

The Assistant

WHEN STAGING
THE FIRST *RING* CYCLE,
WAGNER CAME TO DEPEND ON HIS
SOLID RIGHT-HAND MAN,
RICHARD FRICKE

BY EVAN BAKER

He has the function of arranging the scenes; giving the exact entrances and blocking of the leading performers; showing the novices and beginners with the smaller roles the emphases of the words and sentences.... For the chorus and supers, it is somewhat different. They must be initiated into the situation of the scene during the staging rehearsals. The stage director will communicate to you the main points of the plot, seek to spark your interest so that you will participate in character, in which you will be considered as a very important part of the scene. When this is done, the director will assign you your entrances and exits, your positions and groupings and, when required, the necessary guidance how to connect your words or singing with gestures and arm movements.... The Master [Wagner] has honored me with the task — you who have never trod the boards — of rehearsing you for one of the most difficult scenes in his works.”



ANONYMOUS PORTRAIT OF FRICKE (TOP); IN COSTUME FOR A DANCE IN HONOR OF WAGNER'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS, 1879 (LEFT); JOSEPH HOFFMANN DESIGN FOR ACT II OF THE 1876 *DIE WALKÜRE* (THE HORSE WAS ELIMINATED IN THE FINAL PERFORMANCE)



So wrote Richard Fricke (1818–1903) in his diary on May 15, 1876, at the first rehearsal with the supers who would play the Nibelungs in the third scene of *Das Rheingold*. No clearer description of the functions of a stage director could be stated, and it is obvious that Fricke acted as Wagner's surrogate for this rehearsal.

Extensive documentation of the rehearsal process from the nineteenth century is rare. What exists offers fascinating observations of the backstage world, a view rarely granted the public. From the first production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in 1876, several eyewitness accounts survive. The best comes from Fricke, who maintained a detailed daily diary of his activities during *Ring* rehearsals, portions of which were first published in German in 1906 as *Bayreuth Thirty Years Ago: Memories of Wahnfried and from the Festival Theater*. It is a breezy journal, and it offers rare, uncensored glimpses into the often difficult rehearsal process.

For all opera productions there are numerous unsung heroes, chief among them the assistant stage director. Many directors come to depend on their assistants, who are there not only to take notes, record the blocking or funnel messages to various departments, but also to act as the director's alter ego — a buffer/liaison/representative between management, conductors, singers, musicians, designers, technicians and supers. The assistant also can put forward his own suggestions for the production and frequently serves as a sounding board for new ideas, as well as giving advice based upon his knowledge of the theater, its company and its capabilities. When the director is ill or occupied with other engagements, the assistant will step in and oversee rehearsals. Sometimes an assistant will be asked by the director to help with the preparations of a new work long before the scheduled premiere. The position is often thankless, difficult and draining, both physically and emotionally. Long, strenuous, irregular hours are required, and frequently the assistant bears the brunt of the director's rage when things go wrong.

For the *Ring*, the assistant's role was especially demanding. Four productions, two of them new and mammoth operas, would be performed for the first time ever. There was also the new Festival Theater itself, with its unproved stage machinery, lighting and acoustics. For the entire undertaking, Wagner alone bore the weight of the artistic and managerial responsibilities. Although he was an experienced and talented stage director, Wagner realized he was

moving into uncharted territory. He sought out Fricke to assist him.

Fricke had toured as a dancer during his youth, and from 1853 he supervised productions of opera and choreographed ballets at the Court Theater in Dessau. Wagner got to know him during a tour of German opera houses in the winter of 1872. At the invitation of the theater intendant in Dessau, Wagner attended a perfor-

mance of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, choreographed by Fricke, which impressed him. In April 1876, Wagner wrote an urgent letter to Fricke: "Now comes the time when I must have someone — someone like you — by my side! ... See here! I have no stage director, no chief or assistant stage manager — none! Lord knows what! You must be everything for me!"

