



Houston Grand Opera Unveils Enchanting New Production of Hansel and Gretel by Renowned Puppeteer Basil Twist

Perfect Holiday Treat for the Whole Family Opens December 1, 2006

Houston, TX (October 5, 2006) – This holiday season, Houston Grand Opera (HGO) stages a spectacular new production of Humperdinck's beloved fairy tale opera *Hansel and Gretel* featuring artists from the HGO Studio and members of the HGO Orchestra and Children's Chorus. Eleven public performances, December 1 – 23, will offer ample opportunities for Houstonians to enjoy this holiday treat. The Production is directed and designed by America's premier puppeteer Basil Twist, whose works have dazzled audiences across the continent (New York, Washington D.C., San Francisco, and Montreal) and in Europe (France, London and Munich). Called "true magic" by the New York Times, Twist's work fuses music and puppetry into spellbinding theatrical experiences. His largest puppet for *Hansel and Gretel* will be a giant witch built by the Jim Henson Company, and Twist will build the remaining puppets himself, including several marionettes and bunraku puppets.

Hansel and Gretel showcases artists from the internationally acclaimed HGO Studio, one of the world's finest programs for opera's future stars. Irish mezzo-soprano Fiona Murphy and American soprano Rebekah Camm star as the brother and sister who get lost in the woods and are captured by the Witch, sung by American baritone Liam Bonner. American soprano Jennifer Root and American bass-baritone Ryan McKinny sing the Mother and Father, and Russian soprano Albina Shagimuratova sings the Sandman and the Dew Fairy. Russian mezzo-soprano Maria Markina and American Soprano Alicia Gianni will sing the title roles for three performances, plus a student matinee.

Twist leads the creative team, with lighting by Gordon W. Olson. HGO's new Head of Music Staff Kathleen Kelly makes her house debut conducting her new chamber orchestration of the familiar score. Children's Chorus Master is Karen Reeves. The English translation is by Cori Ellison.

Hansel and Gretel opens on Friday, December 1, 2006 at 8:00p.m. Further performances are on December 7, 13, and 20 at 8:00p.m., December 3 at 1:30 p.m., and December 10, 17, and 23 at 1:30 p.m. and 7:00 p.m..

Wortham Center Tree Lighting

Houston Grand Opera, Houston Ballet and the City of Houston unite to benefit the Star of Hope Mission (celebrating its 100th anniversary serving Houston's homeless population) at the Wortham Theatre Center's annual tree lighting ceremony, November 22, 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Guests will interact with costumed characters from the HGO's *Hansel and Gretel* and Houston Ballet's *Nutcracker*. Suggested donation: non-perishable food items to ensure a successful holiday season for Star of Hope, during which they will serve nearly 100,000 meals. Admission is free.

Family Opera Tea:

This holiday season, treat your family to an experience they'll never forget. Bring your children backstage to interact with the puppeteers, have their photo taken with the Witch, enjoy refreshments, and put their creative talents to work decorating gingerbread boy and girl cookies. Houston Grand Opera's Family Opera

Tea is on Sunday, December 3, following the Hansel and Gretel matinee. Tickets are \$25; for information or tickets call 713-546-0277 or email gpircher@houstongrandopera.org.

About the story:

Hansel and Gretel have been sent by their mother into the forest to pick strawberries for supper. When their father learns of this, he panics because he knows an evil witch lives in the forest. They immediately go in search of the children. Meanwhile, Hansel and Gretel enjoy their berry-picking until night falls and they realize they are lost. A Sandman lulls them into a sweet slumber, during which they are watched over by fourteen Angels. The Dew Fairy awakens them in the morning, and they see a beautiful gingerbread house surrounded by gingerbread children. This is the Witch's house, and when Hansel and Gretel begin to nibble on it, the Witch captures them, planning to bake them into gingerbread. But Hansel and Gretel push her into her own oven, breaking her spell. Mother and Father arrive and everyone celebrates.

