

Magic in Petty's panto lamp

After all these years, Ross Petty seems to have come up with a formula that shakes the dust of Britain from the roots of

his annual Christmas panto and puts them down in the solid soil of muddy York.

Music from the Barenaked Ladies; an appearance by Bret "Hitman" Hart; a boffo performance from Jennifer Dale, who with sister Cynthia surely represents Canada's first pair of designer genes; a dame with a Newfie accent and a pair of assistants that could out "eh?" Bob and

Doug McKenzie; even a couple of really bad jokes about Hamilton: Petty's *Aladdin — The Magical Family Musical* couldn't be more Canadian if the entire cast were to suddenly grow leaves and start sweating maple syrup.

Aladdin opened its pre-Christmas Toronto run last night at the Elgin Theatre, hot on the heels of its swing through Western Canada. It will run here through Christmas Eve, before heading to Ottawa for a limited post-Christmas engagement.

If the title sounds familiar, it should — and for more reason than the fact that Petty and his gang have a number of favoured fairytales in rotation through which they run amok every Christmas.

In fact, this *Aladdin* bears more than a passing resemblance to the one Petty and director Ted Dykstra staged in this self-same theatre only two years ago, because it is the one Petty and Dykstra staged in this self-same theatre only two years ago, prematurely revisited to accommodate this national tour.

And that is a good thing indeed, for in tracing the drift

of its storyline — and frankly, that's quite a drift — writer David Finley and Dykstra have managed to coin a classic Christmas panto that pushes all the right buttons and rings all the right bells.

It starts simply enough, in a quiet library someplace in Canada, as a buttoned-down librarian (Dale) confronts an out of work actor (Petty) who's catching a few winks in the space where she is about to spin out the classic tale of Aladdin and his magic lamp.

But no sooner does she start that tale aspinning than it gets caught up in a few bizarre and certainly unexpected tangles.

Seems that this Aladdin (played with an easy, loopy charm by Jamie McKnight) is a lonely and slightly vacuous sk8ter boy, only son of the Widow Bender (Derek McGrath), the product of the one night she shared with her late, lamented husband.

Through a series of strange coincidences, overseen by the aforementioned librarian, now transformed into a very vampy narrator, and the bad

actor, now transformed into — well, another bad actor — Aladdin meets and falls in love with a Princess (Rhoslynne Bugay), the daughter of the local sultan (played by Kyle Dadd).

Problem is, the princess has caught the eye of the Sultan's magician (Petty), who sees her as a stepping stone to the throne he covets, but in order to win her, he must get his hands on a magic lamp that only Aladdin can claim.

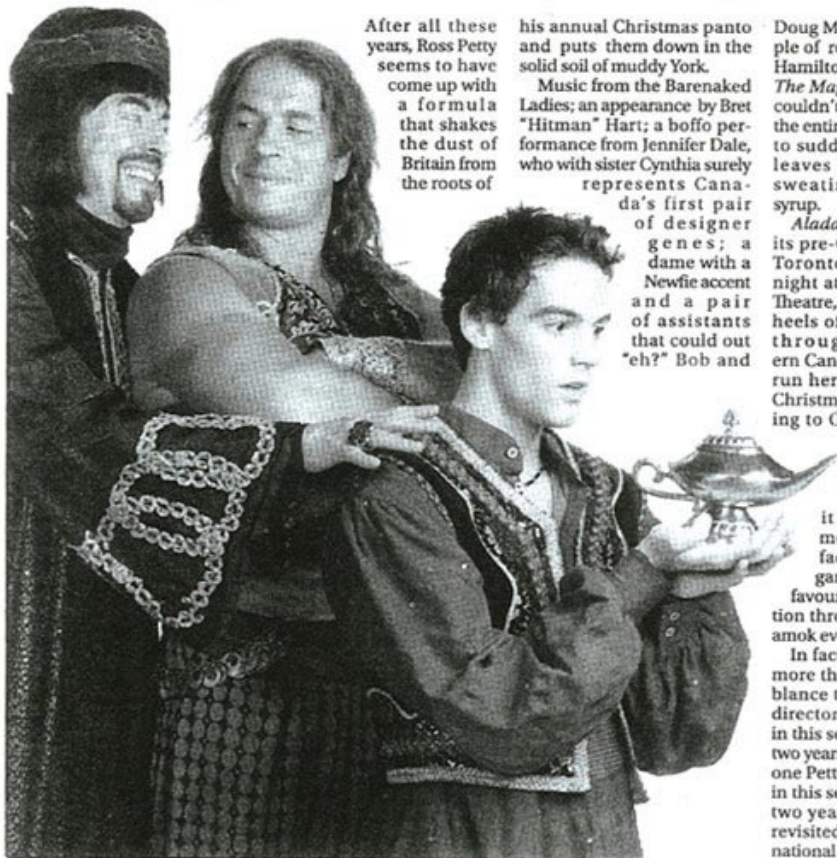
That brings a very powerful genie (Hart) into play, who manages to turn the whole thing into a theatrical smack-down from which everybody recovers in time to live happily ever after.

As mentioned, the tale has a certain lazy drift that allows for plenty of stops to savour bad jokes, whacky musical interludes choreographed by Tracey Flye, impressive special effects and the bad acting that seems to abound.

As pantos go — and this one goes pretty far indeed — *Aladdin's* a little long at two and a half hours, but it's just so demented and so delightfully Canadian that not a single kid in the audience — nor a single one of the people who loves them — is likely to mind in the least.



John Coulbourn
STAGE



Ross Petty, Bret "Hitman" Hart and Jamie McKnight in *Aladdin: The Magical Family Musical*.

★★★★½

**Aladdin:
The Magical
Family Musical**

Starring: The
ensemble

Director: Ted Dykstra