

Panto makes merry with Robin Hood

Review

Robin Hood

★ ★ ★

Directed by Jim Warren. Until Jan. 5 at The Elgin Theatre, 189 Yonge St. 416-872-5555.

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You can tell what time of year it is not only by the temperature and the shop windows but also because Ross Petty and his boisterous band of thespian over-achievers are back on the stage of the Elgin Theatre with their annual Christmas pantomime. This time they have chosen to embellish and demolish is the tale of Robin Hood and his followers in Sherwood Forest, and it would be a wild understatement to say liberties have been taken with the original material.

One of the best jokes in this year's reliably manic, over-the-top edition comes right off the top, when Robin's men prance around the stage introducing themselves and preparing the audience for the dramatic entrance of their leader, played by Graham Abbey.

The audience had been warned in advance that Abbey,

having suffered a leg injury in rehearsal, would be less reckless than originally planned, but at the moment when hundreds of pumped-up eight-year-olds were waiting for him to leap into view, Abbey was nowhere a spotlight could find him.

"He's never on time," the followers confided with a shrug — just before we hear a tremendous crash. Robin Hood has landed. And if Abbey's delicate condition forces him to be more restrained than expected, several of his co-stars make up for it by being unrestrained enough to warrant arrest.

The panto form — with its unholy mix of puns, pratfalls, mugging, drag acts and very rudimentary forms of singing and dancing — is a peculiarly English, frankly lowbrow form. Ross Petty has almost single-handedly made it a Toronto tradition as well. One thing you can count on is that Petty himself will be the lewdly smiling villain whom the audience loves to hiss. This particular Sheriff of Nottingham, the man aka as the husband of Karen Kain, gets to deliver lines like: "This is worse than living with a ballerina."

Without question the most notable dramatic debut of the eve-

ning comes from Kain's frequent dance partner, Rex Harrington, suitably attired in black as an evil wizard, in contrast to a silvery Sara Topham as the Good Fairy. For those who've been watching Harrington for years without hearing him utter a word, it's a shock to hear him deliver punch lines with gusto. And Harrington gives the show its high points when he sings a bit of "Razzle Dazzle" from *Chicago* and leads a group send-up of *Riverdance*.

Brought in from the Shaw Festival to provide added gusto: Nora McLellan as a nurse with more lung power than Ethel Merman, and waggish Simon Bradbury as Pinch.

It's probably beside the point to mention it, but the proceedings are wildly uneven, and sometimes lumber on and on. Still, all the 8-year-olds seemed more than content.

My colleague Mr. Ouzounian regrets (I feel sure) he's unable to panto this year, but I breathed a sigh of relief when, near the end, someone on stage declaimed with ringing authority: "Just you wait until Richard is back on his throne. He'll deal with this treachery!"

I certainly hope so.



Dancer Rex Harrington makes a notable debut as the Wizard of Sherwood Forest, with Sara Topham as the Good Fairy.