



‘Hansel and Gretel’ at the Opera

OPERA REVIEW Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel." Atlanta Opera.
Saturday at the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre www.atlantaopera.org

By [Pierre Ruhe](#) | Sunday, November 11, 2007, 08:00 PM

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As promised, the most spectacular character to appear in Atlanta Opera history strutted out of her candy house, swiveled her hips, heaved her ample bosom and made “Hansel and Gretel” the must-see-to-believe event of the season.

That the Witch in Basil Twist’s unique production, which opened Saturday night at the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre, is a sultry femme fatale — and fairy-tale pedophile who sexualizes the devouring of boys — makes the show all the more unforgettable and eye-popping.

Did she really do what I think she just did?

The Witch is a 14-foot tall puppet, operated by three puppeteers hidden under her dress, with mezzo-soprano Jessie Raven singing up top. Her size plays delightful tricks with our sense of scale. The childlike wonder induced by a great

big puppet also lets Twist get away subversive, R-rated opera.

Innocence/danger juxtapositions are a basic element of Brothers Grimm tales, of course, with a “happy ending” that will keep Hansel and Gretel in therapy for the rest of their lives. That teetering balance of cute and disturbing is made still more unstable by composer Engelbert Humperdinck’s lush orchestra, harnessing a Wagner-sized sound, rich in psychological undercurrents. (Wagner’s “Ring” cycle, too, is a kind of fairytale.)

Yet thanks to often glorious singing, Twist’s storybook concept — including a mischievous cat, menacing trees and a flapping cuckoo — neatly complements, rather than overshadows, the music.

Soprano Jennifer Aylmer, as Gretel, sings with a fetching, fluttery, radiant voice. Her theatrical timing is sharp, her diction ideal (in Cori Ellison’s modern-American translation). As Hansel, mezzo Kirstin Chavez’s tone is at once dusky and sweet. Their evening prayer duet, at the end of act two, touches on sublime singing, just right.

In Twist’s imagination, the Dream Pantomime scene involves 14 white-robed angels swarming magically around the children, who sleep on the forest floor. Although the New York-based puppeteer didn’t offer many insights into the plot, his spectacles are of the highest order, never to be forgotten. Where the hungry siblings run around the stage barefoot in ragged clothes, the parents are also giants, with puppet heads and enormous arms. Phillip Addis sings the Father with a sturdy, lyrical baritone. Cheryl Evans’ Mother is hard to hear but offers lovely tones.

Kristen Brannan’s small voice was sometimes drowned out by the orchestra. She walked on stage in a black dress (as both the Sandman and the Dew Fairy) while hovering puppets acted out the supernatural roles. The children’s chorus, prepared by Jennifer Langley, sang in pitch-perfect style as they romped about in gingerbread cookie costumes.

The idea for Basil Twist’s human and puppet production origin with Atlanta Opera general director Dennis Hanthorn, who commissioned sketches from the celebrated puppeteer. When Atlanta couldn’t afford the production, the Houston Grand Opera picked it up and gave the world premiere in 2005.

This production is also notable for the return of conductor Yoel Levi to an Atlanta podium. His disciplined baton technique and precise ear gives the orchestra — a band of contracted freelancers — some of the luster of, ahem, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, which Levi led from 1988 through 2000. Yet where Levi is a superb craftsman, conducting from memory, tuning and polishing the opera orchestra, there is little art in his interpretation. The entire evening drags at what feel like one middling tempo, with few contrasts and almost no dramatic tension — the biggest letdown in an otherwise superlative show.