



Photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera



Jay Hunter Morris in *Siegfried and Götterdämmerung*.

Lepage Finishes Off the Ring: Siegfried and Götterdämmerung at the Met

Text: Craig Knobles

Nature came to the fore in Robert Lepage's *Siegfried*, and the hero's place in it became the theme of this segment of the Metropolitan Opera's new Ring (seen Oct. 27 & Nov. 1, 2011.) Nature, what Lepage calls "the sensual world", arrived in Pedro Pires's projection of leaves, trees and roots on the 24 planks of the cycle's notorious machine. The planks in Act I that were not serving as the roof of Mime's hut became a forest floor on which red and yellow flecks flitted, simulating autumn leaves and becoming increasingly distracting as the act proceeded. In Act II the planks formed a vertical screen displaying huge trees with massive trunks, stolen admittedly from Fritz Lang's Nibelung film.

If Lepage's picturesque forest displayed nature's wonders to the naïve hero, we in the audience saw its pernicious underside as the machine tilted to reveal the soil rife with creepy-crawly things: worms, insects and rodents. The hero's failure to see the bad side foretold his fate in the Gibichung court.

Water, too, was a motif in Siegfried's world. A pool projected onto the stage apron in Act I was fed by two streams and provided a mirror for the youth; a similar pool in Act II, but fed by a waterfall, turned red with Fafner's blood (as did the waterfall in *Götterdämmerung* when Gunther washed Siegfried's blood from his hands.) The visual

highpoint of this part of Wagner's cycle occurred as Wotan arrived in Act III. Before him spread a broad lake across the whole surface of the slanted machine. As ripples radiated from a stone thrown in, the lake gelled into something solid with the Wanderer presiding like God on the third day of creation. At Erda's emergence, he unrolled a parchment-colored sheet inscribed with runes, like a prayer rug but actually an unfolding of his soon-to-be-broken spear. Erda's cloak was studded with reflective panels that threw flashes of light out into the audience, glimmers of what the future might hold.

Other effects were not as compelling. The Wurm has been a nightmare for designers since 1876: *Siegfried's* dragon should be an intensification of *Rheingold's* snake. Lepage had a marvelous snake, a skeletal head with vertebrae provided by the machine's planks; so one expected in Siegfried a creature formed by an even more fearsome contortion of the machine. Nothing of the sort occurred. The planks lifted like a petticoat to reveal a *Sesame Street*-style puppet head and foreshortened body. Worse, this head could move only from side-to-side, requiring the sword-wielding hero to scurry about aimlessly beneath its chin until the coup-de-grace.

And Siegfried's trek through the magic fire revealed another problem, malfunction.

The planks formed something like a pontoon bridge to provide a path for the hero to pass along; then changed (with a horrible backstage crash) into another bridge for his stroll, with quite realistic flames licking at his heels. The planks then came together as a tilted platform for Brünnhilde's repose as Siegfried crept down to her. That's what happened on the first night. At the second performance, there was a terrible crunch as the planks fell into their rest position and were stuck there for the rest of the opera. So the Valkyrie was forced to creep in surreptitiously behind her Siegfried (was she sleepwalking or moonlighting?) and flop down while his back was turned – I'm sorry to have missed what happened at the third performance.

"In *Götterdämmerung*, it is man who has taken control over nature, creating palaces and houses and staircases that are manicured and extremely controlled," stated Lepage in his notes for the production that premiered on Jan. 27 (I saw the opening night as well as the Feb. 3 performance and the HD broadcast on Feb. 11.) The projections showed the contrast: the Gibichung court seemed to be paneled in unstained wood, a Scandinavian-Modern look, a style unchanging as the house fluidly took on many shapes – closed initially, then becoming the banks of

the Rhine with waves splashing ashore, then columned with the back open as Siegfried and Gunther set out to win Brünnhilde; a wall with niches for guards appeared during Hagen's Dream, but the wall opened wide for the calling of the vassals. On the blond wood was projected a pattern of tree rings, even on Gunther's throne. Humankind, it seemed, had filed nature down and polished, even bleached it; and, to judge from the size of the rings, the house had been built from Yggdrasil itself, an actualization of the theme of nature corrupted and diseased by progress, human as well as divine. To start the opera, as the Norns narrated the effects of Wotan's violation of the World Ash, the planks rose issuing cords that assumed the form of a tree, now just an outline or a memory, a shade: Wagner's own "Ombra mai fu." As their narration reached Alberich's curse, some planks began to rotate, windmill-like, ripping the outline to shreds, the tree, or the memory of it, definitely a thing of the past, the operative word being "fu".

