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A Samoan version of Wagner's *Das Ring der Nibelungen* might not be something that naturally springs to mind, but this sequence of performances over four evenings in the London suburb of Putney did ask core questions about the nature of myth; and whether we as humans learn from them. Parallels between different cultures' myths have always abounded (think of those between the Horus/Osiris and Jesus myths, for example). So bringing Samoan thought and ethos to Wagner's Eddic netherworld, from this perspective, is hardly the massive leap it sounds on the tin, but it worked brilliantly: parallels between Nordic myth and those around 'Moana a Kiwa' (a poetic name for the Pacific, Kiwa being its guardian) form the kernel of the staging.

This is all in safe hands with GAFA, founded in 2012 London's first Samoan Arts Collective (Gafa, pronounced *Nga-Fah*, means genealogy in Samoan). They 'seek truth, innovation and discovery' – all with massive ambition ladled on top. The concept for this *Ring* comes from the wellspring of New Zealand-born Sani Muliaumaseali'i, a multi-talented 'Layered Art Exponent', who also sings Siegfried in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*.

The full title of this presentation is *RinGafa: The Power of Love of Power* (love is, after all, renounced by Alberich to gain the power of the ring itself). And it's not

just (just!) the four panels of the *Ring* we get: there are additional 'mini-plays' that consider the impact of colonial rule. 'A Missionary Speaks' (from *Family called Samoa* by Stella Duffy) charts the changes wrought by Christianity; the bodies of fallen heroes in *Walküre* are referenced in the 1918 Samoan flu epidemic. In *Siegfried*, the dragon is equated with *Tamiwha* (supernatural beings that dwell in dark, hidden spaces such as caves); and we have an 'extra' Samoan pop song and dance after Act II. After all, the intermingling of races (gods, goddesses, humans, dwarves) in the *Ring* is a vital part of the story. The idea of a blast on a conch shell bringing us to attention, initiating proceedings, works beautifully.

This is a *Ring* with a lot to say across a cultural, historical and spiritual divide. As in Wagner's epic, the lines between the human and divine are blurred in Samoan culture. The gods, after all, have very human emotions. To see this version actually staged would bring it fully to life, but with GAFA's skilful use of space and props (indigenous swords, conch shells, etc), the messages remained crystal clear.

The singing was variable, from the positively stellar to some less notable contributions. On the plus side, Freddie Tong's Alberich, part cartoon villain, part deeply flawed archetype, was superb, full-voiced and blessed with impeccable diction

(good diction was a constant throughout the four performances from all singers – just as well, as there were no surtitles). Tong's Curse in *Rheingold* offered one of the highpoints of the Cycle; he was also a brilliantly convincing Hunding. It was good to have a vocally strong, well-matched Siegmund and Sieglinde for *Walküre's* Act I (Tom Lowe and Hannah Macaulay respectively). The extracted sword in this act is of Samoan origin.

The Brünnhilde for *Walküre* and *Siegfried*, Madagascar-born Canadian soprano Yannick Muriel Noah, is the real deal, and a real discovery: a massive voice, perfectly under control, and with something of the stage presence that one associates with Jessye Norman. Theater Bonn is lucky to have her on its books. The Wotan of Pauls Putnins was an excellent complement for her in *Walküre* Act II. Noah's third-act 'War es so schmachlich?', though, was heart-rending in its power; her 'Heil dir Sonne' in *Siegfried* act III radiant. The Brünnhilde for *Götterdämmerung* was Laura Hudson, saving her best until last for a powerful but nuanced Immolation.

As Mime, John Upperton was perfectly in-role, while Ian Wilson Pope was a strong if somewhat over-vibratoed Wanderer. Sani Muliaumaseali'i has all the vocal strength for the role of Siegfried (and certainly the high range); just a touch more of the Heldentenor to his voice and



Opposite page: RinGafa's *Die Walküre* with Pauls Putnins (centre) as Wotan

Left: *The real deal*—Yannick Muriel Noah as Brünnhilde

Below left: Freddie Tong as a superb Alberich



more accurate phrasing would seal the deal (his voice can swoop somewhat).

The casting itself was incredibly carefully considered. Both trios of Norns and Rhinemaidens consisted of groups of three contrasting voices, with each trio blending beautifully, the Rhinemaidens (with their halos of flowers) topped by the clarion-clear soprano of British-Romanian soprano Claudia Anghel, the Norns led by the imposing voice of soprano Rhonda Browne (also a strong Erda). The Valkyries, too, (adorned with bone-tooth necklaces) were similarly well cast. Julia Mintzer's Waltraute in *Götterdämmerung* was proud and imperious. But it was the Alberich/Hagen (Oliver Gibbs) scenes in that music-drama that really stood out.

Stephen Anthony Brown's conducting of the Rosenau Sinfonia seemed to get better and better through the four evenings, the rough edges between scenes and exchanges in *Rheingold* largely eradicated by *Götterdämmerung* (although he allowed too much of a dramatic sag in the first act of *Siegfried*, and the breaking of the Norns' rope of fate in *Götterdämmerung* was underwhelming).

Some orchestral contributions merit special mention: the horn calls of Jonathan Farey, the violin solos of leader Christian Halstead and the expressive solo cello of Rebecca Hepplewhite.

The score used was with the Alfons Abbass/Schott version with reduced wind instruments; but there was no loss in power from the orchestra, arranged stage right. Even the programme sheets contain some of the best Wagner synopses I have seen (*Götterdämmerung*'s plot, in particular, is not easy to explain).

Nothing can detract from the enormous achievement here. The final stage in this cycle's gestation would be a full staging. With its magnificent surfeit of enthusiasm and clearly devoted following, that certainly seems within the company's grasp. Watch this space. **ON**

★★★★★

Colin Clarke