

The *Ring* in Copenhagen

(A review of performances in Copenhagen in May 2006)

The new Copenhagen Opera House combines a light and elegant exterior with a superbly crafted and functional interior. It was designed by Danish architect Henning Larsen and, like its Sydney counterpart, sits at the edge of a harbour. If Utzon's roof evokes wind-filled spinnakers, Larsen's resembles a huge wing about to soar aloft, carrying with it the building's five-storey glass façade. Denmark's latest Opera House, a gift to the nation from shipping magnate Maersk Mc-Kinney Møller, forms part of a grand ensemble that includes, on the opposite bank, the Amalienborg Palace and, beyond that, the neo-baroque Marmorkirken with its massive dome.

Inside the foyer, a wall of honey-coloured maple veneer swells like a giant gourd to enclose a horseshoe shaped auditorium of polished timbers. The auditorium has room for some 1,500 patrons and an orchestra of 110.

The all-important main stage is actually part of a cluster of six stages whose floors are made up of modules on special wheel-mounted trucks. The individual modules are computer controlled and can move silently from one stage to the other, allowing the complete replacement of sets in less than five minutes. Lifts and revolves add to the technical wizardry, which is used to spectacular effect in the current production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* - the first Danish *Ring* since 1912. Performances of four cycles took place in April-May, and I led tours to the second and third cycles. The Stage Director of this new production is thirty-three year old Kasper Bech Holten, the Conductor is Michael Schønwandt, the Designers are Marie í Dali, Steffen Aarving and Jesper Kongshaug, and the Dramaturg is Henrik Engelbrecht.

The flexibility of the theatre's technical systems was well demonstrated in the first Act of *Siegfried*, which offered one, then two and finally three floors of Mime's 1960s-style house. There was a workshop in the basement, a kitchen at the middle level and the teenage Siegfried's bedroom at the top, all linked by a spiral staircase. This physical layout emphasized the psychological distance between boy and guardian, and the Wanderer's ambivalent role between them. Siegfried's forging and Mime's cooking took place in visual as well as musical counterpoint, and the whole Act, so often played as vaudeville, was revealed as the lively and many-layered masterpiece it undoubtedly is. In this, the director, designers and singers served Wagner very well and, to my mind, *Siegfried* was the most successful of the four Copenhagen stagings.

The director wanted the main focus of this production to be on Brünnhilde, and the audience was encouraged to see the events of the *Ring* through her eyes. She made her first appearance during the prelude of *Das Rheingold*, emerging from the gloom of an attic to light a candle and rummage through the archives of her dysfunctional family. 'How did it all happen?' she seemed to be saying. 'Why did it go so horribly wrong?' Over the ensuing four nights she - and we - saw exactly why it all went wrong. At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde returned to the attic (now also housing the bodies of the two dominant men in her life, Siegfried and Wotan) to set fire to the past and begin life anew, with a child - Siegfried's child - born at the very moment the flames took hold. We heard the soaring violins glorifying Brünnhilde (to use Wagner's phrase) but they were now accompanied by another sound - the cries of a newborn baby. So, Wagner's orchestral ending was given its 'text' after all.

The beginning and end of this *Ring* production exemplified much of Kasper Holten's approach: his willingness – when it suited him - to take the stage action into areas that paid scant regard even to the music, and his intention of making the whole cycle conform to a single overriding concept through the device of a personal flashback. He offered no apology for this; indeed he thumbed his nose at those who abhorred the notion of *Regietheater*, in which the director gets to stage his or her *Ring* as distinct from Wagner's. The vehicle for his mockery of conservative opinion was the Norns' scene.

The curtain remained obstinately down after the opening bars of *Götterdämmerung*, but the three Norns rose from their seats in different parts of the auditorium where they had been disguised as members of the audience. The object of their 'cosmic tittle-tattle' this time was not so much Alberich's ring as *Wagner's Ring* and the horrors being inflicted on it by directors such as Kasper Bech Holten! There was much wagging of fingers and rolling of eyes between the 1st and 2nd Norns as they discovered ever more confronting pictures in their programme books and, moving to the stage, tried to peep behind the curtain at the atrocities to come. The 3rd Norn could offer only an uncertain vision of the future, so she was ostracized by the others. A placard was brandished bearing the crossed-out word '*Regietheater*', and as the 2nd Norn hastened to return 'to Mother' she waved a book bearing the photo and name of 'Cosima' - a notorious conservative when it came to staging her husband's works. Some audience members laughed; others considered it an unforgivable travesty.

