

LA Opera 'Ring' Reviews

May 5, 2010

Dear Reader,

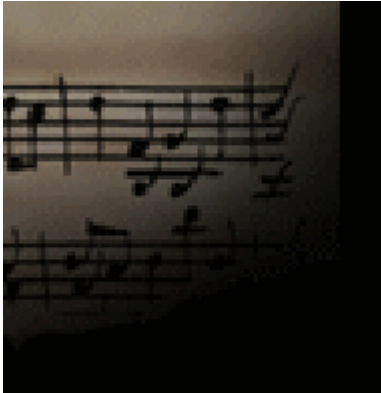
Here are my reviews of LA Opera's "Ring": "Das Rheingold," "Die Walküre," "Siegfried" and "Götterdämmerung." You will discover that I became more critical of the production as the operas progressed, thus turning to humor to express my dismay with "Siegfried" and "Götterdämmerung."

I decided against attending the performances in June 2010. Once was enough for me. The Achim Freyer production coupled with LA Opera's financial woes will have a negative effect on LA Opera's image and programming for years to come.

My condolences.

Carol Jean Delmar

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Los Angeles Opera's 'Das Rheingold': This was not the Wagner I know.



(Left to right) Vitalij Kowaljow (Wotan), Gordon Hawkins (Alberich), and Arnold Bezuyen (Loge). Photo By: Monika Rittershaus

**RICHARD WAGNER
DAS RHEINGOLD
LOS ANGELES OPERA
FEBRUARY 21, 2009**

By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

“Der Ring des Nibelungen” is considered to be one of the grandest and greatest musical masterpieces ever written. Richard Wagner not only composed the score, but he wrote the libretto and created the vision as well. Over the years, his works have been analyzed and scrutinized by scholars, musicologists, and average opera-goers, to better understand the symbolism inherent in the plots and characterizations, and to better comprehend Wagner, the man, and how, when and where his personality, character and opinions have been reflected in his works. Known as an avid anti-Semite, Wagner’s works have been unofficially banned in Israel, and many in the American Jewish community refuse to attend his productions, saying that his prejudicial persona is evident in his plots, characters and music. After all, Adolf Hitler idolized him for his theories on Germanic supremacy. Yet Austrian-Jewish singers and musicians who were persecuted during the Nazi era continued to perform his operas in Europe and America after World War II, and their children and relatives listen to his music for inspiration today. Some cannot disconnect the man from his work, while a much larger majority acknowledges his genius.

Every noteworthy opera company in the world has aspirations of producing the “Ring,” which is a tetralogy of four operas that delves into the strife that occurs when some mythological gods and mortals vie for the ownership of a magical golden ring that can give them almighty power. Many opera companies budget to produce each opera individually, but a company isn’t on the map until it has produced all four operas consecutively within a week. Los Angeles Opera is producing the “Ring” for the first time: two operas this season; two next season; and then three complete cycles in May and June 2010. And the price tag is \$32 million.

The first opera, “Das Rheingold,” had its unveiling at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on Feb. 21. And judging from the first production, it is possible that this “Ring” will become part of operatic history, never to be forgotten. Then again, maybe some people would like to forget it. I for one am a traditionalist. Yet I came out of the Pavilion confused. This wasn’t my vision of the “Ring,” or Wagner’s for that matter. He was interested in Germanic, Scandinavian and Icelandic sagas and was influenced by “Nibelungenlied,” an epic poem discovered in the mid-1700s which was likened to a German “Iliad.” He studied the Nibelung myth and Old Norse Eddaic poetry before writing the text. He was also influenced by the political turmoil in Europe beginning with the revolution in 1848 France. He used the mythology to create a new kind of theater where he could reflect on society’s contradictions in a suggestive, philosophical, poetic way. He wrote “Siegfrieds

Tod" first, the last of the operas in the cycle which was later renamed "Götterdämmerung." Then he developed the librettos for the other three. Having been influenced by the Greek festival of Dionysus and the playwright, Aeschylus, he wrote the tetralogy as a festival or communal event rather than as a piece of art which was only meant to entertain. He was also very specific about the locales. The first scene in "Das Rheingold" begins with three maidens swimming in the Rhine River when they encounter the Nibelung dwarf, Alberich. It is set in ancient times with mythological characters that politically and socially rebel.

Traditionally, the singers are dressed in costumes that reflect the period. And likewise, the sets are suggestive of the locales as described by Wagner, so although we realize we are seeing mythological characters, they still seem real to us. We can see them interact, and we can see their faces. But lately there seems to be competition between opera companies to determine which can create the most outlandish production. Forget about taste – it's all about fantasy.

