

Hansel and Gretel

There was great family excitement in St Michael's Theatre for the New Ross Pantomime Society's presentation of Hansel and Gretel. It was a Gala Night and the Holy Family Confraternity Brass Band entertained the capacity crowd from the auditorium. The settings by Terry Brennan were such a visual treat and a Castle set at the end was a wow. Paul Malone's lighting was bright and very atmospheric when required. Seamus Power as Musical Director kept the pace moving and Willy McCormack was a whizz on the drums, underscoring the many knocks, bangs and crashes during the fun-filled show. Eileen St Ledger and The Costume Warehouse worked colourful wonders on a range of costumes and Denise Bennett White worked miracles with her makeup team.

Carmel Rowe directed with an assuredness that impressed and she left opportunity for some funny ad-libs and asides that the audience loved. There were local politicians present in the audience and the banter was good and added much to the enjoyment. Anne-Marie Cooney Stafford brought excellence and verve to the choreography and many routines were fast-paced and exciting. A Material Girl routine with the Dame was a wow with Nigel O'Neill and Keith Flanagan showing their paces, alongside the young Material Men, Harry Stafford (son of Bill and Anne-Marie, who had all the moves and the family confidence), David Ffrench, Cian Griffin, Conor Kutay, Josh Quinn, Michael Fleming and Eoin Dowling.

Terry Brennan was, as ever, the Dame for all-seasons as Dame Widow Cranky. His ad-libs and getting lost with great asides worked a treat and the audience reveled in his mayhem. Karen Kiely as Hansel and Kerrie Campbell as Gretel endeared themselves to the audience and were integral to the story. Shane McDonald shone as Karl the Woodcutter and Samantha Gibson was captivating as Anna, his scheming wife. Sean O'Brien was splendid as Glock and Mick Doyle was equally impressive as Spiel and Huntsman. Keith Flanagan was majestic as King Fredrick, and Melanie Cleary was smashing as his Queen. Paddy Butler was regal and charming as Konrad and Carrie McCracken was fun as Christine.

Johnny Aylward was excellent as Willie the pig farmer, and Jennie Kehoe was wonderful as Heidi and she brought great vivacity to the part. Lillianna Rice was spooky as Satan the Cat and Kasey O'Connor stole the show as Blue Bird, such was her confidence and vocal ability. Joe Malone was splendid as The Witch, and delivered menace with pizzazz, and sang with style and personality. At the end of Act One he flew into the flies on his broomstick, much to the delight of the audience.

New Ross know how to do panto and sent their audience home happy and excellently entertained.

Michael Hunt

Waterford theatregoers might be impressed to know that Michael Hunt, who brought opera and spectacle to Waterford, directed the Humperdink opera Hansel and Gretel in Bolzano, Italy last year and it has been announced as one of the 10 Best Opera Productions in Europe by the Italian Press. This was an impressive achievement up there with productions from La Scala, Le Chatelet, and Dresden. Michael Hunt, as he did in Waterford, showed that it is possible for smaller organisations to scale the heights. His Tosca in Cathedral Square and in the Theatre Royal was an example of that flair and ability.

Sodium Party

It was good of Garter Lane Arts Centre to host a showing of a new Irish film, Sodium Party, written and directed by Michael McCudden, and starring two young Waterford girls, Bronagh Sheridan (14) and Caoilfhionn Hanton (15). They are grandchildren of Waterford sporting personality Johnny Cleary. Caoilfhionn is the daughter of Beauty Team founder Sarah Jane Hanton.

This feature-length film premiered in Cork in October last at the Indie Cork Film Festival to moderate reviews. It is complex in its deliberately oblique and hazy storyline, of Claire, a student in Dublin or Bray, who gets involved with Danny, who introduces her to drugs, that at one level cause her to have flashbacks to a time when she was growing up in an idyllic place,

but her father was troubled and took his own life. This traumatic scene we see early in the opening credits, and we also learn that young Claire (Bronagh Sheridan) has an imaginary friend, Hannah (Caoilfhionn Hanton). The early parts of the film have a beautiful ephemeral, floating almost drug induced quality.

In Claire's mind Danny becomes her dead father, as well as a liberating rogue spirit, in an autumn of love and mind altering events. McCudden handles the work well and manages to introduce a series of interconnected strands, and repeating events, with nice little twists or differences. On one level, Sodium Party is the name of a rock band, on another it is a series of experiments with water and sodium metal to produce erratic but visually appealing explosions and in another way sodium compounds are used in the treatment of psychosis, dementia, and bipolar illness.

The success of this film is in the visual beauty, the natural quality of the two Waterford teenagers and the luminous look of Slaine Kelly as Claire. James Corscadden looks magnetic as Danny. I loved the control McCudden uses to give shape and mystery, and dreamy passages, with a further twist, when Hannah returns, and then the double whammy of possibility that Claire is really Hannah.

I liked the piano effects soundtrack, and the connections to David Lynch films and television work, and in a small way I saw a connection to *The Turn Of The Screw* (the Henry James novella).

Cassidy's Cross

Last year, when I reviewed Waterford-born writer and playwright Tom O'Brien's novel, *Confessions of a Corner Boy*, I was only beginning to appreciate how prolific an author he is. Another of his novels, *Cassidy's Cross*, is now available as an e-book and it is wonderful how O'Brien has embraced this modern technology. Before Christmas the actor Damien McDonald, who performed in two significant plays last year, Denise Quinn's *The Bluebell Stop* and *On The Razzle*, both at Garter Lane Arts Centre. He also appeared in a selection of one-acts and extracts, performing a monologue from O'Brien's play on the women in Brendan Behan's life. I didn't get to see it, as it was in that theatre up Andy Jordan's Lane that seems to operate on a shoestring, and has no box-office person to speak of.

Cassidy's Cross is set in a fictional area of Doonbay in 1960s Co Waterford, near Tramore, that is mentioned. It seems to be a composite place of the imagination, but I sensed it was Bonmahon. The story it tells is about small town spites, morality and the 'haves' wanting to get more and the 'have nots' simmering for petty revenge and drink-fuelled vandalism.

O'Brien draws his characters well in a spent copper-mining area where prosperity could come again, with the advent of another mining operation that would change the landscape, feeding the need for building materials, that would decimate a local feature but generate employment. This is still a topical issue.

This is not an environmental story, but a flesh and bloody set of conflicts, tinged by greed and hypocrisy, where the local priest is trying to keep a community alive by organising dances, with the help of a local and ambitious politician, a devious and amoral school teacher, who has hidden secrets. There is also the farmer turned business entrepreneur who competes with the teacher for the hand in marriage of a female teacher, who has ideas of her own.

For me she is the central character of this explosive story, more so than the local tearaways, James 'Ringyboy' Ring and his older brother Johnny, who is home on holiday from an uncaring London. The story held me, with its dramatic turns and twists, as you would expect from a good playwright. I also enjoyed trying to match locations from the chapters to local landmarks, like where an old lady sold dillisk above a small town.

This year Tom O'Brien will have a collection of short stories out and I look forward to attending at least one of his plays in the not too distant future.