About the opera:

Englebert Humperdinck began composing the music for Hansel and Gretel at the request of his sister, Adelheid Wette. The project originally involved setting four folksongs, but he received such enthusiastic support from his family that he turned the work into a full-blown opera. Hansel and Gretel was scheduled to premiere in Munich in December 1893; however, the singer performing Gretel fell ill. Opening night was not only postponed but transported to another city (Weimar), another conductor (no less than composer Richard Strauss, who pronounced the opera a masterpiece), and a different cast. In spite of the premier's shortcomings – this time, the Hansel became ill, so the Gretel singer shifted to the Hansel role while another singer took over the part of Gretel on short notice – the charm of the opera completely won over the audience. Hansel and Gretel quickly made its way into other theatres; within a year, it had been seen in more than 50 theatres in Germany. It was the first complete opera to be broadcast on radio (from Covent Garden in 1923) and the first to be transmitted live from the Metropolitan Opera (1931).

About the artists:

This season, Irish mezzo-soprano Fiona Murphy (Hansel), a third-year artist with the HGO Studio, sings Zerlina in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Fox Golden-Stripe in Janacek's *The Cunning Little Vixen*. Last season, she sang Cherubino in the alternate cast performances and the Miller Outdoor Theatre performances of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, the Madrigal Singer in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, Mercedes in Bizet's *Carmen*, and Venus in Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*. In the 2004-2005 season, she sang Kate Pinkerton in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, The Fox in Rachel Portman's *The Little Prince* and Arete/Megaera in the world premiere of Mark Adamo's *Lysisitrata*. She received her master of music degree from the Curtis Institute of Music and received her bachelor of arts degree in English and music from the University College Dublin. Ms. Murphy has performed with the Royal Irish Academy Opera, Opera Ireland, Co-Opera Ireland, The Wexford Festival Opera, and the Opera Company of Philadelphia. In summer 2006, she sang Eurydice in Telemann's *Orpheus* and Stephano in a staged concert of Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette* at Wolf Trap Opera. In summer 2005, Ms. Murphy participated in the Operalia competition in Madrid, was a finalist in the Hans Gabor Belvedere Singing Competition in Vienna, and performed recitals in Ireland. She has also won vocal competitions throughout Ireland.

Moscow native mezzo-soprano Maria Markina (Hansel, December 10, 17, and 23 matinees) is a first-year artist with the HGO Studio. This season, she will sing the Maid in Simon Boccanegra and Lapak and the Woodpecker in Janacek's *The Cunning Little Vixen*. She studied piano for eight years at the Fredric Chopin Music School. From 1997 to 2002, she studied at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts with Professor A. B. Titel, and studied voice with E. T. Sarkisyan, graduating with honors. During her time at the Academy, Ms. Markina took part in performances at the K. s. Stanislavsky and V. I. Nemirovich-Dancenko Theatre, singing Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and Brittan's *Albert Herring*. She joined Moscow's Novaya Opera Theatre in 2002. She has performed the roles of Olga in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, Feodor in Mussorgsky's *Boris Gudunov*, Lel' in *Snow Maiden* and Dunyasha in *Tsar's Bride* (both by Rimsky-Korsakov), and Naina in Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmila*. Ms. Markina has taken part in performances of special recitals entitled "Bravissimo," "Rossini," and "Maria Callas." She recently performed the role of the Third Lady with director Achim Freyer in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. Ms. Markina won first place in HGO's 2006 Eleanor McCollup Competition for Young Singers.