Los Angeles Opera introduced us to some very interesting creatures in Elliot Goldenthal's "Grendel," "The Magic Flute" and "Hansel and Gretel," and we met the most freakish one of them all in "The Fly." Robert Wilson has drawn us into his vision with "Parsifal" and "Madama Butterfly," where characters prance around the stage like robots wearing pasty white makeup and costumes out of ancient Greece. So now it is director-designer-painter Achim Freyer's turn. He has more money though, so the result is a more technologically-astute version of the same thing.

The stage is raked without a curtain but with scrim hanging downstage to reflect light projections of various hues. There are no set pieces per se. Everything is very symbolic and minimalistic. A huge round turntable that moves up and down enables set changes. Elevators are utilized for character entrances while other puppet characters are flown in and out. The modernistic sets create a continual feast of fantasy with avant-garde Brechtian influences. The mortal singers are sometimes thrust behind armor-like embodiments of themselves, or large almost grotesque-looking masks (Alberich). Freia, the goddess of youth, appears as a spirit that seems to rise out of a molded plaster-like violin case that protects her. Loge, the crafty god of fire, appears in a striking red diabolical costume and headdress suited for Halloween. When one giant kills the other, we see blood on a gargantuan hand. The flowing fabric of the Rhine becomes the Red Sea. Salvador Dali -- Eat your heart out!

Los Angeles Opera planned to mount a production created by George Lucas's special effects team a number of years ago, but it was postponed due to setbacks resulting from 9-11. Such a visual experience might have been more enticing to me than the present one because I am not opposed to technical fireworks, but grotesque masks and puppetry seem alien to Wagner's intent. A friend asked me if what we were seeing was Eurotrash. It was definitely in the vein of the dramaturgy now prominent in Berlin. Let's say that it was a sophisticated more tasteful version, except maybe for the inclusion of a prostitute puppet with exceedingly ripe-looking breasts who indulged in a humping party with the Alberich puppet. "That" was Eurotrash.

No, this was not the Wagner I know. I thought I was watching a brand new opera – a grand premiere. The music and story line were familiar, but the surreal staging elements created a completely different effect. It almost seemed futuristic. I mean here were these giants, gods and dwarfs with a miniature Amelia Earhart plane flying from above. Where and when was the action? Maybe this was satire. Maybe this is a satirical “Ring.”

Music Director-Conductor James Conlon stated in his program note that he wanted “a production that respected the infinite power of myth in its rejection of a specific time or place.” Although this production accomplishes that notion, Wagner’s vision was still more specific and realistic. Likewise, in an article in the Los Angeles Times, Conlon said he required that “the visuals not upstage the opera.” Well, they do.

There is so much symbolism to interpret within the confines of Wagner’s intended “Ring” that the audience doesn’t need any more to analyze. Yet I along with my friends were constantly watching what was happening and wondering why it was happening, how it was happening, and what it all meant. Wagner’s music almost seemed incidental to the action, like a film score. Where was that lush orchestration? Where was James Conlon?

The pit was covered, and I finally found Maestro Conlon on screens facing the stage on either side of it. The singers “were” getting some direction. I breathed a sigh of relief. Hiding the orchestra may have been Wagner’s intent, but the acoustics in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion leave much to be desired, so what should have been a dynamic orchestration turned into a sea of muffled sound. Wagnerian singers often worry that their voices won’t project over the orchestra. That was unfortunately not the case here, although their masks might have served as an obstruction. Once when I was supposed to assume that Alberich’s voice was coming out of a puppet onstage, I detected the real Alberich singing downstage left hiding near the wings. Ah, the magic of theater.

As for the singers, I won’t note all of them here because although most of their voices were excellent, the visual effects detracted from the vocal impact. Most of the artists will reprise their roles in the cycles next spring.

Ukrainian bass Vitalij Kowaljow (Woton) instantly had my attention when I heard the dense opulence of his sound. No guttural placement, no wobble – it was sheer heaven to hear a youthful bass that hasn’t had to bear the tides of time. Likewise, mezzo-soprano Michelle DeYoung (Fricka) projected a focused voice of authority. Eric Halfvarson’s dominating tones were ripe and full-flavored as Fafner. Gordon Hawkins, although heard but not seen, captured the vocal complexities of Alberich. Not exactly the dwarf we expected would go for the gold, he was able to manifest Alberich’s temperament in a voice that projected into the hall. The Rhinemaidens blended. We were far more interested in the mirrored double effect they created than in their tone quality. Arnold Bezuyen’s light tenor as Loge was diabolical, although not sufficiently exciting. Some of the other singers displayed too much vibrato for their years. Most of the voices were top notch though, but this was Achim Freyer’s show.

