

The New York Times

October 25, 2010

THEATER REVIEW | 'THE RING CYCLE' (PART 1 + 2)

Spears and Spandex: Wagner via World Wide Wrestling

By STEVE SMITH

Larger-than-life characters, titanic egos, brazen deceit, bloody combat: with such things is Wagner's grandiose four-[opera](#) cycle, "Der Ring des Nibelungen," concerned. That those characteristics are hardly specific to the Norse mythology of Wagner's scenario, however, has endowed this lofty 19th-century creation with enduring resonance. Clever directors have long honored the salient points of Wagner's epic while radically recasting his dramaturgical specifics to make points about contemporary society and its mores.

And thus, "The Ring Cycle (Part 1 + 2)," a new theatrical adaptation by [Performance Lab 115](#) that transplants the first two operas of Wagner's cycle into the garish, hyperbolic world of 1980s professional wrestling. The most surprising thing about this lean, scrappy prose reimagining, at the [Bushwick Starr](#) in Brooklyn, isn't that two lengthy operas are dispatched in 90 minutes but that this cheeky adaptation, by Dave Dalton, Jeremy Beck and the company, addresses Wagner's agenda with remarkable sensitivity and insight.

The evening's first half, devoted to "Das Rheingold," only recently staged by the [Metropolitan Opera](#) as a [costly multimedia extravaganza](#), embraces the wrestling milieu at its loudest and most lurid, all neon spandex and crashing blows. Replacing Wagner's noble leitmotifs, characters take the stage to hoary '80s hair-metal theme songs.

Wotan (Jeff Clarke), king of the gods, is transparently based on the prominent wrestler [Macho Man Randy Savage](#). Fafner (Christopher Hirsh) and Fasolt (Mike Melkovic), the giants with whom Wotan would renege on a bad business deal, are the face-painted, tongue-wagging [Road Warriors](#).

The action begins and ends with their confrontation and its resolution, with a critical earlier scene — in which the dwarf Alberich (a nebbishy Marty Keiser) rejects love in favor of omnipotence — rendered as a flashback. The grapples and stomps of superstar wrestling are convincingly portrayed, yet details of characterization have a wry intelligence.

With the second half's take on "Die Walküre" comes a shift in tone: Siegmund (Mr. Beck) encounters his sister and lover, Sieglinde (Rebecca Lingafelter), amid the benumbed squalor of empty pizza boxes, cheap beer, American cheese and wrestling on TV. Ms. Lingafelter, earlier a delightfully bug-eyed ditz as Freia, palpably projects fear, humiliation and aching lust.

There's more sweaty, smelly grappling, naturally. But the final scene, in which Wotan condemns his beloved daughter, the brassy tomboy Brünnhilde (Sara Buffamanti), transcends cheeky parody to achieve a genuinely haunting potency.
