



WAGNER'S *RING* CYCLE IN ADELAIDE

Michael Scott-Mitchell
Siegfried (Timothy Mussard) in
the forest, Act II of *Siegfried*
2004
colour photograph;
37.1 x 56.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3646037

John Thomson documents the achievement of this extraordinary Australian operatic milestone

The State Opera of South Australia's production of Richard Wagner's epic *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in Adelaide during November–December 2004 was a resounding success. The critics were ecstatic: 'a triumph', 'spectacular', 'wonderfully sung', 'superb', 'an awesome journey'. I attended the second cycle of performances and agree with the superlatives of the critics. I found it one of the most extraordinary events in many years of theatre going. The performances in Adelaide were of special significance as it was only the third time that there had been seasons of complete *Ring* cycles in Australia and it was the first ever all-Australian production. At the conclusion of the performances, hopes were expressed that the production would be restaged in Adelaide in 2008 or perhaps in other countries. Interest was shown from Hong Kong, Singapore and Beijing but, two years later, no announcements of a restaging have yet been made.

In recognition of the significance of this production, the National Library has recently acquired a set of 48 costume designs from the costume designer, Stephen Curtis, and 50 photographs of the production taken by the set designer, Michael Scott-Mitchell. Advertising material, reviews and a program for the production are also in the Library's PROMPT Collection.

Richard Wagner wrote both the text and music of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*) over a 26-year period between 1848 and 1874. He called it a 'Stage Festival Play' and it comprises four operas: *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhinegold*) which is a prelude or preliminary evening, *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*), *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*). *The Ring* is a universal drama of ideas. It concerns the destructive consequences of man's lust for power and greedy exploitation of nature. In writing the operas, Wagner drew on Greek tragedy, Germanic and Norse myths and the writings of 19th-century philosophers as well as his own experiences of social upheavals. Productions of *The Ring* can be, and have been, subject to many interpretations and visual styles. One of the

challenges for any production team is to find its own interpretation.

The Ring has been described as the Mount Everest of the opera world. Given the massive challenges and staging costs, productions of complete cycles are relatively rare. Usually productions are built up over a period of years and only finally brought together in a complete cycle. Few companies in the world have attempted to mount productions of all four operas consecutively, so the State Opera of South Australia took a huge risk in embarking on the production. Technical and logistical challenges were daunting. With four operas in rehearsal at the same time, the scheduling was a nightmare. Director Elke Neidhardt compared it to directing aircraft from the control tower at Kennedy Airport. The production was indeed a stunning achievement for a small regional company with a permanent staff of five.

The statistics of the Adelaide *Ring* cycle are impressive. There are 16 hours of music played over four days. The 75-member Adelaide Symphony Orchestra was augmented to 130 to allow for a rotation of players. There were two sets of timpani, four harps, four special 'Wagner' tubas, as well as multiple off-stage horns and trombones. The operas call for a cast of 49 principals, 70 chorus members, 50 supernumeraries and children to be outfitted in a total of 360 costumes. The scenery occupied more than 38 semi-trailers and the whole under-stage area was filled with hydraulic

equipment, lifts, fire burners, water storage tanks and other technical equipment.

There were six years of planning and 33 weeks of rehearsals. The original budget was \$11 million but it finally came in at \$15.3 million. *The Ring* played for three complete cycles between 16 November and 12 December in the Adelaide Festival Theatre. The top ticket price was \$1500 for the four operas and audience members came from all over Australia. Wagner groupies flew in from 22 countries around the world and their attendance generated an estimated \$15 million in economic activity for South Australia. The production earned 10 awards in the 2005 Helpmann Awards.

There have been only two previous seasons of *The Ring* in Australia. Irish impresario Thomas Quinlan, in conjunction with J.C. Williamson, toured the Quinlan Opera Company to Australia in 1912 and again in 1913. This company introduced many operas to Australia and performed two cycles of *The Ring* in Melbourne in August and September 1913 and one cycle in Sydney in October 1913. It was to be 85 years before a fully staged *Ring* cycle was to be seen in Australia again. The State Opera of South Australia imported a complete production from the Châtelet Theatre in Paris and performed it for three cycles in Adelaide in 1998. In between the staged productions of 1913 and 1998 there were concert versions of the four operas performed by the Melbourne and Sydney Symphony Orchestras in conjunction with The Australian Opera and the Australian



far left:
Stephen Curtis (b. 1957)
Costume design for Alberich
(John Wegner) in *Das
Rheingold* 2004
gouache, crayon, pen and ink
drawing; 39.4 x 38.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3562609

