Previews

Oberlin Opera: Hansel and Gretel—
insights from director Jonathon Field
and members of the cast

by Mike Telin

The first volume of children’s tales published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812 includes some of today’s most beloved stories such as Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel and Rumpelstiltskin. Also included in that volume is the tale of Hansel and Gretel, two children who cleverly outwit a witch. This week, Englebert Humperdinck’s adaptation of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale returns to the Hall Auditorium stage in Oberlin in four performances by Oberlin Opera Theatre, Raphael Jimenez conductor. The production also marks the return of rising opera star Karen Jesse (left) who is reviving her role as the witch.

The opera was last staged at Oberlin in 2003. Oberlin Opera theatre director Jonathon Field says this production is very different from the traditional approach to the opera that he took in the past. “As I was working on it during the spring I became disenchanted with the way I had done it before, so I took my score and erased all of my staging. I also began to look at the characters and tried to figure out some of the motivations — like what it was that led Hansel and Gretel to survive the witch when all of the other kids hadn’t.” However it is Field’s character motivations that prompted him to include a disclaimer in the opera's publicity materials — Please note: Portions may not be suitable for patrons younger than 12.

Field points out that Hansel and Gretel come from a family that is very poor and often goes hungry. “I also imagined when the father comes home he was kind of a threat if not drunk. Then I thought, if the father hits the mother, who hits the kids, and if the kids hit each other and lie and deceive each other, then that’s the way they win over the witch. They’ve been raised all their lives to have this kind of behavior. So part of it is the environment but part of it is themselves. They are kids who are acting out,” adding that Hansel and Gretel continually get into fights and are hitting each other.

“When they say, lets have a little dance, what they mean is a boxing match. So I felt that kinds under 12, it might not be good for them to see this a behavior to model themselves on,” adding that he didn’t want parents bringing their kids expecting one thing and getting the opposite.
Alexis Amie, who performs the role of Gretel, says that once she found out she was cast she began preparing for the role by reading the Grimms' fairy tale. “Most of the tales were passed down as an oral tradition, and I think parents told them to their children as a way of getting the to behave — don’t go out in the woods at night because you will be eaten by a witch so stay at home and listen to your parents. And I think this production incorporates many of the story's original elements. There is a rebellious nature that all kids go through at a certain age. I think they are coming into their own and figuring out how the world works and what they need to do just to survive. This does come into play as they try to figure out how to get through the night. It is a coming of age story and they are children who are rebelling against their parents.”

Nicole Levesque, who performs the role of Hansel, says that she sees the two children as products of their environment. “I think if I were in their situation — after all, the children are abandoned in the woods — I would probably survive just as they have. I’m not sure I’d call them bad children but, by the same token I wouldn’t want to be in a back alley with either of them.” Although Levesque points out that, like many siblings, Hansel and Gretel many not always be particularly pleased with one other. “But when the going gets tough they know that they have each other. You can see that in their relationship with the witch. Both of them are eager to protect each other and then the moment that the witch is not there they are at each other's throats.”

Amie and Levesque agree that the biggest challenge of performing their roles is the amount of time they both spend on stage during the opera. “Humperdinck took a lot of his musical cues from Wagner, and the orchestra is quite large,” Amie points out. “It’s not a terribly long opera but it is vocally demanding in addition to Hansel and Gretel being on stage nearly the entire time.” Levesque adds, “It’s very taxing in terms of learning such a large volume of music, but once we are on stage and into character it doesn’t seem long at all. You do get carried away in the drama.”

The role of Hansel also casts Nicole Levesque in another trouser role. “I’ve done three on the main stage and four more in opera scenes,” she says, jokingly adding that she has become quite comfortable wearing pants and has come to appreciate a well cut suit. “It was difficult because usually when you get cast for a role you start looking for physical representations and I don’t have a lot of experience with being an eight year old boy. I went by family and stories and I did ask a lot of my male friends about what they were like at that age. And what I learned was if it is a stick, it is a sword. If you can pick it up, it is a sword.”

