

Rewriting the Plot

Mark Berry is left confused by some of Günter Krämer's directorial decisions in the concluding parts of his Paris 'Ring'

Siegfried. Torsten Kerl (Siegfried), Katarina Dalayman (Brünnhilde), Juha Uusitalo (The Wanderer), Peter Sidhom (Alberich), Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacke (Mime), Qiu Lin Zhang (Erda), Stephen Milling (Fafner), Elena Tsallagova (Woodbird); Orchestra of the Opéra National de Paris/Philippe Jordan (conductor); Günter Krämer (director), Jürgen Backmann (set designs), Falk Bauer (costumes), Diego Leetz (lighting), Otto Pichler (choreography). Opéra Bastille, Paris, 31 March 2011

Götterdämmerung. Torsten Kerl (Siegfried), Katarina Dalayman (Brünnhilde), Iain Paterson (Gunther), Christiane Libor (Gutrune, Third Norn), Hans-Peter König (Hagen), Sophie Koch (Waltraute), Peter Sidhom (Alberich), Nicole Piccolomini (First Norn, Floßhilde), Daniela Sindram (Second Norn, Wellgunde), Caroline Stein (Woglinde); Chorus and Orchestra of the Opéra National de Paris (chorus master: Patrick Marie Aubert)/Philippe Jordan (conductor); Günter Krämer (director), Jürgen Backmann (set designs), Falk Bauer (costumes), Diego Leetz (lighting), Otto Pichler (choreography), Stephan Bischoff (video). Opéra Bastille, Paris, 18 June 2011

If it would be an exaggeration to say that Günter Krämer straightforwardly sets his *Siegfried* in the 1960s, there are certainly elements of that era to the setting, which makes chronological sense in terms of the Speer-like designs for Valhalla at its height in *Die Walküre*. Mime appears to live in a relatively swish, if undeniably bad-taste, apartment. The plant growing there looks as though it might explain a good deal, including the bear's exit through a lift: were both Siegfried and Mime hallucinating? The time-setting makes a good fit with Wagner's conception, too, given that hopes for revolution were still in the air: a *Junger Siegfried* twinned with *les événements* is far from absurd,



Siegfried (Torsten Kerl) mockingly mimics the effeminate gestures of Mime (Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacke) in Günter Krämer's production of *Siegfried*. Photo Elisa Haberer

especially in Paris, though it is a moot point whether Peter Wapnewski's 'rebel without a consciousness' should have lost it through smoking marijuana rather than never having possessed it in the first place.¹ Designs for this act are garish, verging upon psychedelic.

However, a crucial aspect of Mime's portrayal edges us into the 1970s. Perhaps it would be hoping too much for subtlety in this respect, since it might therefore have gone unnoticed, but Mime appears, through Krämer's direction, Falk Bauer's costumes and Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacker's acting onstage, to be an outrageously caricatured homosexual, hand gestures, dancing and all, with definite tendencies towards transvestism at least. (Is that yet another dig at Wagner and his pink silk, I wonder?) Given that (s)he appears as something of a cross between John Inman and Mollie Sugden, I could not help but wonder whether Krämer were a devotee of the 1970s British sitcom *Are You Being Served?* Indeed I half expected Miss Johannes Brahms to enter stage left à la Baba the Turk. The concept takes us away from endless debates, whatever one thinks about them, concerning anti-semitism, and retains the character's outsider status, and actually seems to be permissible onstage, in a way that a 'Jewish' caricature of Mime, were one so inclined, would not be. It also opens up a new angle upon the echt-heterosexual Siegfried's instinctive aversion towards a parent who claims to be both mother and father, though is actually neither, and who certainly has no offspring of his own. While preparing to forge, Siegfried – immediately, one assumes, *bien dans sa peau* – mockingly mimics Mime's gestures; clearly the outcast's place is in the kitchen. It occurred to me that someone with post-modernist inclination towards hyphens and parentheses might have entitled the first act 'Mime: (A) His/her-(s)tory'; it is certainly one way to address the paucity of women in the drama. Perhaps a thesis has been launched. At any rate, a possible way of representing Siegfried's upbringing somewhat overshadows, indeed becomes, the plot.