Soprano Rebekah Camm (Gretel), a second-year artist with the HGO Studio, was born in Manhattan. This season, she will sing Chocholka in Janacek's *The Cunning Little Vixen* in addition to Gretel. Last season, she sang Micaela in the alternate-cast performances of Bizet's *Carmen*, was heard in Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*, and sang Barbarina in the Miller Outdoor Theatre performances of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. She studied under renowned soprano Shirley Verrett at the University of Michigan and

did graduate work in vocal performance at DePaul University. She sang Lady Billows in Britten's Albert Herring, Micaela in Carmen and Electra in Mozart's Idomeneo at DePaul Opera Theatre. She has sung the Baker's Wife in Sondheim's Into the Woods and was soprano soloist with the Northbrook Symphony Orchestra. In summer 2006, she was the soprano soloist in Bach's Coffee Cantata at the Aspen Music Festival and also with Apollo's Fire in Cleveland. Ms. Camm was a finalist in HGO's 2005 Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers. Her other awards include third place in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and the annual Rose McGilvray Grundman Scholarship, awarded by the American Opera Society of Chicago.

Soprano Alicia Gianni (Gretel, December 10, 17, and 23 matinees), a native of Whidbey Island, Washington, is a first-year artist with the HGO Studio. This season, she sings the Rooster and Jay in Janacek's The Cunning Little Vixen in addition to Gretel. She earned her bachelor of music degree at the University of Washington and an artist diploma degree at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. Her operatic roles include Marenka in Smetana's The Bartered Bride, Lauretta in Puccini's Gianni Schicchi, Elisetta in Cimarosa's Il matrimonio segreto, Infantin in Zemlinski's Der Swerg, Ms. Poe in Argento's The Voyage of Edgar Allen Poe, and Micaela in Bizet's Carmen. She has performed the title role in Puccini's Suor Angelica in concert and has given a partial performance of Mimi in Puccini's La Boheme in Lucca, Italy. She was recently a member of the Florida Grand Opera Young Artist Program and made her mainstage FGO debut as Countess Ceprano in Verdi's Rigoletto. She was the soprano soloist in the Mozart Requiem with the Palm Beach Symphony Orchestra. Ms. Gianni won second place and the Audience Choice Award in HGO's 2006 Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers, and she received an Encouragement Award in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions in 2003 and 2005. She is making her HGO debut.

Soprano Jennifer Root (Mother) returns to the HGO Studio as a fourth-year artist and she also sings the Forester's wife in Janacek's The Cunning Little Vixen this season. Her roles at HGO have included Innkeeper/Nurse in Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov, Ottavia's Nurse in Monteverdi's The Coronation of Poppea, Marcellina in the Miller Outdoor Theatre performances of Mozart's the Marriage of Figaro, Sappho in the world premiere of Marka Adamo's Lysistrata, and A Shepardis in Janacek's Jenufa. Ms. Root received her undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at San Antonio, and has done graduate work at the University of Texas at Austin. She was a studio artist at Chautauqua Opera in the summers of 2002, 2003, and 2004. She has sung Madame Flora in Menotti's The Medium, Olga in Hehar's The Merry Widow, Mrs. Ott in Carlisle Floyd's Susannah and Martha in Gounod's Faust. In summer 2006, she sang Lady Billows in Britten's Albert Herring at Aspen Opera Theater, and was a winner in the Aspen Music Festival's Mozart Aria Competition. Recent awards include the Dallas Opera Guild Vocal Competition, the Shreveport Opera Singer of the Year Competition, and the Palm Beach Opera Competition. Ms. Root won third place in HGO's 2003 Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers.

Bass-baritone Ryan McKinny (Father), a second-year artist with Houston Grand Opera Studio, sings Pietro in Verdi's Simon Boccanegra, Masetto in Mozart's Don Giovanni, Ramfis in the alternate cast of Verdi's Aida, and the Badger in Janacek's The Cunning Little Vixen this season at HGO. Last season, he sang Figaro in alternate-cast performances and Miller Outdoor Theatre performances of Mozart's the Marriage of Figaro and performed in Bizet's Carmen, Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov, Puccini's manon Lescaut and Monteverdi's The Coronation of Poppea. In November, he sings Der Tod in Viktor Ullmann's Der Kaiser von Atlantis conducted by James Conlon in a special performance in Houston; he previously sang the role under Mo. Conlon at the Spoleto Festival in Italy. Other credits include his Carnegie Hall debut in Handel's Messiah (Musica Sacra Orchestra), Prince Gremin in Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin (Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, Miguel Harth-Beoya); Sparafucile in Verdi's Rigoletto (Aspen Opera Theater Center, Julius Rudel); and Sam in Leonard Bernstein's Trouble in Tahiti (Juilliard Opera Workshop). He was the soloist in the world premiere of Henrik Strinberg's I Thought Someone Came with the New Juilliard Ensemble at Alice Tully Hall. This past summer, he sang The tutor in Rossini's Le Comte Ory and Figaro at Wolf Trap Opera. Mr. McKinney won third place in HGO's 2005 Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers.

