

A&E

Two queens, dressed for the holidays



Martin Knelman

Over the festive season Toronto was lucky to have not one but two entertainingly vain queens in town showing off in public on a regular basis. One of them, Catherine the Great — surely among the most self-glorifying art collectors in history — is leaving town in triumph after crowds lined up yesterday on the final day her treasures were on display at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

But there is still another flamboyantly regal narcissist holding court through Sunday — the villainous Queen Celine Poutine, as hilariously played by Ross Petty, sashaying his way across the Elgin Theatre's stage in this year's edition of his annual pantomime production, *Snow White and the Group of Seven*.

And next year, when he remounts his 2004 show *Aladdin*, starring wrestling celeb Brett "Hitman" Hart as the Genie of the Lamp, Petty will be getting his panto together and taking it on the road — with a cross-Canada tour that includes runs in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina and Ottawa as well as Toronto.

"One of these years it will be time for me to turn in my dress," Petty sighed after yesterday's matinee. But he coyly refuses to say just when his farewell appearance will take place.

According to Petty, his wild take on *Snow White* will have sold close to 50,000 tickets by the time it closes, with a box-office take close to \$1.5 million. But, he adds, the show cost \$1.7 million to produce, and there were no government subsidies.

"You can't hope to be a rich person at the end of a six-week," says Petty. "But with the help of our corporate sponsors, what we try to do is break even."

Next year, with the tour of *Aladdin* (the biggest hit in Petty's 10 years of panto) in partnership with Clear Channel Canada's impresario Ronald Andrew, Petty could do better than that.

The Toronto run will be shorter because of the tour, and that's just as well, since it will have to compete for audiences not only with *The Nutcracker* in its new home at the Four Seasons Centre but also with the Rockettes in the Radio City Music Hall show at the Hummingbird Centre, and Soulpepper's *A Christmas Carol* at its new home in the Distillery District.

In its final appearance at the Hummingbird, *The Nutcracker* sold 53,000 tickets over 19 performances for a box-office total of \$2.4 million. So between them, Petty and his wife, Karen Kain, artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada, appear to own Toronto's family Christmas audience — at least until the Rockettes cross the border.



Ross Petty, left, portrays evil stepmother Queen Celine Poutine in his seasonal pantomime.