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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

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Stephen Langridge*
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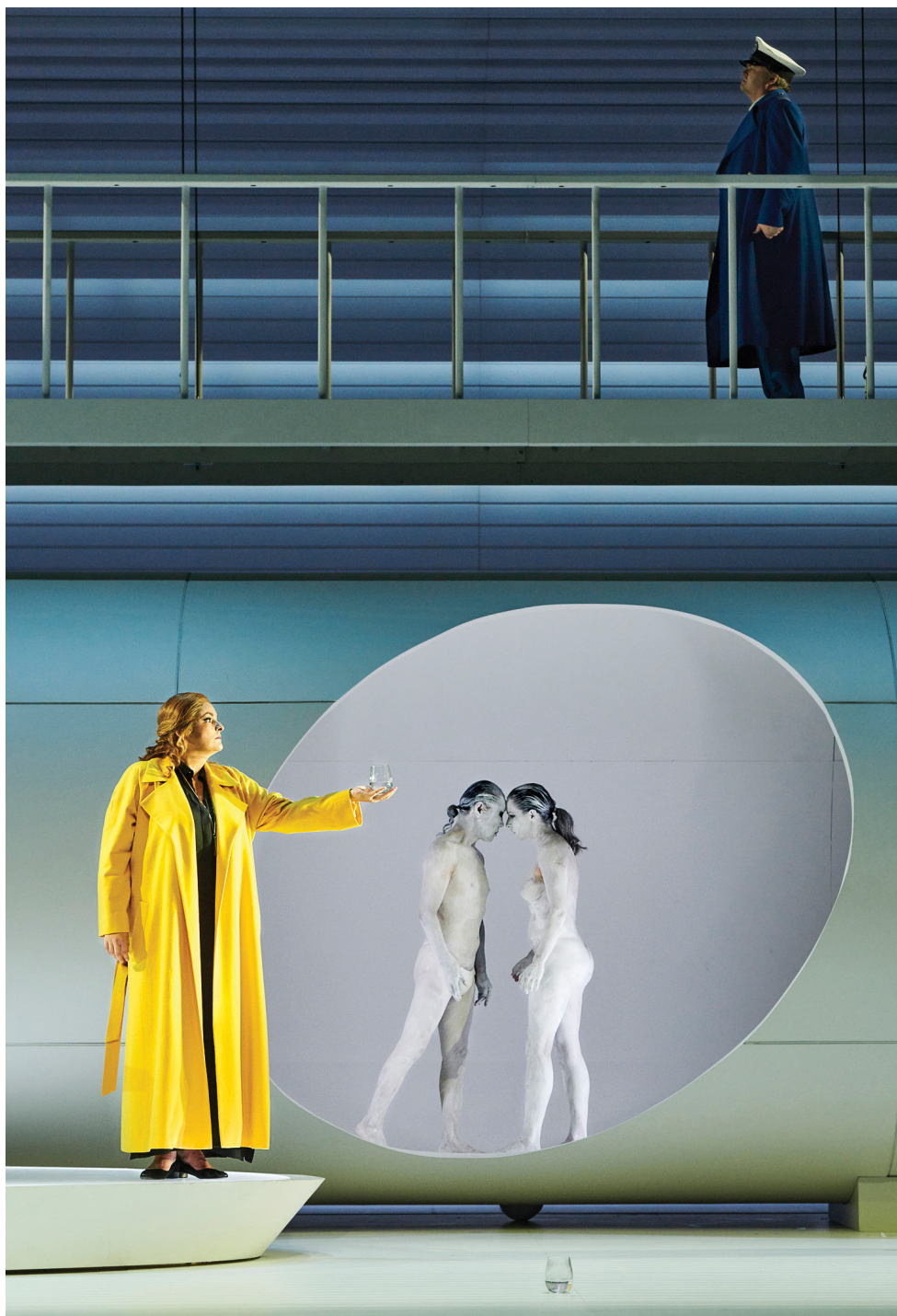
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BY F. PAUL DRISCOLL
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★ **Jonas Kaufmann**

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Stephen Langridge is returning to his roots at **Glyndebourne**.

STEPHEN LANGRIDGE'S work reveals a probing theatricality coupled with an ability to create spellbinding stage pictures. His well-received productions—ranging from *Tristan und Isolde* in Hannover, through *Parsifal* and Birtwistle's *Minotaur* at Covent Garden, to *Damnation de Faust* in Chicago—seem vaccinated against the facile associations of regietheater, preferring instead to tangle with the fabric of the work itself.

