

Theatre IV 1999-2000 CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE



Hansel and Gretel

Book and Lyrics by Douglas S. Jones

Music by Ron Barnett

SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

Hansel and Gretel are brother and sister in a very loving but very poor family. Times are particularly hard because Poppa broke his leg recently and hasn't been able to earn his usual woodcutter's wages. There's not much money to buy food and everyone is hungry, but they try to make do with what they have.

Gretel confesses that she has always been afraid of the dark. Darkness brings witches, Gretel fears, and witches steal children. Poppa, with great conviction, tells stories of witches and black cats. But because Momma wants her children to sleep peacefully and without fear, she makes Poppa tell a nicer story. Poppa sings a song of a wonderful house made of gingerbread and candy. There is more to the song, but Hansel and Gretel fall fast asleep before it is finished.

The next morning, Momma sends the children off to pick berries, equipped with a berry basket and bread for their lunch. Poppa tells them that if they stick to the forest path they will have no trouble finding their way home safely.

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But Hansel has another plan. He wants to leave the forest path and find that house made of gingerbread so that he and Gretel can bring home lots of food for the family. The trick is in convincing Gretel, who wants to be a good girl and obey her parents. He tells Gretel that they can leave a trail of bread crumbs to help them find their way home, and she finally gives in.

Unfortunately, Hansel's bread crumb idea doesn't work. A flock of birds eat the crumbs, leaving the children lost, cold and hungry. When darkness comes, the children are still lost and Momma and Poppa search for them. The Dark tells the children that they needn't fear the nighttime, and gently puts them to bed on the forest floor. They sleep soundly knowing that the Dark will be watching over them throughout the night.

While the children sleep, a coven of witches gather to sing and dance in a wicked frenzy.

The next morning, when the Dark has left and the sun has taken its place, Hansel and Gretel find the gingerbread house. Forgetting his manners, Hansel begins to eat everything in sight. Just as Gretel joins in the feast, the witch appears, disguised as a sweet old lady. She lures the children into the house with promises of even more goodies and then reveals herself in all her wickedness.

The witch locks Hansel in a cage and instructs Gretel to fatten him up. Gretel gives her brother food, but tells him not to eat it. The witch quickly grows frustrated with Hansel's failure to gain weight, and sets her sights on Gretel instead. But Gretel manages to outsmart the witch and push her into the roaring flames of the oven.

Momma and Poppa arrive at last. Hungry as they are, the family decides that they want no part of the tempting gingerbread house goodies. They decide that as long as they stay together, they will get by somehow, and they begin the journey home.

The entire cast gathers onstage for the finale:

Remember: In the dark, or scary weather, just hold hands and stick together.

Bread crumbs make a lousy map. Candy houses could be traps.

Things aren't always what they seem. Bye for now, and pleasant dreams.

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BACKGROUND: THE BROTHERS GRIMM

Hansel and Gretel is just one of hundreds of old German folk tales collected and published by two scholarly brothers in the early 19th century.

Between 1807 and 1814, the Grimm brothers, Jakob and Wilhelm, collected the tales mainly from friends and acquaintances who lived in and around Kassel, Germany. They worried that fewer and fewer people could tell the tales accurately, since many of the tales were passed down orally from generation to generation. Their goal was to preserve the tales in written form as an expression of the German culture and spirit. Jakob wrote, "It is high time that these old traditions were collected and rescued before they perish like dew in the hot sun or fire in a stream, and fall silent forever in the unrest of our days." The first volume of Grimm's Fairy Tales was published in 1812 and by the last edition of 1857, 210 tales had been collected.



The most famous Grimm's Fairy Tales include "Little Red Riding Hood," "Snow White," "Rumpelstiltskin," "Sleeping Beauty," "Cinderella," and "Rapunzel." If not for the visionary scholarship of the Brothers Grimm, we might not know any of these stories today.

