

The Manaus *Ring*

IX Festival Amazonas de Ópera, Manaus, Brazil. May 2005

It is a buyers' market at present when it comes to performances of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Rarely have there been so many interpretations and venues to choose from. Two or three new productions are appearing each year, fuelled by the patronage of globe-trotting audiences and the work's evergreen themes of political foolishness and personal frailty.

In May this year, the voice of Siegfried was heard in the rainforests of Brazil or - to be precise - in the *Teatro Amazonas*, the most famous building in the otherwise undistinguished city of Manaus, located sixteen hundred kilometres from the mouth of the Amazon. Two *Ring* cycles were staged there as part of the 2005 Amazonas Opera Festival. The first cycle, which I attended in an Opera Australia/Renaissance Tours group, proved to be a satisfying and enjoyable experience, attracting a surprising number of young Brazilians as well as visitors from a dozen foreign countries.

In 1857, when Wagner was a political refugee in Switzerland, about to turn his back on Siegfried in favour of *Tristan und Isolde*, he contemplated moving to Brazil at the invitation of emperor Dom Pedro II. Nothing came of this, but nineteen years later he did meet the emperor at the first Bayreuth Festival. Gottfried Semper, Wagner's fellow revolutionary and early collaborator on designs for a Festival Theatre, submitted plans for a new opera house in Rio de Janeiro. So, Brazil and *The Ring* have an interesting if tenuous connection going back to Wagner's own time.

The *Teatro Amazonas* is a legacy of a heady period in the late nineteenth century when Manaus controlled the supply of all the world's rubber. Opened in 1896, the theatre is a confection of stucco, marble, fine timbers, crystal chandeliers and allegorical paintings that owe more to Versailles than to the Amazonian landscape.

The auditorium's acoustics are excellent, and its horseshoe layout ensures that none of the 700 or so seats is far from the action. In this production, no singer became tired or resorted to shouting. Canadian Alan Woodrow's energetic young Siegfried remained as fresh as the vocally rested Brünnhilde whom he awoke with a kiss – a rare experience these days.

The orchestra was in good form, though not at full strength, which meant that the divided string effects intended by Wagner were, at times, a bit threadbare. The program listed a total of seventy-eight musicians, many of whom were from Eastern Europe, attracted to Manaus to play in the orchestra and to teach there and in Sao Paulo.

Amongst the singers, special mention must be made of the Brünnhilde of American soprano Maria Russo, who gave a convincing performance drawing on a solid technique and lively characterization. The Wotan of Brazilian Licio

Bruno was beautifully sung but rather too youthful for my taste. He could easily have passed for Brünnhilde's son rather than her father. Other notable singers were Pepes do Valle (Brazilian) as a toad-like but remarkably agile Alberich, and the rich-toned Stephen Bronk (USA) as Fasolt, Hunding and Hagen. Young American tenor Thomas Rolf Truhitte was a fine and athletic Siegmund. He would also make an excellent Parsifal. Japanese soprano Eiko Senda was a warm and appealing Sieglinde and a touching Guttrune.

With the staging of *Das Rheingold* this year, Brazilian conductor Luiz Fernando Malheiro and English director Aidan Lang completed their ambitious project to assemble the whole of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at Manaus. Lang's interpretation (with sets and costumes by Ashley Martin-Davis) focussed on the exploitation of nature and the misapplication of science and technology. When the curtain rose on the first scene of *Das Rheingold*, the whole proscenium space was filled with a molecular tracery on which tiny lights flickered like minute particles. This was the world as seen through a microscope, but it soon became the shimmering surface of the river Rhine, below which the Rhinedaughters swam and played. We returned to this imagery at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, when nature had been restored to its pristine state and humanity was given a second chance.

In the third act of *Siegfried*, Erda (Regina Helena Mesquita), trailing a long fabric train, dragged herself up and down a huge spiral ladder or helix that dominated the stage. This was an incredibly taxing manoeuvre whilst singing, and the audience's sympathy for her was palpable. Such acrobatics seemed to have no obvious purpose until one realised that Erda - the primordial *Volva* or *Wala* - was in fact creating a double helix, the basic building block of DNA.