From his perspective, Fricke recorded

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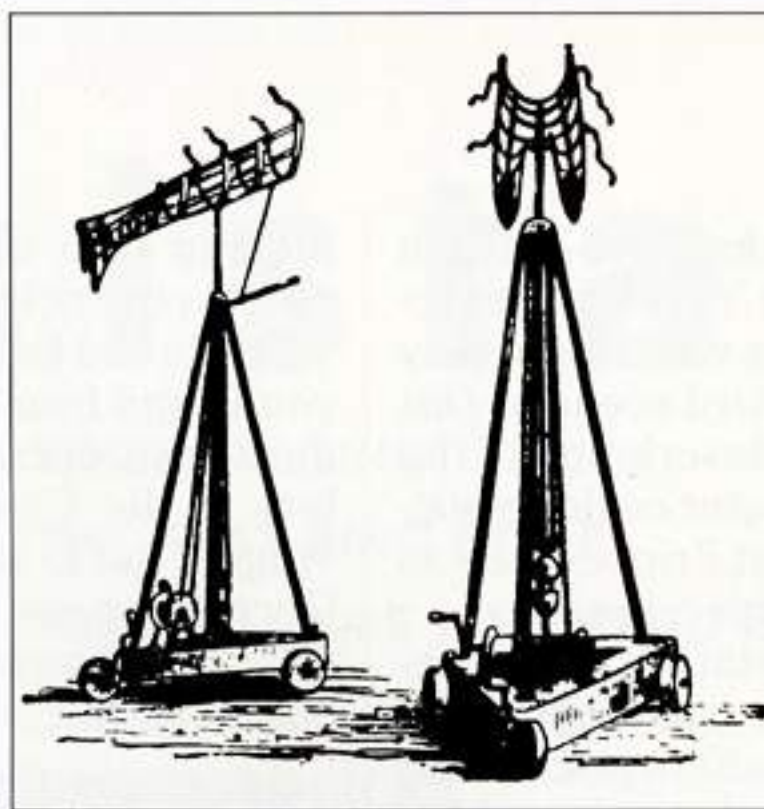
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gossip, opinions and observations of the rehearsal process. Though he had enormous respect for Wagner's theatrical genius, he was never a blind devotee. He was not above criticizing Wagner's ideas or even suggesting changes in the blocking, and correcting some of Wagner's movements that confused the singers or made them uncomfortable. When Wagner was unable to express himself clearly, Fricke put his ideas into practice. Nor did Fricke shy away from confrontation with the composer when the sought-after scenic effect seemed contrary to the spirit of the opera. During rehearsals for the conflagration in the final scene of *Götterdämmerung*, Fricke, Wagner and the technical director, Carl Brandt, engaged in a shouting match. Partly because of this openness between them, Wagner came to value Fricke, who became one of the Master's most trusted assistants, as well as a friend of the family.

One particularly thorny problem noted by Fricke was the first scene of *Das Rheingold*, where the three Rhinemaidens are swimming gaily about. Brandt devised three wagons onto which the singers could be strapped. These wagons could be rolled about the stage, raised to a height of ten feet and tilted into different positions. Each wagon had two stagehands — one to push and steer it left or right, one to raise or lower the singer — and on each wagon sat a musical assistant with the score to guide the combination of movements. Wagner and Fricke attempted to plot all the movements for each wagon, but it was frustrating work. After two days of half-hearted attempts and fruitless discussions, Fricke suggested that the wagons be choreographed as if in a dance. In his entry of May 21, he noted:

The music directors who each are sitting on their wagons ... are the dancers who will lead the pas de trois, together with the three stagehands who will steer and listen to the directions. The movements will be choreographed measure for measure, as if in the ballet rehearsal hall.... One or two measures before the singers begin to sing, the wagons will be brought into their correct positions.... To try and block out exactly the movements on paper is a waste of time. Wagner's relief was instantaneous.

