

Aladdin lets actors uncork their inner buffoons

In true Christmas panto style, kids boo the villain while adults groan — and humour wins over logic every time.

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The Globe and Mail, Toronto

There's a new stuffed bear sitting on actor Barry MacGregor's dressing table. "This is the Widow Twankey," he said, giving it an affectionate poke. The cuddly mascot is named for the role MacGregor plays in *Aladdin*, the rowdy Christmas pantomime running at Toronto's Elgin Theatre through Jan. 3. "And this here," he continued, pointing to a weathered golliwog, "was given to me by my father." A photograph of the 62-year-old actor's dad is also on the table, alongside a small army of tin soldiers and toy Indians on horses. They share space with a lacy brassiere — size 40XXX — and a bottle of acrid-smelling cologne called *Lover Boy* that MacGregor liberally rubs into his heavily rouged skin. He wouldn't go on stage without it.

"Oh, it's all superstition," scoffs MacGregor, a veteran of the Stratford and Shaw Festivals. "I also don't let anyone mention the Scottish play anywhere in my hearing, and I throw salt over the left shoulder."

Other rituals of good luck are being enacted backstage just before the curtain rises on opening night.

Tyley Ross, best known for his Dora-winning performance in *Tommy*, insists on drinking a hot cup of herbal tea and greeting every cast member before going on stage to play the lead. Former daytime-TV host Camilla Scott, as the Genie of the Ring, makes sure she does her makeup early. And Scott Watson, who plays Ping, needs a good scare during his nightly shave in order to nick himself. Avery Saltzman, who shares his dressing-room, obliges every time.

Ross Petty, producer of the \$1.2-million production who also plays the villainous Abanazar, has a lucky charm — his wife, ballerina Karen Kain. Five minutes before curtain, she slips into his dressing room, shutting the door quickly behind her. Perhaps Ross rubs her foot for success.

Whatever he does, it works. In the British tradition of the Christmas pantomime, buffoonery and slapstick humour are far more important than logical plot lines and

character development. There's always a "dame", a large man dressed up as a woman. And the crucial part is audience participation.

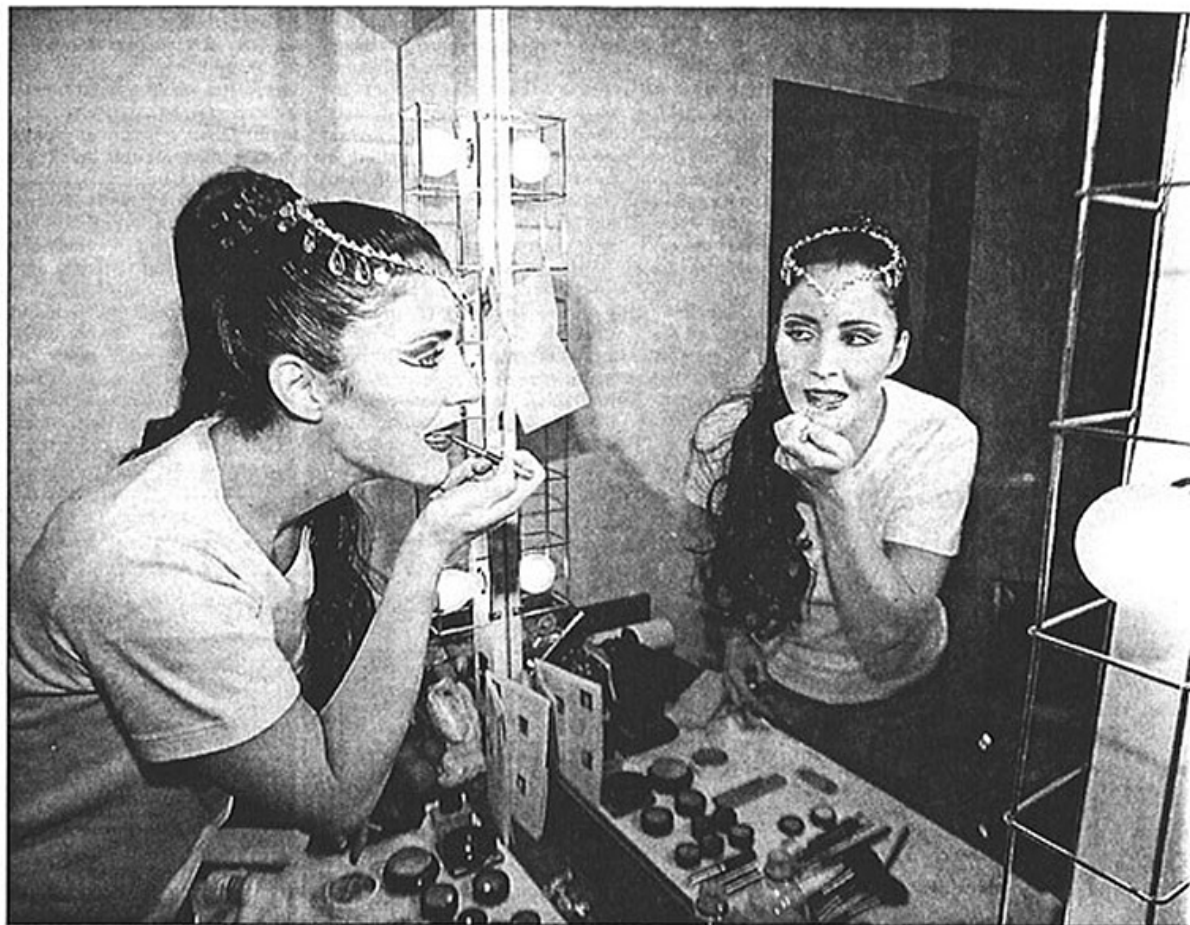
The kids understand this instinctively. They loudly boo Petty when he steps on stage, dressed head-to-toe in black. And they nearly go berserk when Ernie Coombs, a.k.a. Mr. Dressup of CBC-TV fame, walks up on stage. When his trademark trunk of costumes appears on stage behind him, a little voice in the audience cries out, "There's your tickle trunk!"

