

THEATRE REVIEW

Three cheers (boos?) for a beastly panto

Ross Petty's deliriously silly holiday tradition returns for its 15th year with a lively fractured version of *Beauty and the Beast*



Beauty and the Beast: some of the most enjoyable, tuneful musical performances of recent Petty pantos.

Beauty and the Beast
Written by Lorna Wright
and Nicholas Hune-Brown
Directed by Ted Dykstra
Starring Jake Epstein, Melissa
O'Neil and Scott Thompson
At the Elgin Theatre in Toronto
★★★

REVIEWED BY
J. KELLY NESTRUCK

Three boos for producer/stage villain Ross Petty, whose Toronto twist on the British holiday pantomime tradition is now in its 15th year. (In the topsy-turvy world of Petty panto, a boo is equivalent to a cheer.) *Beauty and the Beast* is a sturdy example of his brand of family show where fairy tales are fractured, then the cracks are filled in with pop songs and minor Canadian celebrities.

As rewritten by Lorna Wright and Nicholas Hune-Brown, this year's story is almost completely snapped off from its original plot (not to mention that of the popular 1991 Disney animated film).

In this version, Prince Zak (Degrassi's Jake Epstein) is a timid wannabe rock star who makes a Faustian pact with the Baron Barnum von Cowell (Petty); the Baron will use his magical iScroll to give Zak the confidence to sing in front of crowds and ask the beautiful peasant Bella (Melissa O'Neil) out on a date, but as a side effect he'll be transformed into The Beast.

Von Cowell's evil app is actually part of a dastardly plan to seize the crown. He also has a side get-rich-quick scheme that angers the animal-loving Bella, one involving using another app to transform animals into enslaved pop stars. His two biggest successes to date are Buskin' Beaver, played by a powerful, pint-sized Meghan Hoople complete with Justin Bieber swish, buckteeth and a beaver tail, and Lady Baa Baa (Lisa Lennox), who was Bella's beloved pet lamb before she was turned into an attention-seeking, meat-dress-wearing singer.

Among those enlisted to stop Baron von Cowell are Jake Simmons's blustery Antonio and The Kids in the Hall's Scott Thompson, donning a dress to play Bella's inventor maiden aunt. When he pulls out his impersonation of the Queen or is unleashed to improvise with a group of cowering children invited up on the stage, he is downright hilarious.

According to a focus group of 12-year olds I brought with me to *Beauty and the Beast* - Stefan and Gideon - this year's show deserves three and a half stars. Both thought that the ideal age range for the show was 10 to 13, but I'd say you could move the lower age limit down a couple of years. Kids much younger than that will find the overly complicated story less accessible and may find the pacing too pokey. Indeed, the glaring omission from this Petty production is a warm, friendly fairy narrator to engage the

younger ones from the start.

Instead, *Beauty and the Beast* kicks off with a cold show-within-a-show framing device that's mostly there to get a poke or two in at *Twilight* and other vampire obsessions. (Habits are hard to break for Hune-Brown, who got this gig based on a couple of Fringe meta-musicals he wrote, notably *The Lord of the Rings: The Musical: The Musical*.) While this jukebox musical takes too long to get going, once Prince Zak has been transformed, Ted Dykstra's production is fairly smooth, silly sailing with some of the most enjoyable, tuneful musical performances of recent editions. The talented and charismatic Epstein, who has been touring for the last year in *Spring Awakening*, and O'Neil, a former Canadian Idol with natural stage presence, have strong chemistry. The musical playlist is much more up to date this time around with snappy choreography from Tracey Flye.

Beauty and the Beast runs until Jan. 2.