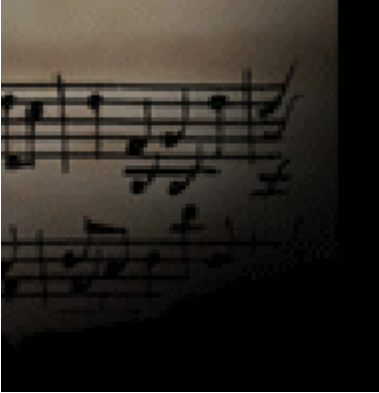
Freyer created an artistic phenomenon that was meant to entertain. I don't think his productions are indicative of the festival spirit that Wagner intended though. This "Ring" will nevertheless be a catalyst for the arts festival in Los Angeles next spring. The economy may determine its success, but the "Ring" nuts -- those who travel around the world to see the "Ring" -- will probably come for sure.

I am not certain that I want to see three more productions cut from the same cloth. I may not want to see the complete cycle. I'm still confused though: In spite of my comments, this "Rheingold" is innovative, inventive, creative and thought-provoking. But that doesn't mean that I have to like it.

"Die Walküre" opens April 4.

Director-Designer: Achim Freyer
Conductor: James Conlon
Costume Designers: Achim Freyer, Amanda Freyer
Lighting Designers: Achim Freyer, Brian Gale
Associate Conductor: Grant Gershon
Concertmaster: Stuart Canin

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Commentary after 'Rheingold': Directors gone wild. It's all about ego!



Dress rehearsal for LA Opera's new production of "Das Rheingold." Gordon Hawkins, center, as Alberich. Photo: Lawrence K. Ho.

By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us
March 1, 2009

Achim Freyer is considered to be a great director and designer. I would call him a proponent of "Regietheater," or "director's theater." He takes artistic liberties and disregards the intentions of composers by imposing his own stage vision upon his singers, musicians and audiences – all for the sake of art.

Historically, Wieland Wagner, the grandson of Richard Wagner, was probably the first to start the movement in Bayreuth after World War II by presenting his grandfather's operas on minimalistic sets, utilizing the grand orchestrations to create epic stagings with visual symbolism. Other visionary directors have followed his lead and apply every imaginable concept to not only Wagner's operas but to the works of Mozart, Verdi and Puccini as well. Examples include turning Simon Boccanegra into a Mafia don, placing "Le Nozze di Figaro" in a Park Avenue apartment, turning Don Giovanni and Leporello into gay lovers, and having King Idomeneo take the severed heads of the Buddha, Muhammad and Jesus Christ out of a bag. The movement, also known as "Eurotrash," has been going strong in Germany, especially in Berlin. There have been Freudian and Jungian "Rings," and a Marxist "Ring" with the Rhinemaidens as whores. Long Beach Opera produced an

adapted, cut version that had a duration of just two nights, and there is an American “Ring” underway in Washington, DC and San Francisco. But all of these productions don’t totally jolt our sensibilities because the characters seem real and interact.

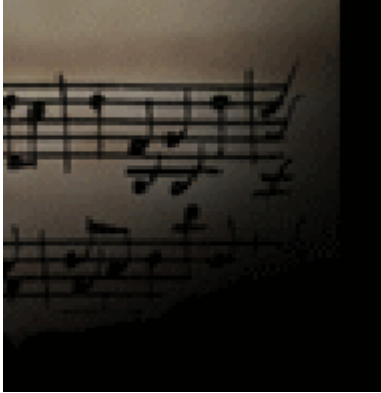
I think that what makes “Regietheater” so controversial today is that opera no longer is about the voices and the music – it has become a director’s medium where the singers become no more than pawns on a chessboard. The directors substantiate their actions with symbolic interpretations, but they totally disregard the composers’ intents and stage directions. Add to this avant-garde and surrealistic visions, and you have “Theatre of the Absurd” opera. I am not opposed to “Regietheater” as a category if it works. But when opera becomes “Theatre of the Absurd,” it doesn’t.

