

Entertainment

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Making merry and very silly ...

IN THE HOOD



ROBIN HOOD: The Merry Family Musical stars Graham Abbey, left, and Ross Petty. Check out the merry men, now playing at The Elgin Theatre.

Each passing year, Ross Petty seems to take silly a little more seriously — which means we don't have to.

In the beginning — well over a decade ago — Petty's annual Christmas panto was a pretty rough-hewn affair. It too often confused self-indulgent with silly in its rush to embrace the strange and wonderful British Christmas custom, the panto, which compels otherwise mature stage artists to dress funny and abuse children's stories.

Over the years, however, Petty has embraced the notion that in the world of successful pantos, it is as important for the audience to enjoy themselves as it is for the artists on stage, if not more so.

As a result, his annual holiday offering has improved every year, sometimes marginally, and sometimes — like this year's offering of *Robin Hood: The Merry Family Musical*, which opened Thursday night at the Elgin Theatre — by leaps and bounds.

Part of this year's success is credit to Petty's casting genius — and not just his own, although come to think of it, Petty has reigned as Toronto's most beloved villain about as long as Saddam Hussein has served as the Bushes' most reviled.

This year, Petty's gleefully naughty Sheriff Of Nottingham is joined once again by Stratford regular Graham Abbey, bringing just the right touch of self-deprecating swagger to the title role, despite a pre-opening injury that forces him to low-ball some of the more physical demands of the role.

Back on board as well are a few other seasoned regulars — Amy Walsh as Maid Marion, Sara Topham as the Good Fairy, and Simon Bradbury as the Iyin'-hearted Pinch.

Then, Petty throws in a few new talents and a few new twists. In the There's-Nothing-Like-A-Dame category, Nora McLellan turns in a self-medicating Nurse Pickle that is anything but a drag, while, in the Major Career Leap category, suave ballet star Rex Harrington gives the Forest Wizard more than enough razzle-dazzle to make him a panto star.

Backstage as well, Petty has brought together a rich blend of old and new, and here, too, things fire on all eight cylinders.



'Hood-winked
— JOHN COULBOURN, SUN

Robin Hood: The Merry Family Musical

Director: Jim Warren
Starring: The ensemble

As music director, veteran David Warrack produces a playlist with just enough original material to elevate it from musical plagiarism to musical pastiche. That leaves director Jim Warren — a most welcome newcomer to the genre — to impose a degree of order and a rough flow on the proceedings. Choreographer Tracey Flye rounds things off with polish, energy and welcome wit in her first foray into the form.

In an adaptation credited to Malcolm Heenman, it all comes together on the Elgin stage, transformed by designer Jean-Claude Olivier, in just the way a panto should.

That is, with maximum silliness — from bad medicine to goodwill hunting — of the kind that delights the child in everyone.

And that's some pretty serious silliness.

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Stage