

# Tales from *Robin Hood*

British Panto combines folklore, fantasy and some very bad puns

by Sarah B. Hood

Interwoven through the fabric of English theatre has always been a thread of magic and folklore. Even the works of Shakespeare use characters and settings from the fairy world. Although they are sometimes played more lightly, these magic beings did not originate as sugar-sparkled Tinkerbell types, but as the more substantial and frightening spirits of the woods and other natural forces.

Christmas in England has been traditionally a time of ghost and fairy stories, and English theatre reflects this heritage with the Pantomime (or "Panto"). On the surface it seems to be a light-hearted children's romp, but the Panto includes elements of ancient folklore along with scraps of Commedia and a smattering of other borrowed idioms.

Toronto producer Ross Petty encountered Panto for the first time in the mid-1980s, and he's never looked back. His first foray into the genre came in 1986, "a co-production with Paul Elliott at the Royal Alex, Hamilton Place and the National Arts Centre," says Petty. "He was the first person to introduce pantomime to Canada."

Until 1990 Petty co-produced a Christmas Pantomime every year, but with the recession of the early 90s he abandoned the series for a while. Then in 1996



From left: Ross Petty, Graham Abbey, and Rex Harrington.

he produced another Panto in a perfect location, the sumptuous Elgin Theatre. That show was *Robin Hood*, and since then Petty has produced an unbroken string of popular Panto at the Elgin every year.

*Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, *Snow White*, *Peter Pan*: the Panto usually start with a familiar fairy tale and then fracture it with topical jokes and puns, musical

numbers, audience participation, slapstick and at least one man dressed as a woman (the "Dame"). But at the heart there always lies a standard formula of heroes, lovers and villains; supernatural helpers and, very often, encounters in an enchanted forest.

"I had no idea that the form was out there and I thought it was a unique kind of a perfor-

mance," Petty comments. "Participatory theatre is about the most exciting thing there is, especially when you have 1,500 people yelling back at you."

This year Petty is returning to the *Robin Hood* script, which has all the standard features, including the enchanted forest. "In England they call it *Babes in the Wood*," he says. The woods are actually personified by the evil Wizard of the Woods (to be played by National Ballet star Rex Harrington) and the Good Fairy (Stratford's Sara Topham).

Successful as they are, it takes more than the wave of a magic wand to get one of these productions to the stage. Part of Petty's job is to attract sponsors to cover some of the production costs (CIBC and Ford answered the call this year). But his preferred role is that of the evil stage villain, who taunts the audience into delighted boos and hisses. "I'm the one that really gets to beat up on the audience," he says.

Petty's Panto has become a successful Christmas tradition from a producing standpoint, but, he says, "The main reason I enjoy the hell out of them is that it's a visceral pleasure to be out on that stage every night and hear them eating it up." ♦

*Robin Hood* runs from December 5 to January 5 at the Elgin Theatre. For tickets, call 416.872.5555.