

Globe Review

THEATRE ▯ REVIEW

Petty's panto is so bad, it's good

CINDERELLA – THE SILLYLYCIOUS FAMILY MUSICAL

Adapted by Chris Earle

Directed by Ted Dykstra

Starring Paula Brancati, Jake Epstein, Ross Petty
At the Elgin Theatre in Toronto

★★★½

BY J. KELLY NESTRUCK

In the upside-down, inside-out world of Ross Petty's fractured fairy tales, boeing is a sign that you're enjoying yourself. The louder you hiss at Petty's evil pantomime dame – this year, he is Cinderella's faggy stepmother Bertha von Botox – the more you encourage her to ham it up. Essentially, the critic is disarmed; any shots I could fire would be blanks.

So, best to just go along with it. A sugary cereal comprised of camp, corn and stock characters borrowed from British panto and doused in North American pop culture, Petty's family musicals have earned their place as a Toronto holiday tradition over the past 15 years. This year, an above-the-odds vintage penned by Chris Earle,

contains all the usual ingredients.

Television stars: Paula Brancati, from *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, is a bland but sympathetic Cinderella, while Jake Epstein, also from *Degrassi*, shows off genuine comedy and guitar-playing chops as the shy Prince, who dresses like the rock star of the same name. Ross Petty, host of the preschool morning show *Kids' CBC*, transfers her non-threatening persona to Forgetful the Fairy Godmother.

Men in drag: In addition to the baritone beauty Petty, Adam Brancier and Dan Chameroy are sizzlerly sidesplitting as the over-the-top stepisters Carniva and Plumbum, who shop at "La Senza big and tall." Their *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* duet, dressed in eighties-inspired fluorescent



green and pink monstrosities designed by evil genius Erika Connor, is a high lowlight.

Pop hits: These are seemingly chosen at random, then shoehorned into the show. This year's songs include

George Michael's *Faith*, Bryan Adams's *I Do It for You*, Whitney Houston's *One Moment in Time* and Barrett Strong's much-covered Motown hit, *Money (That's What I Want)*.

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Dan Chameroy, left, and Adam Brancier are sidesplitting as the over-the-top evil stepisters.

PAULA WILSON

A sugary cereal of camp and corn

» The best voice belongs to Karen LeBlanc, who plays a female paparazzo following the Prince undercover as a male bodyguard; s/he falls for Eddie Glen's skeptical Buttons ("I'm as open-minded as the next stock character...") and woos him with rousing soul numbers by Isaac Hayes and Tina Turner.

Pop-culture references: The most ingenious incorporation involved turning the Prince's ball into an episode of *So You Think You Can Dance*, which featured a trio of pint-sized, scene-stealing guest judges plucked from the audience and allowed the ensemble to strut their stuff in Tracey Flye-choreographed mambo and jive numbers.

The worst topical reference – which in this topsy-turvy world is a compliment – was Petty's ridiculous joke about Michaëlle Jean handing out "prorogues," every Ukrainian governor-general's favourite snack, in the lobby.

Part of the charm of this show is how cheerfully it shows no regard for how dated or overused the pop-culture ephemera it references is.

Having the characters cheer "Cinderella-ella-ella-eh-eh-eh," a reference to Rihanna's 2007 hit *Umbrella*, is one thing, but



Jake Epstein and Paula Brancati: British panto doused in North American pop culture. PAULA WILSON

I thought people stopped using Arnold Schwarzenegger's "I'll be back" catchphrase as a punchline before the first Gulf war started.

Petty's panto is a love-it or hate-it thing. I was hoping to get my hackles up about the

shameless product placement, but in truth the fake advertisements featuring the play's characters were one of the satirical highlights of the show. And I do wonder if a certain pseudo-patriotic coffee chain's brand is really bolstered by the

sight of Plumbum eating doughnut holes out of a purse that doubles as a feedbag?

The only thing I found genuinely distasteful were the constant references to the weight of the stepisters. Granted, with a love for pizza that would rival the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (perhaps the only cultural phenomenon not to be referenced in this show), their obesity is not a metabolism issue. Still, these jokes were possibly harmful and definitely unfunny.

While the second act was perfectly paced by director Ted Dykstra, the first felt too long with too many songs. And yet, at intermission, a straw poll of little girls eating cookies in the lobby gave the show to that point an average rating of four stars. (I fear their critical faculties were compromised by the appearance of two actual, live ponies at the conclusion of act one.) My friend Gideon, who is 10 and liked the political jokes, felt the play deserved only a 3½ stars, which he later rounded down to 3½. Much as I hate to break with The Globe and Mail Christmas tradition of giving Petty's panto two stars, that seems about right. Boo! Hiss! » *Cinderella continues until Jan. 4; www.ticketmaster.ca or 416-872-5555.*