The production also finds the Oberlin Choristers on the stage. “Getting children from the community to perform will hopefully spark a love of opera and theatre into them”, thinks Jonathon Field. “And when you have kids on stage you have the authentic representation of what the piece is all about.”

And what about the Witch? While Field admits there is something deeply weird about the fact that the mother and the witch are supposed to be played by the same person, the look of the witch in this production is based on Voodoo. “Some of her house and clothes do
look voodoo-like because that is where we were pulling inspiration from. But in the end she does get shoved into the oven, so that remains traditional.”

Soprano Karen Jesse portrayed the Mother and the Witch in 2003 “One of the great things about working with Karen is that we have been able to explore different aspects to the witch so that she really becomes psychotic with a split personality.”

After graduating from Oberlin in 2006, Karen Jesse went on to study at the Curtis Institute. She has performed roles for Hubbard Hall Opera Theatre, The Opera Company of Philadelphia and Glimmerglass Opera, as well as The Cleveland Orchestra, to name a few. We reached her by telephone and began by asking her what it’s like to be back in Oberin reviving a role she performed as a student?

Karen Jesse: It’s wonderful! A little bit surreal at first when I went into the first costume fitting – they still had the old costume. But it is wonderful to be back especially now that I am a little more experienced and have few more tools in the tool box.

Mike Telin: And you're working with Jonathon Field again.

KJ: I love working with Jonathon. He was such a huge part of my life here and such an amazing teacher and still is. Besides, it’s always fun to work with people you haven’t worked with for a while. And the students sound so good! I still believe that Oberlin is the place to be for undergraduate voice. It just is, and it’s so awesome to come back ten years later and see that that’s still the case.

MT: What is your take on the story of Hansel and Gretel? I remember being very frightened by it as a kid.

KJ: I do think some of the Grimm fairy tales were developed to scare kids into behaving – if you don’t behave, this too will happen to you. And as time went on they became a little more Anglicized and they became these happy ending tales. But Jonathon is digging into the darkness in this production.

MT: Does the witch have any redeeming qualities?

KJ: Yes and no. I mean in order to portray a character you have to be able to figure out where they are coming from and why they are doing what they are doing. And one thing that I have learned over the past few years is that a character that is evil for the sake of being evil is uninteresting and unrealistic.

People who we consider to be bad don’t think that what they are doing is bad. In this particular case, the witch is very isolated and I think a lot of what she is doing is about survival. When somebody is in the middle of the woods by themselves [laughing] they do have a lot of time on their hands. Think about the Unibomber. Out there with nothing but their own thoughts and who knows what she went through as a child.

MT: I’m fascinated with Jonathon’s take on the story.
KJ: He is creating this ongoing theme of survival, which sometimes means violence. Everybody in this story is doing what they must do to survive.

On the one hand the witch wants Hansel and Gretel to accept and like her and on the other hand she kind of has to eat them. She doesn’t have to but from her very skewed point of view this is what she does. I wouldn’t necessarily call that a redeeming quality, but you do have to look at it as predator and prey. She’s the predator and they are the prey. And it’s what she’s programmed to do.

[Laughing] Here I am defending her, but in order to connect to the role you have to be sympathetic on some level.

**MT: How did you prepare for such an evil role?**

KJ: I have been spending a lot of time watching the witches on TV. They are kind of a big thing right now. I’ve been watching *American Horror Story* and *The Originals*. I’ve also been reading a lot of articles about serial killers, their motives, and trying to understand the best that I can where they’re coming from. Like Jeffrey Dahmer claimed that he didn’t want to kill people he just didn’t want them to leave. Which I think is a little bit closer to the witch. And John Wayne Gacy suffered a lot of abuse from his father especially. And if you look at this production the idea is that there is a lot of violence in Hansel and Gretel’s home. And that that kind of violence repeats itself and so who knows what kind of upbringing the witch had.

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