

CHICAGO LYRIC OPERA'S "RING"

by Fred Putz

"Der Ring Des Nibelungen" is a colossal work requiring great vocal artists, a large and skillful orchestra and huge settings. In the Chicago Lyric Opera's March 1996 production, puppets played an integral part. The four part series centers around the ownership of the powerful Rhine gold which was only attained by renouncing love. An ugly dwarf, Alberich, steals the gold and curses its power when it is stolen from him. The 17 hours of music that follows is a story of gods, ego, power, human frailties and transcendent love. Wagner wanted "The music made visible." The Lyric Opera gathered a remarkable team of talented artists to do that: Zubin Mehta, Conductor; August Everding, Stage Director; John Conklin, Set and Costume Designer; Duane Schuler, Lighting Designer; Debra Brown, Choreographer; and Lisa Aimee Sturz, Puppetmaster.

Lisa's appointment as Puppetmaster came as a result of her previous association with Debra Brown (the choreographer from Cirque du Soleil), who had already created the Rhinemaidens swimming through the air on bungee cords and Valkyries leaping through the clouds with the help of trampolines. Debra recommended that Lisa consult with John Conklin (set and costume designer) on the mock-up of the dragon for "Siegfried." The Lyric was so pleased with her contributions that she was asked to stage the scene and was designated Puppetmaster.

I attended dress rehearsals of "Das Rheingold" and "Siegfried" as Lisa's guest to review the puppetry aspects of the productions.

The stage was flanked by permanent

wooden grids which appeared to be made from huge barn timbers. Through the grid work, side lighting cast every shadow across the stage. Duane Schuler's masterful lighting and John Conklin's mystical backdrops propelled the audience through space and time, fog, clouds, forests and fire into the world of myth.

Puppets first appeared during "Das Rheingold" as the giants, Fasolt and Fafner who approached to collect their fee for constructing Valhalla, the gleaming palace of the Gods. As the music pulsed to their ponderous steps, they appeared upstage as two huge skeletal torsos silhouetted by black capes, with dark stylized masks, long thin arms and hands covered with red gloves. As the giants moved downstage, we realized that they were rod puppets supported by three puppeteers dressed in black; one puppeteer supported the central rod with a flag bearer's harness and one on each side manipulated the hands. As the two actors (singers) proceeded downstage, the puppets followed closely behind and mimicked the actors' actions. For the rest of the scene they stood upstage as quiet symbols of the giants' might. During the conflict scene when Fafner killed Fasolt, the puppets were not present at all. This was a disappointment to me as a puppeteer. Lisa explained that they had intended to have the giant puppet fall, but were unable to resolve logistical problems and were concerned about the safety of the performers.

John Conklin commented, "the style of the puppets and even the costumes of the puppeteers reflect the influence of the oriental theatre. Since we really don't

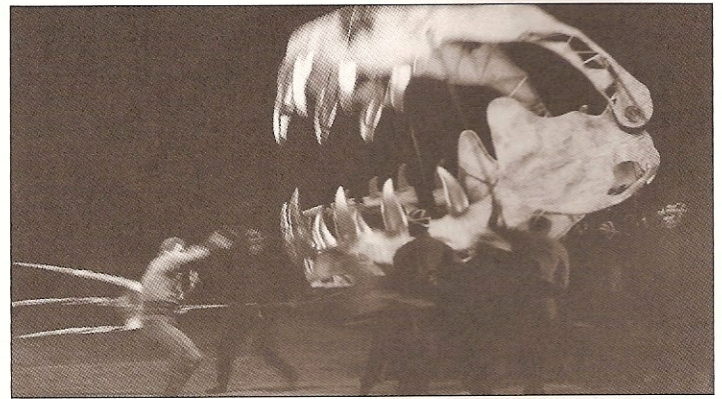
know what dragons & giants look like, I felt I had a lot of freedom. When designing the giants, I never even thought about legs because what I wanted from the puppet giants was height." Lisa and John agreed that the puppeteers should be partially visible so that the audience would be aware of their life-giving energy.

