



A PERSONAL VIEW OF THE PRODUCTIONS

Attendance at the Wagner Festival in Bayreuth is fraught with danger. Besides aggravating an addiction to Wagner and developing a taste for the local dish of field mushrooms there is the danger of setting the operatic benchmark too high. Festspielhaus or not, I am afraid I became victim of the last danger for I found production and performance standards varied greatly over the seven operas.

As I was fortunate to attend all the operas in the festival I wondered, even with different directors and designers, if any coherent theme would be obvious. I found that most were multi-layered productions, as is the current trend, but with differing degrees of success.

Two of the operas, *Mastersingers* and *Parsifal*, were filled with so many multi-layered references you really had to know your Wagner in order to follow or attempt to interpret the action as presented, which naturally takes audience attention away from the music and singing. On a first experience of productions such as these I cannot effectively and enjoyably do both.

The exception, for me, was a very dull and static *Tristan and Isolde* in major contrast to a gross,

university-revue-type *Mastersingers*, an interesting if mixed *Ring* and an enthralling *Parsifal* that I would like to see again.

It is difficult to imagine why Christoph Marthaler, the director of *Tristan and Isolde*, decided on such a detached, emotionless atmosphere for this great, tragic love story. The only examples of multi-layering occur when the scenes change to descend another floor in the cruise ship that forms the set. Evidence of peeling wallpaper in the empty guests' lounge on the upper deck where we meet Isolde and Brangane indicates things are changing and will fall apart. By going deeper into the ship for each act it might represent the internal nature of the action as the lovers realise, accept and act on their thoughts but the unnatural, stylised acting in this production made this an afterthought rather than an enhancement to the music drama as it was happening. The buttoned-up, '50s-style clothing of the lovers, combined with the distance they maintained at all times, made the declaration of love almost comical as the high point of their "passion" was an amorous eye-contact and the removal of a glove. It did not get any warmer, for when they are discovered at the high point of their romance King Marke reacts to their treachery by simply doing up the buttons on Isolde's suit jacket. For

the rest it remained an unengaging and confusing production which was a great disappointment that was not rescued by any outstanding singing.

It is the second year of presentation for Katharina Wagner's and set designer Tilo Steffens' *Mastersingers* and it seems nothing has been changed. The premise of the opera—conflict between tradition and innovation—has been extended to cover "the arts" for it is set in an Arts College with the Masters as teachers. Katherina, as a contender for the Bayreuth Festival succession, seems to wish to totally eliminate any suggestion of tradition but she exaggerates the innovation to the point of absurdity in her "look what I can do" production. Stage props such as sculptured busts of artists and musicians on pedestals and paint-filled Warhol soup cans indicate this setting is an institution for fine arts, music, theatre and dance. The masters of the opera are teachers wearing academic caps and gowns. Her interpretation with Hans Sachs, now a writer or critic who chain-smokes for some non-apparent reason, seems to have a comic rejection of the original, as he is continuously barefoot until the third act and the listeners throw shoes to express their disapproval of Beckmesser's singing. Paint from the Campbell's soup tins that was thrown down from the balconies in the riot scene was the water thrown by the women in the original staging but other references such as the Adam or Golem figure accompanying Beckmesser's innovative prize song and apples being thrown into the chorus in the last act are quite incomprehensible. The idea of extending beyond singing has merit, for the conflict of ideas is an interesting and enduring challenge, but this production slid into such a level of "notice me" novelty and shock value that it lost any coherence, characterisation or sense of relationships in this human comedy.

Dual rather than multi-layering was obvious in Tankred Dorst's production of *The Ring*, for we had simultaneous worlds on stage with the gods and mortals seemingly unaware of each other. This provided novelty rather than inter-

pretative value for in recognisable, everyday sets from our own time, complete with graffiti, they never interacted or allowed any opinion of events to show in their behaviour or faces. Perhaps it was a novel and not too intrusive way to show that the core of *The Ring*—the conflict between aspirations to love and power—is still present today.

