

A FLOWERING TREE An Orchestral Bloom

International tenor Russell Thomas stars in the opera, *A Flowering Tree*, at the Perth Concert Hall on Friday, March 6, and Saturday, March 7. Tickets are available through BOCS.

Perth audiences have been blessed with visits from an array of fantastic artists during this year's *Perth International Arts Festival*. However, some of the best is yet to come. This week, world renowned tenor Russell Thomas, from Miami, performs on a Perth stage for the first time in the West Australian Symphony Orchestra and West Australian Opera's magical production *The Flowering Tree*.

Conducted by Stefan Asbury and directed by Nolan, the opera is based on an ancient fairytale from Southern India. It follows the story of a beautiful peasant girl Kumudha, played by Rachelle Durkin, who discovers her gift of transforming herself into a blossoming tree. As the story unfolds it unravels a journey of love, pain, magic and misery until Kumudha is finally united



with her beloved prince, Russell Thomas.

"This is my first time in Australia. I'm extremely excited about that. This experience will be different. It's the first time I have done any production other than the original. Also, I get to work with an old friend from the MET (Metropolitan Opera) in New York City, Rachelle Durkin, a native of Western Australia," Thomas said.

The idea for the opera stems from the

New Crowned Hope Festival in Vienna 2006. When programming the festival in honour of Mozart's 250th birthday, American stage director Peter Sellars commissioned John Adams to write an opera. Thus, inspired by Mozart's famous piece *The Magic Flute*, the opera was born.

"Adams wanted me to take part. So I auditioned and he liked me for the character and began writing the role specifically for my voice. After I was offered the job I sent several recordings of my singing to him and from there he composed music that fit my vocal abilities. Of course, he didn't make this a walk in the park, the role is a challenge. It stretches all aspects of my voice, from dynamics to range."

Since completing his membership at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Thomas' international career has blossomed starring in leading roles across America, London, Berlin and Vienna. He has also won various awards for his talents and has trained with the Florida Grand Opera, Tulsa Opera the Opera Theatre of St. Louis.

"I began singing along with the radio when I was very young. I sang in church choir and in choirs at school from my first year of primary school until I left for college," Thomas explains.

"When I was eight, I fell in love with opera after hearing it on the radio. Then I saw my first opera when I was 12. When I was in my final year of high school I sang for a woman that was a professor at a local conservatory in Miami, where I grew up. She told me that I could be an opera singer. I was shocked! I loved opera, but never thought I could actually sing it. She gave me four lessons and told me to audition for college opera programs, I did it and was accepted to every place I auditioned."

"I decided to go to the local conservatory, out of gratitude, and it was the best thing I could have done. My family wasn't particularly happy about this choice, but I felt it was my calling. I had to do it."

KATE GILBERTSON

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