

Sunday 1 May 2022, 2.00pm

DVD of Fritz Lang's masterpiece *Siegfried*

*A Wagner Society in NSW in-person event at
the Goethe Institut, Woollahra*

Report

Members enjoyed a rare showing of Fritz Lang's masterpiece *Siegfried*; the first part of his epic film *Die Nibelungen*. The second part, *Kriemhild's Revenge*, will be shown at a later date.



About the film

A showing of Fritz Lang's masterpiece 'Siegfried', the first part of his epic film *Die Nibelungen*. The second part, *Kriemhild's Revenge*, will be shown at a later date. The print has been remastered and the original orchestral accompaniment rerecorded. (None of Wagner's music is used.)

Fritz Lang's 2-part silent film of 1924, 'Die Nibelungen', is a masterpiece of German cinema from the 1920s. A landmark in the development of cinematography as an art, it displays a stunning use of light and shadow, and exquisite set design. The script is based on an ancient, 12th century, German and Norse epic poem 'Die Nibelungenlied' (The Song of the Nibelungen), and was developed and adapted by Fritz Lang's wife, the author and former actress, Thea von Harbou. Her novelised version of the script was published during 1923-4 as an adjunct to the film.

— Film Synopsis

Volker von Azley (Bernard Goetzke), a minstrel, sets down to tell the story of Siegfried, son of King Siegmund of the Nibelungen. Siegfried (Paul Richter) is apprenticed to Mime, a blacksmith, who helps him forge a special sword. Siegfried then sets off to the court of the Burgundian King Gunther (Theodor Loos), at Worms by the Rhine, seeking the hand of the beautiful young Princess Kriemhild (Margaret Shoen), sister to Gunther.

En route to Worms, Siegfried encounters and slays a dragon. He bathes in its blood in order to make his body impervious to swords and arrows. Unfortunately, a leaf lands on his upper back, stopping the dragon's blood reaching him there. This part of his body is therefore made vulnerable. Siegfried also encounters Alberich (Georg John), the dwarf Lord Treasurer to the Nibelungen dynasty. He captures the Nibelungen treasure and acquires a magic cloak which makes him invisible and provides him with the strength of many men.

Upon arrival at the castle of King Gunther, Siegfried is opposed by the warrior Hagan (Hands Adalbert von Schlettow), half-brother of Gunter. Hagan is jealous of the young and handsome Siegfried who seeks the hand of the beautiful Kriemhild. This maiden had previously vowed to marry no warrior. She subsequently foresees Siegfried's death in a dream during which a white dove is attacked by a pair of black hawks.

In order to obtain the hand of Kriemhild in marriage, Siegfried must assist Gunther in likewise obtaining the hand of Brunhild (Hanna Ralph), warrior queen of Iceland. Brunhild has pledged that she will only marry a warrior who can defeat her in a series of athletic games - these involve throwing a large spear, throwing a heavy rock, and leaping through the air. Upon arrival at Brunhild's castle, Siegfried assists Gunter in defeating Brunhild by donning the cloak of invisibility and utilising his special strength.

Upon the party's return to Worms, Brunhild weds Gunther, and Siegfried

takes Kriemhild. However, during an encounter on the steps of Worms cathedral between the two women, Brunhild learns how Siegfried and Gunther had deceived her into giving up her kingdom. She calls on Siegfried to be killed in revenge. Gunther agrees and together with Hagan tricks Kriemhild into revealing Siegfried's vulnerable spot. Hagan then spears the young hero in the back and kills him. With the death of Siegfried, Brunhild becomes remorseful and apparently commits suicide. Kriemhild seeks revenge on Gunter and Hagan.

— Fritz Lang Defined Film Fantasy with Die Nibelungen

By Tristan Ettleman, 6 July 2019

Dragons, dwarves, invisibility, transformations, kings and queens, massive castles, deep forests, foreboding swamps and caves; Fritz Lang rendered this and more with fantastic brilliance in his pair of DIE NIBELUNGEN films, based on the (circa) 1200 AD Germanic poem NIBELUNGENLIED. The technical is impressive but there's more to the films than that. The artistry of the sets and costumes and special effects pull the magic together, but the very structure and scope of the legend told does the form justice. Too often is some form of the term "cinema as poetry" used but DIE NIBELUNGEN may have to be one of the true exceptions. It is literally accomplishing the feat of true epic poetry. What I mean is that DIE NIBELUNGEN does feel like an artifact out of history, a looming work older than its relatively short 95 years at the time of this writing. "Otherworldly," encapsulates DIE NIBELUNGEN's incredible ability to draw investment. Its length (all told, nearly 5 hours long) allowed Lang to let no stone go unturned, giving so much time to each of the archetypal characters. The mythology becomes less distant or theoretical because of it.

By the end of DIE NIBELUNGEN, the initial impression of a straightforward myth is transformed into a complex legend. Siegfried becomes less of the uncomplicated hero; he has the capriciousness and moral ambiguity of even the Greek tragedians. Kriemhild becomes a ruthless manipulator who we nevertheless root for. These portrayals are Lang's, coaxed from the incredible cast of his film and the structure of the original poem. He saw in NIBELUNGENLIED another story, a morally ambiguous one revolving around two men's deception of women. These deceptions and circuitous sequences of dramatic elevation make DIE NIBELUNGEN more than just a pretty face, which indeed it was. Its fantastical elements are so perfectly realized. Lang's films were not truly Expressionistic, and perhaps the effects of DIE NIBELUNGEN could be termed as realistic for their time. But because they were really not, because the dragon and the costumes and architecture and deep forests are so stylized, more Impressionistically than Expressionistically, Lang's fantasy still feels timeless, deepened by a compelling family drama.

<https://trettelman.medium.com/fritz-lang-defined-film-fantasy-with-die-nibelungen-71ae52ddbbee7>