Achim Freyer says in a program note that he has created “timelessness” in his production of Los Angeles Opera’s “Ring,” which was “Wagner’s dictum.” Well, I question him. What I saw in “Das Rheingold” was strange Nibelungs with gigantic papier-mâché masks, gods with white pasty makeup and multiple hands, bald multi-breasted goddesses carrying molds of their bodies in front of them, a prostitute with grapefruit-sized breasts and cherry nipples (which I found offensive), giants who weren’t giants but carried magnifying glasses, gargantuan hands dripping blood, a miniature airplane en route to Valhalla, and more. So is this timelessness? It represents a vision that could never have occurred in the ancient Nordic mythological world that Wagner described. It isn’t a past, present or future vision. It’s a cheap surrealistic, satirical vision. It is anti-Wagnerian and doesn’t work.

Now had Freyer decided to create this vision for the premiere of a new modern opera, it just might have attracted me. I like seeing crazy visions in the name of art. I also am a sucker for magical creatures and puppetry. Even in his “Ring” production, two grandiose giants would have knocked me off my feet. And I also love a great special-effects show – the kind that might have ensued had George Lucas’s team been involved. So although I basically like the traditional, I’m also up for anything modern. But I will never go along with the obscure or bizarre. Anything that mocks a composer’s work, turns singers into pawns so that their singing becomes secondary, insults the intelligence of the operagoer, or moves the audience into the gutter (ie. the prostitute making love to Alberich) – those elements simply don’t work. The defining question for me is: “Does what the director did, fit?” If it doesn’t, then the show doesn’t work.

There are two kinds of great directors. Achim Freyer is a creative artist, possibly a genius, but his productions are all about him. Then there is the director like Peter Kazaras who recently directed the young artists at UCLA and who is also directing productions for Seattle Opera. His is a silent presence. The audience doesn’t even know that he’s there; but, oh, he leaves his mark. His place in the scheme of things is much more humble than Freyer’s. He uses his creativity to enhance the talents of his singer-actors so that they coordinate with the conductor and musicians and shine. His results are just as magical and far more appealing. Now “that” is opera.

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Photo: Monika Rittershaus

Los Angeles Opera's 'Die Walküre': Neither hit nor miss, but it brought the audience to its feet.

**RICHARD WAGNER
DIE WALKÜRE
LOS ANGELES OPERA
APRIL 4, 2009**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

It was almost like a happening. When the curtain figuratively fell on the last act of Los Angeles Opera's opening night of "Die Walküre," the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion audience stood and cheered bravos and bravissimos for 10 minutes straight. So whether I

personally liked it or not seems immaterial. Achim Freyer's production proves that there is a market for a modern "Ring"; old and young Wagnerites will come to see it. Los Angeles Opera is on the map.

But that doesn't change the fact that "Das Rheingold" reminded me of a surrealistic circus show that elicited audience boos. So what makes this "Die Walküre" so different?

There aren't any papier-mâché-masked Nibelung dwarfs in it for one thing, except the ones on exhibit for our memory banks who parade on the edge of the round rotating ramped stage with the grapefruit-breasted prostitute right behind them. The surrealistic aspects cheapen the production, yet the "Star Wars" effects are more in keeping with Wagner's vision, and this is a "Star Wars" "Die Walküre." Although the gods and goddesses are modernistic, we are allowed to see their faces, watch them interact, and we can somehow relate to their emotions. This is due in part to the passionate 68-year-old Latin Italianate heldentenor who defies age with his technique and stamina, and sometimes seems more God-like than mortal. But more about Plácido Domingo later.

In this second installment of the "Ring," we are introduced to Wotan's mortal twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde, who are separated when their mother is murdered. Sieglinde, who is forced to marry Hunding, shelters a stranger, who turns out to be her estranged brother Siegmund. The two fall in love. Hunding discovers that Siegmund is his adversary and a fight to the kill is imminent. But Sieglinde drugs Hunding, and she flees with Siegmund, who has expelled the sword his father left him from an ash tree.

Wotan enlists his favorite Valkyrie daughter Brünnhilde to protect Siegmund, but his godly wife Fricka is opposed to the twins' incestuous relationship and to her husband's adulterous affair with the earth goddess who spawned him the Valkyries. Fricka demands that Brünnhilde facilitate Siegmund's defeat, but Brünnhilde fails to carry out the deed. Hunding kills Siegmund when Wotan shatters Siegmund's sword. Wotan kills Hunding, and Brünnhilde escapes with Sieglinde, who is carrying Siegmund's child. It all culminates in a grand finale when Wotan strips Brünnhilde of her godly powers, places her in a deep sleep, and Loge, the god of fire, surrounds Brünnhilde with flames, to one day be awakened by a fearless hero.

