

## Going for woke pays off in *The Wizard of Oz*, Ross Petty's latest panto

By **CARLY MAGA** Theatre Critic  
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### The Wizard of Oz



Michael De Rose as Sugarbum, Camille Eanga-Selenge as Dorothy, Matt Nethersole as Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, Ross Petty's latest panto now at the Elgin Theatre. (RACHEAL MCCAIG PHOTOGRAPHY.COM / RACHEAL MCCAIG PHOTO)

Written by Matt Murray. Directed by Tracey Flye. Until January 5 at the Elgin Theatre, 189 Yonge Street. [RossPetty.com](http://RossPetty.com) or 1-855-599-9090.

Novelist L. Frank Baum taught us a long time ago that “There’s no place like home.” In a timely twist in this year’s Ross Petty panto of *The Wizard of Oz*, we learn that there’s no place like Earth — but it’ll take a lot more than clicking our heels to save it.

In a fusion of the issues that are top of mind at the end of 2018 — global warming, untrustworthy politicians, and millennial job precarity, oh my! — writer Matt Murray and director Tracey Flye have created what’s likely the most progressive

production to be seen on the Elgin Theatre stage in its 23-year history. After co-writing last year’s spoof of *A Christmas Carol* with Jeremy Diamond, Murray’s first solo script brings a freshness to the panto routine that Flye has become so skilled at recreating. It’s the structure that generations have come to love — which takes a classic story, spoofs it with local jokes, innuendo, drag and high-energy dance numbers, peppered with contemporary pop songs — with a moral undercurrent that adults and children alike need to hear in this particular moment.

The Ross Petty version of *The Wizard of Oz* begins in Toronto's own Oz (Ossington Avenue, naturally), teasingly at a summer street festival — the magnetic chorus of Darren Burkett, Sierra Holder, Julia Juhas, Judy Kovacs, Kevin McLachlan, Jennifer Mote, Matthew Pinkerton and Conor Scully leap and sing in jealousy-inducing bright summerwear as the audience loses its chill from outside.

Soon, however, familiar sentiments emerge from the cheer — rent is up, Dorothy (Camille Eanga-Selenge, returning to Canada after building her musical theatre career in the United States and Australia) is a business-school grad temping as a dog walker until she finds a full-time job in a tough market, business is down for local farmer Mike (Matt Nethersole), mechanic Dale (Eric Craig) and “beard artist” Sam (Daniel Williston), and extreme temperatures have everyone sweltering. Millennial nemesis Miss Gulch (Sara-Jeanne Hosie) is the embodiment of capitalism at its worst — making money off the worsening environment, extorting her tenants for rent, bribing her powerful friends and even ruining bike-riding. A surprise tornado (thanks, global warming) sends the team into the land of Oz (with gorgeous set and costume design by Cory Sincennes and projection by Cameron Davis, seemingly drawing inspiration from references like *The Lorax*, troll dolls, *The Babadook* and *The Incredibles'* Edna Mode), which is actually directly responsible for monitoring the air on Earth.

With the help of her new Ruby High Tops, Dorothy and her client Toto (played by Eanga-Selenge's real-life pup, Olive) have to stop the wicked witch Sulphura (Hosie) and her henchman Randy (Panto favourite Eddie Glen, the only familiar face in a cast of fresh talent, showing off his ease with the comic material and audience interaction) from permanently polluting our planet with smog. Along the way Dorothy finds that her internal strength, business acumen and political smarts make her a worthy opponent to oppressive forces. And the fact that she's also a young Black woman adds a whole new layer of meaning to the story, especially while politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley and Ilhan Omar are kick-starting a new period of progressiveness in the U.S., backed by an unprecedented level of youth involvement in politics.

What really shines when we go over the rainbow is the show's most outlandish characters, like Hosie and Glen as Sulphura and Randy, an evil duo that benefits from a wicked chemistry and a love-hate dynamic. Michael De Rose, meanwhile, had a large bustier to fill in the absence of Dan Chameroy's cross-dressing fairy Plumbum, who has recurred in several Petty pantos (Chameroy closed the Stratford Festival's production of *The Rocky Horror Show* only last weekend). De Rose's Sugarbum — a brighter, younger, punkier but equally bawdy version — won the audience over with a recurring blue joke about the missing body parts of her fellow travellers that keeps the adults giggling too. There's an innocent sweetness that De Rose gives Sugarbum's extra-sugary goodness; in a type of role that can sometimes veer into pure hijinks, that fits in well with the gang — she's a teammate not a troublemaker.

Right now, it's easy to feel like throwing up your arms and saying, “That's it, I'm moving somewhere over the rainbow.” But in its own kitschy, cheeky way, the Ross Petty panto shows that running away won't solve any problems; it's more important to stay and fight back. It's a hefty message, but with the show's humour, design and relentlessly upbeat music, it helps the medicine go down (sorry, wrong panto).

Carly Maga is a Toronto-based theatre critic and a freelance contributor for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: [@RadioMaga](https://twitter.com/RadioMaga)

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