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Dramatic Publishing

Hansel and Gretel:

The Little Brother and the Little Sister



~by~
Max Bush

Hansel and Gretel:

The Little Brother and the Little Sister

Commissioned and premiered by
the Emmy Gifford Children's Theatre of Omaha.

Fairy tale. By Max Bush. Adapted from the Brothers Grimm's written version of the oral tradition. Cast: 2m., 4w. The play is a beautifully crafted revelation of empowerment for youth. Hansel and Gretel learn to face terror, recognize the truth and solve their problems away from the comforting company of adults. Hansel and Gretel are playing hide and seek in their yard when they overhear their parents discussing leaving them in the woods to fend for themselves. The impoverished parents can see no hope for feeding their children and carry out their plan. The first time in the woods, the children find their way safely home thanks to the trail of white stones Hansel cleverly drops. Their father is overjoyed to see them but soon acquiesces to the mother's insistence that they return to the woods immediately. This time, left for good, the children journey forward, following hope in the form of a white bird. Their hope leads them to a witch who has all the food she needs but wants to eat them as well. The children prevail against the witch thanks to Gretel's quick thinking, courage and strength. The white bird returns, leading their father, but not to save them—they have already saved themselves. In the play's final moment, Hansel and Gretel invite their father to join them on their journey. They are free. *One set with set pieces. Medieval costumes. Approximate running time: 50 minutes. Code: HB1.*

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Dramatic Publishing

311 Washington St.
Woodstock, IL 60098-330
Phone: (800) 448-7469

www.dramaticpublishing.com

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MAX BUSH

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DEDICATION: To JAMES LARSON

This adaptation was commissioned by the Emmy Gifford Children's Theatre of Omaha, Nebraska, and opened there on October 25, 1991, with the following cast and crew:

Hansel Kevin Barratt
Gretel Laura Mar
Mother Pam Carter
Father Earl Bates
White Bird Jenny Coyan
Witch Amy Kunz

Director James Larson
Assistant Director Stephanie Anderson
Set Design Film & Stage Services
Light Design Film & Stage Services
Costume Design Sherri Geerdes
music Design James Larson
Incidental Music John Kunz
Properties Tracy Thies
Make-up Cea Larkin

INTRODUCTION

“They found the whole little house full of jewels, filled all their pockets with them, and took them to their father, who became a rich man; but the mother was dead.”

- - **Closing Sentence, “*The Little Brother and the Little Sister*”
Manuscript version by the brothers Grimm**

Kinder Und Hausmarchen (Nursery and Household Stories), by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, is the most often published, most translated, best known German language work of all time. Of all the stories related by the Grimms, “***Hansel and Gretel***” is probably the best remembered.

The Grimm Brothers themselves began the familiar process of altering the stories to make them more presentable to their market. They first embraced the stories within the oral tradition, but edited and embellished them in the written form (incidentally, the story as it was told to the Grimms was “***The Little Brother and the Little Sister***” - it was the brothers who named the children). For the fifth edition of the book, the Grimms changed Hansel and Gretel’s mother into a step-mother. Through successive commercializations and sanitations of the tales, through endless children’s theatre productions that are actually new plays bearing little resemblance to their namesakes, the tales have most often been stripped of their original psychological validity. As a result, most readers and audiences have managed to form their impressions of the stories without ever confronting the truths within the stories themselves. I like Max’s analogy on this: “It’s rather like taking an animal such as a hippopotamus, an animal of power and mystery and dignity, and putting it in a tutu.”

Max based his play primarily on the Grimm’s manuscript version, which predates the first edition and comes as close as possible to the oral tradition. The playwright is interested in both the sociological and the psychological aspects of the story, but it is around the underlying psychological matrix that he builds the play. “Hansel and Gretel presents the alluring, sweet and deadly consequences of regression,” writes Max. “The process of the tale is a process of forming a separate identity within oneself, away from the mother; of symbolically slaying the regressive, devouring mother. It plays out the necessity of facing one’s internal devil

in a terrifying confrontation to achieve a liberation from a seductive, insidious, tenacious stage of life. Banished from the comforting company of adults out of realistic necessity, the child learns to face terror, recognize the truth, and solve the problems. The story is a revelation of empowerment for children. Certainly parts are disturbing, frightening, but as a whole it is a tale of healing, of necessary, healthy growth." Yet, the playwright's determined focus on the psychology of the story ultimately illuminates its sociological relevance.

As the play opens, we see Hansel and Gretel joyously playing in childish innocence, seemingly oblivious to the harshness of the world around them. They (and we) overhear their father and mother (not a step-mother) discuss leaving their children in the woods to die. It is significant that the parents are not presented as monsters. They are weak, they are self-serving, they are defeated by life and by their inability to cope with it. They choose to abandon their children rather than take food from their own mouths.

