

The women in Wagner

The ENO has dared to take on the complete Ring cycle. Jessica Duchen talks to its female director and soprano about the challenges of the finale

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In a small room off the London Coliseum's foyer, three women are talking about Wagner. The director Phyllida Lloyd, the soprano Kathleen Broderick and I are not immune to the significance of this. Wagner attracts a higher proportion of men to his audience than any other composer, and Lloyd, currently steering his four-opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung* towards its finale, *Twilight of the Gods*, for English National Opera, is one of only a handful of female directors to have taken on this gargantuan task.

And being a woman does make a difference. "I don't usually feel in my work that my gender is as relevant as it is here," Lloyd confirms. "You have to make choices all the time about what you're throwing into relief and I'm sure that a woman, whether consciously or unconsciously, is going to make some choices that people don't expect, perhaps because our relationship to power and powerlessness is inevitably different."

Broderick, a Canadian, who stars in the leading role of Brünnhilde, says that in Wagner's operas the women are nevertheless the strongest individuals. "They are the characters who make the crucial decisions, choices that transform themselves and the world around them. And very often they are the redeemers of the men, or of the whole world. Wagner may have been a total bastard, but I have the impression he must have worshipped women!"

Brünnhilde, the heroine of the *Ring*, is Wagner's ultimate redemptive woman. She is a Valkyrie, a warrior daughter of Wotan. Her sense of humanity gets the better of her in the second opera, *The Valkyrie*, inducing her to defy her father. In punishment, Wotan condemns her to sleep within a circle of fire until a man rescues her with his kiss. When *Twilight of the Gods* opens, Brünnhilde has been awoken by the cycle's ostensible hero, Siegfried, who has given her the ring, unaware that the object is cursed. It brings its holder ultimate power, but its forger renounced love to gain that power: now all who possess or seek to possess the ring are doomed.

In *Twilight of the Gods*, the curse is fulfilled, destroying the relationship of Siegfried and Brünnhilde and leading to Siegfried's death. But in the closing pages, the Immolation Scene, Brünnhilde sacrifices herself. She rides into Siegfried's funeral pyre and destroys the ring and its curse at the same time; the ring's gold is restored to the Rhine, its rightful owner. The old order of the gods goes up in flames, making way, Wagner implies, for a new era based on love.

Interpreting the Immolation Scene, the climax of some 17 hours of opera (*Twilight of the Gods* alone is about five hours), is Wagner's ultimate challenge to producer and soprano alike. How is Lloyd approaching it? "We don't want to give away exactly what Kathleen will do to kill herself," Lloyd says, "but she's going to take with her more than just her family. All that is evil and corrupt in the opera's world is swept away. The planet will restore itself, but the human cost is immense."

And for Broderick, what does it take to carry off a scene like this? Lloyd and Broderick catch one another's eye and laugh. "When you come off the stage after singing a big scene," Lloyd says to Broderick, "it's the nearest I've been to meeting someone who's on acid! You're quite possessed, aren't you?"

"I have to turn myself into Superwoman to sing Brünnhilde," Broderick agrees. "Performing it is like meditation when it's really good. You are so focused yet so free, so in touch with the universe - hopefully! I've been particularly helped by the way we've worked on this production, which is very special. I don't know how I'll go to other directors after working with Phyllida, knowing how it's possible to induce so much raw emotion to explode out of us all. It's something you very rarely see on an operatic stage."

It is not only the director and singers who must give their all when a *Ring* cycle gets under way. Staging it is among the most challenging and expensive endeavours any opera house can tackle. ENO has seen through this production over several years in which the company has been stricken with controversy, resignations, financial crisis and the closure of its home for refurbishment (the latter now completed to grand effect). The eventual performance of the four operas as a complete cycle is still in question due to the cost; ENO needs to find about £1m for this and the earliest it could take the stage would be spring 2007. The company must be eager to avoid repeating Scottish Opera's recent debacle - a *Ring* that wowed everybody, but left its company's finances in shreds. And now, up the road at the Royal Opera House, there is a rival *Ring*, two operas behind the ENO.

The ROH production has been drawing tough criticism and ENO has fared little better to date - at least with traditional Wagnerites, who huffed and puffed in protest when Lloyd's contemporary interpretation of the story depicted the god Wotan carrying a plastic chair onto the stage. Yet last summer the company's one-off performance of the last act of *The Valkyrie* set a crowd 10,000-strong shouting and screaming with enthusiasm at, of all places, the Glastonbury Festival. Could this production reach parts and people that others can't?

"Seeing these vast crowds with the Canadian flag being waved and hearing people screaming out, 'Leave her alone!' when Wotan puts Brünnhilde to sleep - it was incredible!" Broderick recalls. "Afterwards I suddenly found myself surrounded by a group of people in their twenties and thirties asking me: 'What is this? Do you do this somewhere else? Can we go?' We want to reach those people as well as the Wagner fanatics, so we have to create a world where people recognise themselves. Surely the whole point is to move people in such a way that by the end they understand themselves better than ever before."

Wagner's magnum opus attracts such fanatics that most directors could be forgiven for feeling that anything they do will be wrong. "You enter a fundamentalist world when you take on the *Ring*," Lloyd agrees. "I'm sure Wagner never intended that. He used to talk about burning the score after a sole, unrepeatable performance; how rock-festival is that? But it has become 'liturgy' - whatever step you take is incendiary. That's also the thrill of it."

Not least among traditionalist objections is that ENO's Wagner is sung in English, not German. But, according to Lloyd, some of the composer's descendants, who run the annual Wagner festival at Bayreuth, came backstage after a performance of the third opera, Siegfried, and gave their wholehearted blessing to Wagner in the vernacular. Broderick was overjoyed. "They told me they thought it was hugely important and an excellent idea," she enthuses. "Wagner himself would have been all for it."

Using the audience's native language is appropriate, too, for a director who wants to focus on the characters' interpersonal relationships rather than the plot's supernatural elements. "A lot of it is about family conversations. Husband and wife, brother and sister, father and daughter," Lloyd says. "There's very little that doesn't resonate with something in our world." Lloyd comes to the *Ring* from a background in straight theatre - her career has encompassed almost everything from Shakespeare to the hit musical *Mamma Mia*. "Some of the press felt that I was depriving the gods of their nobility, taking the myth away by exploring these conversations inside rooms," she says. "But in theatre we've been exploring works like *King Lear* and Greek plays in similar human terms for decades. *King Lear* has been carrying plastic chairs onto the stage for many years and so has *Hamlet*! And the mythic, the epic, can occur out in the street. It could occur in this room. An event doesn't have to be gargantuan or distanced from you in order to take on cosmic significance."

Twilight of the Gods marks the conclusion - for the moment - of an extremely long journey. Would Lloyd do it all again? "I can feel the ulcers queuing up at the idea!" she exclaims. But Broderick, true to their sense of teamwork, intervenes. "I think Phyllida could do the *Ring* again in a thousand different ways," she declares. "And I think this production could keep on evolving. It could be the liveliest cycle that's yet been done. Some productions can become less spontaneous, less full of risk, as their action gets set in stone, but ours keeps on developing. And our *Ring*, as a cycle, could knock the spots off most of the others."

English National Opera's 'Twilight of the Gods', Coliseum, London WC2 (020-7632 8300; www.eno.org) 2 to 30 April