

A modest triumph

OPERA

A Flowering Tree (John Adams)
 WA Opera/WA Symphony Orchestra
 Perth Concert Hall
 Review: Neville Cohn

Opera, an expensive art form, is perhaps more vulnerable to the international financial meltdown than any other.

Instead of being able to experience John Adams' newest work *A Flowering Tree* with all its bells and whistles, we were offered a semi-staged performance. It says much for the inherent power of the piece that despite this being a pared-back offering, it still managed to fascinate.

Everyone has a favourite fairytale from childhood in which goodness triumphs over evil and the pure of heart live happily ever after. After writing operas about international politics (*Nixon in China*) and a terrorist hijacking (the controversial *The Death of Klinghoffer*), Adams has turned his attention to an ancient Indian story in which boy meets girl and the boy's horrid sisters cast a spell on the girl, who is dreadfully disfigured. Evil is eventually overcome and boy and girl are blissfully united.

The Concert Hall is not an ideal

venue for the opera's Australian premiere, with the WASO taking up nearly all of the stage and the chorus positioned to the rear of the orchestra.

For most of the evening, we watched the cast of three vocal soloists in stand-and-deliver mode. Two lengths of white muslin-type cloth provided a backdrop on to which were cast images of the three protagonists, orchestral players and images of colourful flowers representing our heroine's magical ability to transform herself into a tree in full bloom.

Perfectly cast, the three principals were a joy to listen to. Sanford Sylvan was beyond criticism as the storyteller. The clarity of his diction was superb. He seemed incapable of an ugly sound, each precisely pitched note clothed in mellow, pure-pitched tone.

Rachelle Durkin, the Perth-born soprano who has accumulated golden opinions internationally, did wonders as Kumedha, the hapless wife who becomes hideously disfigured because of the machinations of her evil sister-in-law. Durkin uses her voice with rare skill and expressiveness, particularly apparent in the poignancy she brought to those episodes where she contemplates her

dismal fate. Russell Thomas came up trumps, too, bringing a most regal bearing to the role of the prince.

Crucially, the voices of the three principals blended beautifully.

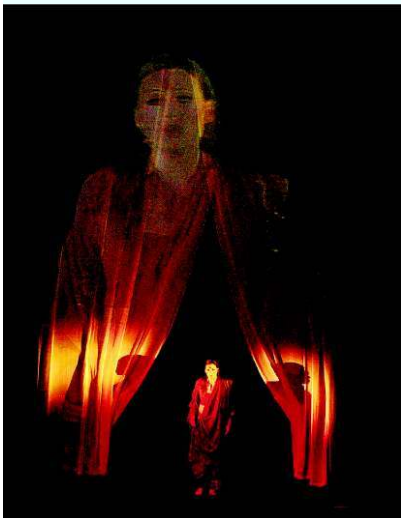
Although the printed program contained the text, it could not be seen in the darkened auditorium — and the lettering on the video screens on either side of the stage was, from a seat in the rear stalls, so small as to be virtually impossible to read.

Adams' orchestral score brims with good things, his sure touch delivering music that is in turn gently pulsating, lyrical, strident and occasionally gratingly discordant. The composer has written no less meaningfully for the voice — and the principals and a disciplined WA Chorus responded splendidly to the score's myriad subtleties.

Stefan Asbury was an inspired conductor, setting tempi which invariably sounded entirely appropriate. In a most important sense, his was a crucial role.

At opera's end, brilliant white light filled the Concert Hall and little pieces of paper fluttered down from the ceiling.

This was yet another triumph in a particularly impressive festival year for fine music.



Poignant: Rachelle Durkin as Kumedha in the opera *A Flowering Tree*.