The Wanderer arrives as a tramp: fair enough. In an interesting touch, he sheds his vagrant's clothes to become a more recognisable chief of the gods as his wager, whose brutality is often glossed over, with Mime progresses. Brutality, in terms of the aftermath of war, is certainly present in Neidhöhle too. The staging of the second-act Prelude is especially interesting. Nude soldiers – although, thanks to Diego Leetz's thickly atmospheric green lighting, it is quite some time before one knows whether they are nude – carry the Nibelung hoard in dragon formation. (One sees what one hears in the music.) The hoard is composed of crates, which, one eventually makes out, have 'Rheingold' inscribed upon them. At the end of the Prelude, the soldiers open the crates, to reveal the weaponry with which the hoard will be defended. *Rentier* capital – Fafner's Proudhonian 'What I lie on, I own' – constitutes power as lethal as Donner's hammer or indeed the machine guns we see. Fafner, when he actually appears, is carried aloft, complete with crown: there is something tellingly phantasmagorical to this portrayal, almost Wizard of Oz-like. And that, of course, is at least part of the key to the Tarnhelm's magic.

If that hits home with considerable dramatic punch, other elements of the production convince less. The Woodbird's representation onstage as another wartime refugee will not please everyone, and it is a decidedly peculiar conception of an unsullied Voice

¹ Peter Wapnewski, *Der traurige Gott: Richard Wagner in seinen Helden* (Munich, 1978), 169.

of Nature. It seems needlessly confused to have her played by an actress, while Elena Tsallagova sings the role – on this occasion, not without uncertainty – offstage. The office environment of the Wotan–Erda scene does no particular harm, but makes no particular point either: it seems somewhat clichéd. However, there is tightening of tension thereafter. The confrontation between Wotan and Siegfried for once genuinely seems a real struggle. Wagner’s emphasis might have changed from his original conception, but this is still the moment when the sword of revolution shatters the spear of state. For all our – and in many respects, the production’s – reluctance to deal with revolutionary heroism, this deed of a Hegelian world-historical hero registers with surprising force. The backdrop to the final scene both confuses and illuminates. By returning us to the *Walküre* and *Rheingold* Speer set, some form of continuity is registered, likewise the changing fortunes of ‘GERMANIA’, now down to only its first three letters. One has to accept that this is just a backdrop rather than Valhalla itself, for the sake of any sense of place.

Genuine dramatic power comes with the idea of having Valhalla’s heroes, old-fashioned in (almost) genuine Teutonic helmets and so forth, onstage above what ought to be Brünnhilde’s rock, ready and yet unable to defend or perhaps even to attain her, unlike Siegfried, the apparent harbinger of a new age – or should that be a New Age? Wotan, or rather, as I discovered at the curtain call, his body double, staggers up the steps, yet has to be assisted by his heroes, and even then it remains a struggle. So the balance or dialectic between the two principal plot strands, if not perfect, is reinstated. Moreover, the spatial separation between Brünnhilde and her old life is rendered glaringly apparent: she is now ‘purely human’, or, as we shall doubtless discover, ‘human, all too human’. However, I did not find much sense of annihilation, whether political or metaphysical, at the end.

The grand denouement was to come three months later. Alas, though Wagner wrote to Liszt in 1853, ‘Mark well my new poem – it contains the beginning of the world and its destruction!’, Krämer’s world came to an end not with a bang but a whimper – and not in the sense intended by T.S. Eliot.² A less period-specific *Götterdämmerung* appeared to have run out of steam, as if to give succour to those followers of George Bernard Shaw who regard the *Ring*’s culmination as its fatal weakness. How anyone reading the score or poem, let alone both together, could possibly think such a thing, I do not know, but it is a point of view, albeit seemingly presented more by default than by design on this occasion. Remaining with Eliot, one might charitably think the scenario a ‘heap of broken images’, though there is no sign of the sun beating here. GERMANIA is now reduced to the shell of a stadium: Nuremberg-like, though there seems to be something of a confusion, admittedly commonly held, between stadium and Kongresshalle. That, alas, more or less seems to be it. There are other touches, some irritating, some not, but I struggled to discern much of an idea.