The first time they are left in the woods, the children find their way home thanks to a trail of white stones Hansel cleverly drops to mark the way. Their regression is fleeting and unsuccessful, for they are returned to the deep woods by their parents and left alone again. This time they journey forward, following hope in the form of a white bird - the same white bird who has eaten the bread crumbs obliterating the trail home. Their hope leads them into a world of witches who have everything yet hunger for even more from those who have nothing. On their own, the children confront the witch and prevail. The white bird returns leading their father, but not to save them - they have already saved themselves.

In the play's final moment, Hansel and Gretel choose to follow the white bird forward and, in a simple act of profound forgiveness, they invite their father to follow them. They are free.

"Yes," I hear you say, "I see the psychological matrix, but what about the sociological relevance? What does this story have to say about the real world of divorce, incest, sexual abuse, chemical dependency, gang violence and teen pregnancy?"

I maintain that the individual psychological journey from innocence through experience to a higher innocence (enlightenment), when sensed as a metaphor for a collective journey, sounds a common sociological resonance. As a society, we collectively face a hazardous path, and though the dangers may change somewhat from generation to generation, the concept of the struggle remains the same. As a society,

we collectively must choose whether to pursue hope into an unsafe world or to retreat to a world that only looks innocent when selectively viewed through what Max disdainfully calls “a haze of nostalgia.” And unfortunately, as a society, we collectively and routinely abandon our children in the woods rather than take food from our own mouths. We tell children that we will take responsibility for their care, safety and upbringing, then (collectively) we allow hungry children to go unfed, lonely children to go unnurtured, ignorant children to go uneducated. We are not monsters, yet (collectively) our children will have much to forgive us for. I hope they, like Hansel and Gretel, will be able to do so.

Hansel and Gretel: The Little Brother and the Little Sister is a wonderfully simple, powerfully imagistic tale, and Max’s greatest concern in translating it to the stage is “to stay out of the story’s way.” That should be a guidepost for producing companies, as well. This play is as compelling and detailed a challenge for directors, designers and actors as anything else they are likely to find - yet it is important that they approach it with great care, for the integrity of the original tale is threatened at every moment in the creative process. The text of the play (like the story itself) communicates sparsely, but on a rich and complex background of subtext. Explore that subtext fully and with joy, but resist the impulse to drape the subtext on the text like fabric on a mannequin. Let the text float on the subtext like a leaf in a stream. The stream holds the leaf up, it moves the leaf from point A to point B, but as we observe the floating leaf on it’s journey we need not have the properties of the water explained to us, for we drink of it every day of our lives.

Scot Copeland
January , 1994

HANSEL AND GRETEL

CHARACTERS:

HANSEL

GRETEL

MOTHER

FATHER

WHITE BIRD

WITCH

TIME: Once upon a time.

PLACE: Near the Woodcutter's cottage on the edge of the forest, in the deep forest, outside the Witch's house.

RUNNING TIME: Approximately 50 minutes.

HANSEL AND GRETEL

At rise we see the woodcutter's house, the forest in the background. Trees, stumps, bushes; a patch of multi-colored stones. Near the house, a large water pitcher.

Hansel runs on carrying a worn, soft, leather ball about the size of a melon, leans against a tree, blinds his eyes and counts. Gretel runs on, checks to see if he's peeking, dashes behind a bush. She decides better of it, runs, and dives behind a tree. She jumps up in indecision, starts toward a tree, stops, hesitates, moves behind stump just as Hansel wheels and yells.

HANSEL: I see you! *(He doesn't. He tosses ball up and down as he scans the area and walks around home-tree.*

He quietly sneaks up on a deserted bush, all the while facing home. He suddenly bolts toward a stump, jumps up on it, prepares to throw the ball.) Caught!

(Gretel moves further away from him by moving behind a tree. Hansel turns and quickly runs back to the home-tree.)

Gretel? Gretel! Where are you? We said you couldn't hide in the forest. Are you in the woods?

(He dashes and takes a quick look behind house, Gretel moves behind a stump and closer to the home-tree. He runs back.)

You will never get home free again. *(He sees her foot sticking out behind the stump.)*

I'll sit and wait for you.

(He sits but immediately begins to crawl toward Gretel.

She peers over stump, sees him, looks for her way out. She picks up a stone, tosses it behind Hansel. Hansel stops, looks, laughs to himself, then continues to crawl toward her.

She peers over stump, sees him moving closer. She starts to crawl out, stops when she realizes he would see her. She desperately looks for an escape. There is none.

