

# PERTH INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

## REVIEW: Flowering Tree

By [Trisha Kotai-Ewers](#) Arts Hub | Tuesday, March 10, 2009



### Perth International Arts Festival: *Flowering Tree*

A mesmeric melding of story, voice and visual artistry, John Adams' opera *A Flowering Tree* draws on ancient Indian folklore to express those themes present in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, from which Adams drew inspiration – youth, love and the growth of moral consciousness.

From the moment the audience enters the Perth Concert Hall for the Australian premiere of the opera, they know they are about to see a very differently staged work. The 81 piece strong West Australian Symphony Orchestra completely fills the stage area, apparently leaving only room for the most static of presentations. Black curtains obliterate the choir stalls, focusing all attention on the musicians and the only apparent stage effect, a central panel that shimmers and sways gently against the black.

The programme confirms this sense of difference as it reveals a pared-down trio of solo voices backed by 32 members of the West Australian Opera Chorus. It also lists a Video Designer (Mic Gruchy) before the usual Costume and Stage Designer (Bryan Woltjen), as well as designers of Lighting (Matthew Marshall) and Sound (Guy Smith). Once the opera begins the importance of his role is immediately apparent.

American baritone Sanford Sylvan as the storyteller enters down the right aisle to take his place front right of the stage where he unfolds the mesmerising tale of the village girl Kumudha, her magical ability to transform into a flowering tree, the Prince who weds her and the tragic outcome of their love. This he does with absolutely clear diction in a tone that is 'radiantly pure' and intimate. His biography reveals the

extensive experience he brings to the role. Australian soprano Rachelle Durkin gives a powerful performance as the magical Kumudha. Entering down the left aisle on her way to her wedding to the Prince she draws the audience with her as guests to the ceremony. Miami born tenor Russell Thomas, who created the role of the Prince in the opera's world premiere in Vienna, completes the trio. His rich voice and commanding stage presence portray admirably a powerful, selfish Prince, used to getting just what he wants, but who breaks down and becomes 'mute and lifeless' when he loses his beloved.

The fourth character in this presentation is the central panel of fabric which, from the first shimmering tremolo of the 25 violins, shape-shifts from the curtains of Kumudha's home, or the marriage boudoir, to a screen for close-up shots of the orchestra and chorus, to abstract images representing Kumudha's transformation into the flowering tree. Even the close-ups of players assume an abstract feeling when they highlight the curve of a wrist holding the bow, the profile of a horn player, all in a golden tone reminiscent of mediaeval paintings. At times the instruments themselves assume an abstract quality. Mic Gruchy's artistry in creating this video backdrop removes any sense that there may be something lacking without the usual operatic stage setting. In fact it works to create a richer sense of theatre by underscoring the aura of magic and otherworldliness. Garlands of fairy lights along the boxes on each level of the theatre increase the sense of witnessing an enchantment.

Balancing the solo voices is the chorus, which fills in other roles, including the King and Kumudha's mother, as well as acting rather like a Greek chorus, commenting on, elucidating, the action. Intriguingly, they sing at times in English, at times in Spanish, the latter the more declamatory moments where perhaps Adams felt the more purely Latin sounds carry more effectively the sense of drama.

Top marks must go to the Director of this season, Sydney-based Patrick Nolan who has drawn these disparate parts together and woven them into an outstanding whole. All in all it is a magical presentation which through the combined excellence of soloists, chorus, orchestra and visual effects, transports the audience into the world of Indian folklore while enveloping us in the magic of an entrancing musical score.

**To find out more about *The Flowering Tree* currently running at the Perth International Arts Festival visit [A Flowering Tree](#).**