

## **The *Ring*: “An Extremely Important Story”**

Francesca Zambello is an international opera and theater director whose recent production of Wagner’s *Ring* Cycle was performed in San Francisco and Washington, DC. It will be performed again at [San Francisco Opera](#) in 2018.

**You have directed and designed numerous old and new non-Wagnerian operas all over the world. How did you eventually come to work on the *Ring*?**

Directing a *Ring* is one of the great challenges of any directing career. *Ring* Cycles don’t come along very often, and it’s a very lengthy commitment. My real love of the *Ring* started at San Francisco Opera in the mid-80s when the company did the *Ring* Cycle under Terence McEwan, who was the general director. I was a house assistant director at the time, and I wrote the supertitles for the production. This *Ring* was originally conceived as a coproduction between San Francisco and Washington. DC is a seat of power, and the *Ring* is all about power and greed. The Cycle is a mirror to the world, our world. It evolves and changes every time we present it.

**How long did it take you to go from the kernel of an idea to a fully laid out presentation and design?**

I first did *Rheingold* in 2006, so this all started in 2004.

**How did the *Ring* differ for you from all the other operas you have worked on?**

The *Ring* has an extremely important story to tell. It speaks unequivocally to us as humans about our relationship with the earth; and what could be more topical? So much of what resonates in the *Ring* from Wagner’s perspective is about the destruction of nature, but also of its birth — and rebirth. Since this *Ring* was conceived, we have experienced firsthand the ravages of global warming. In the *Ring*, we see greed destroy not only nature but the natural order. And, in the end, it is a woman—Brünnhilde—who sets things right again.

**There are so many themes in the *Ring* Cycle that one can approach it in any number of ways. Your production emphasizes environmental degradation and the major role that women play in attempting to save the world. How did you come to see the *Ring* through these lenses? What was the process you went through?**

The Washington *Ring* project began in 2006. I felt it was important for the city’s opera company to have its own *Ring*. It’s such a profound work and says so much about how power can be used and abused. It’s a great story to tell, and the music is so inspirational that it guides you. The work keeps growing, as it becomes ever more relevant to our society; and you, as a director, grow with it.

**Many scenes in your *Ring* are brilliantly done. I can mention only a couple here. How did you come up with the idea of portraying the Valkyries as paratroopers descending to the earth? I found that very exciting and intriguing. A glorious scene. The scene with the Norns**

**and all the wires that they handle was ingenious and thought-provoking. Again, how did you come up with that idea?**

When we were working on conceiving the Valkyries, designer Michael Yeargan and I asked ourselves: when did women fly for the first time? Not just women, but strong, interesting, incredibly free-spirited women doing brave and courageous acts. To me, the Valkyries fit into that time of the great American industrial age that stretched into the twenties. The Valkyries do noble acts by taking the heroes up to Valhalla. They are like the 20<sup>th</sup>-century female flyers, somewhat like Amelia Earhart, so many of whom fought heroically in World War I. The Norns, for me, evoke all of those anonymous women—cloaked in lab coats and protective eyewear, condemned to hours of work in laboratories and high-tech factories, endlessly drudging over the circuit boards that power our technologies. Surrounded by noxious fumes—in this case the fires that burn on Brünnhilde’s rock—they labor on, reading what can only be a dire fate for this planet.

**You took all of the characters, including the gods, and brought them down to a human level so that the entire story becomes a family saga, with all the dysfunctions that exist in most families. I found this a very effective way of making the *Ring* more accessible and easy to understand. How did you arrive at that notion, which is rare in other productions of the *Ring*?**

In fact, Wagner’s gods and mortals do make up a sort of dysfunctional family. The *Ring* is an epic story telling of the fall of an empire over three generations. In our production, we start out in the Gold Rush era when the American landscape was wide open and pure, through the industrial age, and ending up in the not too distant future. The *Ring* is like a mirror to the world, our world. I wanted to tell this epic story in a character-based way, focusing on parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters. Starting out, I knew that Hunding, his men, and Sieglinde lived in the film *Deliverance*. Wotan and Fricka, together with their extended family, lived in the television show *Dallas*, and Hagen and Gutrune remind us of the “Scottish couple.”

**You portray Gutrune as a vapid, seductive woman in a cocktail dress, with intimations of incest with Hagen. Was that meant to present a moral decline, or something else?**

Gutrune as a character has evolved a great deal over the course of this *Ring* journey. She starts out as a product of the moral decline in a world that is being systematically destroyed by the pursuit of gold and the lust for power. But she is also a victim of the family patriarchy, and in her own way just as much of a victim as Sieglinde. Her humanity will be tested when she encounters Brünnhilde, and in the end there may be redemption for her as well.

**How involved are you in the choice of singers? The upcoming performances in San Francisco will feature Evelyn Herlitzius as Brünnhilde, Greer Grimsley as Wotan, Falk Struckmann as Alberich, David Cangelosi as Mime, Jamie Barton as Fricka, Bonnita Miller as Erda, and others. Did you have any say in these choices? If yes, what criteria did you use?**

I work with the company on the cast; everyone is involved usually: director, conductor, and general director.

**How would you like your audience to leave the opera house after having seen your production? What moods, feelings, and thoughts would you like to spark in them?**

Specifically today what resonates is that so much of the *Ring* from Wagner's perspective is about not only the destruction of nature but also the birth and rebirth of nature. I would hope that audiences will heed Wagner's words of warning and our belated realization of global warming. In Wagner's epic, it takes a woman to set things right again, and that's a powerful idea for all of us. Of course, we hope the *Ring* touches audiences also on an emotional level. We're here to convey passion. That's one of the great things about opera!

**What is your opinion of productions where directors impose their own plots on the story, characters sing one thing and do the opposite, and there are a lot of irrelevant and even vulgar scenes on the stage? Do you think those are valid approaches to the *Ring*?**

It's my job as a director to create a world the story can live in. That process would be the same whether it's the *Ring* or any other opera. I ask myself what it's going to look like. How will I tell the story? It's not my job to impose my own plot on the story, but to interpret the story in a way that resonates with the audience. Of course, interpretation is always a work in progress. The work keeps growing, and we all find new meanings in certain things. "Updating" is so hackneyed, a sort of "put it in modern clothing and call it a day." But I did want to clothe Wotan as a successful businessman, Loge as a somewhat dodgy lawyer, Sieglinde as an abused victim of Stockholm Syndrome, and so on, to give an immediate reference to the audience so that people could understand the characters.

–Dalia Geffen