

At Opera SJ: a tasty childhood tale that also feeds adult attention

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This holiday season [Opera San Jose](#) is producing [Hansel & Gretel](#).

So let's just get this out of the way first. The best part of the show? A fabulous drag queen witch who travels the stage on a Segway. It doesn't get any better than this at the opera.



Cast 1: Tenor James Callon as the witch, soprano Sara Gartland as Gretel and mezzo-soprano Kindra Scharich as Hansel. Photo by Pat Kirk. Not pictured: The Segway.

James Callon as the witch absolutely made my day and got me through the show. BRAVO!

It is difficult for me to give a solid review for this show, even as Opera Novice. The opera is considered a masterpiece by [Engelbert Humperdinck](#) (the 19th century German, not the 20th century Brit – who knew there were TWO??) but while Opera SJ always does an amazing job with every opera, it is still a children's story which is not my favorite genre. I had a bit of a love/hate experience with this show (or really a hate/love experience). So let's break it down in pieces.



Cast 1: Soprano Sara Gartland as Gretel and mezzo-soprano Kindra Scharich as Hansel.
Photo by Pat Kirk.

The story: Hansel & Gretel are two children who live in the woods with their very poor parents. Everyone is hungry and there is no money for food. The mother sends the kids into the woods to gather berries, but they discover a witch who lives in a gingerbread house. Said witch cannot wait to fatten up the children so she can eat them. You know, your typical children's bedtime story.

All things opera: The members of Opera SJ really can do no wrong. Whatever show they put on you can be assured that you are receiving the best production of the show possible. The usual inadequate Opera Novice review goes here: "The singers are amazing and beautiful!! The orchestra was perfection!!" I wish I had a better vocabulary for the perfection of our local opera company, but that is the best I can do.

The entertainment (and only small downside): Acts I and II were slow for me. With no witch in sight yet, it focuses on Hansel & Gretel who, let's face it, are the worst. Instead of doing their chores they fool around dancing and singing about delicious desserts. When they're sent into the woods to gather berries they end up eating them all before finally getting lost. NICE GOING, KIDS. As a very happy empty-nester, I was annoyed with the characters. **Sara Gartland** and **Kindra Scharich** (Gretel and Hansel) were amazing in their roles however, and did an fantastic job playing the young brother and sister.

Things turned around for me at the end of Act II when they are put to sleep by the Sandman, and dream of 14 angels. Hansel & Gretel are then transformed into dream ballet dancers surrounded by the sparkling, beautiful angels (played by young children) holding globes of light. This musical interlude was truly magical and I really enjoyed it.

Intermission: I absolutely love seeing kids attend the opera, and I'm always thrilled to see them enjoying themselves. This show was filled with well-behaved and impeccably dressed children, and they were all excitedly discussing the story outside in the lobby. Of course it is a great show to introduce your child to the opera. Is it a great show for adults? AHA! Enter Act III and the witch...



Cast A: Mezzo-soprano Lisa Chavez as Hansel, soprano Cecilia Violetta López as Gretel and soprano Christine Capsuto as the Dew Fairy. Photo by Pat Kirk.

Act III and the entrance of the Dew Fairy (**Christine Capsuto**) were what made me sit up straight and start paying attention. The Dew Fairy is not only gorgeous and funny for the kids, she brings some adult humor that will go over the children's heads but will have the adults shaking with laughter. Regrettably she is only on stage for a few minutes, but that is okay because after she wakes Hansel & Gretel they finally discover the gingerbread house and...

Good gosh almighty, the witch is straight out of [*Priscilla Queen of the Desert*](#) (if Priscilla were a Segway instead of a bus). In Cast A, **Marc Schreiner** plays the witch and I am confident he is great. I saw Cast 1 which stars tenor **James Callon** and I could not take my eyes off him whenever he was on stage. He easily switches back and forth from evil witch to wheedling "nice" witch. There are costume changes, each design more fabulous than the previous. The witch is scary but not terrifying, yet hilarious and awesome at the same time.

The stage was an incredible never-ending forest that was painted so beautifully I kept expecting the actors to run further into the woods than the backdrop allowed. There is a whimsical gingerbread house and a candy cane cage, but the star of the stage was the giant oven with ginormous teeth. As a child this oven would have scared me to death, but I heard no cries in the audience, only whoops of enjoyment.

So, the verdict? If you want to introduce children to the opera, take them to see this and *no one* will be disappointed. If you love opera for opera's sake, you know Opera SJ will deliver with the quality you expect. If you're a newbie or opera novice, well... I guess my final say is that while the production is outstanding, Act I and II were a bit slow, but then Act III makes everything worth it. Really, REALLY worth it. Great holiday show!! And a great early holiday gift for the family!

[*Hansel & Gretel*](#)

[Opera San Jose](#)

Through December 1

And if you think Hansel & Gretel aren't your thing, get ready for [*Madame Butterfly*](#) on February 15! Tickets available now, so get your holiday shopping done with a really original and special gift!