

# L.A. Ring

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Richard Paul Fink as Alberich, Eric Halfvarson as Hagen in *Götterdämmerung*.

The Los Angeles Opera had a significant success in staging its first Ring cycles (three of them) in the summer of 2010, though the results were decidedly mixed. Achim Freyer's production was a real strain on the eyes – black backgrounds, scrims, spotlights on clown-like faces, and lots of neon lights. There were many blood-shot eyes in the audience after the performances, though many of the images onstage were strikingly modern in terms of design though rarely in terms of the drama.

Freyer used Bertolt Brecht's theories of the Alienation Effect for this Ring, and Freyer alienated the audience from Wagner's characters by turning them into clowns or cartoon figures with white makeup, masks, and grotesque costumes. Poor Siegfried was especially clownish, but Wotan and Fricka were as well. John Treleaven's Siegfried tended to be uneven and tentative in his first scenes, but he got better and better as the cycle progressed. We never got to see Wotan's face since he always had a birdcage on his head. Wagner's complex characterizations were damaged by Freyer's often simplistic approach though some of the stage pictures were striking and beautiful in a surreal way.

Musically things went much better. James Conlon conducted a well-paced, lively Ring, though the orchestra rarely had the gorgeous violin sound and total accuracy in the brass that one would hope for. Most of the singers, despite their often silly costumes and makeup, succeeded in overcoming this production and creating some humanity in their characters. Linda Watson was especially

impressive as Brünnhilde, singing with clarity, beauty of tone, and total accuracy in her high notes. Plácido Domingo, a local hero here, sang Siegmund with a large, gorgeous sound, despite the fact that this production gave him only half a face. Michelle DeYoung sang four roles, all wonderfully – Fricka in *Rheingold*, Sieglinde in *Walküre*, and Second Norn and Waltraute in *Götterdämmerung*. Eric Halfvarson succeeded as Fafner, Hunding, and Hagen, bringing vocal heft to all three of these characters.

Vitalij Kowaljow became an imposing Wotan, shaping the notes wonderfully and always completely audible, despite being made to appear like a robot with a face on his stomach. Graham Clark became a very funny Mime despite the mask he was forced to wear, and Richard Paul Fink created a suitably menacing and frustrated Alberich, though Freyer had these characters puffing cigars to show their materialism. Arnold Bezuyen became a comically grotesque Loge who dashed around the stage quite effectively. Wagner's complex and very human characters, one of the great strengths of the Ring, were often lost in this production, though some singers managed to outsmart the director. Nevertheless the end of the final opera received a standing ovation since the music was so well performed, and who could resist cheering for the home team after such an achievement and despite Achim Freyer.

While this Ring was being performed in L.A., the little Los Angeles Uncommon Opera Company in Pasadena staged a clever production of *Die Feen*, Wagner's first opera.

Though this is not a great opera, it was fun to see it onstage and see so many of Wagner's mature ideas in embryonic form. Here humanity must deal with a god-like figure (as in *Lohengrin*), a hero must sing to his muse (as in *Tannhäuser*), and a hero needs a sword (as in *Siegfried*) and a cup (as in *Parsifal*). Van Nessa Hulme (as Ada) and Erin Murphy (as Farzana) were especially impressive in this first of Wagner's operas.

Los Angeles had clearly become a real center for opera in America with its first complete Ring cycle. Southern California has finally become Wagnerian.



*Die Feen* was also performed in Los Angeles.

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