

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Valkyrie

Richard Wagner

English National Opera

Coliseum

(2004)

My latest appointment with the second chapter of Wagner's *Ring* cycle was approached with apprehension. The recent experience of director Phyllida Lloyd's interpretation of *The Rheingold* for English National Opera had raised serious misgivings about her staging of one of the grandest music dramas of them all.

In the event, I'm bound to report *The Valkyrie*, while still seeking, at least in early scenes, to maintain the strange, modernistic form which in *The Rheingold* appeared so alienated from the great, timeless score, began to engage with the music.

Could it be my own senses were at last absorbing the director's language? Or is the opera itself proving too powerful for her confinement? What, in the first part, had appeared musical and dramatic performances of different genres is now beginning to look occasionally at least, homogeneous. Black-jerked Valkyries still lack the mystique of Wagner's witches and men in white coats say more about Phyllida Lloyd's encounter with Tennessee Williams than they do about Wotan's incestuous longings.

Not that such public argument between director and subject is to be encouraged. It's hard enough for the new audiences ENO would draw to the Coliseum to come to Wagner at the best of times, let alone to struggle with a performance at odds with itself. If Wagner's *Ring* is to work its magic for the average mortal, it needs the impressive brilliance from the pit to be reflected by the figures on stage, human or divine.

A piercing scream raises the curtain on Hunding's lonely hut, looking remarkably like a rustic version of Richard Hudson's design for *Rheingold*, as unidentified figures move in and out. Signs of an absence of motivation in the central characters will continue to flaw later scenes with text and business stretched to fill the musical background, rather than developed in response to it.

A hardness of tone in Par Lindskog's Siegmund contrast's sharply with the rich bass of Clive Bayley's Hunding with Orla Boylan a sweetly sung Sieglinde.

Robert Hayward's Wotan falls distinctly short on authority in his Act II scenes with the rebellious Brunhilde - a striking performance, beautifully sung, by the slim Kathleen Broderick - and with the schoolmarmly Fricka of Susan Parry. Yet Hayward taps a richer vein of compassion for the challenge of a god's realisation that he is also a father.

The famous *Ride of the Valkyries*, enacted as a surfing spectacular in the skies with the corpses of slain warriors tumbling from the heavens as their reward, almost succeeds in matching the sound that is one of the most famous on the operatic stage. As for the recreation room setting for the Act II world of the gods, use of a live camera might have been more effectively used to underscored

Wotan's sentence of banishment. It does little, however, for Brunhilde seated front stage where her natural expression is vision enough.

Isn't the real danger of experimentation in this drama one of blurring our focus on the lyricism and intensity of relationships Wagner has so carefully conjured for us? Speculating as to what the director is up to hardly seems a fair return for a five-hour session. As Thomas Mann, in the programme notes, reminds us: it is the element of the mysterious, the nebulous and half-discernible which enhances the grandeur.

At least Paul Daniel and the generous orchestral forces, which might step up the tempo a touch, are not in the business of such diversion.

*"The Valkyrie" may be seen on May 26, 29 and June 5.*

**Reviewer:** [Kevin Catchpole](#)