Both Grimm brothers were born in Hanau, Jakob in 1785 and Wilhelm in 1786. They were educated at the University of Marburg, where they became interested in philology, the study of language as it relates to human culture and history. Jakob published an important book called *Deutsche Grammatik* (German Grammar), which for the first time set forth a strictly scientific grammar for all the Germanic languages. This work, in which language is considered not as something static but as something ever growing and closely bound up with the life and destiny of the people who speak it, proved revolutionary in the field of philology. The brothers also contributed pioneering work to a German dictionary which was not completed until after their deaths.

The brothers worked together in complete harmony. They spent all their lives under one roof, sharing books and other property, a happy partnership that even Wilhelm's marriage did not change. Wilhelm, the sicklier of the two, died in 1859 and Jakob died in 1863.

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BACKGROUND: FACTS ABOUT GERMANY

Since *Hansel and Gretel* is a classic German folk tale, this Theatre IV production may whet students' appetites for more information about Germany itself. The following selection of topics may help them begin to make connections between *Hansel and Gretel* and broader aspects of German geography and culture.

Education in Germany

German children of Hansel and Gretel's age are required by law to attend school. From the age of six to fourteen, they must spend four years at a primary school. Followed by one of several secondary school options, depending on whether they wish to pursue a vocation or a university degree. According to the German constitution, all students must also receive religious training until the age of fourteen. Almost all German students get a summer vacation that lasts about six weeks.

Kindergarten is a German tradition, as well as a German word, that has been borrowed by many different nations. Between the ages of three and six, a German child might attend a kindergarten run by local governments, churches, private companies or other groups; kindergarten is not officially part of Germany's public school system.

The German states were among the first in the world to set up a public education system for all children. Apparently the system is very successful, because Germany currently boasts a literacy rate of greater than 99 percent.

German Food

At the beginning of *Hansel and Gretel*, the children and their parents are so hungry that they sing a song about their favorite foods. Their fantasy meal is heavy and rich, like much traditional German food.

Many German diets are high in starch. The ever-present noodles and dumplings of southern German dishes are replaced by potatoes in the north. In addition, Germans eat bread at almost every meal. Processed meats and fish are also classic German fare: pickled, smoked and marinated meats are popular, as are the famous German wurst sausages.

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(liverwurst, knockwurst, etc.) Top all this off with plenty of rich German beer, and add a sweet German pastry for dessert, and you have a diet that is not very healthy.

During the 1960's and 1970's, German doctors and health officials began a major campaign to improve German dietary habits. The traditional German diet, they said, sometimes leads to obesity and a variety of health problems. Today, many Germans (like many Americans) are trying to eat more fruits and vegetables, and cut down on fatty meats and fattening beer.

A Famous German Forest

It is not surprising that much of *Hansel and Gretel* takes place in the forest, or that the children's father is a woodcutter, because forests cover about one-third of Germany's total area.

The famous Black Forest (or Schwarzwald, in German) stretches out beside 106 miles of the Rhine River in southeastern Germany. Named for the dense growth of fir and spruce trees that block nearly all the sunlight, the Black Forest is a very popular German vacation spot.

The region is noted for its mineral springs, lumber production and granite quarries. The tradition loving people of the Black Forest are famous for manufacturing beautiful toys, cuckoo clocks, radios, and musical instruments.

Unfortunately, air and water pollution threaten the health of all of Germany's great forests. During the 1980's, Germany joined other European nations in taking the first serious steps to diminish environmental pollution.

BACKGROUND: WITCHCRAFT

The witch that Hansel and Gretel encounter is part of a great tradition of witches in literature, stretching way back to Greek tragedy and right up through to *The Wizard of Oz* and contemporary horror novels.

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From the earliest times, people in all parts of the world have believed in witches. From the late Middle Ages to the early 18th century, vehement opposition to the witch cult was demonstrated throughout Europe in public trials and executions. In the United States, witch fears reached their height near the end of the 17th century in Salem, Massachusetts, where more than 20 people were executed as witches and many more were tortured.

The most common idea of a witch is one who uses supposed magic powers to harm people or damage property, having received these powers from evil spirits or perhaps the Devil. In some cultures, however, witches are thought to be capable of doing good deeds as well as destructive ones. For instance, a witch in Africa or the West Indies might be called upon to provide a love potion or cure a sickness with a spell or incantation. Today in the United States, there are people who consider witchcraft an organized religion devoted to nature worship, and who meet regularly in covens (groups of 13 or fewer members.)

