

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

HANSEL AND GRETEL

by Engelbert Humperdinck

SEPTEMBER 17, 21, 23 AND 25, 2016

**Lyric Opera's 'Hänsel and Gretel' is a charming opera
with minimal menace**

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By Libby Hanssen

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Whereas many operas involve doomed romances or ill-fated heroes, Engelbert Humperdinck's "Hänsel and Gretel" is a sweet treat, tuneful and fantastical. The Lyric Opera of Kansas City opened its 2016-2017 season in Kauffman Theatre with its first production of this classic work in decades.

Directed and choreographed by Doug Varone, this opera was set in the desperate poverty of the Depression era and the glitzy facade of a rundown carnival, instead of the enchanted wood and gingerbread house of the Grimm brothers' tale, with the witch convincingly re-imagined as a clown. David Zinn designed the sets and costumes, with a creative array of sequence and sparkles.

The leads were charming. This is not just a fantasy tale, but a love story — the love of siblings who will squabble endlessly but in the next breath protect each other valiantly.

Soprano Rachele Gilmore played Gretel to mezzo-soprano Megan Marino's Hänsel, with a likeable dynamic between the two. Their voices were also well matched, fresh, clear and unforced.

The performances played up all sorts of childhood terrors (gnawing hunger, adult anger, the dark, the unknown), balanced with humor and sympathy. Marino, especially, has mastered the gangly limbs and attitude of a preadolescent boy.

Troy Cook played the Father, his tra-la-las wonderfully sonorous, with Victoria Livengood tasked with a double role as the frustrated, tired Mother and the conniving Candy Lady (her villainous intentions tempered by her hammy delivery).

The moments of pure music, some based on folk tunes, were the most cherished. Hänsel and Gretel's prayer was heartfelt and simple, the children's chorus sang with energetic sweetness, and the Sandman (soprano Laurel Weir) had a soothing air.

Additionally, soprano April Martin maximized a brief moment as a rather insouciant Dew Fairy to excellent effect.

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The orchestra, directed by John Keenan, gave the score a fair reading. This opera is both blessed and cursed with extended orchestral segments, a challenge for the director to sustain a mood and continue the narrative. These moments were handled well, for the most part, setting up background for the malevolent carnies, as well as a dream sequence of benevolent dancing angels. These were fairly well characterized, performed by Varone's dance troupe.

Yet, just like in a creepy fun house, there was something unsettling about the production. Some of the sets, designed for Minnesota Opera, didn't fit the stage, looking smallish and a bit rinky-dink. Part of the thrill of a carnival is its overwhelming sensory overload — flashing lights and jangling music — hiding secrets in dark corners. There was little magic to this show. Nearly every piece of the spare set was brought on and off by the characters, somewhat awkwardly used while on display, with no secrets and few surprises.