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Graham Clark as the Witch, Lucy Schauer as Hansel.
Photo by Robert Millard

Lucy Schauer shines in LA Opera's dazzling 'Hansel and Gretel,' but the new libretto raises questions.

**ENGELBERT HUMPERDINCK
HANSEL AND GRETEL
LOS ANGELES OPERA
NOVEMBER 19, 2006**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

The opening of LA Opera's "Hansel and Gretel" on Sunday afternoon, Nov. 19, in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion was a fantasy feast for adults and children alike. It was phenomenal, stupendous and magical because the incredible cast, sets, staging and lights seemed welded together to create a totally complete theatrical experience. Lucy Schauer's Hansel was second-to-none, and Douglas Fitch's staging and sets were superb.

Everyone knows the story of "Hansel and Gretel." It's the Grimm brothers' fairy tale

from which Engelbert Humperdinck based his opera, handily matched with a libretto by his sister, Adelheid Wette.

THE LIBRETTO

In this new Los Angeles Opera production, an English translation of Adelheid Wette's original German libretto has been replaced with a new English libretto by writer-lyricist Richard Sparks. His libretto is enchanting; the story line remains intact; and every word matches well with the notes in the score. Sparks did an eloquent job, but I question whether or not it is ethical to alter the text of a highly acclaimed opera that premiered in 1893.

Would anyone attempt to change Lorenzo da Ponte's librettos of Mozart's "Le Nozze di Figaro" or "Don Giovanni?" I think not.

Half of any opera is the music; the other half, the text. When a masterpiece has been composed, we think of it in its totality. Both the music and words constitute the opera. Then how can one be true to the composer and opera by changing the text? Is it morally ethical? What would Humperdinck say if he were alive today?

I suppose it might be worse to change both the music and the libretto. One might wonder how composer Modest Mussorgsky would react to Rimsky-Korsakov's versions of his opera, "Boris Godunov," or what Puccini would think of the endings to his opera, "Turandot." At least Puccini wasn't around to complete his work, so somebody had to do it. Yet when I hear Gretel's dance-song, I expect to hear her sing: "With your foot you tap, tap, tap; with your hands you clap, clap, clap; right foot first, left foot then, round about and back again."

I'm not so sure that I want to hear Sparks' "The Rice Cream Dance," which substitutes the words to "Rice cream, rice cream, rich and sweet; rice cream, rice cream, tap your feet; tap your heels, tap your toes, that is how the rice dance goes."

The "Evening Prayer" has been altered as well. There is no reference to the angels anymore, and in the Act 2 dream-pantomime sequence, the angels have been replaced by forest creatures. We don't really miss the angels, but is this adaptation true to Humperdinck's original masterpiece and wishes? He probably would have smiled at the wonderment of it all; however, he intentionally toned down some of the characters from the original tale. If he'd wanted the characters to be more cynical or evil, he would have created them that way; but maybe it all doesn't really matter, for after all, this is about art and creativity, and every aspect of this production was executed with good taste.

THE CAST

The acting in "Hansel and Gretel" is just as or more important than the singing. Mezzo-soprano Lucy Schauer was absolutely marvelous as Hansel. Her voice was solid, but what made her performance so invigorating was her child-like awe. Dressed in the German Lederhosen of the time, she jumped, frolicked and somersaulted on the stage like an acrobatic pro. Every movement had intent and purpose. Every word was delivered

with clear enunciation. No one could have played the part better.

Maria Kanyova's Gretel was lovely, youthful and joyous as well. Her tones were effortless and clear, and she was a perfect match for Hansel.

Tenor Graham Clark's Witch was hilarious. Prancing around the stage in a short pink skirt, tights, pink patent-leather pumps and a yellow wig with ribbons, one couldn't really call him a drag queen, which might have been offensive to the parents in the audience who had escorted their children. Rather, he was a woman witch who simply had a deep voice and was dressed in a hysterically amusing costume. We didn't pay much attention to his singing. It was far more interesting to watch him fly across the stage like Peter Pan and slide down the tall lollipop stick adjacent to his gingerbread house like a fireman gliding down the firehouse pole to his firetruck. Clark's agility almost matched Schauer's, only he was three times her size so his gymnastics seemed more unpredictable.

Donnie Ray Albert was an excellent father to Hansel and Gretel, both in voice and stance. He was supported well by Luana DeVol, who played his wife; Christine Brandes, who played the Sandman; and Stacey Tappan, the Dew Fairy. Tappan's lovely vocal quality caught our ear even though we couldn't keep our eyes off her imaginative blue, then pink-lit costume which elevated her into a heavenly vision.

THE PRODUCTION

Douglas Fitch's creative and enterprising direction, staging, set and costume design are responsible for this ostensibly successful production. Every movement and action he gave the cast members was thought through and communicated with clarity so that they were able to develop likeable, engaging and magnetic characters. When the Witch cast her evil spell on Hansel and Gretel with "Hocus pocus, bonus jocus," their responses were sheer delight.

The sets were creative and in good taste down to the last detail: the cabin where Hansel and Gretel lived, with its moving, animated straw broom furniture; the elevated raked platform floor in the cabin, although a little wobbly, which enabled the singers' voices to sail through the hall; the picturesque forest with magical Maurice Sendak-type creatures, bushes and plants ranging from gnomes and E.T.-like beings to gigantic red-and-white spotted toadstools; and the quaint gingerbread house which was dismantled to reveal a gingerbread press and titanic oven.

The lighting was specific and wonderful, except when one of the three mushrooms didn't light up, and the costumes were glorious and true to the period and settings. When the hat popped off the molded puppet-like body-sized head of the Sandman who looked a bit like Howard Cosell, the audience laughed as a smaller more attractive flesh-and-blood face revealed a caring protector. And the children chuckled when the Witch imprisoned Hansel in a gigantic plastic inflated bodysuit.

The only facet that absolutely did not work in this production occurred just before Hansel

and Gretel's mother made her first entrance. We heard her amplified voice and saw her face projected on a large video screen, which totally jolted us.

The orchestra was led aptly by conductor Alan Gilbert and sounded exceptional when the audience was able to distinguish the contrasting textures between the folksongs and melodic phrases with the bolder Wagnerian motifs throughout the score. I don't know what was more enchanting during the Prelude: the horns and bassoons chanting the prayer, the dance-like jubilant sounds that set us in a fairy-tale mood, or our desire to focus on the onstage vision.

The opening of "Hansel and Gretel" the weekend before Thanksgiving marked the beginning of the holiday season. Children in the audience were provided with treats during the intermission, and after the opera's conclusion, were given the opportunity to have their pictures taken with life-sized character cutouts. Upon leaving the theater, complimentary gingerbread cookies were provided by Gelson's market.

If I were a parent, I would jump at the opportunity to take my children to see this wonderful form of holiday entertainment. It was truly a magical afternoon in the theater for the child in all of us.

Director/Set & Costume Designer, Douglas Fitch

English Libretto, Richard Sparks

Conductor, Alan Gilbert

Lighting Designer, Mark Jonathan

Concertmaster, Stuart Canin

Children's Chorus Artistic Director, Anne Tomlinson

Animal Head Molds, Allesandro Thompson

Costume & Wig Construction, LA Opera Costume Shop and A Wicker Workshop