The manicured world found its contrast in nature, in the greenery and freshets that returned at the edge of the illusory world shared by Siegfried and Brünnhilde before the hero's descent into civilization; and, as a foil to the Gibichung court, nature appeared ravishingly in the Act III Rhine scene, where the panels were filled with a flood of water over and around rocks (their three-dimensionality ruined by follow spots), onto which the Rhine-daughters, having shed their mermaid tails, sprang cat-like as they sang and slid like otters down waterfalls. Thus Lepage dodged the temptation, so common today, of using this scene to show the degradation of nature, the banks of the Rhine as defunct power station or recycling center. Whenever the Rhine appeared, the projections did their best to simulate primeval nature. So with the "Rhine Journey" we saw a sheet of water (too early, coming during Loge's music) with a few central planks descending to form a raft on which Siegfried and Grane rode. The horse was here a marvelous illusion, silhouetted with the hero. Later, better lit and in profile as the raft came to shore, Grane became comical and too obviously taken from the play "War Horse" next door. Likewise, Hagen and several towing attendants walking on the projected waves brought thoughts of wet feet.

Lepage's desire has been to "just tell Wagner's story," including as much of that story as his stagecraft could achieve (Siegfried began with the pantomime of Mime snatching Sieglinde's baby, then a child waving a toy sword.) That desire determined the final moments. Gutrune entered the house, where Siegfried's corpse was brought. With Brünnhilde's entrance the planks opened to reveal a place for Siegfried's pyre well behind the scene. Fiery projections began as the Valkyrie tossed in the torch, and then mounted Grane, who was rolled like a Trojan horse towards the pyre. The planks closed over them and were



Hans-Peter König (Hagen), Deborah Voigt (Brünnhilde) and Iain Patterson singing the second act trio in *Götterdämmerung*.

lit by flames, until the wood became ash. At the return of the Rhine music (this time correctly timed) the projections became a sheet of water as the Rhine-daughters rose to drown Hagen. Then, with the Valhalla theme, the planks dropped to reveal the whitened statues of the gods that had appeared as shrines in Act II, and whose heads now exploded. Finally the machine settled into a flat floor and began to undulate slowly as it had at the beginning of the cycle. Lepage could not have been more scrupulous in following Wagner's stage directions. Only missing were the survivors who venture out to watch Valhalla's conflagration – unless, of course, the silhouetted heads of stagehands, behind the scene but quite visible from where I was watching, were meant to be seen.

From this ending the meaning of the machine was finally revealed – it had no intrinsic meaning, being merely a prop, something to provide a convenient surface for elaborate projections. How might the machine have been more meaningful? An example of stage machinery used such was found in **Giorgio Strehler's** staging of Shakespeare's "Tempest" from the 1980s, where Prospero's magic island was a stage floor that lurched to simulate storms, undulated with the breathings of the cast, and altered to show change of scene. Finally, when the magician broke his staff, the machine fell into complete ruin, the on-stage manifestation of Prospero's abjuring his "rough magic." Let's hope that, having missed the chance here, Mr. Lepage and Ex Machina will try something of this sort when they take on **Thomas Adès's** opera, *The Tempest* at the Met next fall.

Ex Machina's huge prop carried with it disadvantages other than meaninglessness, occasional malfunction and a lot of noise.

Participating singers expressed their own opinions of the machine at the Wagner Society of New York's *Götterdämmerung* Seminar. **Hans-Peter König** complained that it kept 80% of the Met's stage from being used. **Katarina Dalayman** added that the production team, for fear of injury to the singers, did its best to keep them away from the machine, limiting spontaneity and dynamic stage pictures. At best, one could say that it provided a sense of the natural world, though minus the spaciousness of the Met's previous production, and had, what was important to the Met management, a simple, not kinky interpretation of the cycle; one that will be serviceable for several decades.

As with many a Met production, the cycle provided a frame for great performances, and great performances there were! Even the puzzle of **Deborah Voigt's** Brünnhilde was clarified somewhat. Though disastrous in the opening *Stegfried*, at the second performance she was in great voice. The high notes that seemed so disconnected on the first night were well integrated with the rest of her range, and she sang with force. This continued with the first-night *Götterdämmerung*, revealing for the first time in the cycle, how she might be able to pull it off. She did face stiff competition from her alternate, Dalayman, whom I heard at the third performance, and who was overwhelming: an example of a singer perfectly fit for the role versus one who was just managing to cope. This is the fourth cycle I have seen Dalayman in (Stockholm's, the Bastille's, and two parts of the Met's previous production) – here she was more powerful of voice and striking in character than ever before.