Each of the four operas was set in a different period, an idea taken from Patrice Chéreau's centenary *Ring* at Bayreuth. The story moved from the 1920s for *Rheingold* to our own time for *Götterdämmerung*, complete with mobile phones, motor-cars and topical political references. When Siegfried toasted Brünnhilde before drinking the mind-bending draught, he addressed her directly on his mobile phone! When Brünnhilde was confronted with the terrifying vision of a stranger coming through the flames, her first instinct was to rush to the telephone for help. The audience tittered.

For the vassals' scene, Gunther wore the uniform of a Balkans general and his men were cast as thugs and war criminals. Gutrune was a beautiful, self-indulgent rich girl and, for a moment, there was a hint of something more than sibling affection in her relationship with Gunther (paralleling the Volsung twins) but the idea was not developed. Fafner was a top-hatted property developer in a wheel chair, from which he staggered in rage to club his brother to death. As the fearsome 'dragon', he turned out to be a frail old man, poisoning the natural environment and living in an underground control room from which he addressed the world via loudspeakers (the Wizard of Oz?). The Linden tree was now a poisoned relic that had toppled into Fafner's quarry, and it was in that bleak quarry that Siegfried listened to the forest murmurs with ne'er a rustling leaf in sight. However, there was a real Woodbird - a white dove - which flew about and perched on cue in an amazing (if distracting) way. In Holten's interpretation, this bird was Brünnhilde's messenger – a white counterpart to the black ravens of Wotan. In an unnecessary piece of activity near the end of *Die Walküre* when, according to the orchestra, Brünnhilde was being wrapped in sleep, she busied herself in sending the bird out into the world.

Like Chéreau, Holten paid great attention to the acting, which was of a high standard throughout. However, in Holten's concept there was also a strong element of cruelty and violence, as gangsters competed for power and riches. It was a case of Chéreau meets *The Godfather!*

In *Das Rheingold*, the 'gold' that so excited the three flappers at their 1920s swimming pool bar, turned out to be an amphibious naked young man, frolicking like some pet in a glass-sided fish tank. The spurned Alberich, beside himself with rage, smashed a bottle and then, with its jagged edge, cut out the young man's heart, brandishing this triumphantly aloft as the water in the tank swirled with blood.

Sex, violence and booze were recurring elements in Holten's *Ring*. When characters had little else to do, they invariably reached for a bottle, or a revolver, rifle, pistol, submachine gun and, occasionally, a sword, spear or iron bar. In order to seize the ring (actually, it was a long helix-shaped bracelet rather than a ring), Wotan, with Loge's assistance, chained up the Nibelung in a white-walled torture chamber and hacked off his forearm with a surgical instrument, thus mimicking Alberich's own cutting out of the Rhinegold's heart. As Alberich howled and sobbed, the severed limb swung against the wall, splashing blood everywhere. The none-to-subtle message was that Wotan and Alberich were both brutal thugs, each as bad as the other. The depiction of Wotan in these terms is not uncommon in modern productions, but it hardly does justice to the noble (if flawed and self-tortured) nature of the god, conveyed so eloquently in the score. For Wagner, Wotan was the 'sum of the intelligence of the present' – which is to say, he is *us*, with all our flaws and inconsistencies, our capacity for love and our inclination to egoism. To reduce him to a self-seeking criminal is to deprive him of a much more complex and interesting place in the drama.

As the gods began their triumphal entry into Valhalla, the plaintive song of the Rhinedaughters floated up on cue, except that this time their voices came not from the Rhine gorge below but from Loge's record player. Loge was a slippery, chain-smoking journalist in this production, ironically always looking for a light! He 'had the goods' on Wotan and unwisely boasted of the fact. Anxious to cover his tracks, Holten's Wotan decided that Loge knew too much and so he plunged his spear into his heart (three operas too early if one believes the Norns) and that was the end of him! Except it wasn't, because he still had to be summoned at the end of *Die Walküre* and dispatched to Valhalla at the end of *Götterdämmerung*.

