

Opera Around the World

Opera, May 1995

America The dragon business

Chicago

'Well, what about the dragon?' asked a friend the day after the January 24 opening of LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO'S *Siegfried*. 'If the dragon isn't any good, I'm not going.' Fortunately, I could assure him that the dragon was very good indeed. While many would argue that the dragon is hardly the most important element in a *Siegfried* production, the fact is that when the dragon scene is done well most of the audience will leave the opera house satisfied that their five hours were well-spent, whereas a boring dragon guarantees that practically everyone will fidget through the entire Wotan-Erda business and go off feeling somehow cheated. Lyric's Färner, the creation of puppetmaster Lisa Aimee Sturz, is a gigantic reptilian skeleton requiring some 16 black-clad acrobats to manipulate its vertebrae and massive fanged jaws and head. The Woodbird is a simple origami bird held by a dancer who flies magically off like Peter Pan with Siegfried in pursuit. In Act 1, the furnishings of Mime's hut include a rocking-horse dragon which Siegfried rides from time to time. The bear episode is handled deftly, economically, and effectively.

In earlier instalments of the cycle, August Everding's staging and the designs of John Conklin ranged from the whimsical to the magical to the frankly ludicrous. So elegantly and brilliantly were the staging challenges of the first two acts of *Siegfried* met that Act 3 came as a severe let-down. The Wotan-Erda and Wotan-Siegfried scenes were played within Conklin's permanent wooden grid-frame against backdrops of hotel-mural quality. The final scene, fatally familiar already from *Die Walküre* and indescribably ugly, consists of a neon vortex containing something like dental castings. Brünnhilde is revealed on a white slab resembling an embalming table, feet-first to the audience and framed in glaring white neon: a presentation not terribly flattering to either of the two sopranos in this production and making the Awakening look more like a re-animation.

Much ground lost in the staging was made up musically. The Lyric Opera Orchestra, under Zubin Mehta, has never sounded better. Mehta's Wagner is becoming more solid each year. He is less apt to italicize every leitmotif, but some transitions still sound forced and he never quite achieves the kind of inevitable flow that the great Wagner conductors instinctively manage to convey. Siegfried Jerusalem sang Siegfried in all but the January 30 and February 3 performances, in which Wolfgang Schmidt appeared. With seemingly limitless vocal resources, Schmidt lived up to his advance billing, although in more lyrical passages he sometimes lapsed into a sort of croon. His Siegfried certainly had sheer energy and vocal power. Jerusalem built a much more compellingly complex

Siegfried, conveying an intuition and inner knowing that belied the outward bully, transcending comic-book heroism and embodying the sort of hero that Wagner—and Wotan—surely envisioned. James Morris's Wanderer was richly sung and masterfully acted, with an uncanny ability to 'sing through consonants' so that not a syllable was lost. Graham Clark's Mime was a masterpiece of comic villainy. Ekkehard Wraschha, one of the world's great Albertichs, brought his dark, menacing baritone to counter Morris's stately resonance. Färner was sung admirably by Eric Halfvarson. Olga Makarina's lovely coloratura was the off-stage Voice of the Forest Bird. Nancy Mautsby's ripe timbre made her an ideal Erda.

On the opening night, Eva Marton was not at her best, her pitch insecure and more imprecise than usual, her phrasing dictated by a star's convenience, not meaning or character. Her Brünnhilde was the weakest portrayal of the evening. Jane Eaglen, on the other hand, may be the finest Brünnhilde alive today. Possessed of a voice of great beauty and flexibility, Eaglen sang floating pianissimos and electrifying crescendos effortlessly. One hopes that her capacities as an actress will grow to match her vocal brilliance.

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