The Achim Freyer production confuses me. In fact, after seeing it, I came home and turned on my video of the 1990 Otto Schenck production, which has been revived at the Met. The Schenck production definitely suits my taste better, but I cannot deny that the Freyer production has validity and appeals to the younger more technologically-oriented generation. The Freyer production is lost without his translation though.

I had a discussion with the young fellow who was sitting next to me. He was enthralled with the vision and viewed the stage as if it were a painting. "We are looking at the brush strokes until the painting is complete," he explained. He spoke of visions and symbols, yet when I asked him what the symbols meant, he had no idea. My sense tells me that Achim Freyer understands his own symbolism, but we in the audience don't. We can appreciate the vision, but what does it all mean? Too much complexity can be a burden

when we have enough on our plate attempting to figure out what Wagner meant.

My neighbor then brought up another point: Every “Ring” nowadays has some sort of gimmick. Modernistic “Rings” are the only productions being performed. It’s great when you have something new to compare to the old, but if you are young and have never seen the old, how can you discern what the composer intended? How can you judge the quality of a new innovative production if you have no idea what the old ones were like? Maybe one day there will be a market for the traditional again.

My neighbor -- a young gifted singer -- also told me that in Europe, singers are directed to somehow act contrary to the inherent emotions that emanate from the libretto and music. For me, that is a grave problem in Robert Wilson productions and now in Achim Freyer’s. For example, Siegmund and Sieglinde stand on opposite ends of the stage. We can’t sense their feelings of love, and love is a great Wagnerian theme in “Die Walküre.” If it weren’t for Domingo’s heartrending tones and the subtitles projected above the stage, we wouldn’t have a clue. It is so difficult for coaches to teach young singers how to put emotion into their voices. I guess these coaches no longer have to -- emotion is becoming passé. With less acting involved, the directors are saying that the music speaks for itself and is accentuated. Maybe, but then it just sounds loud and void of artistry.

THE PRODUCTION

Artist-director Achim Freyer has again utilized a highly raked platform turntable stage with a scrim front. Both stage and backdrop are stripped, and all three acts are gloomy and dark with red, white and blue accents of lighting, costuming and makeup. Spears and swords are represented by lit fluorescent tubes. We see faces akin to Halloween skeletons. Wotan’s head is still caged and sometimes he appears upside down. Siegmund and Sieglinde hide behind molded shells to shield them from harm. Fricka’s arms again reach out with attached appendages, and dancer doubles provide the action the singers cannot. At times non-singing actors walk in slow motion around the circular disc-like clock. Our eyes follow their moves. Act 1 is therefore paced slower than Wagner intended. The Valkyries are costumed in dismal black but wake us up later. At least their wrought-iron bicycle horses attract us with their red flairs when “Die Walküre” crescendoes into a spectacular light show painted over some lush orchestral textures.

The audience could just be responding to the spectacle of it all. Everyone always applauds when the curtain goes up on a new sensational set. Should they be applauding for a set? Probably not. They also get excited when fireworks are sprayed over a grand orchestration at the Hollywood Bowl. That doesn’t necessarily mean that they have discerning taste. I am critically assessing the audience’s response because there were a few boos hiding behind the cheers, and I have my own personal doubts – especially when it comes to the Nibelung dwarfs, the puppetry and masks, and the bizarre costuming that flaunts the female body parts.

THE SINGERS

Overall, the singers were excellent. A more traditional production would have enabled them to show more of their emotions and relate better to the other characters. Each singer

seemed alone onstage. Loudness took precedence over beauty.

One exception was Plácido Domingo who sang Siegmund with ringing focused intensity. His passionate “Wälse! Wälse!” thrilled us. His “Spring Song” held us spellbound. Ukrainian bass Vitalij Kowaljow (Wotan) has a rich voice that stood out above the rest because of its unique quality, but at times it was difficult to figure out where on the stage he was standing and where his sound was coming from. Linda Watson (Brünnhilde) had a slow start but warmed up as the evening progressed. By the finale, she was exuding some robust tones of distinction. Anja Kampe (Sieglinde) gave it her all, which almost seemed to be too much. We missed the humanity in her role. She was trying too hard, pushing too hard. Where was the warmth? Where was the love? Michelle DeYoung was a much more secure presence this time around. Freyer gave her Fricka more flexibility. Eric Halfvarson (Hunding) displayed a well-seasoned voice but one with the beginnings of a wobble. We didn’t get much of a sense of his character, which was probably due to his ostentatious red costume and Freyer’s direction.

