

'THE VALKYRIE'

Video Wagner in a Nutshell

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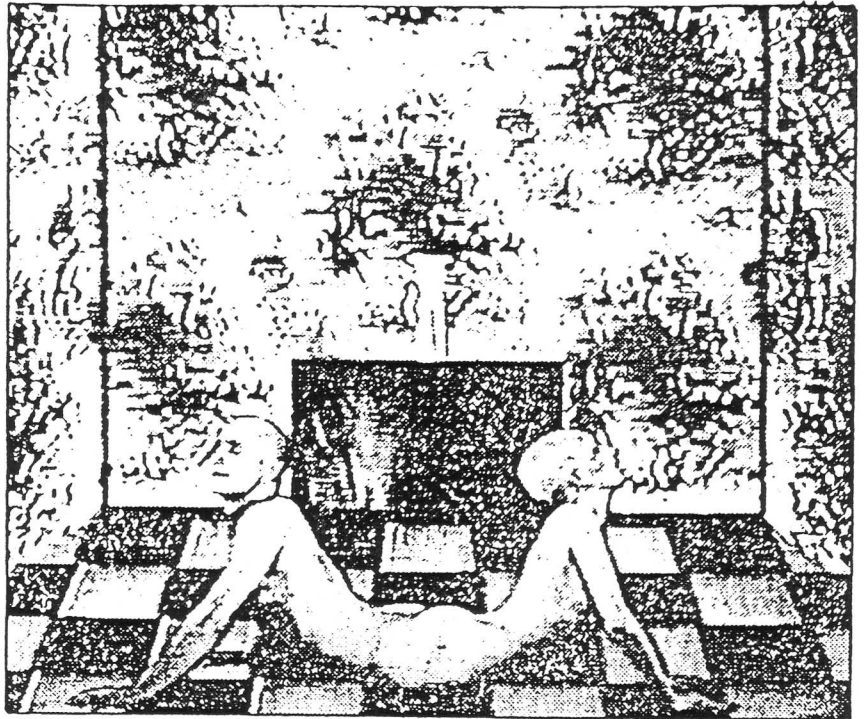
Purists will certainly howl, but those for whom Wagner's operas are less than Holy Writ may be fascinated, as well as irked, by "The Valkyrie," an unusual video treatment of the second opera of "The Ring of the Nibelungen." The 85-minute video by Belgian artists Frank and Koen Theys will have its West Coast premiere in two showings tonight at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley.

That's right, 85 minutes. To put it mildly, the brothers have played fast and loose with Wagner's drama, which under normal circumstances clocks in somewhere closer to four hours. The characters and basic plot elements are all in place but stripped down to a kind of streamlined highlights-only version.

More interestingly, the opera is set in an electronic never-never land built up of densely overlaid video images. Lip-synching to a recording by Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic, the actors show up against backgrounds that are abstract or oddly disproportioned, and such icons as Siegmund's sword inhabit obviously different visual space from the people handling them.

For the most part, the result is a compelling and visually disorienting work, more a fantasy based on Wagner's opera than a reinterpretation of it. (The Theyses have produced a similar treatment of "Das Rheingold," but it is unclear whether they will complete the tetralogy). The technological sophistication at work is evident; at times there are as many as five distinct layers of imagery, all interacting in oblique ways.

The video wizardry can be put to good use, as when the bodies of



Video wizardry joins the bodies of Siegmund and Sieglinde in this high-tech version of 'The Valkyrie'

Siegmund and Sieglinde are joined to suggest their deep kinship. But when it doesn't come off — when the visual effects seem studiously arty, or just silly — the result can look like one of Terry Gilliam's animated Monty Python sequences.

The pair have matched some of Wagner's recurrent musical leitmotifs with visual ones of their own. Again, some of these, like the military aircraft and barbed wire that suggest Wotan's anger, are nicely evocative.

The decision to use inflatable sex dolls to represent the Valkyries, though, is both inappropriate and visually repellent (although the dolls' round red mouths do suggest the Valkyries' war cry, "Ho-jo-to-ho"). Why the actors are all bald is anyone's guess.

"The Valkyrie" screens at 7:30 and 9:15 tonight at the Pacific Film Archive, 2625 Durant Avenue, Berkeley.