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Ross Petty's Sleeping Beauty keeps all ages entertained

Hilary Farr commits fully, AJ Bridel is a powerhouse and James Daly is convincing romantic lead in annual panto.



Hilary Farr's professional acting and dancing chops are in fine display in a fully committed performance as villain Malignicent in Ross Petty's Sleeping Beauty. (RACHEAL MCCAIG)

Ross Petty's Sleeping Beauty

By Jeremy Diamond, directed by Tracey Flye. Until Jan. 7 at the Elgin Theatre, 189 Yonge St. rosspetty.com or 1-855-599-9090

He's not gone away, you know. The big news about this year's Ross Petty holiday musical was that, for the first time in its 21-year history, its producer would not appear in the show, opting to conserve his energies for offstage activities including fundraising.

But Petty still fits himself into the action: a short video of him is screened and the actors in Sleeping Beauty interact with the video as if Petty were performing live.

As a latecomer to the Petty party (this is the first of his shows I've seen), I appreciated this taste of his confident, comic performance style and the shameless showmanship of the gesture.

This knowing tone is delivered in Sleeping Beauty through topical one-liners by sidekick character Egg (played by 14-year Petty veteran Eddie Glen) and the camp-tastic presence of plus-sized cross-dressing good fairy SparkleBum (debut performer Paul Constable).

It's also present in how ready the show is to be silly in updating the classic fairy tale: to keep Princess Rose (the adorable AJ Bridel) away from anything that might prick her finger, her parents (Lisa Horner and Laurie Murdoch) force her to wear a big inflatable bubble around her upper body.

While the four children who came with me (ranging in age from 10 to 3) liked the Princess, they reserved their greatest kudos for "the evil lady": Hilary Farr, replacing Petty in the villain role.

Farr's professional acting and dancing chops are in fine display in a fully committed performance. Farr works the audience skillfully and we booed her with gusto (as is the panto custom).

Across the board, the triple threat talent is high: James Daly, a revelation this summer as the adolescent anti-hero in the Shaw Festival's Master Harold. . . and the Boys, is also a terrific singer and convincing romantic lead as the lovelorn lute player Luke, and his chemistry with powerhouse Bridel is winning. Horner and Murdoch are very funny as both the Queen and King and their pyjama-clad alter egos, Melatonin and Morpheus.

A key part of what makes such shows appealing are high production values and this doesn't disappoint: Michael Gianfrancesco's set, Kimberly Purtell's lighting and, in particular, Beth Kates and Ben Chaisson's projections are full of eye-popping colour and visual interest. Music director Bob Foster and his six-person band keep things lively.

For those unfamiliar with these shows, the brazen product placement might be surprising: at points, a screen drops in front of the stage and filmed ads for sponsors (including this newspaper) are shown. This is, in fact, a convention with deep roots in pantomime history: characters in Victorian pantos might have visited a gin palace, for example, to promote a distillery that was funding the show.

Bringing what may seem like outdated performance conventions into the present day is what contemporary panto is all about, and Petty and his expert creative team led by director Tracey Flye are masters at it.

This show entertained my brood of multiple ages quite thoroughly and we joined a crowd leaving the Elgin Theatre with big smiles on our faces.