More unscripted violence followed when bottle-swigging Valkyries, black-winged and wearing bloodstained ball gowns, set about abusing the corpses of dead heroes, stripping them of valuables and roughly tossing their bodies on piles. So much for Brünnhilde's assurance to Siegmund that Wishmaidens would wait upon him in Valhalla! In the final scene, Wotan's wistful memories of his daughter's bright pair of eyes were accompanied by her screams of agony as he tore the wings from her body. We had heard those screams before - with the mutilation of Alberich.

In this production, Hagen made his initial appearance in *Siegfried* - for those able to identify the pallid and sullen youth seen lurking with Alberich outside Fafner's lair. At the end of the nocturnal encounter in *Götterdämmerung* (here incongruously set in a basement, bathed in the harsh glare of fluorescent tubes) Hagen plunged a knife into his father's chest whilst the old man, with his dying breath, urged him to remain true. The picture of the psychopath was complete when, in the vassals' scene, Hagen summarily 'executed' captured prisoners with pistol shots to the back of the head, and threw women (Muslim?) captives to the balaclava-wearing soldiers.

The director saved his most provocative surprises for the ends of Acts. Thus, Sieglinde, not Siegmund pulled *Nothung* from the tree; Hunding took Wotan's injunction to 'Go!' literally and just walked off stage, laughing at the dead Siegmund and spitting on his corpse; Siegfried, using *Nothung*, split not the anvil but Mime's television set; Guido Paevatalu (Gunter) himself appeared and sang as Siegfried-

as-Gunther in Act One of *Götterdämmerung* and, of course, at the end of it all, Brünnhilde survived and gave birth – though mercifully, not on stage. Nevertheless, there were moments of real theatrical potency, such as in the confrontation between Fricka and Wotan, the final encounter between the Wanderer and Erda as they faced mutual powerlessness (in Erda's nursing home), and the love scene on a wintry rooftop as Siegfried thawed Brünnhilde's heart and, together, they imagined the end of the gods and laughed at death.

The singing was consistently good, with the notable exception of a miscast – or more correctly – misdirected Hagen. The director's preference for a reptilian, creepy characterization rather than a powerful, dominating one left a gaping hole in the dramatic fabric. All too often, Hagen was lost amongst the crowd of vassals and had little visible hold over his half-brother and sister. Compounding the problem, the singer in question (Peter Klaveness) was more baritone than bass and produced a brittle sound hardly calculated to inspire fear and loathing. When Hagen is upstaged by Gunther, *Götterdämmerung* has problems.

James Johnson, the Wotan/Wanderer in all but the third cycle *Rheingold* was outstanding, both vocally and as an actor. He was a dominant presence and one of the best Wotans I've seen. The Brünnhilde for the third cycle was Swedish soprano Iréne Theorin, and she was very good indeed. The Brünnhilde for the second cycle was Tina Kiberg, who was excellent but not as powerful as Theorin. Stig Fogh Andersen was a most convincing Siegfried (he also sang Siegmund because Poul Elming was indisposed for both cycles). Andersen still looks the part even though he is in his mid-fifties, and I would guess he has another five or six years in him still as Siegfried. He made it comfortably to the end of *Siegfried*, which is no mean feat. Stephen Milling (Fasolt and Hunding) was superb, physically and vocally. It was a pity he wasn't cast as Hagen. The Alberich of Sten Byriel, Fricka of Randi Stene and Mime of Bengt-Ola Morgny also stood out.

The combination of an open orchestra pit and the auditorium's polished timber surfaces resulted in a very bright acoustic in which the brass and timpani were at times overwhelming. Wagner certainly knew what he was doing when he prescribed a covered pit for the *Ring*. However, in the absence of anything approaching the Bayreuth model, the only practical alternative might be the use of temporary extensions to stage aprons in order to dampen the louder instruments and achieve a more balanced sound.

The intervals were just 30 minutes long, which meant that the smoked salmon, pickled herrings and terrine of venison had to be consumed with unseemly haste. Obviously 30 minutes was more than sufficient for scenery changes in this house but one can only hope that the Danes were showing off and that this will not become the norm for Wagner performances in high-tech opera houses. Tamper with productions if you must, but interval dining is sacred!

My abiding impression of the Copenhagen *Ring* is of a production full of surprises (some more defensible than others) but one that was always engaging, well performed and brilliantly staged – in a theatre that is surely second to none.

Peter Bassett