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ERNIE COOMBS: Better known as Mr. Dressup, veteran children's actor in *Aladdin* at Elgin Theatre.

Mr. Dressup takes the stage

Ernie Coombs stars in holiday offering *Aladdin*

BY JENNIE PUNTER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Flying carpets, magic lamps and genies are things one associates with the story of *Aladdin*.

But study any version of *The Thousand And One Nights*, the ancient collection of Arabic tales about characters like Sinbad, Ali Baba and *Aladdin*, and you won't find a single reference to a *Tickle Trunk*.

Of course that minor detail doesn't bother the folks at Ross Petty Productions. They've cast TV's Mr. Dressup, a.k.a. Ernie Coombs, as the Emperor in their ham-it-up holiday show, *Aladdin: The Magical Family Musical*, opening Wednesday at The Elgin Theatre.

In the tradition of English pantomime, *Aladdin* follows last year's Petty production *Jack And The Beanstalk* and the previous year's *Robin Hood*, both of which presented a familiar tale in a musical theatre format. On top, there was plenty of slapstick, topical humour and, especially, opportunities for

the audience to heckle, boo and cheer.

Coombs, a man one can truly call 70-years-young, took a break from rehearsals last week to talk about his return to the live stage and reminisce about his days as the namesake host of *Mr. Dressup*, the popular CBC children's TV program that ended its 30-year run in 1996.

Having started his theatre career as a children's entertainer in the early '60s, with a Pittsburgh theatre troupe that also included Fred Rogers of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* fame, Coombs is delighted to be back on the stage in a supporting role.

"I took my daughter and two youngest grandchildren to see *Jack And The Beanstalk* last year, and we were coming out of the theatre and I said to my daughter, 'Gee I'd love to do a show like this,'" Coombs recalls.

"It's so much fun and so much like the children's theatre I used to do, having fun with the audience. So when Ross Petty (the producer, who also plays the villain, Abanazar) called me in September, I couldn't believe it. I didn't have to think twice about saying yes."

At first, Coombs thought he would be playing Widow Twankey and *Aladdin's* mother in drag, but that double role went to Shaw and Stratford veteran Barry MacGregor. "But they really wanted me to be Mr. Dressup," says Coombs, who says of his TV character, "Over the years, he's become me and I've become him."

"The Emperor turns out to be a good guy, but he has a little edge to him. Being an emperor, he likes to have people beheaded but he never really gets around to it. I also have two bodyguards, Ping and Pong, and in one scene we have some fun with idea of them acting like Casey and Finnegan."

The mention of Mr. Dressup's former pals Casey (the kid with the painted, unmoving grin) and Finnegan (the silent, smiling dog), characters created and performed by Australian pup-

peteer Judith Fitzgerald until the early '90s, raises an issue close to the heart of many Canadian 20- and 30-somethings.

Many of them, who grew up with the show in its early years, were heartbroken to discover a few years ago that Casey and Finnegan had, gulp, retired.

"We phased them out gradually, we never actually said goodbye," Coombs explains gently. "Judith wanted to retire, so Casey and Finnegan were seen on fewer days as we phased in other puppets."

"What made it seem sudden was that people... who hadn't seen the show for years would have kids and then start watching *Mr. Dressup* again and say, 'Who the heck are all these other puppets?' Everywhere I go, people ask me about it, as if it was my fault."

Coombs gets a chance to explain the disappearance of Casey and Finnegan and relate other tales from his years in children's television in a speaking gig he does occasionally, mostly at universities, called *Tales From the Tickle Trunk*.

"It works best at campus pubs," says Coombs. "One university in Alberta advertised the event with the slogan: 'You grew up with him, now have a beer with him.'"

He may have retired from the daily grind of taping TV shows and touring a live production, but with *Mr. Dressup* still in reruns on CBC and, this season, on Showcase, Coombs is sure to encounter fans young and old whenever he takes to the stage.

"The great thing about performing in *Aladdin*, and stage work in general, is that you have the instant gratification, a chance to interact with the audience."

"I can't tell you how many times someone has come up to me after a stage show with an old snapshot and said, 'My mom took this picture of me at your show 20 years ago and now here's my little child, so can we get another picture?' So it feels like things have come full circle."