Baritone Liam Bonner (Witch), a second-year artist with the HGO Studio, is a native of Pittsburgh. This season, he will also sing Wagner in Gounod's Faust and Harasta in Janacek's The Cunning Little Vixen. Last season, he sang Count Almaviva in the alternate cast and Miller Outdoor Theater performances of Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro, Moreales/Dancaire in Bizet's Carmen and Liberto in Monteverdi's the Coronation of Poppea. He received his master of music degree from the Manhattan School of Music and his bachelor of fine arts degree from Carnegie Mellon University. Mr. Bonner's opera credits also include the title roles in Mozart's Don Giovanni and Puccini's Gianni Schicchi, Belaev in Lee Hoiby's A Month in the Country, Bob in Menotti's The Old Maid and the Thief, Eisenstein in Strauss' Die Fledermaus, and Sam in Bernstein's Trouble in Tahiti. In summer 2005, he performed with San Francisco Opera's Merola Opera

Program. In summer 2006, he sang Sid in Britten's *Albert Herring* at Aspen Opera Theater, and was a winner of in the Aspen Music Festival's Mozart Aria Competition. He has been the baritone soloist in Orff's *Carmina Burana*, and has sung with the Pittsburg Symphony, Filharmonie Hradec Kralova (Czech Republic) and with Opera Theatre of Pittsburg. Mr. Bonner won the Audience Choice Award in HGO's 2005 Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers.

Soprano Albina Shagimuratova (Sandman/Dew Fairy) is a first-year artist with the HGO Studio and a native of Tashkent, Uzbekistan. This season, she also sings Frantik in Janacek's *The Cunning Little Vixen*. She studied voice and opera in the Kazan State Conservatory. She graduated with honors from the Moscow State Conservatory. In 2004, Ms. Shagimuratova joined the Moscow Academic Theatre as soloist, performing leading roles including Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata*, plus *The Swan* in *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* and the Queen of Shemakha in *The Golden Cockerel*, both by Rimsky-Korsakov. She has performed the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* with The Grande Opera of Kazan. Ms. Shagimuratova has toured to U. S. and Europe with these same companies. From 2003 to 2006, she participated in The International Voice Institute. She has given recitals at the S. Richter International Festival in Tarusa, as well as Yaroslavl, Kazan and Moscow. She has appeared often in concert and oratorio performances throughout Russia and Eastern Europe, featured as soloist in works by Mozart, Mahler, Beethoven, Rossini, Faure, and Lloyd Webber. Awards include the Vinas International Competition for Singers, and the M. Glinka International Competition of Opera Singers. This marks her HGO debut.

