

I have been fortunate enough to see all the “Ring” productions at the Grüner Hügel since 1971. In that time, there have been a wide range of concepts and stylistic ideas behind the stagings, which justify taking a synoptic view of the reception of Wagner’s opus summum in the Festspielhaus, especially in view of the new production by Frank Castorf in 2013. It began for me in 1971 with the last production by one of Wagner’s two grandsons, Wolfgang Wagner. His production was still completely in the New Bayreuth mould and left a great deal of room for the imagination, with the mysticism and intensity of its images, using a distorted disc to conjure up constantly changing associations. The focus was once again on the heroic principle, as it had been in the other post-war productions of the “Ring” by Wieland and Wolfgang. Thomas Stewart and Theo Adam were the great Wotans of their age, and Jean Cox the Siegfried - what casts!

And then things really started moving with Wagnerian Regietheater, or “director’s theatre”, on the Grüner Hügel, though the movement had in fact already begun earlier. Joachim Herz had presented a new production in Leipzig in 1973-76, which has in the meantime become the stuff of legends, and Ulrich Melchinger attracted attention in Kassel in 1970-74 basically thanks to the thematically specific concept behind his production. The 1976 “Centenary Ring” by Patrice Chéreau, who “wanted to cast Wagner off his pedestal”, could be regarded as the third major production in the Regietheater school. Chéreau also led the way with a completely new style of individualised character direction, in which, for the first time in Bayreuth, the individual fates of the protagonists also found intensive emotional expression, thus creating the concept of the “singer-actor”. Who can forget the scenes between the Walsung pair Jeannine Altmeyer and Peter Hoffmann, or those between Gwyneth Jones and Donald McIntyre as Brünnhilde and Wotan, or René Kollo as Siegfried? In that case, the tide changed successfully on the Hügel, even though the protests by the “Old Wagnerians” were at first extreme. When that “Ring” was taken off af-

The Bayreuth “Ring” productions since 1971

Klaus Billand

ter five years, it had become a cult production which people still talk about even today - something which has long since ceased to be the norm in Bayreuth... In addition, Chéreau took full advantage of the principle of “Bayreuth as a work in progress”, which was still intact in those days, to make constant improvements to his production. On the rostrum, Pierre Boulez likewise explored the music from a new angle.

Despite that, there was also a moment with an aesthetic step backwards. In 1982, Peter Hall staged the “Ring” with a concept that made use of Bayreuth and Germanic mythology and remained largely faithful to Wagner’s stage directions, and even found a role for the Festspielhaus in the finale of “Götterdämmerung”. While some of the sets were certainly interesting and indeed visually opulent, such as the scene with the Gibichung vassals, the Magic Fire, or the Rhinemaidens swimming naked in a vast pool which, much to Wolfgang Wagner’s annoyance, had to be emptied onto the staff car park in a great deluge during the scene change, there was nevertheless a certain fairytale air about it all, which was quite devoid of excitement. Georg Solti cast the baton aside after only one year because he could not manage the specific conducting style required by Bayreuth. Adam Fischer leapt into the breach and later organised his “Wagner Days” in the Budapest Spring.

Before the new production of the “Ring” by Harry Kupfer in 1988, the “Richard Wagner Gesellschaft e. V.”, which had been formed out

Ring 1971 — 2013

of protest against the Chéreau “Ring”, was still eagerly distributing leaflets calling for the Hall production to be kept on. Nevertheless, the great East German opera director and Wagner connoisseur picked up exactly where Chéreau had left off, with a Regietheater concept that began at the very back of the stage with the “road of life” but also included some splendid mythical moments. Now, however, there was a highly topical theme at the heart of the production - the 1986 reactor catastrophe in Chernobyl in the Ukraine. He used that event to present a bleak warning on the Bayreuth stage, with a visual and dramaturgical intensity that was at times awe-inspiring, about the destructive power of mankind over nature. At the end, he illustrated the indifference of a party gathering in evening dress and with glasses of champagne in their hands, enjoying watching the old world go up in flame on their televisions. Alberich, the enduring concept of evil, pulls the curtains to... Just how right Kupfer was became clear to me only a few minutes after the première, when I had not yet left the Festspielhaus car park and was listening to the news on the car wireless: at an air show in Ramstein, a jet had hurtled into a crowd of spectators and triggered a fireball, causing great loss of life. People watched it on television and soon went back to their daily business...