Some elements of this production were memorable, such as the Rhine river bed with a video of the surface with other maidens swimming overhead that created the effect of being in the river. Others, such as the absence of the Niebelungs (we just heard the hammering offstage), no dragon and no funeral procession, were visually disappointing. Valhalla took some interpretation, for in the background it seemed like the docking port of a space station until a pan-out revealed it as the eye of a dragon. I am still trying to work out the significance of a dragon as Valhalla. The eye returned before being obscured by smoke in the final but anti-climatic scene as there were far too many Gibichungs and mortals running around the stage to focus on Brünnhilde. I think the audience agreed, for the silence following the fall of the curtain was not from awe or elation but from the sense that it all had ended with a whimper, not a bang. Overall it was a very mixed, mostly forgettable, *Ring* production.

My Bayreuth “wow” and everlasting memory came with *Parsifal*. In marked contrast to Katherina’s ideas, a break with tradition was also evident in the Stefan Herheim production, for from the opening scene, depicting Villa Wahnfried, it was obvious that this *Parsifal* would also be about the composer and Bayreuth itself.

Effective staging and costume design introduced another thread which enabled the *Parsifal* story to be interpreted through a German history lens covering two world wars. As has been done before, this production put the Nazi link with Bayreuth and the Wagner family dramatically on stage “to be dealt with once and for all”. Herheim made a different historical link to an earlier director in his return of the focus to art at the start of Act 3, set

in the post-war parliament, with the use of the quote from Wolfgang Wagner: “Hier gilts um der kunst” (Here it is all about art). Fortunately it was Wagner’s art, not Katherina’s paint-throwing. And multi-layered art it was, for the scenes morphed to layer and blend three parallel narratives thus preventing any fixed point of view. This fluidity extended to an interpretation of characters as well, for at times five identically costumed people represented the young Parsifal while on another occasion Parsifal was simultaneously represented as a boy, a man and a wizened old man.

Although you needed to know your Wagner, it was easy to follow the story through this interpretation. As part of a back-story we saw the birth of a baby who became the grail in a breathtaking stage move that used a central podium. Brilliant stage technology made this podium an integral part of the temple, representing an early production of *Parsifal* in Bayreuth (Montsalvat); a World War I hospital with injured soldiers, nurses and good-time girls (the flower garden); Bayreuth in the Nazi era (Klingsor’s Castle), where it is the site from which the spear is hurled; and finally as an eagle emblem in the Reichstag (temple at Montsalvat), when Parsifal returns with the spear. Here it descends to be filled finally with reflected light from above (the dove which indicates tradition is not totally ignored), using a mirror that is eventually turned on the audience.

This astounding production represented my idea of “gesamtkunstwerk”. It was a total work of art for me, as *Parsifal* is about compassion, redemption and release, and I could follow this through all three woven narratives. It rescued Bayreuth productions for me and made me want to return.

—Shirley Breese



MEMBER PROFILE



Maggie Cash

Maggie Cash has been a member of the Wagner Society for many years.

Her first memories of Wagner’s music were via “the wireless” and Bayreuth broadcasts at full volume played by her father, which would have rung out for miles over the family paddocks.

The real start to her life as a Wagnerite came with the concert performance in 1981 of *Die Valküre* in the Melbourne Town Hall under Mackerras with Nance Grant as Sieglinde, Robert Gard her Siegmund and Rita Hunter as Brünnhilde. This was closely followed by the *Götterdämmerung* which Mackerras conducted in Sydney.

In 1987 Maggie and her late husband John heard their first full *Ring Cycle* in Munich and, when in 1988 the Society received its first allotment of tickets, it was off to Bayreuth! *Ring* visits to the Met, Berlin, Seattle, Chicago, San Francisco and, of course, Adelaide have followed over the years.

Maggie is uncertain about her favourite Wagner opera, feeling it is often the one she has just heard. However, when pressed, she chooses *Götterdämmerung*. She is quite certain of her favourite venue, however, and, not surprisingly, it is Bayreuth.