

# Dei ex Machina: Robert Lepage's Rheingold

Text: Craig Knobles



Kuva: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

Mime (Gerhard Siegel) and Alberich (Eric Owens).

"I am a man of the North," said **Robert Lepage**, in a public interview sponsored by the Wagner Society of New York; and, gesturing towards Quebec where he was born and works, he explained how his concept of Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* was grounded in his circumpolar background. He spoke of his experiences in an Iceland almost totally devoid of vegetation, and of lava breaking through glacial ice.

Lepage's *Rheingold* opened twelve days later at the Metropolitan Opera, where stark scenery and vivid projections went far towards repeating these experiences. Sparseness of the Icelandic landscape and the harsh, but fatalistic, inevitability of the changing sky determined the abstractness of his sets; and the wonders of new technology produced effects that no other Ring could duplicate. On the whole, the feel of this production was one of bleakness, even in the fiery confines of Nibelheim.

It is not for nothing that Lepage's company is called *Ex Machina*. Their exploration of new theatrical means through technology has led to some exciting theater, and it is a machine that will dominate this cycle. As designed by **Carl Fillion**, twenty-four aluminum planks faced with fiberglass that move and change configuration provided all of the scenery and were a piece of theater in themselves, with the singers pushed almost

entirely to a matching apron at the front of the stage. The machine, whose weight necessitated reinforcing the Met's stage, undulated in silhouette as the Rhine began to sound; rose to lift the River's Daughters, who hung suspended wagging their mermaid tails; and continued to rise, creating a shelf for the girls to lie on. Upon Alberich's theft, the planks flipped to form a wall behind Wotan and Fricka, who looked out over the audience, finding a Valhalla only they could see. When the giants appeared, several planks dropped forming two huge hands, on whose thumbs the giants entered. A cable attached to Loge allowed him to inch up the wall between these thumbs, and later, on the descent to Nibelheim, the machine twisted to form steps, along which Loge and Wotan strode as though seen from above. The twisted frame not only created a roof for the cave, but became vertebrae for the dragon Alberich changed into. At opera's end, it revolved into a fortress with its own drawbridge, the Rainbow Bridge, up whose vertical face the gods marched; the bridge then tilted over to meet a platform on which they exited and closed to seal an impenetrable wall against the outside world, Boris Firquet's projections providing a good imitation of stone.

Other projections were innovative. Using a technique developed for Lepage's *Damnation de Faust* at the Met, the images were

modified by the motions and voices of the singers, so that one could see bubbles coming from the mouths of the Rhine Daughters, as they sang, and pebbles sliding down the shelf at their every movement. Loge was surrounded by a puddle of flame, which followed him and flared as he moved. **Etienne Boucher's** subtle lighting provided the colors one would expect on the backdrop – blue for the Rhine, yellow for the gold, red for Nibelheim, and a spectrum for Valhalla (though not on the bridge itself) – but his follow spots often stepped on the toes of the projections. Internal lights caused the Rhinegold to glow; those in Loge's hands warmed the terrified Freia and allowed the god of fire to mime her golden apples and Alberich's gold; the ring itself was a laser on its possessors' fingers.

Nets became a leitmotif. When Alberich tried to enmesh the Rhinedaughters in one, a tail deftly flipped it over his head; in revenge, he used it to carry off their gold; likewise, a long net, used to drag the dwarf's hoard up to Valhalla, became a hammock for Freia to lie in while the gold was piled on her – oddly enough, leaving her face visible. Finally, it provided Fafner an easy way to drag his booty off. Alberich's hoard was in the form of armor for the dwarf's anticipated warriors, and there was so much of it Wotan and Loge

must have felt short-changed when only a fraction was brought above ground.

