

Review: 'Hansel and Gretel' -- adorably naughty family fare

By Richard Scheinin rscheinin@mercurynews.com San Jose Mercury News

Posted:

MercuryNews.com

The evil witch in Opera San Jose's delightful (and just a little bit kinky) new production of "Hansel and Gretel" is quite the sight: a drag queen dressed up for a Wonderland ball. "You've come for a visit? Oh what fun!" croons tenor Marc Schreiner, in the role of the witch, when the fairy tale's brother and sister wander into his -- er, her -- gingerbread domain.

During Saturday's opening performance at the California Theatre, some members of the audience broke into nervous laughter, and there was more laughter when the vamping, eye-shadowed Schreiner stripped down to his corset. What next? Oh, you know. Hansel gets locked up in a cage for fattening, and Gretel becomes a slave -- but only briefly. In the end, they shove the witch into her oven, turning her into gingerbread, and Engelbert Humperdinck's melodious smoothie of an opera comes to a heartwarming family finish.

Schreiner is so good in this role that I couldn't resist beginning with him. But, really, don't get the wrong idea: In Europe, "Hansel and Gretel" is Christmastime family fare, like "The Nutcracker" or "A Christmas Carol." And as a father of three, I hereby pronounce this South Bay production to be adorable family entertainment, drag queen and all. Niftily directed by Layna Chianakas, it runs through Dec. 1 with a pair of rotating casts. (I've seen only the first cast.)

It's even sung in English, and you will find the tunes to be instantly whistleable; this is perfect Opera 101 for children, who will lock straight into the Brothers Grimm story (as well as this production's storybook sets, designed by Larry Hancock). Yet Humperdinck is working on multiple levels: The ecstatic fanfares that announce the children's arrival in the witch's kingdom will make every Wagner freak smile.

The heart and soul of this production are mezzo-soprano Lisa Chavez as Hansel and soprano Cecilia Violetta López as Gretel. They are a lovable team, delightful from the moment they appear, exuding the happy innocence and mischievous energy of children. This brother and sister make the fun for each other; they dance, spin, sing. They tease one another. They take care of one another through the terrors of night.

Many of the production's most emotional moments are theirs: for instance, their Act I dance sequence ("Clap, clap, clap!"), as well as Gretel's anxious song as they lose their way in the forest, which leads to their mysterious duet with the cuckoo. Their acting is so convincing, and such fun, that -- well, let's stop at that, because I don't want to overlook their singing.

López has been impressing audiences with her satiny soprano for a while now, but Chavez is new to the company this season, and this is her breakout performance. Saturday, her mezzo voice was a cascade of colors, full of vitality -- and Chavez projects beautifully, better than anyone else in Saturday's performance. Hers was a knock-your-socks-off performance.

Another highlight: the dream pantomime at the end of Act II, when Hansel and Gretel are transformed into a pair of dancers -- here, the elegant Gabriel Mata and Hannah Vaughan. While the orchestra, conducted by Joseph Marcheso, builds through Humperdinck's Romantic splurges, the dancers (whose sequence is

choreographed by Maria Basile) are surrounded by Mother Nature and her band of little angels, carrying orbs of light into the dark forest. Visually, the production excels: Pamila Gray's subtle lighting, Elizabeth Poindexter's imaginative costumes, ranging from Grimm-like (mostly) to brothel-esque (as mentioned).

As Gertrud, mother of Hansel and Gretel, mezzo-soprano Nicole Birkland is dramatically stiff but sonically imposing. As her husband, Peter, baritone Evan Brummel sings with vibrancy and meaty tone, while the endearing songs of the Sandman and Dew Fairy are carried off with charm by sopranos Chloe Smart (especially) and Christine Capsuto, respectively.

Addendum: The English supertitles kept freezing and misfiring during the performance; presumably the company will fix the glitches.

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069, read his stories and reviews at www.mercurynews.com/richard-scheinin and follow him at [Twitter.com/richardscheinin](https://twitter.com/richardscheinin).

Opera San Jose

Presenting "Hansel and Gretel" by Engelbert Humperdinck; libretto by Adelheid Wette, English translation by Marcie Stapp

Through: Dec. 1; next performance: 8 p.m. Nov. 21

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$111, \$100 family four-pack, \$11 (cash-only at box office) for students 25 and younger with ID; 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org