

Panto always pays off. Petty's Wizard of Oz..... Christmas fun!

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First posted: Friday, December 02, 2011 03:28 PM EST | Updated: Friday, December 02, 2011 03:31 PM EST

Ross Petty as the wisecracking Wicked Witch.

The Wizard of Oz: The Wickedly Wacky Family Musical

4.0 stars

Starring: The ensemble

Directed by: Tracey Flye

Location: Elgin Theatre

TORONTO - Perhaps the true magic of Christmas can be found in the fact that, while the holiday rarely plays out according to the script one creates, you still find yourself having a wonderful time in the midst of the ruins.

And that's what makes Ross Petty's annual stage panto the perfect Christmas entertainment, for while it only occasionally proves to be as good as you expect it to be, year after year it still proves to be one of the best ways to celebrate the holiday in Toronto.

And happily, this year is no different.

So, while Ross Petty Productions' *The Wizard of Oz: The Wickedly Wacky Family Musical* (which opened Thursday at the Elgin, where it runs through Jan. 6) owes just about as much to L. Frank Baum's iconic story book as Rob Ford owes to Arts Vote, it still adds up to a pretty, Petty fine time, despite itself.

Adapted — and boy, is that term used loosely here — by Lorna Wright and Nicholas Hune-Brown, it starts on a promising, if clunky, note as a host of magical beings convene in coven to task the good witch Splenda (Jessica Holmes) with the protection of a young girl named Dorothy Gale (a feisty Elicia MacKenzie). Dorothy is subsequently

discovered in downtown Toronto, imaginatively created by set designer David Boechler, in concert with video designers Beth Kates and Ben Chaisson.

Undeterred, Splenda whisks her new ward to a magical land named Oz, short for Australia — get it?

Lame, but at least it allows the chorus to showcase accents almost as egregious as the one employed by Splenda, who sounds like she was spawned in a night of passion shared by Elmer Fudd and Barbara Walters.

It all serves to get things running at a fair clip, although, this being panto, still far from smoothly — but then the wheels fall off and the whole story gets shanghaied by a group of miners who dig a hole so deep, the show could be trapped in Chile.

Then there's Petty himself, as a wisecracking Wicked Witch, either passing the villainous panto torch to — or having it dragged from his long green fingers by — a bewigged and upstaging Dan Chamero, reprising his Plumbum role for the third time.

Even Eddie Glen has fun as the Wizard, aiming at Ozzy Osbourne but unleashing his inner Wynona Judd instead.

On the charm side, there are the sponsor ads, which still represent some of the best commercial values in town, and some fine choreography from Marc Kimelman to boot.

And, from a performance perspective, it's tough to imagine a more endearing cowardly lion than Steve Ross', perfectly paired with Kyle Blair's loose-limbed scarecrow, Teamed with Yvan Pedneault, cast more for his belt than his bonhomie as the Tin Man, they create a winning trio with which Flye should have conjured more.

It's still a Petty panto, done the way we've come to love them, and while it is certain to improve in the playing, it still teaches us yet again that Christmas doesn't have to be perfect — it just has to be Christmas.