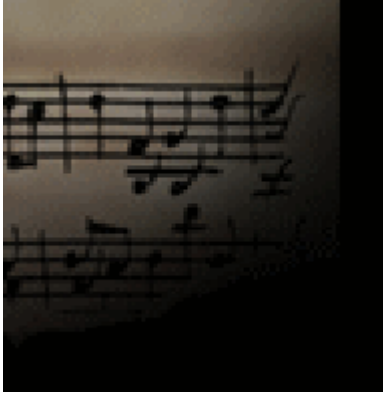
James Conlon led the orchestra with grace and care. At times the music was full-bodied and specific. It didn’t sound muffled as in “Das Rheingold,” but some of the requisite grandeur was still missing.

So was it a hit or a miss? Neither! I reserve the right to stay critical.

Stay tuned for “Siegfried” next fall.

Conductor: James Conlon
Director-Designer: Achim Freyer
Costumes: Achim Freyer, Amanda Freyer
Lighting: Achim Freyer, Brian Gale

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Los Angeles Opera's 'Siegfried': A cross between 'The Muppet Show' and 'Star Wars'



John Treleaven, Siegfried. Photo: Monika Rittershaus

**RICHARD WAGNER
SIEGFRIED
LOS ANGELES OPERA
SEPTEMBER 26, 2009**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

The Dorothy Chandler Pavilion had many unoccupied seats for the opening matinée of Los Angeles Opera's "Siegfried." And by Act 3, there were even more, which prompted

me to begin this review with the sentence: “I hated it.” Or as one famous soprano whose name shall remain anonymous said: “The director is a jerk.” Nevertheless, Act 3 got better.

My reaction didn't surprise me though since I've hated the grotesque papier-mâché-looking masks since the beginning, especially on the Nibelung dwarfs Mime and Alberich who, by the way, have been labeled Jewish caricatures by many a musicologist, and in this instance, their facial features fit the stereotypical allegations. As Wagner describes Jews in his essay “Judaism in Music,” Mime's nervous movements were unappealing and he sang in a jerky annoying fashion. Plus he walked around with what appeared to be club feet. No wonder Siegfried -- the child Mime nurtured and the son of Sieglinde and Siegmund in “Die Walküre” – detested and wanted to kill Mime after finding out that if he didn't do the dwarf in first, Mime would do him in as soon as he killed the dragon who had the gold. Siegfried was a naïve hero-type who looked like a furry bear with bulging muscles and a bushy yellow-blond wig to remind us that he was an Aryan. So he killed the dragon and the dwarf, relieved Wotan (now The Wanderer) of his godly powers; and then he captured the sleeping beauty on the rock surrounded by fire. And it took him five hours with two intermissions to do it.

The raked stage and revolving ramp didn't help matters much. Various characters kept walking around it in slow motion. I didn't know whether I had motion sickness or was simply on a tedious 10-hour flight to nowhere with an incessant need to jump out of the plane. I wasn't sure if what I was seeing was Eurotrash until I saw my friend the prostitute with the big ripe grapefruit breasts, and this time she had some fleshy drooping buttocks as well. And every time we were supposed to think sexy, there were some plump botox-injected red lips in view. Achim Freyer thought of every cheap cliché in the book. Alberich even lit up a cigar.



Linda Watson, Brunnhilde. Photo: Monika Rittershaus.

Since Wotan only had one eye, his second eye was placed strategically where all of us could see it. Each time I glanced at it I thought of the cow's eye being slit in Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's surrealist film "Un chien andalou." I just don't know if this is what Wagner intended when he composed "Der Ring Des Nibelungen." It seemed like I was hearing Wagner's music in the body of another opera. Thirty-two million dollars for a "Ring" that doesn't really have a set. Could some crazy avant-garde costumes and colorfully lit fluorescent tubing cost \$32 million? No, it must have been the turntable, I decided. We certainly didn't get our money's worth with the little dragon who looked like an insect that should have been in LA Opera's "The Fly." I know that director Achim Freyer is a painter, but really, I just laughed when a big red blob popped up onstage so that Siegfried could plunge his sword into it and symbolically kill Fafner. Nothing was real, not even Brünnhilde's intimidating breasts. There were bicycle horses again. The Wanderer sang hidden on the ground while his body stood perched visibly atop a ladder. The concept of seeing double through mirrors was again utilized as a false visual since there was an ensemble cast to create the illusions. And when Siegfried and Brünnhilde finally did get together, they were miles apart.