Another form of puppetry was utilized during the transformation scene. Alberich, the dwarf who had stolen the gold, was duped into displaying the magical powers of the tarnhelm (the magic golden helmet), by the devious god, Loge. As the lights dimmed, the stage was bathed in ultraviolet light, and strange iridescent shapes appeared. These were "flash cards" (one side painted black and the other side painted with fluorescent white), each manipulated by a puppeteer. At first the shapes seemed to have no relationship, but as the music progressed, the shapes joined together to form the profile of a skeletal dragon which advanced in a stylized manner toward Wotan. The dragon disappeared as quickly as it appeared. Next, Loge challenged Alberich to change into something small and so the shapes reassembled and parted, revealing a toad. The shapes became rocks and the toad leaped realistically from one rock to another. The timing of the assemblage of both the rocks and the dragon were perfect and must have taken many rehearsals.

When preparing for the "flash card" sequences, Lisa made small cardboard cutouts of the figures which she manipulated on a grid while reading the score and listening to the music. In this way each card was flipped at a precise



Photo: Dan Rest © 1993 Lyric Opera of Chicago



"Siegfried"

Photo: Dan Rest

moment in a given time/space on the stage. Lisa emphasized the importance of the collaboration that occurred between all of the artists creating the scene. Even Maestro Mehta got into the act, conducting the dragon and toad as part of the orchestra. The result was truly magical and wonderful.

During "Siegfried" the giant Fafner appeared as a dragon — a "reptilian skeleton" measuring perhaps 24 feet. It was constructed from aluminum rods covered with lightweight plastic. The largest part of the figure was its head with huge snapping jaws and large teeth controlled by seven puppeteers. The hands consisted of a wrist and three long clawed fingers. These and the long segmented backbone were operated separately from the head.

According to Lisa, in the mock-up version, all of the pieces were connected with a black cloth, but this did not fit her concept of the dragon being heavy and earthbound. It did not allow her the flexibility needed for the dragon to expand during the combat scene with Siegfried. "The concept was for the dragon to appear slowly, revealing only part of it at a time so that the audience would be continually surprised by its size. We worked hard to establish the spatial relationship of the various pieces so that once the full figure was in view, we could then have it grow bigger by widening the space between sections and lifting it higher off the ground. Since we did not have a 'real' body to contend with, we could manipulate the skeletal illusion."

When the dragon first appeared we saw only a bit of the claws parting the upstage door as if opening a huge curtain. Next, the dragon's head lifted over a hill and then the entire figure crawled on. As the dragon pursued Siegfried around the stage, it appeared to become even larger and its hands raised up in an attempt to grasp the hero. Its mouth opened and seemed to utter the giant's vocal frustrations. As the monster wrapped its tail around Siegfried, Siegfried slashed at the dragon with his sword. When Siegfried delivered the final blow, the beast was bathed by red light, signifying a mortal wound. At this point the monster broke apart as if exploding and became smaller as it retreated into the upstage darkness.

In our interview I asked Lisa about the difficult process of organizing 16 puppeteers and rehearsing their movement. She compared it to the way the orchestra functions. "Each performer needs to know his own part, while always 'listening' to the rest of the players with a peripheral awareness." One of the biggest challenges, Lisa explained, was training the puppeteers (none of whom had previous experience), to focus their thoughts and actions into one being. Before going on stage, the

