

Embarking on LA Opera's *The Ring*

By Robert F. Adams / Special to CASA

A DAUNTING TASK, I decided to throw myself into witnessing LA Opera's massive \$32 million production of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, Richard Wagner's masterwork. Audiences must be possessed in order to sit through 16 hours plus of non-stop magical music and four separate operas that include *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Gotterdammerung*. This is a seminal production in LA's cultural history, and this production is a first for Los Angeles, and marks a huge effort, even entailing a 14 million dollar loan from the LA County supervisors.

The production has been controversial, splitting audiences and critics alike, separating those who prefer a traditional Viking helmet and spear affair from those who prefer post-modern interpretations. The production values at LA Opera definitely lean toward a post-modern mythic quality, as envisioned and shaped by Achim Freyer the director, and James Conlon the conductor.

The production even encouraged protests on opening night, with anti-Wagnerian groups singing and waving banners in front of the arriving audience, angered that the Nazi-associated Wagner and his work were being sponsored in part by the City and County. I wonder if they were aware that LA Opera's version of the *Ring* would have been called "Degenerate Art" by the Nazis as the visual and symbolic approach puts a large distance between a version Hitler would have approved of.

The Dorothy Chandler Pavilion has some weak sound spots at the back and center parts of the stage and the extreme verticality of the seating balconies, however, the production designer and director played

against the condition, delivering a wide cinematic horizontal view. A scrim at the front of the stage is almost always present, allowing for filmed projections of symbolic images, separating the audience from the performers. The musicians were beneath the stage, becoming a hidden presence, somewhat muffling the music.

The fantastical flying props, the masks and puppets, along with the other-worldly and grungy costumes, tell cyclical themes of greed, corruption, pride, love, and

betrayal, as well as self-destruction. Set within a symbolic circle that spins at key moments, the characters appear as if on a giant broken clock, gliding by the audience in an eerie manner reminiscent of a very dark cartoon.

Art references abound from de Chirico surrealism, to Dali, to Walt Disney and Ancient Greek prototypes, all the way to George Grosz and Picasso's blue period. The director Achim Freyer was a protégé of Bertolt Brecht and his singular storytelling delivers on unusual levels. The visual styling

is unforgettable, and these qualities make this *Ring* production very distinctive from others. The visual devices mirror the musical themes, extensively clever and perplexing at other moments. The feeling of all this has a timeless quality, that is both tragic and triumphant.

There are demands and challenges made upon the production team by director Freyer, including a team of shadowy dancers that move costumes and props around on a stage which is unbelievably steeply raked. Everything that moves on it, even in the darker lighting moments, presents danger to dancer/actors, singers, and props. Except for brief intermissions, *Das Rheingold* and

Die Walküre go on for close to seven hours. There are numerous elements that must be coordinated, with many theatrical balls in the air, including music that never stops being played. The company at LA Opera does a superlative job in sustaining the effort.

The characters are often beautifully realized by the cast of this "music drama" (as Wagner referred to his *Ring*). Highlights included multiple characterizations by the mezzo-soprano Michelle de Young, who has a voice that floats rather than being pushed; the incredibly dramatic work of one of Opera's greatest tenors, Plácido Domingo (playing Siegmund in *Die Walküre*); the weightiness of Eric Halfvarson playing various giants and thugs; the stillness and strength of Linda Watson who sings protagonist Brünnhilde; the creepy movements and vocal stylings of Richard Paul Fink, playing the nasty Alberich (the dwarf who causes the problems by stealing the gold from the Rhine in the first place); the magical Graham Clark as Alberich's brother Mime; and the rich vocals of Vitalij Kowaljow, playing Wotan, the one-eyed chief-god. The Valkyries and Rhinemaidens are wonderful too – flowing through beautifully-lit fabrics and costumes with their sorrowful laments. They are treasures to witness.

Reactions were interesting and the audience was filled with people in the music and theatre worlds. "It is like looking through the eyes of someone else," Lillian Groag, an accomplished opera and theatre actress told me. "It's not how I see it, but now we know how Achim Freyer sees it."

Alan Fletcher, the director of the Aspen Music Festival stated to me that "this *Ring* is really starting to come together. It takes this long for companies to find their way into this body of work." (LA Opera has been staging parts of the *Ring* over the past year and one half, leading up to this presentation of the whole cycle).

I chatted with actor Christoph Waltz (who won an Oscar this year and visited the Santa Barbara Film Festival) after the first two operas. When asked how he liked it, he stated, "I do not know yet, we only are half-way there!"



Die Walküre



Das Rheingold

Photos by Monika Rittershaus

This is a show not to be ignored by fans of theatre, art, or opera. Performances go on through the end of June, and there are tickets available for all four opera performances. If you decide to attend, you will be spending interesting evening (s) in this strange world.

Performances of the Ring cycle continue through the end of June. **Das Rheingold** 7:30pm Fri, June 18th; **Die Walküre** 12pm Sun, June 20th; **Siegfried** 12pm, Sun, June 13th & 6pm Wed, June 23rd; and **Götterdämmerung** 6pm Wed, June 16th & 5pm Sat, June 26th. Tickets range from \$50-\$275. For more information call 213-972-8001 or visit LAOperaRing.com.

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Marquis Seminar- Wagner's Mythology: Roots and Inspiration at The Getty Villa, Auditorium on Saturday, June 19th from 9am to 4:30pm. The Getty Villa is located at 17985 Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu. Tickets are \$95/\$75 students (includes lunch). For more information call (310) 440-7300 or visit www.getty.edu/museum/programs/courses/ring_festival.html.