After such intensity, things simply had to quieten down - it was followed by the design “Ring” by Alfred Kirchner and Rosalie. The images were starkly, indeed to some extent aseptically, abstract and were always easy on the eye, but they never expressed any dramaturgical acuity, and so their “Ring” production seemed more like a story for newcomers to the “Ring”, with fairytale pictures in pleasant colours. The production team resurrected the familiar old disc, this time with a map grid, on which there were a limited number of good visual ideas in overstyled costumes. Once, when I saw Marcel Prawy in an interval, the grand old man of Viennese opera commentary, or “Mr. Opera” as he called himself, I asked him what he thought of the production. Presumably thinking of the lengths to which Regietheater had gone since

Chéreau, he replied: “Well, it’s still the best of all the bad...”

Then at last Jürgen Flimm came along to present his long-planned “Ring” in Bayreuth, though he still needed intensive advice from the Hamburg Wagner specialist Udo Bermbach, who later wrote an interesting book about their work. Contrary to my usual experience at Bayreuth, I liked this production best in 2000, the year of its première. Flimm, who generally narrated the action with no clear thematic intensity, in the manner of Ibsen, presented a profoundly mythical setting in the 2nd act of “Götterdämmerung”, followed by a finale that bordered on genius. A little Parsifal in gleaming armour stood in front of a huge black gate, behind which there appeared to be something hidden, though it was left to the individual’s imagination to guess what it was - perhaps something very personal. After a year, he dropped that ending. When I complained - in a well-meaning way - that he had betrayed his production, he replied in an interesting exchange of letters that Bermbach and Giuseppe Sinopoli, the conductor, had talked him into the idea, but he had never been convinced it was right. Instead we were offered the banal sight that we had already seen so often of men and women marching through a brightly shining entrance. And in the 2nd act of “Götterdämmerung” we now had a super-technical scaffolding arrangement as the Gibichungenhalle, which was not particularly convincing. Flimm’s “Ring”, like Hall’s and Kirchner’s, could not really stand comparison with the great productions after 1951. It was, however, a triumph for Gabriele Schnaut as Brünnhilde, Wolfgang Schmidt as Siegfried and John Tomlinson as Wotan and Hagen, who brought enormous intensity to the two roles, which he took on in two successive productions.

The expectations regarding the 2006 “Ring” production directed by Tankred Dorst, a connoisseur of myths (“Merlin or the Barren Land”), and Ursula Ehler were hopeful, perhaps too hopeful. In an interview with FAZ in November 2004, he spoke about how he wanted to present the gods as just that. They could be magnified as a mysterious power and

allowed to retain their other-worldliness. What interested him was the fable per se, the question as to how these myths could be established in our minds today. That was the basic principle behind his staging concept, the way to link the mythical to the modern world, as it were. It could also be seen as an attempt to establish a connection between the myth inherent in the “Ring”, which had enduringly shaped the reception of the “Ring” with the staging aestheticism of New Bayreuth under Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner until well into the 1970s (see above), and the Wagnerian Regietheater of the last 30 years, whether adopting a more historical or topical setting, in order to provide new insights into the tetralogy and what it has to say to us today, placing our belief in reason in perspective, and enabling us to acknowledge the existence of the rough and wild in us. Dorst’s book “The Footprints of the Gods” contains some fascinating insights into the dramaturgical concept behind the production, but it also makes it clear that much of it was not - or could not be - put into effect at all, or only in the form of half-hearted or imperfect attempts... When it came to creating the link between mythical or alienated elements and the real world, dramaturgical deficits and inconsistencies became increasingly apparent in the course of the four evenings, with a character direction that was all too often inadequate. Even the effect of the “Götterdämmerung” finale was lost in the arbitrary meaninglessness of familiar stylistic elements from the present day. At least Wotan’s eagle eye reappeared, a final greeting to the remote myth... But it was a great “Ring” for Christian Thielemann, conducting the magnificent Festival orchestra. And it was a great performance by Falk Struckmann as Wotan/Wanderer and it saw the emergence of Stephen Gould as probably the best Siegfried in the world today.

Against this multifaceted background of the “Ring” reception, it will be interesting to see Frank Castorf’s idea of making oil, rather than gold, the object of desire as the source of wealth and power. With this focus on a topical theme, he would come closer in concept to Harry Kupfer’s “Ring”. Around that time, Castorf was still regarded as part of the “rebellious youth” in Berlin...