

THEATRE REVIEW

Shtick-filled Aladdin a winning family show

BY STEVEN MAZEY

Aladdin, our skateboard-loving hero, makes a memorable entrance in one scene of Ross Petty's *Aladdin: The Magical Family Musical*, decked out in a fur-trimmed red cape and a sparkly matching turban encrusted with jewels.

"Who are you supposed to be, Toller Cranston?," quips one character.

This should give you an idea of the kind of humour to expect in this breezy, likable family show, which opened at the National Arts Centre Tuesday and continues through Sunday.

An updated, fizzy take on an English-style panto, it offers a nasty villain, broad jokes and generally impressive singing and dancing. There's even an audience sing-along version of the Barenaked Ladies' *If I Had a Million Dollars*.

Too many family-oriented shows are over-sweet and cutesy, and they can be difficult to sit through for adults.

Tuesday's show had the children in the audience squealing, laughing and booing the show's villain (played by Petty), but it also kept the parents laughing, with a steady stream of jokes meant for them.

Not all of the jokes are brilliant, but the performers seem to welcome the groans as well as the laughs, and they ad-lib appropriately. It's all played in a hammy, over-the-top pitch that is part of the show's charm.

In one scene, Aladdin's salty-tongued mom likes what she sees when she lays eyes on the Genie (played by former wrestler Bret "Hitman" Hart), his thick arms on impressive display in his sleeveless vest.

"Who's this little beef biscuit?" asks mom, whose gravelly voice and hint of five o'clock shadow could have something to do with the fact that she's played by an actor named Derek McGrath. McGrath's wig is a shade of orange not seen since Lucille Ball was in her prime, and he's given the character a hint of Newfie accent and some Mary Walsh attitude.

Mom also sings up a storm, and in one scene launches into a memorable rendition, complete with choreography, of Shania Twain's *Any Man of Mine*. Backup is provided by her two male sidekicks, Weenie and Beans (Jonathan Ellul and Mark Allan).

And then there's Petty, who makes his villain a lot of fun.

When he gets into an insult match with Aladdin, calling the young man a "poor man's Justin Timberlake," Aladdin responds in kind, calling him "you husband of a ballerina." (Petty is married to Karen Kain).

Give credit to writer David Finley and director Ted Dykstra for coming up with a zingy show and a cast of talented performers who can sing, dance and tell jokes with snappy timing.

At 2½ hours (with intermission), *Aladdin* might be a little long for toddlers, but Tuesday's show seemed to hold the youngsters' attention, and there was little of the squirming and chattering that can break out at children's shows.

It helps that children are encouraged to take part, and there are a few scenes in which young audience members are brought onto the stage to be part of the action.

Along with Ross and McGrath, the stand-out performers include Jennifer Dale as a librarian who narrates the show and transforms into a slinkily dressed, wisecracking Sheherazade; Jamie McKnight as the none-too-bright Aladdin, Rhoslynn Bugay as a giggly Princess Jacuzzi and Kyle Dadd, who as Sultan Redundo, channels Jim (Gilligan's Island) Bachus.

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McKnight and Bugay also have particularly strong singing voices.

Hart doesn't have a lot of lines, but he's fine with what he's been given, he looks the part, and his presence in the show creates an opportunity for a wrestling-related gag in the second act.

There is also good work by the singing and dancing ensemble and the small band under director Rick Fox. Choreographer Tracey Flye has come up with some brief but zippy dance scenes. Costume designer Erika Connor has created bright, glittery costumes that show a sense of humour.

Petty's annual musicals have become a popular tradition in Toronto, but he told the crowd at the curtain call Tuesday that this was the first visit of one of his shows to Ottawa since 1989. Judging from the reaction of the audience, Petty and friends would be welcome back every year.

Aladdin continues at the NAC through Dec. 31. Tickets and times: 613-755-1111.