

## Australian Stage A Flowering Tree

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Written by [Anna Locke](#)

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*A Flowering Tree* is, as the storyteller sings at the beginning, “a story of love, and then pain, and then love again.” Inspired by **Mozart’s *The Magic Flute***, it was commissioned for the New Crowned Hope Festival in Vienna for the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mozart’s birth. In this **Perth International Arts Festival** production, the opera is not so much in full bloom but merely close to blossom.

Based on a southern Indian folktale, **A Flowering Tree** tells the story of a poor girl (*Kumudha*) who is able to turn herself into a flowering tree. The *Prince* sees her transformation and asks for her hand in marriage. The prince’s sister, jealous of

*Kumudha*, demands she does her “trick” for her friends, yet leaves *Kumudha* stuck between a tree and a human. Wracked with grief, the *prince* leaves the palace, becoming a beggar and wandering aimless through the country. *Kumudha* is taken in by a group roving performers, and after time passes, they both end up in the same city. There, they are brought together again, and *Kumudha* is returned to her human form.

There are moments of beauty, not so much in the lyrics, but the music by the renowned American composer **John Adams**. **Adams** has written this opera for three solo performers and a chorus. Baritone **Sanford Sylvan** as the *storyteller* carried much of the opera narrative with his smooth, calm voice. Australia’s own **Rachel Durkin** sing the part of *Kumudha*, and is joined by American Tenor **Russell Thomas** as the *Prince*. There is a particularly tender duet between **Durkin** and **Thomas** where he sings “*Four parts of the day I grieve for you; Four parts of the night I’m mad for you.*”

**Stefan Asbury** conducts the superb **West Australian Symphony Orchestra** and the **West Australian Opera Chorus**. These two ensembles are always a joy to listen to and tonight was no different. They took the lyrical and emotive makeup of the piece and brought it to life, easily slipping from minor to major as the story traveled. Of particular note were the two guest recorders (**Jay Harrison** and **Alison Conroy**) who assisted in creating a light, folktale atmosphere.

This is the Australian premiere, and a coup for the festival. It does however, have its faults. The **Perth Concert Hall**, whilst superb in acoustics for voice and orchestra, isn’t suited for the ‘semi’ staging that was decided on for this production. The white cloth with its multiple usages was shoddily hung whilst the red silk hangings for wedding scene were distracting.

The audiovisual elements (video designer **Mic Gruchy**), whilst focusing on the singers, orchestra and chorus, lacked the sharpness and quality that would have turned interesting into outstanding. The costumes (**Bryan Woltjen**) surprised me the most for their inconsistency. **Durkin** was predominately in Indian clothing, but the storyteller looked like he had walked off the street. The orchestra looked sharp yet casual in all black, whilst I couldn’t help but repeatedly stare at the male chorus members wearing bonds singlets.

Despite its faults (primarily in the staging), the story did draw me in and I clapped as enthusiastically at the end as the rest of the audience (3 long curtain calls). It is a rare chance for Perth audiences to see a contemporary piece of opera and will no doubt appeal to traditionalists and contemporary music lovers alike.

### A Flowering Tree

*A Perth Festival co-production with WASO & WA Opera*

**Venue:** Perth Concert Hall

**Dates/Times:** Friday 6 and Saturday 7 March, 2009, 7.30pm

**Bookings:** BOCS on 08 9484 1133

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