The word witch comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *wicca*, meaning wise one or magician. Originally, a witch could be either a man or a woman. Over time, however, only women came to be considered witches, while men with similar powers were called warlocks or wizards.

Cats—especially black cats—have long been associated with witchcraft. Hansel and Gretel's father summons up this ancient popular notion when he tells the story of the cat who was really a witch in disguise. In the superstitious Middle Ages, people killed hundreds of thousands of cats because they associated them with the Devil. Many experts believe that the destruction of so many cats led to a huge increase in the rat population of Europe and contributed to the spread of the bubonic plague (which was carried by rat fleas.)

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A VERY TASTY HOUSE

Gingerbread was a popular dessert in Germany when the Brothers Grimm recorded the tale of *Hansel and Gretel* in the early 1800's and it still is today. Gingerbread can take many different forms: light and spongy, rich and sticky, or the biscuit-like variety commonly used to make gingerbread people and gingerbread houses.

The following is a simple recipe for one kind of gingerbread:

Ingredients:

1/2 cup shortening	1 teaspoon nutmeg
1 cup sugar (white or brown)	2 teaspoons baking soda
2 eggs	1 1/2 teaspoons ginger
1 teaspoon lemon rind	1/2 cup boiling water
2 cups flour	1/2 cup molasses

Directions:

Cream shortening and sugar. Beat in eggs and add lemon rind. Sift remaining dry ingredients together, and add them alternately with the liquids to the shortening/sugar mixture. Beat until blended. Bake in a greased 8x11 inch pan in a 350 degree oven for about 40 minutes.

Try it with applesauce or whipped cream!

DISCUSSION/ACTIVITIES

1. Discuss the brother/sister relationship in *Hansel and Gretel*. How do Hansel and Gretel get along with each other? Do they ever fight or disagree? Do they take care of each other or protect each other from danger? Do you think the story would be different if they were both girls or both boys? What is fun about having a sibling, and what is difficult about it, if anything? Encourage students to share examples from their own family lives.

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2. The world of *Hansel and Gretel* is full of things that children might commonly find frightening: witches, the Dark, black cats, the deep forest. Why are these things scary to some of us? How do Hansel and Gretel handle some of their scary situations? Are scary things in plays, books and movies any different from the scary things we might encounter in real life? It's natural to be frightened sometimes; even adults are often frightened of something. Discuss strategies for dealing with the scary things we all encounter.

3. Use *Hansel and Gretel* to explore an assortment of important safety and health issues. For instance, do the children behave wisely when they wander off the forest path and enter the home of a stranger? What should we do if we ever become lost in an unfamiliar place? Who are the appropriate people to turn to for help? What do we do if we are approached by a stranger? Kitchen safety and good nutrition are other possible discussion topics. How do we behave around hot ovens and stovetops? A house made of sweets may sound like a tasty idea, but would that be enough for a healthy diet? What makes a well-balanced meal, and what are some healthy snack ideas?

4. The Brothers Grimm collected folk tales like *Hansel and Gretel* by talking with people. Before the Grimms, many of these stories had never been written down; they were passed from generation to generation orally, or out loud. In the play, Poppa tells a story to the children about cats and witches, a story that perhaps he heard from his own grandfather. Encourage students to share stories that they have heard from their parents or grandparents.

5. As a related physical exercise, have students play "telephone" to explore how a story might change as it is passed from generation to generation. Have students sit in a circle and designate one person the "story starter." The story starter should come up with a very simple one-sentence story and whisper it to the person seated next to them. That person then whispers it to the next person, and so on. When the circle is complete, have the last person report on his or her "version" of the story. Is it at all different from the original story?

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Theatre IV along with Theatre IV's ArtReach is the second largest theatre for young audiences in the nation and is the Children's Theatre of Virginia. We encourage your comments about *Hansel and Gretel*, please send your letters to:

Theatre IV, 114 West Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23220

If you need to reach Theatre IV by phone, please call **1-800-235-8687**.

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