Lepage's cycle seems destined to join the recent trend of what I call "Designer Rings". As examples one should mention the Mariinsky's, Robert Wilson's, the Fura del Baus production in Valencia, and Achim Freyer's LA Ring. As opposed to the plethora of "Director Rings", these stagings are primarily visual and mostly non-interpretative. Their mantra is, "I only want to tell the story, not reinterpret it." But the story is told in pictures. Such productions can be radical or conservative: the **Schenk/Schneider-Siems-sen** Ring that ran for twenty years at the Met was of this sort, and indeed the similarities between the Met's old Ring and new are striking – both eschew *Regietheater*, and allow singers to go their own way. This is important in a repertory house like the Met, with long-lived productions and the necessity to bring in singers at the last minute. Basing a production on individual performers only gets in the way. So it was no surprise that the new Ring had only generalized interaction between the characters. What was surprising

for a production of such prominence was the lack of consistency in the voices.

A shock was **Bryn Terfel** (Wotan), whose singing seemed overly pressured, leading to distortion. Perhaps he was pushed to it by the strength of **Stephanie Blythe's** stunning Fricka, a voice monumental in its size and quality. On Sept. 30 Terfel seemed to be competing with her, though he sang more naturally in the Oct. 4 performance. The differences in vocal heft, by the way, were homogenized in the Oct. 9 HD broadcast, and Terfel there revealed a subtlety in the role not discernable in the house. **Hans-Peter König's** Fafner too dominated his brother giant (**Franz-Josef Selig**) by the size of his voice, his black sound rock solid, whereas Selig's showed effort. **Wendy Bryn Harmer** (Freia) was another standout, with an easily soaring soprano. Mime was served well by **Gerhard Siegel**, as was Froh by **Adam Diegel**, though the timbre of his voice was rather odd. **Dwayne Croft's** Donner had a healthy sound, while **Richard Croft** (Dwayne's brother) seemed a bit light for Loge – here was another singer whose subtlety was emphasized by HD. Not at all subtle was **Eric Owens'** Alberich, powerful

but coarse, while the Erda of **Patricia Bardon**, though no contralto, had remarkable lyricism (the blue and white light illuminating her made her pronouncements distinctly eerie.) The *Rheintöchter*, **Lisette Oropesa**, **Jennifer Johnson** and **Tamara Mumford**, blended marvelously, with voices as powerful as their tails. **James Levine** returned after a long recuperation to lead a performance that was poised and majestic, but the maestro seemed drained during his curtain calls.

I suppose it was a good start for the Met's new Ring, but also a disappointing one. The magic tricks – Alberich's disappearances (he simply ambled offstage), a prosaic toad, the rainbow bridge with randomly colored threads but no rainbow – were often perfunctory, and there were stretches of ennui, which bodes ill for the longer parts of the cycle. Since the effects seemed out of all proportion with the effort to produce them (namely, that giant machine), a line from Horace's *Ars Poetica* kept running through my mind, "*Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus*" – "The mountains will go into labor and there will be born a laughable little mouse." Let's hope that in *Walküre* the mouse will roar.

## Metropolitanin uusi Ring Teksti: John L. DiGaetani



Kuva: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

Alberich (Eric Owens) ja Reinintyttäret.

Metropolitan-oopperan uusi Ring-sarja alkoi värikkäästi **Robert Lepage**n uudella *Reininkulta*-produktiolla. Esityksen alkaessa esirippu on auki ja näkyvissä on tyhjä näyttämö sekä pitkä alumiinilevyjen rivi. Mutta musiikin alkaessa nämä levyt tekevät ihmeellisiä asioita: ne liikkuvat ylös ja alas, muodostavat yhtenäisen kokonaisuuden ja välillä jakautuvat useisiin erilaisiin muotoihin. Valaistus ja tietokoneanimoidut erikoistehosteet tuovat vaihtelua tähän peruslavastukseen. Pääosa yleisöstä olikin uuteen produktioon erittäin tyytyväinen ja odotti keväällä 2011 esitettävää *Valkyyriaa*. Cirque du Soleilissä mukana ollut montrealinranskalainen tiimi on luonut tälle Ringille hyvin kiinnostavan konseptin.

