

HAPPINESS MEANS NEVER GROWING UP

Hooked on Peter Pan

It would be cruel to force adulthood on Ross Petty just when he's having this much fun.

The vaingloriously villainous Petty is back as cackling Captain Hook in his own production of *Peter Pan: The Family Musical that Won't Grow Up!*, running at the Elgin Theatre from Dec. 5 to Jan. 6.

It's the fifth annual holiday-season offering of one of Petty's pantomimes, drawn from a British Christmas tradition that entails the fracturing of fairy tales, ad-libbing shenanigans on-stage and drawing a good deal of noisy audience participation.

By no means is this the silent variety of stage presentation. The point after a great deal of voluble buffoonery in one of Petty's productions is to make sure the malevolent character he plays doesn't get the last word.

"I couldn't turn down playing Captain Hook," says Petty, who sat out his usual bad-guy role last year to direct instead. He also couldn't resist again enlisting TV's Mr. Dressup, Ernie Coombs, "who has been such a joy — the audience just devours this man."

Light-heartedness, thus, is the order of the day, but various aesthetic goodies are in the stocking as well. Featuring original music by Toronto's Judy and David Gershon, Petty's latest outrage against classical literature stars Canadian actor



Ross Petty and Sheila McCarthy play the leads in a grown-up Peter Pan.

Sheila McCarthy in the title part.

"I think she was born to play this role," Petty says of the red-headed gamine who starred in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* on the big screen and *Emily of New Moon* on CBC Television. "She's delighted to have a chance to do a musical."

Petty says he had McCarthy at the top of his wish list for the part, and the timing of the actor's return to Toronto after years in Stratford facilitated the arrangement.

For all the fun Petty has on-stage during his holiday uproars — villains are his specialty, although he claims the sweetest of off-stage personalities — getting the works in gear must combine grownup business with boyhood adventure.

For example, Petty explains, "I get my sets and costumes from England, and they're just up to the gills in pantos [pantomimes] at that time of year."

Accoutrements for Peter Pan were hence booked two years ago during one of those visits to England in which, he says, "I take a busman's holiday, get on the train and go to where the pantos are."

As the birthplace of this particular stage form, England puts on some pantomimes on the scale of Las Vegas spectacles, Petty reports. Yet there's nothing overseas that makes the Sears-sponsored show at the Elgin — which has drawn past audiences in excess of 43,000 people — seem lacking.

That sounds impudent from a former colony, perhaps, but why be defensive about Canada being a young country? Petty's *Peter Pan* proves once again that maturity is overrated.