Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Not Quite Ready for Prime Time

Sylvie · Wednesday, November 9th, 2016

The 24th Street Theatre has been focusing its attention on creating children's theatre that is not (a) boring, (b) condescending and (c) just for children. It is designed instead to entertain as well as instruct all of us children of all ages (which includes you).

Broadly speaking, the goal is to take themes considered mature and make them artfully entertaining and instructive for all kids eight years old and way over. There was plenty to rejoice about with its productions of *Walking the Tightrope* (which dealt with death) and the exceptional *Man Covets Bird* (about how to grow up well). This latest effort is a slight reinvention of the tale of *Hansel & Gretel* and the result at this point is not quite ready for prime time.

Transporting *Hansel & Gretel* to the Depression-era coal mines of Eastern Kentucky sounds worthwhile for this tale of a brother and sister abandoned in the woods by a desperate, poverty-stricken father. (The contemporary analogy being made is with the unaccompanied children sent alone across the U.S.-Mexican border from troubled countries to the south). In the play, Hansel and Gretel are taken in by a blind Mountain Woman (read witch) who looks on them mostly as dinner.

l-r, Angela Giarratana and Sarah Zinsser in *Hansel & Gretel Bluegrass* at the 24th Street Theatre.

Aside from Hansel (Caleb Foote) and Gretel (Angela Giarratana) and the witchy Woman (Sarah Zinsser), another player is a radio jock known as The Duke, who acts as a kind of down-home narrator, seen exclusively on video and played by *The West Wing*'s Bradley Whitford. The equally prerecorded musical spine is bluegrass music smartly delivered, but also only on sound and video, by the Get Down Boys (Israel Parker, Mark Cassidy, Scott Gates and Even Winsor-bass). This includes some traditional American tunes and hymns, with Giarratana's Gretel singing quite a few of them *a cappella*.

But the production values are a bit shaky and the message less clear this time around. A reason for the video and the bare bones feeling is the need to make the production portable for touring. We get it. But at least for this initial in-theatre run it would have been nice to have those Get Down Boys get down as living, breathing beings. Opening weekend, the pacing of the 75-minute show was sluggish, and the three live performers came across as under-rehearsed or under-invested. It does not help that Bryan Davidson's book is spoken in a heavily accented drawl that's often hard to grasp.

The set by Keith Mitchell, with lighting by Dan Weingarten, feels more cut-rate than creative, including a water well that plays a central role and is an awkward solution to the story's resolution. Complex projection work by Matthew G. Hill feels tentative, and the tricky sound and light cues that sub for props don't always hit their mark.

Beyond those physical challenges, there is the moral of the story. It's muddy. The intent of *Hansel & Gretel Bluegrass* is to address the issue of child abandonment, but the children here are betrayed not just by circumstance, but also by adult *behavior*. So the takeaway for the kids in the audience is more complicated.

Bradley Whitford as The Duke in *Hansel & Gretel Bluegrass* at The 24th Street Theatre.

The production needs to find a key to making the action morally clearer and as artful and entertaining as it aspires to be. There is room and time to smarten things up and this is a company and a director, Debbie Devine, that know how. Reflection, time and a little tightening have been known to work wonders.

Photos by Cooper Bates

WHAT: *Hansel & Gretel Bluegrass*

WHERE: 24th Street Theatre, 1117 West 24th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90007.

WHEN: Saturdays, 3 and 7:30pm; Sundays, 3pm. Dark Nov 26 & 27. Ends Dec. 11.

HOW: Adult tickets, $24; under 18, $10; seniors, students, teachers, $15; North University Park residents (with ID), $2.40.

Top image: l-r,Caleb Foote and Angela Giarratana in Hansel & Gretel Bluegrass at the 24th Street Theatre.

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