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Costume designer relishes futuristic version of 'Das Rheingold'

By Pamela Espeland | 08:48 am



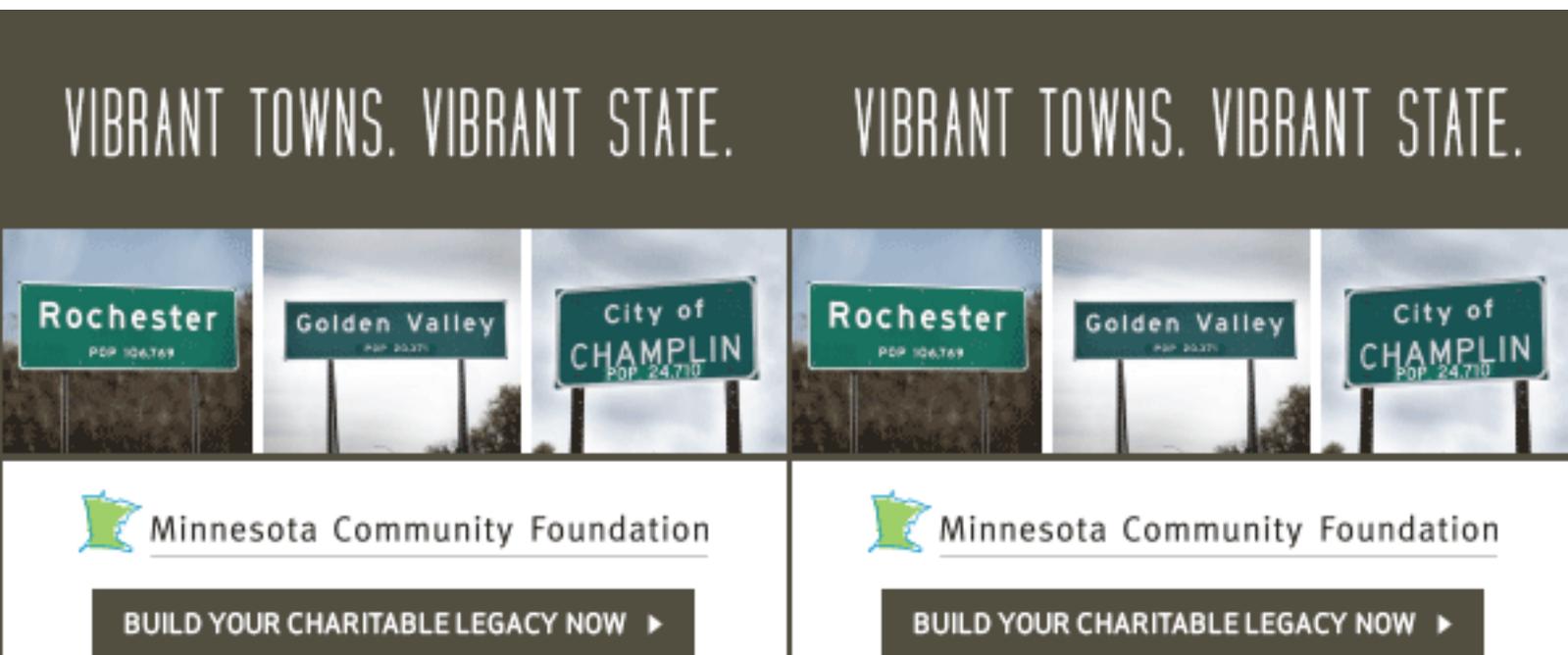
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MinnPost photo by John Whiting

Mathew LeFebvre in the Minnesota Opera costume shop.

Minnesota Opera put together its creative team for **“Das Rheingold,”** its first-ever Wagner “Ring Cycle” opera, it didn’t have to look far for one key member. Stage director Brian Staufenbiel lives in San Francisco, projections and video designer David Murakami is based in L.A., and lighting designer Nicole Pearce hails from New York City. But costume designer Mathew LeFebvre is right here in Minneapolis. Born, raised and educated in Minnesota, he spent a year in grad school in California, then moved back and has stayed ever since.

In conversation last week in the Opera Center's costume shop in the North Loop, LeFebvre (pronounced le-fave) was surprisingly calm, considering the first tech rehearsal was the following night and some costumes were still in pieces. "To be an artist based here, and to have a career similar to a New York-based designer, has been great," he said. "It can't be overstated that the talent in this town is incredible. To come up with these crazy ideas and have talented people like this make them a reality is a gift." Several people around us were busy stitching and embellishing gowns and elaborate headgear.