Hagen is wheelchair-bound: the cliché did no harm and indeed gave physical presence to his ‘degeneracy’, though it is an image as insensitive toward the disabled as Mime’s camp extravaganza is to homosexuals. What really lies behind this confinement, however, is a greater role allotted to Alberich. During the Prologue, Hagen is wheeled

² Letter of 11 Feb. 1853, in *Richard Wagner: Sämtliche Briefe*, i–ix, ed. Gertrud Strobel, Werner Wolf and others (Leipzig, 1967–2000), v.189.

around by an unidentified hooded figure: I thought it might be Hagen's father or mother, though it might merely have been an extra. That figure is present for much of the first act, eventually revealing his identity. So Hagen is doing Alberich's bidding in a far more straightforward way than usual: a pity, since Wagner renders the 'Schläfst du, Hagen, mein Sohn' confrontation so rich in its ambiguity – Boulez describes it with atypical hyperbole as 'amazing' – but never mind.³ Things really fall apart, however, when it comes to the third act. Alberich, not Hagen, stabs Siegfried, but it is not clear what is gained by this. Hagen is merely wheeled off by Gutrune, whereas it is Alberich who returns onstage to deliver the final line, 'Zurück vom Ring!' Alberich is then speared in turn by the Rhinemaidens, and lies dead onstage as the curtain falls. (Siegfried is still there too.) The question 'what happens to Alberich?' is resolved, but instead one might ask, 'what happens to Hagen?' Is there any point in the exchange? So bold a rewriting ought at least to have provoked; here it seems merely haphazard, part of a final couple of scenes which might have arisen had one asked someone unacquainted with the *Ring* to guess 'what happens next?' There are no 'watchers', so crucial to the remnant of society and the possibility of a future, either. Krämer had tended previously to avoid video; now it is all over the place, first for water and fire and then for a bewildering portrayal of a Valhalla-like hero – or is it several heroes? – ascending something akin to a virtual Jacob's Ladder during Siegfried's Funeral March. Is heaven being reinstated, or is it merely a Feuerbachian critique of immortality that is obliquely being reiterated? One is granted no reason to know and, frankly – sadly – little reason to care.

Haphazardness is the impression, moreover, that one gains from the non-appearance of Siegfried and Gutrune at the end of the second act. They are there in the music and clearly should be on the stage: one might argue that musical presence renders visualisation unnecessary, yet I could not help but wonder whether Krämer, in his arbitrary haste to disregard Wagner's stage directions in favour of pretty much anything, had even studied the score. Blood brotherhood is for some reason accomplished as if Siegfried were an unsuccessful vampire; why is unclear. A final case of undue confusion, which I can hardly avoid mentioning, comes at the end of the first act. There are difficulties, of course, in staging the Siegfried–Gunther–Tarnhelm matter, but having Siegfried come along with Gunther, first hiding behind Gunther – one wanted to call out, pantomime-style to Brünnhilde, 'He's behind him!' – and then under the table, merely popping out to grab the ring – now, 'He's behind you!' – only serves to make matters worse, adding to a general sense of tiredness. Whatever the Tarnhelm, actually visible onstage, was supposed to accomplish, it did not, but nor did a critique of its powers seem intended. A weird interpolation beforehand had been some dirndl-clad men dancing during Siegfried's Rhine Journey. It was good to see the Rhinemaidens during that scene, however, affording a sense of place all too often absent elsewhere.