Fricke saw the wagons for the first time



SWIM-WAGONS FOR
DAS RHEINGOLD'S RHINEMAIDENS

on May 26: "I have to admit I was greatly surprised. Now I am not yet certain if and how the singers will have the courage to lie in that machine and — sing. Not that they will be unable to sing in a half-reclining position, but because of sheer fright they won't be able to make a sound! I am very curious!" On

May 30, Fricke began the rehearsals with the stagehands and the musicians alone, and great effort was required on everyone's part. Later, Wagner arrived at one of the rehearsals. Anton Seidl, then a young musical assistant, reported that "The up and down and left and right of the rehearsals lasted six hours. The Master became very tired, and we three [Seidl, Felix Mottl and Franz Fischer] could hardly feel our arms and legs anymore." After four more strenuous rehearsals, the stagehands and musical assistants were ready to rehearse with the three Rhinemaidens. Fricke's record of the June 3 rehearsals is priceless:

The sisters Lilli and Marie Lehmann and Fräulein [Minna] Lammert arrived. They looked at the machines, and saw the gymnast swimming in one. "No," said Lilli. "No one expects that of me, I won't do it in any circumstances, I've just gotten out of bed after an illness, and I'm continually dizzy." The others remained still. "Fräulein Marie," I said. "Courage, try it once, and I'll bet you'll overcome your fear, and you'll get the upper hand and enjoy the swimming." The ladder was placed in position, and Brandt and I helped her in. With "oohs" and "eeks," and squeaks and squeals, we strapped her in firmly, and the ride began slowly. Gradually she lost her look of fear, laughed and said it moved beautifully. Seconds later, Lilli decided she too would try it, and Fräulein Lammert followed, and all three were swimming with happy smiles. Wagner appeared, and the entire scene went smoothly, and the three ladies sang their parts enchantingly.

In the entries for June 15, 16 and 17, Fricke described rehearsals of *Die Walküre*, involving Brünnhilde's horse, Grane ("gentle as a lamb," a loan from King Ludwig's stables), and Wagner's reactions. At the rehearsal for the Act II *Todesverkündigung* with Brünnhilde and Siegmund, Fricke wrote that "Brünnhilde led Grane slowly, as she must, over the rocky crag. In this scene when Brünnhilde

announces that Siegmund is to fall in battle to Hunding, Wagner felt that the horse would divert attention away from this highly important and magnificent scene, and I agreed. Therefore, Grane stays out, and Brünnhilde enters alone."

Fricke considered himself an organized person, and it must have been both fascinating and frustrating to watch the rehearsals directed by Wagner. In the June 8 entry, Fricke complained at a rehearsal for the second scene of *Das Rheingold*, "The singers are getting discouraged.... He wants one thing today, and then tomorrow it will be completely different. It is impossible to fix the scene with all these changes. He constantly interrupts and demands the silliest gestures from the performers (and they are not appearing onstage for the first time), which leaves them in total confusion." Another entry from June 26 shows Fricke giving up on the idea of maintaining a detailed written record of the staging: "I am convinced that Wagner ... will change everything again."

By the time *Götterdämmerung* reached final rehearsals, everyone's nerves were stretched to the breaking point. Time was running out, and there was still an enormous amount of work to accomplish, particularly with the technical staff. July 26: "Siegfried should and must be brought to the funeral pyre, set down and switched unseen with a dummy, and then placed on the bier." But Brandt did not follow these instructions, and at rehearsal the effect went awry. "Wagner lunged for my throat. I screamed at him, 'Master, I want to achieve your effect, but tell me how!!' I turned to Brandt, 'Herr Brandt, do what you want. I am at my wits' end.' But Brandt simply shrugged his shoulders and walked off."

Despite pressures, difficulties and mistakes during the first performances, the artistic achievements of Richard Wagner and his team of performers and technicians were an undeniable success. Yet at the close of his diary, Fricke noted that Wagner was not completely satisfied. In a conversation with Fricke before his departure from Bayreuth, Wagner confided, "Next year, we will do everything completely differently." But sadly, the opportunity to restage the *Ring* never presented itself again in Wagner's lifetime. It is tantalizing to consider what new visions Wagner might have presented with the aid of his talented assistant. □

MR. BAKER is writing a book on the history of opera staging and design, to be published by Yale University Press.

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