

HANSEL & GRETEL

THE ROYAL NEW ZEALAND BALLET'S END OF YEAR TREAT

By Leah Maclean

The Royal New Zealand Ballet (RNZB) are seeing out 2019 with *The Ryman Healthcare Season of Hansel & Gretel*, a fairy tale production that is drizzled in surreal sweetness and original edge. The production, commissioned with Artistic Director Patricia Barker at the helm, is the first full-length ballet of RNZB dancer and Choreographer in Residence Loughlan Prior.

The tale is as many will remember it, two children wander into the woods and discover, to their adolescent delight, a house made of gingerbread and sweets. But the house is owned by an unscrupulous witch who wants nothing more than to eat the children, only to have them escape her clutches by pushing her into the flaming oven intended for their demise. It's a cautionary tale with a satisfying conclusion.

The RNZB version of the fairy tale classic has been created as an amalgamation of *Hansel & Gretel* iterations, with an original score by composer Claire Cowan and set and costume design by Kate Hawley (*Crimson Peak*, *Mortal Engines*). Audiences can expect a production of "peaks and troughs", true to the original story which is laced with elements of both darkness and delight - Loughlan likens it to an epic live action Disney film. "My main goals for the production are to take our audience on an epic fantasy journey into the unknown", he explains, "and have something that will appeal to every type of person, whether you're a ballet fan or just want an entertaining night at the theatre".

The story of *Hansel & Gretel* is one that has been close to Loughlan's heart from childhood and one that he is thrilled to be adapting for the stage. The story has seldom been performed as a ballet, giving Loughlan and his collaborators a lot of creative agency; "we've developed our script from scratch, keeping in all the beats that everyone remembers - the witch, the gingerbread house, the breadcrumbs, the cage - but then we've put our own quirky, pop-culture references in".

Choreographically *Hansel & Gretel* is a genre fusion, a style that is characteristic across Loughlan's body of work - with particular affinity toward contemporary inspired ballet and a little musical panache. When asked about the challenges of committing such diverse choreography to an iconic story Loughlan explains that the flow has been fairly straightforward, which he largely attributes to the gift of time for "pre-visualisation" and Claire's musical prowess. "The music has been the blueprint for the ballet; it's the glue that holds everything together. The music and choreography should exist in tandem; it should feel like they couldn't exist without the other".



CLAIRE COWAN AND LOUGHLAN PRIOR

In this day and age adapting much loved tales into any other medium can be risky and must certainly put a lot of pressure on the adapter to 'get it right'. Loughlan explains that the key to good storytelling (particularly in a ballet where there is very little spoken word) is to have the broad picture clear in one's mind from the beginning and to pursue feedback from outside parties. "One of the developmental processes Claire and I went through was to ask what peoples experience with the story was; simply asking what their first thoughts were when hearing *Hansel & Gretel*. It's interesting what people remember from that story... more often than not people would say the gingerbread house and the witch, they didn't even think about Hansel and Gretel!" Being able to satisfy those memories and successfully weave in unique new elements has been an exciting challenge for Loughlan and his collaborators, and it's one that has made this production larger than life.

Hansel & Gretel is set to premiere on Wellington's stage on 6 November and then heads on a nationwide tour until 14 December. Loughlan can't wait for the whole thing to come together and enthusiastically encourages people to book their tickets to the enchanting new work.

LOUGHLAN SAYS MYSTERIOUSLY, "THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAIL, THERE ARE A LOT OF SURPRISES IN *HANSEL & GRETEL*..." ■

The Royal New Zealand Ballet Ryman Healthcare Season of Hansel & Gretel
6 November - 14 December nationwide tour
Tickets on-sale now