Hansel crawls up to other side of stump, begins to slowly rise. Gretel jumps up and screams in his face.)

GRETEL: Hansel!

(He starts for a moment as she squeals and runs toward home. Hansel recovers, chases her and, when he's close, throws ball and hits her. He then runs for home but she trips him.)

HANSEL: Aaahhh! Gretel!

(She chases down ball, picks it up, throws, hits him and runs toward home. He frantically crawls toward ball but it's too late.)

GRETEL: *(Touching home-tree.)* FREE! HA! TWICE! FREE! FREE!

HANSEL: You tripped me. That's not fair.

GRETEL: We never said we couldn't trip.

HANSEL: *(Hitting her with the ball.)* We can't trip.

GRETEL: All right. Not anymore.

HANSEL: I would have won.

GRETEL: I won, Hansel. Twice. You have to get the water from the stream.

HANSEL: I don't know why we have to get the water. We always get the water.

GRETEL: *(Handing him the pitcher.)* Go on.

HANSEL: I'm too hungry and tired to go all the way to the stream.

GRETEL: Hansel, it's for our soup.

HANSEL: It's not good soup. It's stick soup. She makes it with sticks. It tastes like water with sticks in it.

GRETEL: She won't cook us anything if we don't get the water.

HANSEL: Let's play again.

GRETEL: I'm still free. *(Running after ball.)* And you still have to get the water.

HANSEL: You won't win this time. Give me the ball.

(She throws it to him.)

And no tripping.

MOTHER: *(Calling from within house.)* Hansel?

HANSEL: The water -- *(He runs to the pitcher, picks it up.)*

GRETEL: She's coming.

(He hands pitcher to Gretel, runs and hides. She hurriedly sets it down, hides. Mother enters from the house, sees pitcher.)

MOTHER: Ah. Good. *(She picks up pitcher.)* Empty. Gretel? *(She looks but can't see them.)* I told you I needed water from the stream for soup. Hansel? Your father will be home from the market and he'll be thirsty and hungry. Gretel!

(Hansel pushes Gretel out, but the Mother doesn't see her. Gretel hides again.)

MOTHER: If you don't get the water you won't eat.

(The children stay hidden.)

Gretel! You have to help me! You know you have to help me. Hansel!

(Father enters pulling a wagon with firewood stacked high on it.)

FATHER: Finally . . . home. . . *(Setting down wood.)* What a time to live.

(She embraces him warmly.)

MOTHER: You look exhausted.

FATHER: *(Seeing pitcher.)* Ah, water.

MOTHER: No, empty. I asked the children to bring some up for you.

FATHER: They didn't?

MOTHER: I heard them playing and thought they had . . . You couldn't trade any wood?

FATHER: There's no food.

MOTHER: None?

FATHER: The stocks are full of thieves - - people like you and me - - who tried to steal food, just to live. The streets are crowded with peddlers, fortune-tellers, barbers, surgeons, cobblers, all starving.

MOTHER: What are people doing?

FATHER: They're dying.

MOTHER: And their children . . . ?

FATHER: How are we to feed our poor children when we have nothing for ourselves?

MOTHER: No one is going to help us. We must do something.

FATHER: What?

MOTHER: I have thought about this - - and so have you, I know. *(Soothingly.)* Tomorrow morning we will take the children into the thickest part of the forest. We will light a fire, and give each of them a piece of bread; then we will go do our work and leave them.

FATHER: I could never leave my children alone in the forest.

MOTHER: Will you find us food?

FATHER: No child deserves to be left in the wood.

MOTHER: Will you find us food?

FATHER: I have until now. We've eaten until now.

MOTHER: But our food is almost gone - - look in our cupboards. You and I may be able to survive until crops are re-planted.

FATHER: The wild animals would tear them to pieces.

MOTHER: Then we will all die of hunger.

FATHER: They're our children.

MOTHER: I know they're our children. I can't watch them starve to death. Can you? Gretel is so pale already. And maybe, in the forest, somehow, they'll find a way to survive.

FATHER: They'll never survive alone.

MOTHER: We don't know. We won't know. I'll never know. *(She picks up pitcher, exits toward stream.)*

FATHER: Wait. Wait!

(He exits after her.)

Hansel and Gretel step out, look after their parents, stunned. Gretel sits on the ground, cries. He drops ball, watches it roll away.)

HANSEL: We'll have to find our way back.

GRETEL: At night?

HANSEL: I'll find our way back.

GRETEL: How, in the dark?

HANSEL: I'll . . . tonight, when the moon is out, I'll go out and gather the white stones that shine in the moonlight. I'll fill my pockets and when we go into the forest, I'll drop them one by one. Then we can follow them back home.