left:
Stephen Curtis (b. 1957)
Costume design for Fafner
(David Hibbard) in *Das
Rheingold* 2004
gouache, crayon, charcoal,
pen and ink drawing;
39.4 x 38.4 cm
Pictures Collection
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above left:
Michael Scott-Mitchell
The gods prepare to enter
Valhalla in *Das Rheingold*
(Elizabeth Campbell as Fricka,
Kate Ladner as Freia seated,
Timothy DuFore as Donner,
Andrew Brunson as Froh,
Andrew Collis as Fasolt lying
on floor and John Brocheler
as Wotan) 2004
colour photograph;
37.2 x 56.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3645379

above centre:
Michael Scott-Mitchell
The final moments of
Götterdämmerung with
Valhalla, the home of the Gods,
on fire seen through the water
curtain 2004
colour photograph;
37.1 x 56.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3646513

above right:
Michael Scott-Mitchell
Siegfried (Timothy Mussard)
fights Fafner the dragon, Act II
of *Siegfried* 2004
colour photograph;
37.1 x 56.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3646062

Broadcasting Commission in the 1980s. There were further concert performances by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under chief conductor Edo de Waart in the late 1990s. In the mid 1980s, the Australian Opera embarked on a complete staging but it was abandoned after the first two operas. Ultimately, it was the success of the 1998 imported production that encouraged the State Opera of South Australia to embark on a new, all-Australian production.

German-born Australian resident Elke Neidhardt was selected to head the new, all-Australian production team. In preparing her *Ring*, Neidhardt stated that she didn't want to do a conventional production full of log cabins and horned helmets, nor did she want to do an avant-garde production that divorced the action from the meaning—as is common in many European opera houses. She aimed instead to tell the complicated story simply and clearly in a production that was true to Wagner's words and music. Neidhardt also wanted the production to be visually interesting and was not afraid to introduce humour. The production team of three very experienced designers included, as well as Scott-Mitchell and Curtis, Nick Schleiper as lighting designing. In 2001, the team retreated to a house in the Blue Mountains to jointly work out their approach and continued to work happily and closely together over the next three years.

Michael Scott-Mitchell studied architecture before graduating from the National Institute

of Dramatic Art in Sydney. He has designed many stage productions for Australia's leading theatre and opera companies, but he is probably best remembered for conceiving and designing the giant cauldron for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. He brought this inventiveness to his *Ring* designs which included a water curtain and real flames as well as a huge mechanical claw representing the dragon in *Siegfried*.

The spectacular water curtain, representing the river Rhine, filled the entire stage opening and pumped 20 000 litres of water from below stage to the fly tower, 16-metres above the stage, where it was compressed and released onto an opaque curtain. The ring of fire around Brünnhilde's rock was produced by 12 individual gas jets built into the stage and a line of gas-fuelled flames suspended across the stage represented the fire in *Götterdämmerung*.

Costume designer Stephen Curtis has had a 25-year career designing for opera, theatre and film. For *The Ring*, he spent a year poring over books, magazines and photographs seeking inspiration from a wide variety of sources. After the designs were complete, it took a further two years to bring the costumes to reality. In keeping with the production concept of telling the story clearly, Curtis was interested in design that expressed the character. He wanted to create a strong presence for each character while at the same time letting the audience understand the sometimes complex



relationships between the characters. He did this by using colour and costume elements to show the connections. The gods, for example, were dressed in white, rather like an upmarket TV family, which emphasised their human qualities. The Rhinemaidens were dressed in wetsuits, the giants in luminous yellow safety jackets. The overall look was modern but not within a specific time or place. Leather, PVC and vinyl became Curtis's favoured fabrics.

The performing arts are the most ephemeral of arts. They can not be easily recorded. Once a performance is over, it is gone for ever. No video or sound recording, photograph or design can be a complete record of the performance. In the case of

Der Ring des Nibelungen no commercial video was made. A sound recording of one of the operas, *Die Walküre*, has recently appeared with the other three operas projected to be released over the next 18 months.

The Performing Arts Collection of South Australia acquired one of Brünnhilde's costumes and its matching design. These items, together with the costume designs and photographs now in the National Library's collection, form a lasting visual record of this significant Australian production that may never be seen again.

JOHN THOMSON is a theatre historian and consultant on performing arts resources



far left:
Stephen Curtis (b. 1957)
Costume design for Mime
(Richard Greager) in *Siegfried*
2004
gouache, crayon, pen and ink
drawing; 39.4 x 38.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3562594

left:
Stephen Curtis (b. 1957)
Costume design for Flosshilde
(Zan McKendree-Wright) in
Das Rheingold 2004
gouache, crayon, pen and ink
drawing; 39.4 x 38.4 cm
Pictures Collection
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