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“...a moving plastic spear
looks only like a flash of
light.”

wanted it very dry and hard,” costume designer Heinrich adds. “And we didn’t want to double the emotion and romanticism in the set and costumes when they are already found in the music.”

When the lights first rise on this *Ring*, there is the road: a long trail, but not a winding one. It goes straight upstage to seeming infinity. This is the deepest Bayreuth scenes have ever gone—sixty meters virtually to the back wall of the rear stage, behind the vast mainstage. Downstage, where its margins lie beyond the confines of the proscenium arch, the road has ruts in the center. Its roughness is emphasized by parabolas of white light which shoot across the stage from the wings. There is almost no noticeable front or overhead lighting—nor are there followspots. This highly focused lighting masks the doors to the rear stage, as well as the lines of the settings concealed in the road itself.

The road remains the focal point, the visual through-line, in all four *Ring* operas. It is sturdily constructed of metal, wood, canvas, and assorted synthetics. Sections containing sets used only in one scene or opera are replaced with others outfitted with different scenic surprises. When Wotan, for example, seeks counsel of sleepy Erda, goddess of the earth and mother of his flight of Valkyries, three great chunks of granite pivot up out of the road to reveal Erda in her hiding place. And with lasers dancing, the road even serves as the bottom of the Rhine.

In *Das Rheingold* high-tech effects include a metal framework, which rises from the road. Serving as the setting for Wotan and Loge’s descent into the lair of the dwarfs, it suggests an underground factory, seething with smoke and steam. Valhalla, the gods’ new home in the clouds, is seen only as two legs of an invisible structure, and the rainbow by which the gods enter into Valhalla is vertical and many-colored. Behind it is a plastic elevator in which they ascend.

“If we could stand next to one leg of a real rainbow, maybe it would look vertical too. Rainbows are so big!” exclaims Schavernoeh, defending his vertical rainbow bridge. “At first, the colors glide down, slowly, almost like water. There are ten linestra tubes altogether - two red, two blue, two green, two violet, and two yellow. They are fifteen meters high, divided into fifteen sections, but without visible spaces in between. They are controlled separately, so as the colors descend, we can light each meter-long section as it appears. The rainbow looks like neon, but actually it is linestra, which is not gas in a tube like neon, but in principle is like an electric light. You can regulate it from zero to full.”

“The elevator is sitting there, transparent,” Schavernoeh continues, “and the gods climb in. They are on a platform with levels, enclosed by a sharp triangle, 7.5 meters high. Then there is powerful white light, a summa of the rainbow’s colors. As the god’s rise, the rainbow seems to lift, as if drawing them to the heights of Valhalla. Actually the rainbow doesn’t move. The lower sections are merely turned off.”

In *Die Walküre*, the desperate Siegmund, fleeing his enemies, takes shelter in Hunding’s hut, which has an immense dead tree trunk growing out of it. To reveal the hut, the road surface rises, like a clamshell opening toward the audience. Under the road is a coffered ceiling, lit with fluorescent units. The Ride of the Valkyries is curiously achieved by a V-shaped metal catwalk descending from the flies. Illuminated inside its cross-struts are strips of white light. Spirits of dead warriors, brought to Valhalla by Wotan’s heroic daughters, are suggested by clumps of ghostly heads and gowns.

In *Siegfried*, the third opera in the cycle, Mime’s cave looks very much like some major industrial failure: a ruined nuclear missile silo, or even a sunken submarine. The dreaded lair of the dragon Fafnir, however, does indeed suggest the Chernobyl reactor just after melt-down and explosion. The dragon itself is animated by a series of waving tentacles like giant suction tubes.

In the last phases of *Götterdämmerung*, angled projection screens in rear-slanted pillars at the sides of the road glow with night scenes of thousands of windows in hundreds of skyscrapers. Upstage over the doorway to the rear stage is a huge X-construction, with its own symbolic associations. When the Rhinemaidens appear to beg the magic ring from Siegfried, they are haggard, poisoned even, moving about in a metal construction which could be some kind of huge water-purifier for the Rhine.

“What you see is what you get,” Schavernoeh insists, discussing his *Ring* design. “It’s not necessary to have a seminar on it.” In fact, at the mid-premiere press conference about the new *Ring*, Schavernoeh refused to be pressed into identifying real sources of inspiration for his stage pictures. As with most scenic designers, his fantasy often has a germ in actuality, but what he does to develop it on stage is in service to the dramatic concept. If anything, Schavernoeh deplures literal-mindedness in his audiences and critics. He would like his stage fantasies to tease some imaginings of their own.

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All design elements of the Bayreuth *Ring* cycle-sets (5), lights (6), and costumes (7)-worked hand-in-hand to create the aggressive and harsh feel desired by director Kupfer.

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Tous les éléments décoratifs du cycle du *Ring* de Bayreuth (5), les lumières (6) et les costumes (7) travaillent en combinaison étroite pour créer la touche agressive et violente désirée par le metteur-en-scène Kupfer.

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Bei dem Bayreuther *Ring*-Zyklus arbeiteten alle Elemente von Bühnenbild (5), Licht (6) und Kostümen (7) Hand in Hand, um die aggressive und grelle Atmosphäre zu schaffen, die Regisseur Harry Kupfer wünschte.