

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

HANSEL AND GRETEL

by Engelbert Humperdinck

SEPTEMBER 17, 21, 23 AND 25, 2016

BWW Review: HANSEL AND GRETEL at Lyric Opera Of Kansas City

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By Alan Portner

Engelbert Humperdinck's 1893 grand opera "Hansel and Gretel" rises to the high quality audiences have learned to expect from Kansas City's Lyric Opera Company. You may think you know Engelbert Humperdinck, but this fellow is a German composer who died in 1921 rather than a British pop singer from the 1970s. "Hansel and Gretel" is his most performed opera.



"Hansel and Gretel" was designed as the musical backdrop for a family puppet show. Humperdinck expanded the work into a 16 song Singspiel. "Singspiel" is a wonderfully appropriate German word for a play with music and dialog or what we might call - a musical comedy. Eventually the family project evolved into a full scale opera that was conducted by a German musician you may have heard of. Richard Wagner is remembered for his martial music and for his most devoted fan, one Adolf Hitler.

In their desire to provide its audiences with a new take on a classic work, Lyric Opera relocates the classic story from "Grimm's Fairy Tales" in Bavaria to rural America during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Instead of the Black Forest and a wicked witch, this production features a traveling circus with a mean old clown. The dark cloud hanging over mean clowns acquires a new meaning with this transformation.

The audience is introduced to the circus and the spiriting away of young children by a corps de ballet imported for this production by Director /Choreographer Doug Varone. Hansel (Megan Marino) and Gretel (Rachele Gilmore) slave away in their tenement home while Mother scrounges for food off stage. Hansel is a child broom-maker. Gretel sews.

Mother (Victoria Livengood) comes home only to find chores left undone. Mother is irritable. In her rage, she spills a pail of donated milk which is all the family actually has to eat. The children are sent away to gather berries. Father (Peter Cook) arrives home after a day as a door to door salesman of brooms with a basket of food just in time. Together they search for the children, who have mysteriously disappeared.

They have become lost in the forest near the circus grounds. After an uneasy night under the stars, Hansel and Gretel are lured to the circus carousel. Instead of horses, the carousel characters are gingerbread children. Instead of a gingerbread house, the carousel is home to the wicked witch/clown.

In a dual role, the witch is played by the singer who has previously been the mother (Victoria Livengood). Hansel and Gretel dispatch the witch by pushing her into her double oven and cook her into a rather large cup cake. Father saves them and all is well with the world.

“Hansel and Gretel” is handsomely staged with plenty of stagecraft, excellent sets and costume, and enjoyable special effects. It seems appropriate that the three act opera does not come close to ending until the rotund clown character sings. Miss Livengood plays her part for laughs.

Voices at the Lyric Company are uniform in their excellence. “Hansel and Gretel” is sung in German. Research into this opera tells us that in English speaking countries, the score is often performed in English. One frequent English rendering is done by the Metropolitan Opera of New York.

It seems to me that if the opera is going to be moved in time and place, it might be more accessible if the language was similarly transported to the locale in which it was being performed and make the transformation complete. Translations are evidently widely available.