

Golden 'Ring'

Exuberant staging, cast
make 'Siegfried' glisten

By John von Rhein
TRIBUNE MUSIC CRITIC

When we last saw Brünnhilde at the end of "Die Walküre" on Tuesday night, her father Wotan had kissed his favorite daughter to sleep standing up in the portal of the Valkyries' pyramid.

When we saw her again, some 47 hours later, in the final scene of "Siegfried," the newly mortal Brünnhilde was stretched out supine on a fluorescent-ringed table, awaiting her awakening by the flame-defying hero, Siegfried. How she got from portal to table was never explained. Perhaps Wagner's heroine has a secret somnambulistic streak about her.

Or perhaps this, too, is another of director August Everding's puckish little jokes, his way of treating serious matter lightly and playfully in his Lyric Opera production of Wagner's "Ring" cycle.

In any case, the Lyric's revival of "Siegfried," the third music drama of the tetralogy, Thursday at the Civic Opera House proved far and away the high

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point of the cycle thus far. Some aspects of the production had been freshly restudied, and with a top-flight cast and an orchestra whose every member met Wagner's extended instrumental demands with full concentration, the five-hour duration seemed very short indeed.

This is "Siegfried" as exuberant myth. If one thinks of the "Ring of the Nibelung" as a four-part symphony, this fairy tale about the muscle-bound young hero who slays the dragon, wins the gold and weds the heroine is the scherzo movement. This, after all, is the last glimpse Wagner gives us of pure innocence—the innocence of youth as well as of unsullied nature—in the "Ring," the only opera in the saga with an unambiguously happy ending. Everding invites us to enjoy it, and we do.

John Conklin's stylized decor allows the director clear, open spaces in which to spin the mythic tale.

Puppet master Lisa Aimee Sturz brings back her nifty dragon, a large skeletal Fafner with snapping steel jaws and mean-looking claws. The Wood Bird is represented by a white origami creation borne by a dancer and, at the end of Act II, a soaring aerialist.

Unfortunately, the two crucial stage effects—Siegfried's splitting of Mime's anvil and his shattering of his grandfather Wotan's spear—were

Siegfried

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step and fiendish glance was spell-binding.

What a pleasure it was to behold two Wagnerian pros like Clark and Jerusalem playing off one another so effortlessly.

Jerusalem's portrait of the embryo hero had boyish brashness and manly strength, mixed with touching moments of confused introspection. His lyrical

singing revealed, I thought, a new freedom, color and subtlety; he paced himself well over a punishingly long evening.

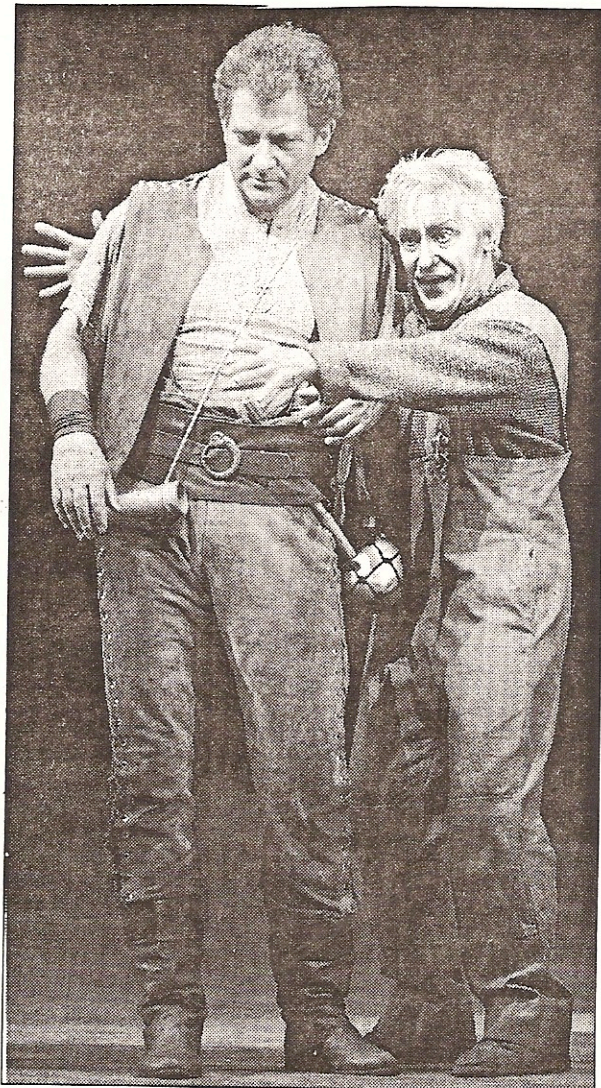
For the heroine's radiant awakening, Eva Marton was able to scale down her vocal amplitude to suggest Brünnhilde's loving femininity. Alas, at full volume and under pressure, an intrusive wobble and pitch problems got in the way of her musical performance.

Morris invested the Wanderer's four duets with tone at once full-throated, grandly noble and god-like: another vocally and dramati-

cally commanding performance.

Ekkehard Wlaschiha reprised his definitive Alberich, Nancy Maultsby her sable-voiced Erda. One felt privileged to hear Matti Salminen as the blackly cavernous voice of Fafner.

Zubin Mehta's conducting conjured deep, saturated sonorities from the lower brass, limned the opera's long conversations with a welcome flexibility and brought a luminous flood of string sound to the gorgeous scene beginning with "Heil dir, Sonne."



Tribune photo by Nancy Stone

Siegfried Jerusalem (left) sings the role of Siegfried and Graham Clark is Mime in "Siegfried."

spoiled. Initially the anvil stayed put, and all poor Siegfried got for his troubles was a bent sword. And because the same sword failed to connect with Wotan's staff later on, James Morris had to break it himself. But what mattered most on Thursday were the singers.

I mean no disrespect for the brave singing of Siegfried Jerusalem in the title role, or the stalwart contributions of everyone else, but the real star of the show was Graham Clark as Mime. His twitching, cackling, conniving dwarf again was a performance to cherish, musically sung, as keenly realized in dramatic nuance as it was in verbal clarity; every