“As an artist, I think I enjoy finding a way to tell big, difficult stories with lots of scenes. That’s better for me than something that is sort of Chekhovian and domestic. That doesn’t really work for me,” Langridge says in an interview via Skype last winter. “One just works with intellect and idea and instinct.”

In Europe, Langridge has maintained a robust career as a stage director while also serving as the artistic director of Sweden’s Gothenburg Opera. Six years ago, when he arrived at the company, he was inspired by its top-to-bottom focus on environmental sustainability. Gothenburg is perhaps the only opera company in the world to have installed both beehives and solar cells on its roof. So when it came time to mount the company’s first full *Ring*, Langridge, as the cycle’s stage director, wanted to express what seemed to be on everyone’s mind. “Of course, the story is, in some ways, of the world’s resources being plundered and converted into power,” Langridge says. “I was already

Big Picture.

thinking, how can the opera world join in this discussion and be on the front foot?"

Langridge's *Rheingold*, which took the stage last November, won critical and audience plaudits for its finely tuned vision of moral crisis enacted on an ecological scale. The bridge to Valhalla was built from a rainbow of jettisoned Scandinavian housewares that had been upcycled from the city's garbage dump, and Langridge tapped an army of Gothenburgers of every age, shape and stripe to represent Wagner's undulating Rhine. The production's sets, constructed from an engineered wood called oriented strand board, "also seem to have wonderful acoustic properties, which made the singers happy as well," he says.

The show gave Langridge the means for reconciling Wagner's operas with the inclusive fringe and community-theater work that defined the early part of the director's career. "One of the things [Wagner] wrote in *The Artwork of the Future* is that a *Gesamtkunstwerk* can only properly exist within a community of artists. So my argument is that a community of artists is exactly what we're building—and that the edges of that is porous. This gets all a bit *credo*, but my belief is that the thing that makes us human beings is precisely our ability to engage in cultural activity."

Langridge's production of *Walküre* takes the stage in Gothenburg in December, but last spring he left his post at the company to become the artistic director at Glyndebourne. (Langridge will return to Gothenburg to stage *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* in 2020 and 2021.) For the director—the son of the late British tenor Philip Langridge, a frequent presence at the English festival—the move across the North Sea represents a homecoming. "It's a really old story for me, but my father was in



Opposite page: Hannover *Tristan und Isolde*, 2018; this page, from top: Gothenburg *Rheingold*, 2018; Langridge at Gothenburg

the chorus when I was a baby. So it's family mythology, but there's a strongly held belief that I actually learned to walk on the lawns there while he was rehearsing. It's in my blood, that place."

After graduating from Exeter University with a degree in

also a number of big community operas, including the first ones that they had onstage in the new house. My way of thinking about work has been developed by what I experienced at Glyndebourne. One day I would be going into a scruffy prison for a community performance, and then the next day I saw Lorraine Hunt sing in Peter Sellars's extraordinary production of *Theodora*."

While Langridge's programming decisions won't bear fruit until Glyndebourne's 2022–23 season, his artistic directorship there has already been informed by his previous tenure in Sweden. "In Gothenburg, I directed an opera every year—and in Glyndebourne, I'm not planning to. That means that I'm not missing somebody else's rehearsals directing my own opera," he says. "A fantastic thing I've discovered over the last few years is to be able to engage with pieces that I love but should not direct. It's easier for singers, because it's so clear that this person who should sing Cavalli is probably not cut out to be Siegfried. But it's not so obvious, unless we're super honest with ourselves as directors, the things which we enjoy but shouldn't do."

"Clearly, one thing that we haven't said is that I hadn't planned to take another job," Langridge adds. "That wasn't in

[*Rheingold*] won critical and audience plaudits for its moral crisis enacted on an *ecological scale*.

drama, the younger Langridge was again brought into the Glyndebourne fold through a number of community projects presented by its education department. "My first professional steps were also at Glyndebourne. Over the following fifteen years or so, I did a lot of work there, in schools and prisons and universities—and

my scheme. My scheme was that I'd finish this off nicely here in Gothenburg, where I've really enjoyed the adventure of having a job for the first time in my life, and then go back to being freelance. But when the idea of Glyndebourne came up, I just thought, 'Oh, I *have* to do that. That's perfect.'" ■