

## A SUPERB **RING** IN SAN FRANCISCO

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San Francisco Opera's new production of Wagner's **Ring**, the three cycles of which have just finished their summer run, was a great success in almost every respect: lovingly conducted by Donald Runnicles, strongly cast both vocally and histrionically, and superbly directed by Francesca Zambello, it proved to be one of the most enjoyable Rings that I've seen in 35 years of attending performances of the tetralogy.

The production was widely spoken of as an "American Ring" which, after I'd seen the second cycle, and half of the third, I thought rather sold it short, or at least was an inadequate description. For this is a Ring which realizes the timeless qualities of the work as well as making reference to a particular period and place. Francesca Zambello is very clear about her intention: "...while the setting of our Ring is certainly grounded in American iconography, it isn't limited to that. Many of our "locations" could be anywhere today." Elsewhere she notes that "The greatness of Wagner's vast world is that it encompasses the past, present and future."

The American period references, however, do certainly provide a fascinating narrative progression from a pristine to a degraded world, ecologically and socially. **Das Rheingold** makes reference to the Californian gold rush era, when Alberich appears with map and prospecting implements at the top of a ravine where the waters gush down into a mist covered river and the female guardians of the gold. Later, the Gods appear as leisured entrepreneurs... Froh and Donner in striped college blazers... admiring the near-finished work of the off-stage Valhalla which eventually is revealed as a thirties American skyscraper. In **Die Walküre**, Hunding's hut is a poor forest dwelling filled with guns and hunting trophies and a trophy wife; the other side of the social coin is Wotan's office, that of an industrial magnate, complete with huge desk and telephone. It shows us the view from Valhalla, a vista of other skyscrapers, already marred by a cloud of pollution. Brünnhilde brings Sigmund the news of his death beneath an abandoned, crumbling freeway, littered with junk, a surreal, de Chirico-like scene made almost beautiful by Mark Mc Cullough's evocative lighting. By **Siegfried**, the degradation of the environment has advanced: in a setting of ugly electrical pylons and piles of rubbish, Mime's "cave" is a wrecked trailer...no sign of a forest here, nor in the second act where we meet Alberich again, now doing it hard, hiding out in the basement of a depression-era abandoned factory, making molotov cocktails. Here, too, Fafner resides in the form of a huge garbage compactor. The sudden appearance of a beautiful forest, comes then as a surprise, which Hans Vaget explains very pertinently as a nostalgic vision of nature now reduced to a mere hallucination. Then, Brünnhilde's rock, modeled it seems on the battlements of San Francisco's Presidio and the Marin headlands, has now been subjected to considerable degradation. Throughout the tetralogy, filmed projections have chronicled the rape of the landscape: pristine gushing waters and the sheer beauty of the first scene give way to extensive logging, devastated landscapes, and parched river beds. By **Götterdämmerung** we are in the computer age, and the Norns handle not the rope of fate but a tangle of computer cables within some vast motherboard.

The design elegance of the skyscraper age has become nouveau-riche display in the Gibichung Hall, all glass and steel, decked with white leather settees with faux-leopard-skin cushions... which causes an amusing reaction from the forest-reared Siegfried when he enters. And in the last scene, the original virginal-white costumes of the Rhinemaidens are now dark and bedraggled as they gather the garbage strewn about the now dry river bed. Well might they sing, “night lies in the depths; once they were bright....” After all this, the final gesture of hope in the midst of this environmental catastrophe, the appearance of a boy who plants a tree downstage, could have seemed like an empty gesture. Yet, timed to the final motive heard in the tetralogy, that first heard when Sieglinde rapturously greets the news that she will give birth to Siegfried (often given the tag “Redemption by Love”, but more properly suggesting rebirth and renewal), the result is extremely moving and echoes the music’s feeling of optimism. The notion of a spoiled world is firmly embedded in Wagner’s text; and if the American references are hardly in the same category, it must be stressed that the results here never seem forced or exclusive of other, broader implications of this vast work.

The real beauty of Zambello’s production, however, is its sure direction of the characters of the drama and their actions. Again, the director makes her intentions clear: “It was crucial for us to place the intimate inside the epic...to balance the larger than life with the personal. Gods, goddesses, creatures, heroes, and mere humans ....as they are transformed, so are we who watch but sense their stories are also ours.” Blessed with a cast who clearly relished her meticulous preparation, Zambello inflects the action with a myriad of details which connect the narrative with our personal experience: we smile at the irony of Froh’s rapturous words describing the newly-sweet air brought by Freia’s return from the giants since they are sung as he embraces the pile of gold which is Freia’s ransom; we enjoy a confidential moment with Mime in **Siegfried** when Wotan, in answer to Mime’s second question, speaks about a “wise Nibelung”, Mime turning discreetly to the audience and pointing to himself with jokey pride; we feel for Brünnhilde as she momentarily falters before the hateful task of telling Siegmund his fate; we warm to Siegfried when, though he clearly has been justified in killing Mime, he nonetheless casts a regretful look at the body of his foster parent as he leaves. There are many such moments where we respond with an empathy strongly elicited by performance and direction. One of the most telling is the moment of Siegmund’s death in **Die Walküre**. Wotan, having dispatched Hunding, goes to the dying Siegmund who now recognizes his father, and extends his hand to the latter’s cheek, the hand gradually sliding down as he falls back dead.

