

Red Deer Players stage lively 'panto'

BY MARK WEBER
Red Deer Express

You never know quite what to expect when you walk into what's described as a 'panto' production. But that's pretty much the point.

The Red Deer Players are staging *Snow White and the Seven Nobbits* at the Scott Block, opening Dec. 26th with shows continuing through to Jan. 3rd.

Curtain for the show is at 7 p.m. except Dec. 28th when show time is set for 2 p.m.

Penned by Albert Azzara and directed by Carole Forhan and Sue Humphreys, the play falls into the 'panto' tradition – stories that can be loosely based on a classic fairy tale for example, with lots of mayhem, song and dance, zaniness and contemporary references tossed in for good measure. Audience interaction is also a key part of it.

Ultimately, the 'panto' is an Anglo-Italian Christmas tradition, proved popular not only in the UK but Australia, South Africa and the U.S. where one New York production once ran for 1,200 performances.

Central Alberta Theatre staged one last winter, and this year, the newly-formed Red Deer Players opted to take a run at it – with for the most part outstanding results.

Lady Borden, Snow White's wicked stepmoth-

er, treasures the magical tablet app that reassures her on a regular basis she is indeed the most beautiful woman in the world. Played beautifully with loads of wicked charm by Marianne Christenson, Lady Borden is horrified to learn one day she's slipped to number two. Who has ousted her from the top position?

An earthquake strikes at the moment that the lovely Snow White, played by Ashley Newman, turns 18. A beauty herself, and now a woman, the app is of course designating her as number one.

Lady Borden plots with her butler Butterworth (Glynn Humphreys) and Gooner McGoonigal (Lionel Lustgarten) to get rid of Snow White, who escapes to her father's hunting lodge on Redford Ridge with her faithful pals Buttons (Vicki Dykes) and Bingo the Panto Horse (Natalie Rivera and Ruben Rivera).

Meanwhile, the Twerks, Buttons' adopted family (consisting of Mother Twerk and her seven nobbits) find Snow White who had been injured and left for dead in the woods.

But of course things have a wonderful way of working out in fairy tale-themed stories, and *Snow White and the Seven Nobbits* is no different with a little help from Chad Charming (Bryan Miltenberger).

The Twerks are an absolute hoot from start to fin-

ish. Medic Twerk (Sharon Lightbown), Meany Twerk (Lorraine Stuart), Mirthy Twerk (Shannon Ward), Muddley Twerk (Karen Andresen), Mumbley Twerk (Jennie Beal), Moany Twerk (Amanda Prinse), Mousey Twerk (Hannah Humphreys) and of course the incredibly entertaining Azzara as Mother Twerk, never fail to brighten things up every time every single one of them steps on the stage.

Azzara is amazing in his role – and offers many of the play's strongest, most comical moments. What a

gift to the local acting scene – this man is truly in his element and it's a joy to watch him hit the stage in such an unrestrained manner.

Many of the musical numbers are really engaging as well, and they run the gamut from *I Feel Pretty* from *West Side Story* and *I'd Do Anything* from *Oliver* to *Oh What A Beautiful Morning* from *Oklahoma* and *Whistle While You Work* from *Snow White*.

Of course, the focus of all of this is the lovely Snow White, and if there was ever anyone who was born to play the part, it's

Newman. She's a beauty, and captures the character's legendary sweetness, innocence and kind heartedness to perfection. And to top it all off, she has an amazing singing voice to match her other qualities – a real delight. Pantos, admittedly, aren't for everyone. Some may find the sheer craziness a bit much.

But I have to say, I enjoyed this show (kids would like it too). There were lots of strong performances, and Azzara shows again what a creative writer he really is as well. Of course, much of the credit has to go

to Forhan and Humphreys, too. They have clearly poured their hearts and souls into every part of this production, and it really shows. As does the unbridled enthusiasm of every person in it.

It's tough time find much wrong with a colourful, lively, enthusiastic show like this one that has plenty of heart, and in its own way, plenty of warmth this holiday season.

For tickets, contact the Black Knight Inn Ticket Centre at 403-755-6626 or www.blackknightinn.ca.

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