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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Boys (and girls) in the hood

**An old-fashioned
pantomime gets
a new-fangled
TV treatment**



Campy and energetic, 'Robin Hood' brings a Christmas theatrical tradition to the TV screen

Panto loons

It's campy. It's gaudy. It's silly. And, for many years, the pantomime has been a cherished Christmas tradition around theatre circles in Britain. Geared to the young, and young-at-heart, a Christmas "panto" is usually based on some well-known nursery rhyme or fairy tale. But the similarity doesn't last long.

A panto often takes plenty of liberties with the storyline as it belches out a raucous array of playful songs, giddy satire and corny comedy. Audiences are encouraged to get in on the act, too. They boo and hiss as the villain concocts a dastardly scheme. They clap and cheer for the hero, too. It's all part of a pantomime's loonie holiday fun.

Actor/writer/producer Ross Petty knows how much fun a panto can be. He has been involved with them since 1983, when he and his wife, ballerina Karen Kain, headlined a production of *Dick Whittington And His Cat*. "It was quite remarkable," Petty says now. "In all the years of theatre that I have done, I've never experienced that kind of electricity on stage."

It soon prompted Petty to become involved in pantomimes as a writer and producer, first on stage and then with such TV productions as *The Cinderella Gang* in 1986 and *The Magic Of Aladdin* in 1988. But the recession and corporate cutbacks during the early 1990s forced Petty's pantos into hiatus until last year, when he put together a production of *Robin Hood* at Toronto's Elgin Theatre. At the same time, he cut a TV deal to go with it. The result: *Robin Hood: A Merry Family Musical*, a two-hour special which CTV is unwrapping as a Christmas Day present.

Robin Hood casts Petty as the naughty Sheriff of Nottingham,



Kain and Petty: a pleasant Christmas diversion

who conspires to bilk the lovely Maid Marion (June Crowley) out of her inheritance.

Kain headlines the show as the Spirit of the Forest, who lends a helping hand and magical spell, wherever she can, to Robin Hood (Dan R. Chameroy) and his band of merry men. Frank Augustyn brings more stellar clout to the cast as Will Scarlet, while Simon Bradbury adds a novel twist as Pinch, the Sheriff's dimwitted sidekick. Rounding out the core cast is David Walden's amusing turn as Nurse Tickle.

Shot on a shoestring budget (\$500,000), *Robin Hood: A Merry Family Musical* doesn't boast much in the way of special effects or overly imaginative camera work. Nor does its simplistic staging waste resources on elaborate sets. The intent here is to capture a straightforward rendering of the theatrical experience that accompanies a typical pantomime.

"I think that's what makes it work for television," says Petty, who is now working on a rendition of *Jack And The Beanstalk* in Toronto. "We make no mistake in trying to fool the audience at home that we're in a studio somewhere. I think it's important for them to know we're in a live theatre."

In fact, it's the campy interplay between actor and audience that often gives *Robin Hood: A Merry Family Musical* its energy boost. "That's pathetic!" a disgusted Sheriff of Nottingham bellows at the audience's initial jeers when he makes his first appearance. "I've heard more boos for the Three Tenors!"

Such merriment is bolstered by an array of playful songs, energetic production numbers, and a graceful balletic pas-de-deux featuring Kain and Augustyn. In all, it makes for a pleasant Christmas diversion.

In fact, Petty sees *Robin Hood: A Merry Family Musical* as his own special Christmas present to the nation, a labor of love which he hopes will continue for years to come.

"There's just no comparison when you're standing on a stage," he says of the panto. "When those kids boo the Sheriff of Nottingham...I just get chills up my spine whenever I hear that."

Robin Hood: A Merry Family Musical, Christmas Day; CTV