But there were some redeeming features about this production. I heard that the singers were dismayed with some of the staging and costumes, so sometimes Freyer allowed them to remove their headgear. What an improvement! We could see their faces and hear their voices. And the previously muffled orchestral sound was nonexistent. The orchestral music was ravishing, especially in the third act. Plácido Domingo, James Conlon and Freyer had altered the orchestra pit cover. So that's where the \$32 million went. Just kidding.

The orchestral music was at times enlightening and entrancing, but Wagner's vocal scores never fill my heart like those of Mozart, Verdi and Puccini. Heldentenors are simply hard to listen to. I long for melodies that touch the soul.

It took Wagner almost 15 years to complete "Siegfried." After composing the first two acts, he wrote "Tristan und Isolde" and "Die Meistersinger." Then he wrote Act 3 of "Siegfried" with a new stylistic maturity that more readily affects the senses. The difference in sound is startling. The richness in the latter part of the score paves the way for the opera's climax. With the addition of the two ladies, Brünnhilde and Erda, the plot, sound and vision improve immeasurably, and Wagner's art can more fully be appreciated.

Also in Act 3, much of the lighting was stunning: the colors, patterns, smoke effects and strobe lighting.

But the real reason I attend live opera is to hear the singers. And this production had its standouts.

Vitalij Kowaljow (The Wanderer) has a rich chocolaty sound with authority. He is one of the reasons to attend this "Ring." Oleg Bryjak's bass-baritone as Alberich distinguished

him from the rest. Jill Grove's mezzo (Erda) was voluptuously regal, and Linda Watson's soprano (Brünnhilde) was powerful, focused and confident. Hearing the duets between Kowaljow and Grove, and Kowaljow and Watson made me glad that I wasn't one of those who had walked out.

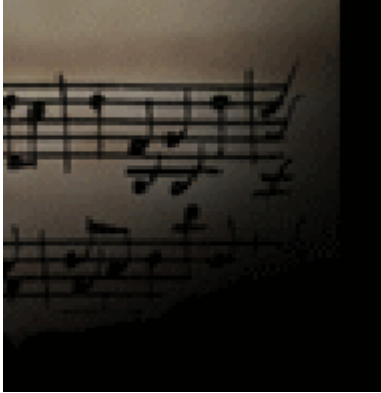
The remainder of the cast was strong as well. The role of Siegfried is long and tiring. John Treleaven's sound had more depth than most. Graham Clark drew a colorful Mime character with flexibility in voice, body and movement, and Eric Halfvarson (Fafner) reminded us that the quality of his sound is singular and lasting, although his character was a bit perplexing due to Freyer's direction. Stacey Tappan's Woodbird was sweet but strident-sounding. The dancers and stunt people were supportive.

A young fellow from Germany was sitting next to me. He told me that he heard someone say that this "Siegfried" is a cross between "The Muppet Show" and "Star Wars." I'm afraid that I concur. I actually detected a bit of the fantasy of "Die Zauberflöte" in it, and sometimes Siegfried acted so childish that I thought I was seeing "Hänsel und Gretel."

Please make no mistake: I dislike this production. It is not classic or historic, and I doubt that other companies will want to rent it, which would have been lucrative for the financially-strapped LA Opera. Producing the "Ring" should elevate a company. This "Muppet Show" does not.

Director-Designer: Achim Freyer
Conductor: James Conlon
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Photo: Monika Rittershaus. Alberich, Richard Paul Fink; Hagen, Eric Halfvarson.

LA Opera's 'Götterdämmerung': Once was more than enough.

**RICHARD WAGNER
GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG
LOS ANGELES OPERA
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By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

I have really had enough of LA Opera's "Der Ring Des Nibelungen."
"Götterdämmerung" is the last opera in the cycle. I was ready to leave after the first two hours but stayed just so I could write this review. Five-and-a-half tedious hours with slow-moving cartoon characters who walked sluggishly on a minimalistic set on a raked stage with a revolving ramp wearing cheap grotesque costumes with masks to create a vision so that when the apocalypse finally came, there wasn't really all that much to

destroy. But I do have to say that I'm glad I stayed until the end because the only creatively stimulating part of the production was the last three minutes when what little there was to destroy was destroyed magnificently -- whisked away to reveal the innards of the stage, the bare grid and lights and the two prompters who had been hidden behind two ravens even though they weren't hidden because I could see them all along. The whole thing was kind of ridiculous, actually, but after five hours and twenty-seven minutes, I was willing to take whatever I could get. I was so glad when it was over that I didn't know if I was applauding because I'd gotten through it, or because the apocalypse was truly what I'd been waiting for. A few lights, a few fireworks, and LA Opera has produced the "Ring." Once was enough for me. My condolences to the people who plan to sit through a week of this when LA Opera presents three cycles beginning the end of May.

