

“WE’RE CELEBRATING PEOPLE’S JOURNEYS IN LIFE, AS WELL AS THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITY.”

“Opera is always changing, so it’s exciting to be on the forefront of that change,” said Sandra Bernhard, the newly-appointed director of **Houston Grand Opera’s** HGOC. Inspired by the pillars of communication, community and cooperation, HGOC is the opera company’s new initiative to provide opportunities for observation, enjoyment and participation in the creation of art for the entire Houston community. The goal of the program is to employ “methods of creating a community through opera,” says Bernhard.

The initiative aims to bring new programs to the Houston community, including *Song of Houston*, which has been underway since the spring of 2007. Susan A. Elliot, Houston Grand Opera’s manager of planning and special projects, said that “the project came to be after General Director Anthony Freud was inspired by a story told to him by a Houston community member. The woman’s maid had immigrated to Houston by walking from El Salvador with her child. Many other people in Houston have made similar extraordinary journeys.”

Song of Houston’s events and programs include Writers in the Schools, a photography workshop produced in collaboration with the National Geographic Society, traveling exhibits of photography and visual art created by community members, a special section of the company’s Web site and continuing education courses for adults.

At the core of *Song of Houston* is *The Refuge*, a full-scale musical work for the stage that celebrates the journeys of six different cultural groups that have become parts of the Houston community. Written by composer Christopher Theofanidis and poet Leah Lax, *The Refuge* will unite hundreds of performers from the six focus communities, including a Vietnamese dan bau player, a Russian Jewish bayan player, and an Indian qaw’wali singer, with the orchestra, chorus and children’s chorus of the Houston Grand Opera, as well as the artists of the Houston Grand Opera Studio. Before its premiere on November 10, 2007, each of the six movements of the piece will be performed in the communities that inspired them. “We’re celebrating people’s journeys in life, as well as their cultural identity,” said Elliot. Additionally, one of the two complete performances of the piece will be a “thank you” concert expressly for all of the people who contributed to *The Refuge* with their time, stories and music. 🎶

— Megan Young



Houston Grand Opera’s 2006 production of Humperdinck’s *Hansel and Gretel*. Photo by Brett Coomer.