A third-generation puppeteer, Basil Twist (Director and Set/Costume Designer) became the only American to graduate from *EEcole Superieure Nationale des Arts de la Marionnette* in Charleville-Mezieres, France, one of the world's premiere puppetry training programs. His *The Araneidae Show* has been presented in the International Puppetry Festival at The Public Theater (New York), has toured internationally, and won a 1997 Bessie Award and a Citation of Excellence from UNIMA (the Union Internationale de la Marionnette). In 1998, he received a Drama Desk Award nomination for Theatre Couture's Off-Broadway hit *Tell Tale*, and he premiered his *Symphonie Fantastique* at New York's HERE Arts Center, which garnered Twist a Drama Desk nomination, an UNIMA Citation of Excellence, a OBIE Award, and an America Theatre Wing/Hewes Design Award and has toured to San Francisco, Montreal, Washington DC, France, London, Munich, and back to NY (Lincoln Center and Dodger Stages). His Lincoln Center-commissioned *Petrushka* premiered in New York in 2000, was awarded a 2000 UNIMA Citation of Excellence, and has appeared in Michigan, in Connecticut, at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival (Massachusetts), and at the Ravinia Festival (Chicago). Twist's *Master Peter's Puppet Show* with Eos Orchestra premiered in New York and traveled to the Ravinia Festival and to The Cleveland Art Museum. He developed the puppetry for Paul Vogel's new play *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, which received its world premiere at Trinity Repertory Company (Rhode Island) in 2003 and went on to *The Vineyard* (New York) and *The Long Wharf* (New Haven). He was the underwater puppetry consultant on the film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. His *Dogugaeshi* was awarded a 2003 Bessie, and his staging of Repighi's rarely performed *La Bella Dormente Nel Bosco* (*Sleeping Beauty of the Woods*) premiered at the Spoleto Festival USA (2005) and went to Lincoln Center Festival. *Red Beads*, with director Lee Breuer and composer Ushio Torikai, premiered at the Skirball Center (New York) to rave reviews. Twist is the director of The Dream Music Puppetry Program at HERE Arts Festival in New York City. A 2006 Guggenheim fellow, he is making his HGO debut.

Gordon W. Olson (Lighting Designer) is in his third season as the lighting supervisor for Houston Grand Opera. At HGO, he has designed lighting for the HGO Studio's 2005 scenes program and Concert of Arias – *Splendor in Red* and the Miller Outdoor Theatre performances of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* in 2006. Other credits include the Texas Salutin' Hoedown for the Houston Children's Chorus; *Vampires*, *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Peter Pan*, *Gianni Schicchi*, *Suor Angelica*, and several pieces for Sharir + Bustamante Danceworks at University of Texas – Austin, where he received his MFA in theatrical design; and *Angels in America* for University of Arizona, where he received his BFA. At HGO, he has assisted lighting designers such as Peter Kaczorowski, Duane Schuler, James F. Ingalls, Nigel Levings, Paul Palazzo and Ken Billington. He also designed lighting for the 2003 summer concert series with Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble.

Kathleen Kelly (Conductor) is jointly HGO's head of music staff and the music director of the HGO Studio. She has served as assistant conductor, coach, and prompter at the Metropolitan Opera from 1998 to 2006, coaching major German Pieces such as Berg's *Wozzeck* and Lulu, Strass' *Elektra*, and Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Lohengrin*, *Parsifal*, and the Ring Cycle, plus Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, the world premiere of Tobias Picker's *An American Tragedy*, and the Met premiers of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and William Bolcom's *A View from the Bridge*. This summer at Berkshire Opera (a summer festival), she conducted her new arrangement of *Hansel and Gretel*, which HGO will revive for this production. Las

summer at Berkshire Opera, she conducted *L'elisi d'amour* and was named the company's music director; since 2003, she has conducted there and directed the company's resident artists program. She has also worked with Seattle Opera, Opera Australia, and Glimmerglass Opera, and she has coached under Andrew Davis, Donald Runnicles, Valery Gergiev, Charles Mackerras, and HGO's Patrick Summers, with whom she worked during her apprenticeship in San Francisco's Merola Program. After finishing the program, she joined the coaching staff at SFO (1993-1998) and conducted two Western Opera Theater tours. She has worked with many renowned singers, including Thomas Hampson, Ben Heppner, Jane Eaglen, Wolfgang Brendel, Placido Domingo, James Morris, Deborah Voigt, Karita Mattila, Renee Fleming, and Susan Graham. A native of Minnesota, Ms. Kelly is an active recitalist and has taught master classes at Baylor University, Towson University, University of Michigan, and the Peabody Conservatory.