None of this engaging drama is achieved at the expense of the singing. Indeed, the singing is of a very high standard throughout. Prime among these is Nina Stemme’s Brünnhilde. Her engaging performance, ranging from her familiar, comradely, yet rebellious relationship with Wotan, to her human transformation and her dignified final role as the person who “knows all things” is finely portrayed and sung with a beauty of tone and a heroic ring which do not tire even in the taxing last scene. Few sopranos can match this kind of performance. Almost as impressive is Mark Delavan’s Wotan. While the voice is not large, the sound is beautiful and a fine intelligence governs his performance, seen best in the gripping scene of Wotan’s narration in scene two of **Die**

**Walküre**, its tension a telling contrast to the high jinks with Brünnhilde in the previous scene. There is also a nice moment in **Das Rheingold** when Fricka, encouraged by Loge, attempts to cajole Wotan into obtaining the ring held by Alberich: Delavan smiles and gestures in time with the statement of the Ring motif in the orchestra, as if the music echoed his thoughts. Later, when the formidable Fricka of Elizabeth Bishop proves Wotan's match in **Die Walküre**, the singer, emboldened no doubt by her power-dressing costume, relishes the moment, playing her scene to the hilt and dominating the scene vocally. You could hardly imagine a more comely pair of Wälsung twins than Anja Kampe and Brandon Jovanovich and their appearance and dynamic acting are matched by excellent singing, from the latter both heroic and sensitive, from the former the kind of full, rounded tone one hopes for in a Sieglinde. The two Siegfrieds are amazing well matched physically. As the young Siegfried, Jay Hunter Morris gives a superb performance which is all the more creditable given that he emerged late in the production from cover to on-stage singer. Few Siegfrieds have managed so well to balance the character's cruel traits with a loveable boyish innocence and vulnerability, seen as he reacts to Mime's tale of the death of his mother, or his realization that he has finally learned fear on waking Brünnhilde. You could of course claim that Morris lacks the ultimate "heft" for the forging song, but with a performance like this, that is a small price to pay. One looks forward to his visit to Adelaide to sing Captain Ahab in Jake Heggie's **Moby Dick** later this year. Ian Storey, the mature Siegfried, looking very like his predecessor, is almost as good a performer, especially effective as he reacts in wonderment at the vulgar splendour of the Gibichung palace. The voice is now a little rough in places, but it is a fine performance overall. David Cangelosi's scene-stealing performance as Mime, rather than indulging in the bleating tones favoured by many "character" singers, never forgets to sing properly, and is vocally finely matched by the Alberich of Gordon Hawkins. Finally, a mention of the delightful Woodbird of Stacey Tappan (who also appears as Woglinde). Here the Woodbird is visibly very much part of the action, appearing as a charming young girl with bird-like actions. She flirts with Siegfried, encourages his efforts to communicate via the reed pipe, congratulates him as he turns to his horn in frustration, comforts him in his loneliness, and gently chastises him when he seems about to set fire to the bodies of Fafner and Mime.....all combined with spectacularly accurate, beautiful singing. It is a winning idea of director and singer.

Zambello fully acknowledges her indebtedness "to the artists with whom I have collaborated on the evolution of this production". Apart from the fine singers, and the excellent sets and costumes designed by Michael Yeargan and Catherine Zuber respectively, these collaborators include lighting designer Mark Mc Cullough and Projection Designer Jan Hartley. Few production are lit as evocatively as this **Ring**, whether it be the small details tellingly revealed by lighting in the later scenes of the second act of **Die Walküre** or the lovely changes at the end of the first act of that opera when Spring's entry causes the rear walls of Hunding's hut to disappear and the exquisite silver-blue moonlight gradually develops a crimson glow as their passion grows. The projections carry the burden of much of the inter-scene narratives, detailing the Wälsungs' frenzied escape through the forest in hand-held point of view shots, the gradual degradation of the natural landscape, and some of the fire effects. There is a lovely moment during the transition from the Norns' scene in **Götterdämmerung** when

the projected flames guarding her rock just become visible on the front scrim as the clarinet steals softly in with Brunnhilde's motif.

Throughout the performances I saw, the orchestral playing and the conducting were of a very high standard. With Donald Runnicles as conductor, one seldom has niggling misgivings about tempos or dynamics; the whole work seems to flow naturally so that one concentrates on the drama.

In short, San Francisco Opera's new Ring is a dramatic advance on its previous very fine production by Nikolaus Lehnhoff, two cycles of which I saw in 1990. Indeed, compared with the current productions at Bayreuth, Berlin, Vienna, Los Angeles, London, and Toronto, this may perhaps claim to be currently the finest of the lot. Certainly it was a refreshing antidote to the "concept"-dominated productions I saw in Germany in the week which followed San Francisco; there, a single concept or idea, while sometimes interesting, tended to control the work, limiting its scope and challenging the text. In San Francisco, the grounding in American iconography caused few such limitations.