At 71, Coombs seems chipper and vigorous. "I wouldn't have missed this for the world," he said, backstage. He experienced his first pantomime a year ago, when he and his daughters and granddaughters attended *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the panto Petty presented in Toronto last year. Coombs was so impressed that when he left the theatre, he turned to his daughter and loudly said he'd love to be part of such a show.

Petty must have uncanny hearing, because months later Coombs got a call inviting him to join this year's cast. He says he's thrilled by the crowd's reaction. "You can't help but get buoyed up by the audience," he said while waiting for his cue. "It's a great experience at this time in my life because it brings me back to live stage work. I've never before worked with an ensemble, and all this energy is just great."

The play demands energy. There's a loose script, with plenty of room left for improvisation. Some of the gags — groaners nearly every one — are fresh each night. Petty tries out a few new lines on opening night that has musical director David Warrack falling over his synthesizer in the orchestra pit. Dancers and singers in the chorus also have a hard time keeping a straight face, but they let go in the wings.

Infected by the onstage mayhem, actors whack each other with the plastic billyclubs wielded by *Aladdin*'s Keystone Kops. They also fake hara-kiri with play swords. "There's a looseness to it, a real sense of fun," said dancer Monique Lund. "A lot of it isn't scripted," added fellow chorine Janet Zenik, "so sometimes you're shocked. But you can't show it."



Camilla Scott backstage (above); Tyley Ross (right) and Ross Petty (far right); hamming it up as genies, bad guys, and a boy with a lamp. EDWARD REGAN/The Globe and Mail.

But no amount of self-discipline can prevent the cast and crew from laughing at MacGregor. He plays the dame in this production — and he has waited for 51 years for the chance. "I was 11, working backstage in a theatre in Windsor, England, where my father was a leading man," he says. "That's when I first saw the dame, and I knew then that I wanted to play her."

MacGregor takes pains to explain that the role isn't about drag or transvestitism. It's a throwback to the days when women's roles were habitually played by men because women weren't allowed to perform in the theatre.

MacGregor quickly switches from historical asides to struggle into his custom-made bra, shamelessly thrusting himself about and vamping.

Later, backstage, he stands listening to the audience's laughter. "They're having a wonderful time, aren't they?" he muses. "It's very nice, this — it's spectacle. It's fun. It's why theatre is the most important entertainment industry there is right now." And then he excuses himself. He's got to do a pratfall.

Aladdin continues at Toronto's Elgin Theatre until Jan. 3. Call 416-872-5555.

