

THE VANCOUVER SUN

DECEMBER 19 TO DECEMBER 25, 1997

TVtimes



MERRY MUSICAL

**CTV UNWRAPS ROBIN HOOD JUST
IN TIME FOR CHRISTMAS**

Petty theft

Ross Petty steals the show as a raucous Sheriff of Nottingham

By Grant McIntyre

When Ross Petty was a kid growing up in Winnipeg, he was so determined to make it in New York, he had the city circled in red ink on a map on his wall. So when he found himself living in Manhattan in the late 1970s, with a regular part in a network soap under his belt and making his Broadway debut at age 33, you might think the story should end there. But real life, unlike fiction, tends to go on beyond standard plot curves.

Thanks to a chance meeting with a certain Canadian ballerina and other twists, Petty is now producer, writer and star of both the pantomime *Jack and the Beanstalk* now playing at the Elgin Theatre in Toronto and the television version of last year's pantomime production of *Robin Hood: A Merry Family Musical*.

To one who has watched *Robin Hood* — on stage a year ago and on tape an hour ago — the sound of Petty's voice on the phone has the odd effect of being both intimidating and amusing. Yes, it is the same set of vocal chords that filled the theatre with booming, blundering evil as the dastardly Sheriff of Nottingham. But now the voice on the phone is refined, almost soft-spoken, and the words are thoughtful and carefully chosen.

"I never thought that I would ever leave Manhattan after having spent eight years there," he says from his Toronto home. "Had I stayed in New York, I would have probably maintained as an actor solely and not gone into the production end of things. I know the frustration of being at somebody else's mercy all the time is immense — waiting for the phone to ring, and you never get the job."

By the time he arrived in New York in the late

1970s, his phone had rung sufficiently. He'd spent a year in London that included a stint in a West End musical, and a year in Paris singing at the Lido nightclub ("a wonderful job to have as a young man of age 24 — a heterosexual young man"). Once in New York, he got a steady role in the soap *All My Children*, for Petty, a gruelling experience. "It's not an enjoyable way to get your television wings ... I hated the soap-opera work simply because the pressure was monumental."

He opened on Broadway in Arthur Kopit's dramatic play *Wings* in 1979, and later toured in the title role of the Sondheim musical *Sweeney Todd*. It was during the show's 1982 run at Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre that he met National Ballet of Canada prima ballerina Karen Kain. He also met his other true love: pantomime.

Kain had been asked to appear in the pantomime *Aladdin*, produced by Paul Elliot. The show was a success and a year later, Kain and Petty were married and starring together in Elliot's 1983 production of *Dick Whittington and His Cat*. In a way, it was Broadway that had brought him to Toronto, and pantomime (and Kain) that kept him here. Petty went on to co-produce and star in four pantomime productions. Last year's *Robin Hood* was his first solo effort as a producer.

Ross Petty with onstage and offstage partner Karen Kain, together in *Robin Hood*

The accepted wisdom places the origins of "panto" in Italy, and perhaps as far back as ancient Rome. "Over continued on page 17