This is the twenty-sixth production native Texan Karen Reeves (Children's Chorus Director) has prepared the Children's Chorus or child soloists since 1991. Operas she has prepared for HGO featuring a children's chorus without complementary adult chorus are Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1993), Humperdink's *Hansel and Gretel* (1997), and the world premiere of Rachel Portman's *The Little Prince* (2003) and its 2004 revival. As a part of HGO's Education and Outreach Department, Ms. Reeves also directs the HGO High School Voice Studio, a one-year scholarship training program for high school seniors preparing for further music study. The High School Voice Studio is now in its seventh year and has been instrumental in placing participants in some of the best universities and conservatories around the country. Ms. Reeves also directs HGO's summer opera camps for children and teenagers. She has sung with the HGO chorus since 1990.

All performances of *Hansel and Gretel* are held in the Wortham Center's Cullen Theater, Texas at Smith. *Hansel and Gretel* is sung in English.

The Wells Fargo Pre-Curtain Lecture Series takes place forty-five minutes before each performance. Guest speakers present as twenty-minute informal lecture in the orchestra level of the Cullen Theater. These lectures, free and open to all ticket holders, are intended to enhance the audience's enjoyment by preparing them for the production they are about to attend.

The Wortham Theater Center features wheelchair access to both theaters, with a choice of seating locations and ticket prices. An infrared listening system, underwritten by Shell Lubricants, is available and free of charge at all performances. Please call HGO's Customer Care Center at 713-228-OPERA (6737) or 800-62-OPERA (800-626-7372) for details. Descriptive services for persons with impaired vision are available with 48-hour advance reservations. Call HGO Education and Outreach at 713-546-0230 for details. Individual tickets for *Hansel and Gretel*, starting at \$40 (inclusive of all city surcharges) are on sale now. Tickets are available at www.houstongrandopera.org and by telephone at 713-62-OPERA (800-626-7372) 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday-Friday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, and 12 p.m.-4 p.m. Sunday. (Sunday hours apply only during repertory periods.) Tickets are also available at the Houston Grand Opera Box Office (in the lobby of the Wortham Theater Center) 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. The Box Office operates on Sundays only if there is a performance, opening at 12:00 p.m. and closing after first intermission.

Student and senior citizen rush tickets are available at the box office all day or by phone until 4 p.m. on a day-of basis only. Tickets are subject to availability—one ticket per ID. Student tickets are \$15 and \$35 depending on seat location. Senior tickets are 50% off the regular prices in the Orchestra section only. To check availability or to buy rush tickets, please call (713)-228-OPERA or 1-(800)-62-OPERA the day of the performance. For weekend performances, call the Friday before the performance to check on availability.



The Jim Henson Company has remained an established leader in family entertainment for over 50 years and is recognized worldwide as an innovator in puppetry, animatronics and digital animation. Best known as creators of the world famous Muppets, Henson has received over 50 Emmy Awards and nine Grammy Awards. Recent credits include the Emmy® nominated "Sid the Science Kid," "Dinosaur Train," "Wilson & Ditch: Digging America" and "Pajanimals." Features include "The Dark Crystal," "Labyrinth," "MirrorMask," and "Unstable Fables" and television productions include "Fraggle Rock" and the sci-fi cult series "Farscape."

With additional locations in New York and London, The Jim Henson Company is headquartered in Los Angeles on the historic Charlie Chaplin lot, complete with soundstage and postproduction facilities. Independently owned and operated by the five adult children of founder Jim Henson, the Company is also home to Jim Henson's Creature Shop™, a pre-eminent character-building and visual effects group with international film, television and advertising clients, as well as Henson Recording Studios, one of the music industry's top recording facilities known for its world-class blend of state-of-the-art and vintage equipment. The Company's Henson Alternative brand has recently launched the national tour of "Stuffed and Unstrung," a live puppet improvisational show named one of the top 10 "Best Stage Shows of 2010" by *Entertainment Weekly*.

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