

Ross Petty Productions

Snow White stumbles into reality-TV land

Canadian Idol stars will play leading roles in Petty's latest pantomime, *Snow White and The Group of Seven*

In his stage and film persona, there's often been something of the glint in the eye of a riverboat gambler with actor-producer Ross Petty. And his sevens have just come up very lucky, indeed.

While it's the 10th anniversary of Petty's pantomimes at the Elgin Theatre in Toronto, seven is not only the key number in this year's production of *Snow White and the Group of Seven* (Nov. 30 to Jan. 8) but a pivotal figure in Petty's breakthrough new deal with Clear Channel Entertainment.

Clear Channel will in late 2006 present one of Petty's most successful and frenetically fractured fairytales — *Aladdin* starring Brett (the Hitman) Hart — in seven Canadian cities. The road show tour will give Petty a new kind of leverage to attract national sponsors to one of his family-oriented shows for the Christmas season.

"Clear Channel is the largest conglomerate of live presentations in the world," says Petty, himself perhaps slightly agog at the notion of his seat-of-the-pants pandemonium launching a tour that will include Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, the National Arts Centre in

Ottawa and the Elgin in Toronto." I hope to have most of the original cast in place," adds Petty, who induced World Wrestling Federation star Hart to take on the assignment of the Genie in the show last year.

Roughly based on the English music hall traditions that also gave birth to vaudeville, Petty's pantos have come a considerable distance in the last 10 years. Last year's production of *Aladdin* garnered six Dora Award nominations, with the show's writer David Finley winning the honour. Previously written by committee, and still leaving plenty of room for ad libbing, the Petty pantos have in Finley for the first time a single author.

"We were very fortunate to have discovered David Finley last year because he had never written for the stage, only television and cartoons," remarks Petty. Finley returns for *Snow White and the Group of Seven*, as does director Ted Dykstra, co-creator of the phenomenally successful *2 Pianos, 4 Hands* and also a Dora nominee for his efforts on *Aladdin* last year.

Petty had mounted a show called *Snow White and the Magnificent*

Seven in 2001 but underlines that while the title of the story is similar, the work on the stage this season will be entirely different.

"We were bandying about all sorts of ideas about what could be going on in that cottage in the woods," says Petty, not quite inadvertently provoking all kinds of evil speculation in his listener as to what an adult entertainment from Petty might resemble. "And we decided to go with the moment."

And a mad moment it is to be, here with the seven being members of a boy band who are shooting a reality-TV series in the dwarfs' cottage (the dwarfs are away because they're working in the forthcoming Mirvish stage presentation of *Lord of the Rings*).

Reality TV is actually providing some significant part of the casting for Petty with four leading contestants from Canadian Idol in key roles. Idol champ Ryan Malcolm is joined by his runner up Gary Beals and Billy Klippert as several of the singing boys, while Elena Justo plays Snow White.

"She is an Asian young woman of 19 and I'm delighted to be able to cast a non-white in the role of Snow



Canadian Idols, from left: Ryan Malcolm (winner in 2003), Elena Justo, Billy Klippert and Gary Beals.

White," comments Ross.

Starring roles in the piece go to comic actor Sean Cullen, latterly of the Mirvish Toronto mounting of *The Producers*, and Alan Frew, lead singer of Glass Tiger. Cullen will be the man in the mirror of the wicked

stepmother and Frew is patriarch of the Group of Seven.

"As with Brett Hart last year, we have the luxury of writing for our performers," notes Petty, who continues his nearly unbroken record of villainy in his own works by again essaying

that horrid stepmother.

Now that he's also writing contracts with Clear Channel, Petty gets a chance to cast his diabolical spell over the rest of the country. At this point, the implications for Canadian unity are impossible to gauge.