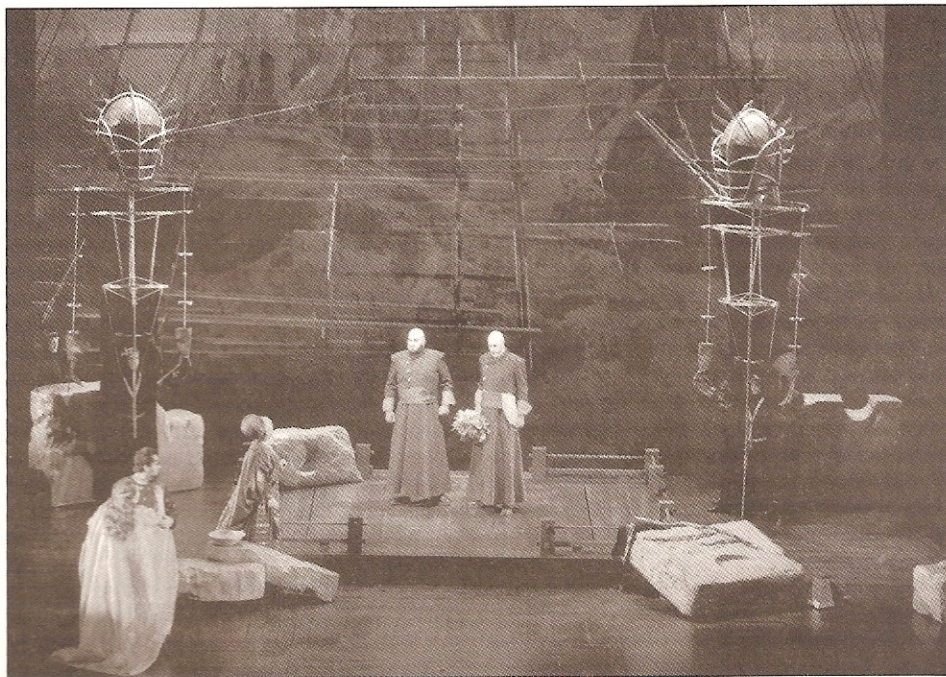


Photo: Dan Rest © 1996 Lyric Opera of Chicago

puppeteers would synchronize their breathing. They moved on stage in unison with measured steps. For the dragon to turn his head and follow Siegfried 7 people were required. Each person needed to move only 1/7 of the required distance in order for the turn to be accurate. "They needed to be so unified that even if the singer (Siegfried Jerusalem) did not follow the specific blocking of this complicated scene, the dragon could spontaneously adjust."

The woodbird which leads Siegfried to the dragon's lair and teaches him the true meaning of things is presented as a large origami puppet operated by a dancer dressed in green velvet. Slight movements of the dancer's hand caused the head to move and the wings to flap to give the illusion of flight. The dancer seemed to extend herself and the bird into space. Lisa related, "in most productions of *Siegfried*, the woodbirds never appear on stage and are merely indicated by the singer looking up into the sky. Because of the presentational visual style that John created, we wanted to show the life force that motivates the puppet figure. We used identical twins as puppeteers with identical birds who could alternate their appearances from different parts of the stage to give the illusion that the bird was omnipresent." The bird and dancer were given total flight at the rousing finish of Act II as they were lifted into the air on a "flying" apparatus.

In closing our interview, Lisa commented on how satisfying it was working with Wagner's music, "It is so beautifully

descriptive that I could see action in the music itself, and teaching the choreography was easier because of the unique clarity of the orchestral score." She also mentioned the atmosphere of cooperation and trust at the Lyric, "As a veteran of the 'no money/no time/no space' theater scene, it was a joy to work in such a professional environment."

The success of Lyric's production of "The Ring" was due to the combination of Wagner's well-played music, imaginative set design, creative lighting, sophisticated choreography, and the magic of puppetry.

Lisa has a B.A. in theater and religious studies; an M.A. in Experimental Theater; and an M.F.A. in Puppetry. Recent endeavors include: a large cast of puppets crafted for the Actor's Alley's production of "The Puppetmaster of Lodz"; "Facing Both Ways," an exploration of Celtic mystical states presented during the Los Angeles Puppet Artists production of "Icons Revisited"; a guest puppet appearance on TV's "Murphy Brown"; and a Snapple commercial using sock puppets. At the age of 10 Lisa attended classes at the local community center. Later while studying acting and directing at Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Lisa met Rufus and Margo Rose and took their course in puppetry. Puppetry combined her interest in acting and design with her background in Jung and mythology and there was no turning back. While working on "The Ring," Lisa turned 40 and gave birth to her second child, Theo, who loves the horns in "Siegfried."