

# Petty as Prunella: A stage villain



GARY SMITH

I'm sitting backstage at Toronto's Elgin Theatre talking to Prunella DePraved.

For anyone who hasn't seen this year's pantomime that's Ross Petty, though right now he's definitely out of drag. The lacy Prunella knickers and hideous green gown he wears on stage are hanging limp on a wardrobe rack. And Petty's fluttery stage wig, with its dangling white kiss curls sits on a head-form in front of me.

"That's me all over," Petty laughs.

A handsome man, who has tackled demanding characters, from Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* to daytime soap darling Eddie Dorrance, Petty is ironically best known in Canada for his dastardly stage villains.

Since 1984 he has been booed roundly by a generation or two of children, who know him as a variety of evildoers, from the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham to cranky Captain Hook.

"Let's face it, the public has come to expect me in the villain's role," Petty nods fingering a Prunella brooch on the counter in front of him. "There's a certain comfort quotient. They know exactly what they'll get."

"And for me, all those boos and hisses are just as good as bravos and applause when it comes to the curtain call."

Petty loves Prunella DePraved, for instance, the dastardly character he plays in this year's pantomime production.

"This Dame is real Ethel Merman. She's out there all the way.

"I've never personally attempted to create a traditional pantomime Dame. I'm not into that. This isn't Prunella as some exotic drag queen. We always know she's a man in a dress.

"I have no intention of making fun of women. For me, Prunella is a villain in a skirt, that's all.

"Really, I don't think a lot about it. I put on the wig, I put on the gown and there she is, larger than life.

"I've always made sure my villains don't actually scare kids. There's always something of the buffoon underneath. When I roar the kids know it's just in fun."

Petty says this year's *Cinderella* is the product of a four-day think-tank in which the cast had fun with the Michael Heeneman script, long before they started rehearsals.

"People may think much of what they see here is improvised, but it's not. There's a real structure here to follow.

"Of course every so often something funny crops up and you have to go with it."

Petty's also adamant this year's *Cinderella* is far from a sweet little stereotype. "This year's show is about a female with a quest. It's not just a gooey love story. And there are little overtones about the environment, and a re-



SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Ross Petty gets a kick out of playing Prunella DePraved in his slapstick version of the family musical *Cinderella*. He's well-known for playing evil characters.

al sense *Cinderella* is a courageous person.

"But there's plenty of fun too. We try to fit in little jokes for the adults," says Petty, noting they buy the tickets.

"And we try to give the children a theatre experience that will make them love the stage, become converts for life.

"If this show brings families together for fun at Christmas that's great. And if it gives me five weeks listening to an immediate roar of approval ... or

disapproval, that's great too."

Petty wants to tour his musical all over Ontario. This year he's added Kitchener to the Toronto run. Hamilton Place didn't work out this time, but he looks forward to "maybe next year!"

*Cinderella* plays Toronto's Elgin Theatre through Dec. 30. Call 1-416-872-5555. It moves to Kitchener's Centre In The Square Jan. 2 and 3. Call 1-800-265-8977.