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- Sports
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Mixed Grill

By DAVID SHENGOLD 08/16/2002

Wagner via Wrangler in Ring Cycle spoof delivers twangin' 'n' lamentin'

Das Barbecü is probably one of the better things Speight Jenkins, General Director of Seattle Opera, has offered the world. This country-and-western retelling of the story of Wagner's *Ring* in archetypal Texas first saw the light of day during Seattle's *Ring Cycle* of 1991, where it offered festival-goers lively relief after all those hours of Gudrun Volkert and Roger Roloff. Jim Luigs' lyrics are extremely clever and Scott Warrender's songs, if understandably a bit generic, offer a five-person ensemble some fine opportunities for twangin', lamentin' an' carryin' on in the best of' country style. Particularly in the second act of *Das Barbecü*, some of the songs are quite enjoyable and moving, especially "Turn the Tide", the big "11 o'clock number" for Brünnhilde, Erda and Wotan.

Das Barbecü has been seen in New York before, and probably most easily finds an audience while the Wagner tetralogy is being performed (bet Jane Eaglen would enjoy seeing it, too) but Heartist Productions and the Impressionistic Theatre Company brought a valiant and highly professional staging to Manhattan's West End Theater to brighten summer's dog days. In his first New York production, director and choreographer John Gray did a bang-up job with a talented, motivated cast, and a trio of musicians, but limited space and resources.

Fortunately the show involves no actual Wagner parody but tells the story to its own distinctive beat, with the Rivermaidens performing in a pool show and "Rodeo Romeo" Siegfried meeting Gutrune when drugged between songs in a down-home bar. Everyone in the cast had the vocal style down pat and moved with ease among their many parts. Despite a small turnout on the night I attended (the second night of an unheralded off-off-Broadway run) everyone threw themselves into their work with gusto and high professionalism.

Two of the actors were particularly striking vocalists. Courtney Morris, a spirited and endearing performer, made a gracious Narrator and sang and acted the dickens out of Fricka and Erda (as well as Needa Trout, the back-up singer, Y-Vonne [sic] Duvall, a Rivermaiden, and a Valkyrie —Lilli Lehmann herself never took on as much). Stephanie Lyng also lent pizzazz to the Rivermaidens, but her main part was (as in Wagner) the emotional rock of the show, Brünnhilde. Lyng brought great looks, unflagging energy, and a terrific theatre music-voice to the part, making something genuinely meaningful and moving of her songs. Would that she could saddle up for the Wagnerian version too —she might actually make a dramatic impact in the Met's empty, calendar-art staging. Look sharp for Courtney Morris and Stephanie Lyng's names in cast lists of future shows.

Keralee Clay had slightly less polish to offer vocally but offered the genuine Texan article in terms of megawatt charm and sharp-etched characterizations. Most Gutrunes don't make a quarter of the impact of the big-hearted beauty Clay drew—two parts Dorothy Malone in *Written on the Wind* to three parts Susan Hayward in *Tulsa*. Plus, her flashback Freia ("A Little House for Me") had her own nymphomaniac charm. Kevin Kraft has an everyman quality that allowed him convincingly to move from a quietly sexy cowboy Siegfried (strumming his own guitar with style in "Wanderin' Man") to a buck-toothed, goofy stage-villain Alberich, and seem like a completely different actor. He sang with convincing style in each guise (and he was the butchest Norn this side of Grace Hoffmann). David Gaspin did a similarly skillful quick-change act between big cattleman Wotan and Hagen (here a narcoleptic family idiot); he brought a substantial baritone to Wotan's big number, "River of Fire." The three-piece orchestra contributed laughs, sound effects, and a honky-tonk swing to a highly enjoyable evening.

Having finished his Verdi Marathon, Vincent La Selva has turned his sights Advertisement on Puccini. It's not yet clear whether he will mount the whole canon (a family of work whose smaller members are often slighted in New York, although City Opera and Di Capo respectively have *Il trittico* and *Edgar* slated for this season), but he provided a real service in reviving *Le Villi*, the composer's very first opera, dating from his late 20s and first done in 1884. La Selva's New York Grand Opera, besides being provided free, is suffused with a *conductorial italianità* now very rare in local opera performances. Going to hear them on a lovely summer night in Central Park is probably the closest thing America can offer to an Umbrian hill town performance in the square. The Achilles heel remains the amplification; although it seemed a shade better this year in terms of the solo voices. The chorus and (particularly) the scrappy orchestra did not come over the sound system too well.

The production (by Jan Holland) and the eight dancers in the ballet portions of this "fusion" piece (which also offers a bit of narrative *mélodrame*) were the best I had seen in a Grand Opera staging. A simple, illustrative approach suited the charming but slim piece far better than an elaborate, Lincoln Center-ish mounting (or BAM-bait deconstruction) would. *Le Villi* is basically *Mean Giselle*—the betrayed ghost doesn't intercede for her forgetful betrayer when the Willies seize upon him—but there are flashes of recognizable Puccini in the music, with a particularly strong Act One trio and the tenor's "Torna ai felici di."

Hallie Neill sang Anna with sufficient beauty of tone, stage intelligence, and stylistic command to make one wonder where this "juicy lyric" performs the rest of the year. Dutiful as an actor, Pablo Veuilla made exciting noises as Roberto (truduced by the

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“Seductress of Mainz,” unfortunately shown). The tenor retained some lyric charm in piano passages while offering some pretty thrilling ping on top, with a “dark” brightness that made me think of Daniele Barioni’s voice on record. Barioni’s example might urge care on him, but he too would be good to hear unamplified. Raemon Martin, a mainstay of Grand Opera, furnished paternal dignity and solid sound as Guglielmo. Over all it was a highly worthwhile evening in the Park.

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