When we last saw Siegfried and Brünnhilde, they were in love. I can't for the life of me figure out why. He looked like the Struwwelpeter (Shaggy-Peter) character in the Heinrich Hoffmann children's book, and she looked like a big fat Cher on a bad hair day with ugly breasts Cher would have altered in a minute. Poor Cher. If I had been cast as Brünnhilde, I simply wouldn't have submitted myself to such degradation, but then I guess we're in a recession.

So Siegfried drank the magic potion. (Seems we've been watching a lot of characters do that this season.) Who wouldn't want to forget? Then Siegfried screwed Brünnhilde and went running to Guttrune so that Brünnhilde could be with Gunther. Love and betrayal -- that'll get you nowhere. Then Hagen stabbed Siegfried. We weren't quite sure how it happened or if it happened until Siegfried turned around and showed us a blue thing that was painted on his back. It looked like an eye. How dramatic. Anyhow, Brünnhilde found out the truth and took the ring from Siegfried; the two went to heaven together engulfed in flames; Valhalla became toast; the ring was cleansed and retrieved by the Rhinemaidens, and we were all allowed to go home.

But first I have to tell you about the most ridiculous-looking character that I have ever seen: Hagen. He had two sets of legs: the little yellow ones attached to the front of his costume, and his real legs, which were hidden under black trousers. He walked around with his real legs -- as if we couldn't see them -- and kept rubbing up against props and throwing his fake legs on top of them. Sometimes we really did forget that he was standing tall. Maybe this show should have been staged at the Magic Castle. I guess it was all an illusion.

The Norns were dressed in round robust skirts. And the Gibichungs looked the silliest of all with masks that made them look as if their heads had been bandaged in gauze -- I mean, right out of Rod Sterling's "The Twilight Zone."

Now, I ask you: What is wrong with this picture? You guessed it. All I am talking about is the vision -- about Achim Freyer's mockery of Richard Wagner's "Götterdämmerung." "Götterdämmerung" is an opera with real singers, musicians and a conductor. Pardon me, but I forgot. Now let me refresh my memory.

Although I find Wagner's orchestral scores brilliant and awe-inspiring, his vocals are often an acquired taste. For a newcomer listening to John Treleaven as Siegfried for the first time, the urge to get-up-and-leave must have been difficult to resist since he was forcing and pressing his tones from the onset. Frankly, I didn't think he'd make it past the first intermission. Wagner's vocal scores are difficult to sing, and Treleaven has been vocalizing for weeks, probably excessively and without enough support. But then strangely, he seemed to improve. I wonder what was in that elixir.

Linda Watson as Brünnhilde nevertheless had stamina to burn, at least for an hour past the five-and-a-half hour curtain. Watson is a dominant presence on a Wagnerian stage. She has a big voluptuous voice. It isn't necessarily beautiful in all registers at all times, but it gets the job done in spades. And for Brünnhilde, who could ask for anything more?

Eric Halfvarson's powerful sound was robust and potent but had a great deal of vibrato in it. Alan Held (Gunther) and Jennifer Wilson (Gutrune) sang energetically. Michelle DeYoung as Waltraute should have been heard and not seen.

They were all unrecognizable pawns on a parquet floor. And the more I reflect on Richard Paul Fink who was effective as Alberich, the more I believe he was meant to display the demeanor of the type of Jew Wagner described in his essays. Boy did I hate looking at those deformed-looking dwarves with the papier-mâché masks.

As for James Conlon, he led the orchestra with Wagnerian flair, but although the orchestral sound was persuasive and clear, it was controlled and far from compelling.

It was Freyer's "Ring" through and through. We were observing the colors of his palette. He upstaged everyone and everything in his path, and in a very uncomplimentary way, but then LA Opera paid him to do it.

This "Ring" will hopefully die with its final performance in June. It was a waste of time and money and will have a negative effect on LA Opera's image at home and abroad.

Conductor: James Conlon
Director-Designer: Achim Freyer
Costume Designers: Achim Freyer, Amanda Freyer
Lighting Designers: Achim Freyer, Brian Gale
Associate Conductor-Chorus Master: Grant Gershon
Concertmaster: Stuart Canin