basic jokes. Still, the fact that it individualizes them at all is an accomplishment for the annals. This is the best script a Petty show has ever had: the work of a real writer, Chris Earle, who may be doing his best work. It has construction and development and all those other things that building firms ring you up with quotes for -- also some things they don't offer,

such as jokes. (Did you know Michaelle Jean was Ukrainian? She brought perogies to Parliament. Don't worry, there's more where that came from.) There is some revisionism. Paula Brancati must be the least downtrodden Cinders on record; one of those post-feminist (or at least post-Beauty and the Beast, Disney version) heroines, she does few chores and is a champ at arm-wrestling, a talent that, typical of this show's foresight, comes in handy at the denouement. She and her dad face their personal recession by running a cafe whose menu seems to consist entirely of pumpkins, and you should be able to see where that's headed. To help it along there's Patty Sullivan's delightfully child-friendly Fairy Forgetful, who gets her instructions from a Fairy Godfather attached to some supernatural Cosa Nostra.

Meanwhile, there's the prince (Jake Epstein), who'd rather be a pop star, the Artist Formerly Known as The Prince, though he still seems in line to be King as, once love-struck, he converses entirely in quotes from Elvis songs. Once upon a time he would have been played by a woman, but the convention of Principal Boy seems to have given way to Principal Boy's Bodyguard. Playing the character formerly known as Dandini, but billed here as Tony and Tina, Karen LeBlanc sheds male attire and dark glasses to reveal great legs and a river-deep mountain-high singing voice. She also provides a new love interest for Buttons (the indispensable Eddie Glen), reprieved from his usual fate of standing around all gallant and heartbroken while the girl of his dreams makes off with the boy of hers. The roster of named characters is completed by Laurie Murdoch, doubling as baron and king and especially fine as the latter who has an inspired line in malapropisms.

The script's economy is matched by that of Ted Dykstra's direction. To be sure, there are true and false economies: I don't take kindly to a transformation scene that consists of a blackout followed by the heroine's re-entry in a change of clothes. Still, when the carriage appears, it is drawn by real horses. More important, everything moves fast and sure. We're spared the traditional singalong sequence; instead, the statutory inveigling of kids from the audience is made part of the plot. They are judges (extraordinarily confident ones at my visit; either they'd been well-briefed or they've learned from TV) at the So You Think You Can Prance contest that's a vital part of the ball. The prancing, whether real or wannabe, is of a high standard; for once, a panto has choreography (by Tracey Flye) that deserves the name. There are also great witty costumes by Erika Connor. And a moral: Never take directions from a barber-shop quartet. (I don't have time to explain.)

- Cinderella continues at the Elgin Theatre until Jan. 4. Call 416-872-5555 for more information. www.rosspetty.com

Cinderella's choreography probably could

stand on its own merits.

By David White