

Fairytale Opera Theater

Hansel and Gretel Opera Synopsis

ACT I

SCENE I (Setting: At home.)

Gretel stitches a stocking, and Hänsel is making a broom. Gretel sings to herself as she works. Hänsel mocks her, singing to the same tune a song about how hungry he is. He wishes for Mother to come home. Gretel tells him to be quiet and reminds him of what Father always says: "When the need is greatest, God puts out his hand." Hänsel complains that one can't eat words, and Gretel cheers him up by telling him a secret: A neighbor has given Mother a jug of milk, and tonight she'll make a rice pudding for them to eat! Hänsel, excited, tastes the cream on the top of the milk. Gretel scolds him and tells him he should get back to work. Hänsel says that he doesn't want to work, he'd rather dance! Gretel agrees, and they begin to dance around.

SCENE II

Mother enters, and she is furious when she finds that Hänsel and Gretel have not been working. As she threatens to beat them with a stick, she knocks over the jug of milk. Mother sends Hänsel and Gretel to the Ilsenstein forest to look for strawberries. Alone, she expresses her sorrow that she is unable to feed her children, and asks God for help.

SCENE III

From far off, Father sings about how hungry he is. He bursts into the house, roaring drunk, and kisses Mother roughly. She pushes him away and scolds him for being drunk. He surprises her by taking from his pack a feast: Bacon, butter, flour, sausages, fourteen eggs, beans, onions, and a quarter pound of coffee! He explains to her that beyond the forest, it is almost time for a festival, and everyone is cleaning in preparation. He went from house to house and sold his brooms at the highest prices. As Father and Mother celebrate, he suddenly stops and asks where the children are. Mother changes the subject to the broken jug, and after she finishes telling him the story, he laughs, then asks again after the children. She tells him that they are in the Ilsenstein forest. Suddenly scared, Father tells her that the forest is where the evil Gingerbread Witch (literally, "Nibbling Witch") dwells. She lures children with cakes and sweets, pushes them into her oven, where they turn to gingerbread, and then eats them. Father and Mother rush to the forest to search for their children.

ACT II

SCENE I (Setting: In the forest. Sunset.)

Gretel weaves a crown of flowers as she sings to herself. Hänsel searches for strawberries. As Gretel finishes her crown, Hänsel fills his basket. Gretel tries to put the

crown on Hänsel, but, saying that boys don't play with things like these, he puts it on her head instead. He tells her that she looks like the Queen of the Wood, and she says that if that's so, then he should give her a bouquet, too. He offers her the strawberries. They hear a cuckoo calling, and they begin to eat the strawberries. As the basket empties, they fight for the remaining strawberries, and finally, Hänsel grabs the basket and dumps the leftovers in his mouth. Gretel scolds him and tells him that Mother will be upset. She tries to look for more, but it's too dark for her to see. Hänsel tries to find the way back, but he cannot. As the forest darkens, Hänsel and Gretel become scared, and think they see something coming closer. Hänsel calls out, "Who's there?" and a chorus of echoes calls back, "He's there!" Gretel calls, "Is someone there?" and the echoes reply, "There!" Hänsel tries to comfort Gretel, but as a little man walks out of the forest, she screams.

SCENE II

The little Sandman, who has just walked out of the forest, tells the children that he loves them dearly, and that he has come to put them to sleep. He puts grains of sand into their eyes, and as he leaves they can barely keep their eyes open. Gretel reminds Hänsel to say their evening prayer, and after they pray, they fall asleep on the forest floor.

SCENE III

Fourteen angels come out and arrange themselves around the children to protect them as they sleep. They are presented with a gift. The forest is filled with an intense light as the curtain falls.

ACT III

SCENE I (Setting: In the forest.)

The little Dewman comes to wake the children. He sprinkles dew on them and leaves. Gretel wakes first, and wakes the sleepy Hänsel. They tell each other of their mutual dream, of angels protecting them as they slept.

SCENE II

Suddenly they notice behind them an enormous gingerbread house. On the left side is an oven, on the right side is a cage, and around it is a fence of gingerbread children. Unable to resist temptation, they take a little bit of the house and nibble on it.

SCENE III

As the children nibble, a voice calls out, "Nibbling, nibbling, little mouse! Who's nibbling on my little house?" Hänsel and Gretel decide that the voice must have been the wind, and they begin to eat the house. As Hänsel breaks off another piece of the house, the voice again calls out, "Nibbling, nibbling, little mouse! Who's nibbling on my little house?" Hänsel and Gretel ignore the voice, and continue eating. The witch comes out of the house and catches Hänsel with a rope. As Hänsel tries to escape, the witch explains that she is Rosine Leckermaul (literally, "Rosina Tastymuzzle"), and that she likes nothing better than to feed children sweets. Hänsel and Gretel are suspicious of the witch, so Hänsel frees himself from the rope and he and Gretel begin to run away.

The witch takes out her wand and calls out, "Stop!" Hänsel and Gretel are frozen to the spot where they stand. Using the wand, the witch leads Hänsel to the cage. The witch leaves him stiff and slow of movement. She tells Gretel to be reasonable, and then the

witch goes inside to fetch raisins and almonds with which to fatten Hänsel. Hänsel whispers to Gretel to pretend to obey the witch. The witch returns, and waving her wand, says, "Hocus pocus, holderbush! Loosen, rigid muscles, hush!" Using the wand, the witch forces Gretel to dance, then tells her to go into the house and set the table. Hänsel pretends to be asleep, and the witch, overcome with excitement, describes how she plans to cook and eat Gretel.

The witch wakes up Hänsel and has him show her his finger. He puts out a bone instead, and she feels it instead. Disappointed that he is so thin, the witch calls for Gretel to bring out raisins and almonds. As the witch tries to feed Hänsel, Gretel steals the wand from the witch's pocket. Waving it towards Hänsel, Gretel whispers, "Hocus pocus, holderbush! Loosen rigid muscles, hush!" As the witch turns around and wonders at the noise, Hänsel discovers that he can move freely again.

The witch tells Gretel to peek inside the oven to see if the gingerbread is done. Hänsel softly calls out to her to be careful. Gretel pretends that she doesn't know what the witch means. The witch tells her to lift herself a little bit and bend her head forward. Gretel says that she's "a goose" and doesn't understand, then asks the witch to demonstrate. The witch, frustrated, opens the oven and leans forward. Hänsel springs out of the cage, and he and Gretel shove the witch into the oven. They dance. The oven begins to crackle and the flames burn fiercely, and with a loud crash it explodes.

SCENE IV

Around Hänsel and Gretel, the gingerbread children have turned back into humans. They are asleep and unable to move, but they sing to Hänsel and Gretel, asking to be touched. Hänsel is afraid, but Gretel strokes one on the cheek, and he wakes up, but is still unable to move. Hänsel and Gretel touch all the children, then Hänsel takes the witch's wand and, waving it, calls out, "Hocus pocus, elderbush! Loosen rigid muscles, whoosh!" The children are freed from the spell, and give Hänsel and Gretel their lifelong thanks.

SCENE IV

Father is heard in the distance, calling for Hänsel and Gretel. He and Mother enter and embrace Hänsel and Gretel. Meanwhile, the gingerbread children pull out from the ruins of the oven the witch, who has turned into gingerbread. Father gathers the children around and tells them to look at this miracle. He explains that this is heaven's punishment for evil deeds and reminds them, "When the need is greatest, God puts out his hand."