A professor of costume design at the University of Minnesota, LeFebvre is an Ivey winner and McKnight fellow whose designs have been seen in many shows

at the Guthrie and Penumbra, the Children's Theatre, History Theatre and Mixed Blood. Outside the Twin Cities, he has designed for Off-Broadway theaters, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and several regional companies. For the past seven years, the costumes for the Guthrie's "The Christmas Carol" have been his – all 185 of them – with additions and tweaks along the way, depending on the cast and adjustments to the script.

He has enjoyed a close relationship with Penumbra, designing for several August Wilson plays, including "Jitney," both the current production that closes this weekend and the earlier 2000 staging. In January of this year, LeFebvre was in Arizona with Lou Bellamy, working on Wilson's "Fences," when Minnesota Opera asked him if he wanted to do the Wagner. "Immediately I thought – how many opportunities are you going to get to do that?"

"Das Rheingold" is LeFebvre's second Minnesota Opera production. In 2014, he created the costumes for Puccini's "La Fanciulla del West," the season opener. Before then, he worked with the U's opera program for several years. So he has mastered the many tricks of designing for opera: costumes that move, give singers breathing room, read well up close (for publicity photos) and from the back of the house, adjust to changing lights, communicate the director's vision and stay within budget. All while knowing, as he told TPT's "MN Original" in 2012, that "the clothes are there to help tell the story, but nobody's going to walk away humming the costumes." Even in opera, or especially in opera, the

costume designer's role is largely unsung.

For LeFebvre, the challenge this time was designing for an unusual production of the Wagner.

Because the Ordway's orchestra pit is too small to hold the 80-piece orchestra required, the musicians and conductor Michael Christie will be on stage with the performers, who will move among them on elevated walkways. Early on, director Staufenbiel decided to use large projections as visuals. "He started thinking about that technology," LeFebvre said, "and from there about the power of the gods." (Most of the main characters in "Das Rheingold" are gods.) "This led to a sort of futuristic version, where the power of the gods is technology. ... Maybe the gods were part mechanical and part human."



MinnPost photo by John Whiting

In process: the headpiece designed by Mathew LeFebvre for the character Loge in 'Das Rheingold'.

LeFebvre began looking through images on one of his favorite sources: Pinterest. (He admits to having a "huge Pinterest board.") The Borg in "Star Trek," Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner," cyberpunk and Swiss surrealist painter H.R. Giger, who created the original designs for "Alien" (another Ridley Scott film), were all influences. "Giger does these incredible paintings where it's a combination of mechanical and organic, and we looked at that kind of stuff quite a bit," LeFebvre said. Lines and

silhouettes were informed by haute couture. “When I look at my sketches and listen to Wagner’s music, it feels right,” he said. “But if you listen to Kraftwerk’s ‘Computer World,’ it also works.”

How is designing for opera different from designing for theater? “The big thing is you’re designing to the music,” he said. “The music is dictating so much of what the production looks like. With theater, much of what I do is focused on the characters and trying to make clothes that seem like psychological extensions of who they are. The playwright gives you a lot of information about who they are, and you’re digging into that. Sometimes there are specific references to what people are wearing. If you’re doing an August Wilson play, you’re thinking about the time period and Pittsburgh and those guys.

“With opera, it’s so much more emotional, and it’s really epic. You’re heavily influenced by the emotional impact of the music, and that helps you come up with the ideas for the costumes. There’s a musicality to August Wilson’s language, and a rhythm that drives how everything moves together, so maybe the two are more similar than I think. But opera allows you to make bolder visual statements, especially with these amazing voices. I’ll never get jaded to the fact that those sounds can come out of human beings. It just blows me away.”

We brought up his “nobody’s going to walk away humming the costumes” comment. He replied with something equally humble: “I’ve heard designers say, ‘My work is really only successful if nobody notices it.’” If you see “Das Rheingold,” be sure to notice the tree-like headpiece worn by the character Loge (tenor Richard Cox). Here’s the story behind it, straight from the designer’s mouth:

These are little plastic branches I got from Pier One, and Beth [in the costume shop] has been cutting them apart and attaching them. Luckily our actor [Cox] is bald, but it’s a pretty major undertaking because there’s quite a bit of weight. And so there’s a felt hood underneath here, and then this is like a bald cap, and then this is lace that they use for building wigs, so that this can be spirit gummed to his head, and then makeup goes over the top of that.

And then Cox opens his mouth beneath it and sings.

*“Das Rheingold” opens Saturday, Nov. 12, at the Ordway and continues through Sunday, Nov. 20 for five performances in all. Minnesota Opera favorite – and noted Wagnerian – Greer Grimsley sings the role of Wotan, with Nathan Berg as Alberich, Denyce Graves as Erda, Katharine Goeldner as Fricka, Karen Wolverton as Freia, Dennis Petersen as Mime and Kyle Albertson as Donner. **FMI and tickets** (\$25-200).*

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