In the prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, the three Norns, clad in foetus-like body stockings traced with blood vessels, were linked to one another by their umbilical chords – literally ropes of life. When these chords were broken by the forces of materialism and lovelessness (cue 'the ring' and 'Alberich's curse') the Norns were effectively aborted and dropped from sight.

Later in *Götterdämmerung*, there was to be an even more sinister allusion to the manipulation of nature and the misuse of medical science.

The Boys from Brazil is a novel by Ira Levin, memorably filmed in 1978 with Laurence Olivier and Gregory Peck. Its central character is the sadistic Nazi doctor Josef Mengele, who in real life took refuge in Paraguay and in Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city, until his death in 1979. In the fictional story, Mengele is engaged in breeding and raising clones of Adolf Hitler with a view to restoring the Third Reich. It seems that director Aidan Lang saw an opportunity to draw some parallels with *The Boys from Brazil* – and perhaps have a dig at the Brazilians at the same time.

When the curtain rose on Act One of *Götterdämmerung* we were shown not the Hall of the Gibichungs but a brilliantly lit operating theatre. Gunther, in surgical garb, was bending over the operating table on which his sister Guttrune lay. He was working with instruments and tubes in the area of her

lower abdomen, pausing only to engage Hagen in a discussion about the family succession. Gunther and Guttrune - we inferred - had decided not to follow the example of their Volsung counterparts, Siegmund and Sieglinde in creating a heroic race, but had chosen a more clinical approach. Later, in the second Act, when other women appeared for the double wedding festivities, they too were in hospital garb, apparently already co-opted into the Gibichung IVF program as surrogates for the hapless Guttrune.

Hagen did not share Gunther's enthusiasm for the breeding program, for the future of the Gibichung race meant nothing to him. His interests were better served by using his half-brother and sister to ensnare Siegfried and Brünnhilde, thereby bringing the ring within his grasp. And so the drama continued on its way.

Lang's approach was original and stimulating, and there were many memorable images. The sight of the enslaved Nibelungs confined to Bedlam-like cubicles whilst hammering in full view of the audience was unforgettable. The model of Valhalla as a monumental city à la Albert Speer's Germania was clever, as was Fafner's Cave of Envy, which was simultaneously a cave and an enormous eye (a green eye in fact) that swivelled round to reveal the giant himself curled up inside. Fire effects were created by bundles of red fluorescent tubes, and Mime's forge was located in an underground mineshaft, linked to the outside world by a vertical flue. Models of the Woodbird and Wotan's ravens were mounted on long flexible wands carried by black-clad dancers. The scene in Hunding's hut was restricted to the *ménage à trois* - without the supernumeraries so fashionable these days - and was the better for it. With the coming of Spring, the walls of the hut fell flat, as brother and sister burst free from the conventional world of Hunding and his ilk.

The director obviously thought that Freia's 'apples' was a spelling mistake and that what Wagner had really intended was Freia's 'nipples'. When the goddess of love finally returned to her family in Scene Four of *Rheingold*, she drew from her blouse a long tube connected to her right breast and, one by one, the other gods took nourishment from it - while heroically keeping straight faces.

An important visual motif in each of the dramas was a glass cabinet (or multiple cabinets) used by the gods to achieve a state of suspended animation. Wotan and the other gods emerged from these cabinets during Scene Two of *Rheingold* and, in due course, Brünnhilde was put to sleep in one, standing upright. Dressed in the red and silver armour of a Valkyrie on entering the cabinet in *Die Walküre*, she emerged from it in *Siegfried* wearing a fetching sky blue outfit. Clearly, these were very useful cabinets indeed. At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, Wotan walked solemnly on stage, mounted a staircase and locked himself in a cabinet once more whilst his world collapsed around him. The audience was left to speculate as to his fate.

It was not clear whether the glass cabinets were inspired by the old tale of the Sleeping Beauty, Star Trek images of 'teleporters', or the need for something

more dependable than Freia's apples/nipples. Either way, they seemed the least successful of the many innovative ideas in this otherwise enjoyable production.

Peter Bassett