For *Siegfried*, Philippe Jordan seemed to have the 'scherzo' element well in hand. Masculine drive, delineating the trajectory of Siegfried's behaviour, was counterbalanced by a welcome 'French' – perhaps 'feminine' – range of colour in the orchestra. Adorno would surely have applauded the sense of phantasmagoria, which yet did not seem

³ Pierre Boulez, 'A Performer's Notebook', *Orientalions*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, tr. Martin Cooper (London and Boston, MA, 1986), 291.

to be present merely for its own sake. For the most part, the orchestra was on fine form, the Forest Murmurs magical indeed. Moreover, I do not think I have heard more impressively resounding kettledrums in this work than here: not a trivial point in recounting the tale of Fafner. It seemed, however, that the early third-act slackening of tension onstage was mirrored in the pit. The structure of this act is especially difficult to hold together: I have heard far worse, but there were moments of meandering. Worse was to come in *Götterdämmerung*, however. Slowness without direction was the order of the day, a sluggish transition from the Gibichung Hall to Brünnhilde's rock feeling interminable. Yes, there is a sense of world-weariness to this drama, but forward impetus should be difficult rather than impossible. (Again, that is, unless one conceives the work as a failure and wishes to expose it as such.) It has sometimes been alleged that the combined prologue and first act are simply too long, but never does it feel that way in a great, or even good, performance. The Waltraute scene probably came off best, moving between extremes of speed, yet with a proper sense of the whole, rather as if it were a cantata, which in a way it is. It undoubtedly benefited from wholly committed performances on the part of Sophie Koch and Katarina Dalayman. The second and third acts were paced much better, though, sadly, it felt like too little, too late.

Ablinger-Sperrhacker's vocal performance was as impressive as his stage portrayal: *Siegfried's* first act really was Mime's story. His wheedling second-act deceptions were just as impressive, likewise the 'evil stock-jobbers' satire' (Hans Mayer) confrontation with Peter Sidhom's verbally attentive Alberich, who alas sounded somewhat underpowered in *Götterdämmerung*: unfortunately so, given his augmented role.⁴ Juha Uusitalo handled well the changing demands of role and production, both Wanderer and the emerging-returning Wotan finely characterised and well delivered. Stephen Milling's Fafner, however, threatened to overshadow all and sundry; his was an excellent performance in every way. The deep beauty of Qiu Lin Zhang's voice and the dignity of her stage presence made for a notable Erda, though there were moments of less than perfect intonation. Torsten Kerl emerged with considerable credit as Siegfried. His resources, quite understandably, were sapped somewhat during the third act, but he recovered for a powerful final duet. He was overshadowed, however, during *Götterdämmerung*, where it became ever clearer that, despite a thoughtful performance, he is simply not a Heldentenor. In any encounter with Brünnhilde, let alone Hagen, this Siegfried was quite overpowered, for here Hans-Peter König and Dalayman were the undeniable stars of the show. The latter's moments of scintillation that we observed in *Siegfried* blossomed into a truly unhinged *Erwartung*-style account of the scene with Gunther and Hagen: reminiscent of Gwyneth Jones, yet in tune. König's performance was, one strange moment of wild tuning aside, impressive indeed: black, forthright, clear of text. Strangely, Christiane Libor's Gutrunne came into her own in her final scene; she had previously seemed merely anonymous, without the slightest hint of the corrupting allure for which Wagner's potion is not entirely a substitute. Iain Paterson's assumption of Gunther grew in stature. It is a difficult role at the best of times: to portray weakness without sounding vocally weak is no mean task. Let us hope, however, that some impressive portrayals will benefit from a rethinking of this final instalment's staging: the earlier dramas' real achievements certainly merit it.

⁴ Hans Mayer, 'The "Ring" as a Bourgeois Parable: Wieland Wagner's New Conception and its Realisation in Bayreuth', Bayreuther Festspiele: Programmheft, *Götterdämmerung* (1966), 33.