Lavasteet ja puvut eivät olleet eurotrahsia. Lavalla ei ollut rottia, eivätkä henkilöt näyttäneen pelleiltä tai sarjakuvansankareilta. **François St-Aubin**in puvustus perustui selvästi vuoden 1876 Bayreuthin alkuperäispuvustukseen, kun taas **Carl Fillion**in lavasteet olivat erittäin moderneja, ja niitä pystyttiin muuntelemaan lavalta käsin. Yleisö oli usein haltioissaan, erityisesti Nibelheimiin laskeutumisesta ja oopperan lopussa jumalten lähdöstä Valhallaan. Näissä kohdissa ohjaaja oli luonut todellista dramaattista jännitettä laulajiksi puettujen akrobaattien avulla.

**James Levine** on johtanut Ringiä yli 20 vuoden ajan. Hän tuntee partituurin erittäin hyvin ja on saanut orkesterisoinnin läpikuultavammaksi, vähemmän meluisaksi ja monivaihteisemmaksi.

Laulajatkin olivat vaikuttavia. Stephanie Blythen äänen loistokkuus teki hänestä yleisön suosikin. Hän oli uskomattoman tarkka ja hänen äänensä oli kuuluva. Hän lauloi niin korkeat ja matalatkin nuotit kuin kovaääniset ja hiljaisemmatkin kohdat vaivattoman varmasti. **Bryn Terfel**in Wotan oli ongelmallisempi. Hän kuulosti aluksi epävarmalta ja varovaiselta, mutta kasvoi lopulta roolinsa mittoihin. Silti hän ei missään kohdassa kuulostanut riittävän hallitsevalta. Välillä hänen äänensä ei kuulunut, välillä se huojuu. Uskon silti, että mitä enemmän hän laulaa tätä roolia, sitä paremmaksi hän siinä tulee. Hänellä oli hiukset kasvoillaan peittämässä silmää, jonka hän menetti Frickan takia. Tämä alkoi vähitellen tuntua ärsyttävältä

tä ja sai hänet näyttämään kulkurilta – tavallaan kyllä sopivaa Wotanille.

**Eric Owens** teki Alberichistaan sympaattisen hahmon, jota Reinintyttäret kohtelivat julmasti ja ovela Loge ja väkivaltainen Wotan vielä julmemmin. Reinintyttäret **Lisette Oropesa**, **Jennifer Johnson** ja **Tamara Mumford** kuulostivat yhdessä upeilta. Heidän äänensä sointuivat yhteen hienosti. He osasivat myös käyttää taitavasti heitä kannattelleita köysiä ja liikkuivat kuin olisivat olleet vedessä.

Fasolt ja Fafner, **Franz-Josef Selig** ja **Hans-Peter König**, olivat jättäviä niin äänellisesti kuin näyttämöllisestikin. Heidän äänensä olivat kuuluvia ja kauniita. **Gerhard Siegel**in esittämä Mime oli kiinnostava hahmo, veljesten välisen kilpailun ja tyrannimaiseksi muuttuneen veljen uhri.

**Dwayne Croft**in Donner sopi olemukseltaan ukkosen jumalaksi ja **Adam Diegel**in Frohssa oli nuorekasta viattomuutta. **Richard Croft**in Loge teki vaikutuksen elokuvateatterissa, mutta oopperatalossa hänen äänensä ei kuulostanut tarpeeksi suurelta. Näyttelijänä hän onnistui hyvin. **Wendy Bryn Harmer**in Freia oli kiinnostavalla tavalla pois tolaltaan, mutta kuulosti silti ihastuttavalta. **Patricia Bardon**in Erda kuulosti sopivan pahaenteiseltä Wotania varoittavaksi jumalattareksi. Kaiken kaikkiaan tämä *Reininkulta* oli vaikuttava saavutus niin näyttämöllisesti kuin musiikillisestikin. Se innosti odottamaan keväällä esitettävää uutta *Valkyyriaa*.

Suom. Robert Storm