

Weird and witty 'Walküre' will make Wagner purists crazy

By Craig Seligman
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

WAGNER HAS been subject to so much revision over the past 40 years that some audiences may be ready to face the 85-minute video "Walküre" of the Belgian brothers Frank and Koen Theys. The tape, without subtitles, screens on Saturday evening, at 7:30 and 9:15, at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley.

Purists shouldn't even think about going. But for anyone else, the brilliance of the Theys' imagery may make up for the unthinkable liberties they take: their futurist/surrealist vision of the drama would mark them as superb designers even if they had been limited to a conventional stage.

The actors have shaved heads. Siegmund and Sieglinde are naked most of the time, and the nudity underscores the eroticism that singers — even beautiful ones — don't always project. (Wotan and Fricka's robes, in contrast, make the gods seem cerebral and slightly dead.)

SOME OF the Theys' frontier-ries make you wince at first, like the inflatable sex dolls they use as Valkyries. But visually the dolls — their mouths rounded (for other purposes) into the wide-open O's of *Houyhohs* — really work; the results transcend the idiocy of the conception.

When Siegmund and Sieglinde lie under a tree in the forest and an inflatable Brunnhilde appears — rotating slowly, like a pig on a spit above them, the image is as

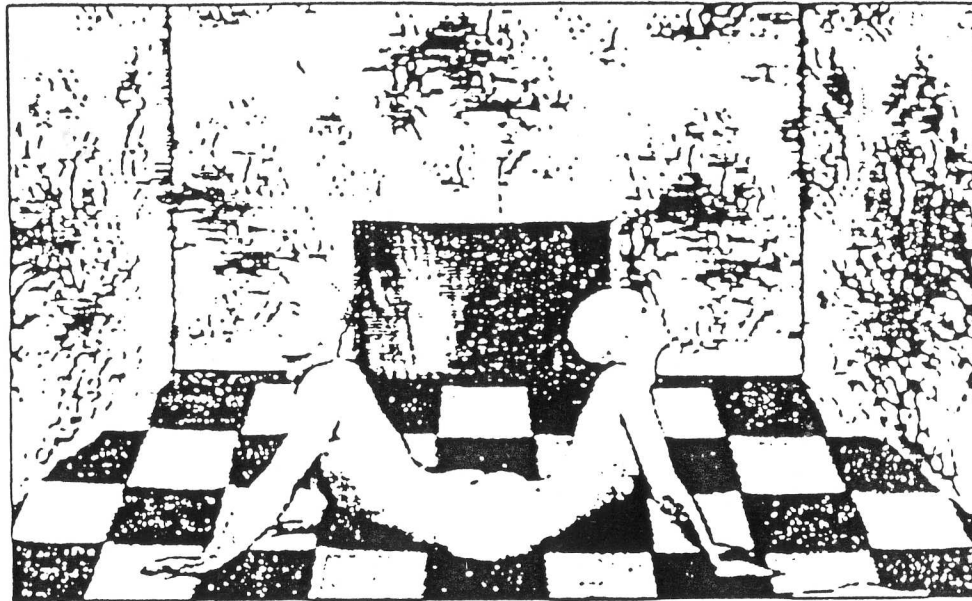
demented, and as convincing, as a detail out of Hieronymus Bosch. Later, when Wotan delivers his sentence, the plastic Brunnhilde gets a debutante dress, representing her demotion from goddess to woman: risible, witty and right.

The temptation is to keep listing images. The Theys have a great sense of style; weird or funny as the notions they come up with may be, they're never tacky, and how many productions of Wagner can you say that about?

But the brothers' manipulation of electronic space — their use of video overlays — is what makes this "Walküre" stunning. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, improving on the film-projection techniques that were being used to jazz up Wagner in the opera house, showed in his film version of "Parsifal" how a train of images can italicize the leitmotifs and highlight the interlinked meanings of Wagner's music, and at the same time relieve the boredom of the static stage.

UNLIKE SYBERBERG, the Theys use video backgrounds to get motion — "Parsifal" looks sluggish compared to their "Walküre." But they go way beyond the familiar plasticity of screen space. By layering and by changing video overlays as fluidly as Wagner changes keys, they come up with a kind of visual chromaticism, a method in which the pictures rival — or at least have the potential to rival — the richness and the complexity of the music.

Where the Theys can drive you crazy is their tampering with sound. They start with the Kara-



The shaved and nude Siegmund and Sieglinde mate in the first act of the revisionist 'Walküre.'

jan/Berlin Philharmonic recording; the actors lip-sync, badly. To add barking dogs during the opening chase, or thunder, or whatever, may be logical, if potentially banal; slowing the playback speed or throwing in feedback provides clever glosses on the electronic medium, as well as some entertaining effects.

Fracturing and re-editing the score is inevitable, though maybe not to this extent (they make some weird choices, like dispensing with the magic fire music at the end), in reducing it from several hours to 85 minutes.

BUT HAVING mediocre (or else poorly recorded) Belgian musicians sing, in Flemish, on top of the

German voices defaces the music — the sublime music. Clearly the Theys want to put a national stamp

on their production; the title of their four-opera "Ring of the Niebelung" (they've already finished a

"Rheingold" as well) is "Lied van mijn Land" — "Song of My Country."

Notwithstanding a certain malicious glee you may feel at the idea of Belgians co-opting this supreme example of German nationalism: the Theys, as it turns out, do a better working with Wagner than working against him. If their ultimate interest lies somewhere else — in their own (obscure) program rather than the opera — then — much the worse for them, and for their audience.

Still, Wagner has provided them, as he provided Syberberg, with a structure for getting across difficult ideas; and if, in the end, the ideas don't come across very clearly, the structure itself takes on a beautiful new luster. The brothers set out to master Wagner and the end up serving him.

Their "Walküre" deserves to be seen, but it's hard to say by whom Wagnerians will fume (if they don't sneer), and audiences who don't know Wagner won't begin to penetrate this curious, distorted, brilliant, ridiculous work.

MOVIE REVIEW

'Die Walküre' ('The Valkyrie')

Directors: Frank and Koen Theys

Writer-Composer: Richard Wagner

Not Rated

Theater: Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley

Evaluation: ★ ★ ★