GRETEL: Hansel!

(She hugs him.)

HANSEL: Don't worry, Gretel. Don't worry. I'll find our way back.

(Music, dim-out.)

END SCENE I

SCENE II

Evening in the deep forest. Very large trees, large rocks; two stacks of wood, one prepared for a fire, the other to feed the fire. Occasional bird songs; strong silences. This is a rich, earthen place; deep color with brilliant patches of bright flowers, lichens and light. It's teeming with old and new life and full of unchecked energy and possibility.

Father enters, followed by Mother, Gretel and Hansel. Gretel runs ahead gathering wild flowers.

FATHER: It's just a little further.

GRETEL: *(Picking a flower.)* Another yellow one.

(Hansel stops, turns back, drops a white pebble.)

FATHER: Here's the fire I built for you.

(Hansel runs to check out fire.)

Isn't this a beautiful place?

GRETEL: We've never come this far before.

FATHER: There's a stream, see?

MOTHER: And bushes with berries.

GRETEL: *(Picking a flower.)* I've never seen a flower like this.

MOTHER: Here, children. Some of your favorite cake for your supper. I made this for you last night.

GRETEL: Will you have some with us, Mother?

MOTHER: We . . . have to get wood before it's too dark.

GRETEL: I'll give you part of mine.

MOTHER: But it's so small; and I made it for you. I want you to have your favorite cake. And here's some water.

GRETEL: Cake is better with milk.

MOTHER: I wish I had milk to give you.

HANSEL: *(To Father.)* Why did we come so far in the forest?

FATHER: A good question, Hansel. You are a smart boy, aren't you?

HANSEL: There's wood near the house.

FATHER: Very smart.

HANSEL: And how are you going to bring the wood back? You didn't take your wood cart.

MOTHER: Father will light the fire and you eat.

FATHER: *(As he lights fire.)* The fire will burn slowly, all night. See how I built it? And there's more wood.

HANSEL: But we don't need a fire all night.

FATHER: No . . . no . . . but you don't need to be afraid of animals with a fire like this. And it will keep you warm.

MOTHER: When you've eaten, lie down by the fire and rest yourselves. When we're finished, we'll come back for you.

GRETEL: Here. *(She gives her mother the bouquet of wild flowers.)*

MOTHER: Gretel . . .

FATHER: Yes, you sleep while we gather wood and. . . we'll come back for you.

(Mother starts off, Father hesitates.)

FATHER: You . . . you're smart, Hansel, very smart. And you're brave, aren't you Gretel? *(He kisses her.)* Very brave. . .

(He exits, followed by Mother.)

GRETEL: I'm not brave.

HANSEL: I'm smart.

GRETEL: Will they come back?

HANSEL: They said they would. Father said he would.

GRETEL: They wouldn't leave us here. Not here. *(Standing against an enormous trunk.)* These trees are big. . . It's getting dark, already.

HANSEL: We're safe by the fire. *(Eating.)* Cake. See, she made us our favorite cake.

GRETEL: It's good. Cinnamon.

HANSEL: I'm so hungry I could eat a mountain of cake.

GRETEL: A mountain of cake.

(A wind passes through the forest. The children hear it, look around and up. Then they hear a sound like the distant, slow chopping of wood.)

Listen . . .

HANSEL: That's Father, chopping wood, right over there. See? Father said he'd come back. I want milk with this cake.

(Behind Gretel the White Bird glides in on the wind, lands, screeches and flutters it's wings. Her screech is piercing, frightening. She resembles a large bird of prey more than a duck or dove.)

GRETEL: Hansel!

(Hansel stands in horror for a moment, then picks up a stick, pulls Gretel behind him.)

HANSEL: Father! Mother! Father!

GRETEL: Scare it away. Get it away.

HANSEL: What does it want?

GRETEL: Scare it away; kill it!

HANSEL: Father!

GRETEL: He said the fire would protect us from the animals.

(The Bird spreads her wings, moves toward them, cooing. Gretel screams, Hansel pulls her away from bird.)

Hansel!

(The Bird glides toward an opening in the trees. She turns, screeches, hops toward path. She turns, sees Hansel and Gretel aren't moving, then glides back into clearing.)

HANSEL: Stay behind me. *(He starts slowly toward Bird.)*

GRETEL: Hansel, what will you do? . . . It'll bite your throat. It'll claw your eyes!

(Hansel walks cautiously up to the Bird, reaches out to touch her. The Bird turns her head to be petted. Hansel suddenly strikes Bird with the stick, she squawks.)

HANSEL: Go!

GRETEL: *(Joining him as she sees Bird move away from Hansel.)*
Go! Go!