

## **die walküre**

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Wotan's social experiment is coming unravelled. His multicultural paradise is falling apart at the seams, his high-rise utopia tainted by a ragged subculture of poverty and brutality. His plan to save himself is flawed; his estranged wife and business partner Fricka is unimpressed.

With this cogent Walküre, the Flemish National Opera's Ring cycle is well on its way. The Belgian theatre director Ivo van Hove is not the first person to bring a 21st-century vision with a twist of science fiction to Wagner's tetralogy, but his looks refreshingly new and beautifully thought through. Van Hove pays close attention to both text and score, understands and underlines inherent tensions, exposes the workings of power and its attendant dilemmas, and steers clear of clichés.

Hunding's hut is a subterranean squat in a dangerous urban slum. The sword Notung is a high-tech weapon in a steel suitcase. Siegmund taps in a code to release it from its protective box. It does not save him. Wotan himself smashes his son's skull with a baseball bat.

A bevy of modern-day Valkyries cross Tank Girl with ER, chortling over their fallen warriors in their bombed-out intensive care unit. Half soldier, half nurse, they ride to work on real white horses. Hove wants to juxtapose free nature and manmade catastrophe. The horses watch the last act patiently from the back of the stage, fidgeting at the fortissimos.

A solid and satisfying cast plays out the evening's drama with conviction. Jeffrey Dowd's Siegmund is battle-scarred but intense; in Atilla Jun's frighteningly brutal Hunding, he meets more than his match. Therese Waldner's Sieglinde is cowed but passionate. James Johnson lives and breathes Wotan, a towering figure wracked by the pain he has wrought. It is a commanding performance. His Fricka, Anne Mason, is magnificent in her rage, and equally engaging to listen to. Jayne Casselman's Brünnhilde, powerful but consistently flat at first, comes right in the third act.

The Ghent pit is too small for a full Wagnerian orchestra, but reduced forces are not the main problem. Ivan Törzs too often chooses flabby or erratic tempi, losing tension or letting things lapse into disorder. It is a grave weakness in an otherwise fine evening.