



Last night at the opera: 'Flowering Tree' mesmerizes

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Jessica Rivera as Kumudha/ photo by Philip Groshong

What did you think? Here's my impression:

"If only I could become a flowering tree," sings the peasant girl Kumudha in John Adams' enchanting new opera, "A Flowering Tree." "I would shed my human form, blossom forth, unfurl myself ... my head a crown of smooth white petals."

The opera's tale of magical transformation, love, painful trial and ultimately, reunion and redemption, was a mesmerizing journey in Cincinnati Opera's new production that opened Thursday in Music Hall.

The concluding scene provided an unforgettable feast for the eyes. Kumudha made her final transformation amid a kaleidoscope of colorful banners, and petals showered down on her and the prince. It brought many in the good-sized crowd to their feet for extended ovations.

The myth of magical transformation of a human into a blossoming tree exists throughout world cultures. Adams and Peter Sellars, who wrote the libretto together, found theirs in a 2,000-year-old South Indian folk tale, and embellished it with exotic ancient Indian poems.

In the tale, the peasant girl transforms herself into a blossoming tree in a ritual with pitchers of water, to sell the wondrous blossoms to support her poor mother. A prince spies her transformation and demands that she be brought to him to wed. They are happy. But Kumudha is cruelly tricked to perform a transformation that leaves her in a half-woman, half-tree state. She becomes a beggar, is rescued by a minstrel troupe. Eventually, she is reunited with her prince and healed.

Adams, who wrote his two-act opera in 2006 to observe Mozart's 250th birthday, took his inspiration from "The Magic Flute." The obvious similarities involve the trial of the two lovers and finally, their enlightenment and reunion.

At its heart, "A Flowering Tree" is a chamber opera, an intimate, magical tale. But Cincinnati Opera's new production staged by Brian Robertson, aided by a superb corps of dancers from Cincinnati Ballet and newly designed video projections, played well in Music Hall. It is largest space in which it has ever been mounted. Colorful, timeless costumes lent an exotic, Indian flavor. **Seamless lighting by Thomas C. Hase added to the mood.**

That said, with eight dancers, who performed stunningly, as well as the fine cast, chorus and projections on a vast rear projection screen – the eye sometimes didn't know where to look. The projections, by video designers from Crossroads Community Church, were an evocative "dreamscape" and an asset to the minimalist set design. But they could be distracting, too, especially if there was too much movement on the stage.

The cast of three singers also created the roles at the 2006 premiere: Jessica Rivera as Kumudha, Russell Thomas as the Prince, and Eric Owens as the Storyteller.

Rivera gave a deeply moving performance as Kumudha, both vulnerable as the young bride and tragic in the darker moments. She fully inhabited her role, and sang radiantly, whether a wide-eyed young girl dreaming of magical powers, or slithering over the stage in her grotesque, part-human form.

The tenor Thomas, as her Prince, projected a dark-hued, powerful voice that was effective both as spoiled prince and desperate husband. Owens, who was onstage much of the time, was a powerful communicator, who guided the story with warmth and humanity.

Musically, this is Adams' most sensuous, spacious and evocative score, with delicate and colorful instrumentation evoking "world music," primitive rhythms echoing Stravinsky and mystical chanting for the chorus.

The orchestra's opening notes, bubbling, pulsating repetitions, pointed to Adams' "minimalist" roots. But his music was continuously inventive – such as the use of recorders to add delicate atmosphere. Like most contemporary opera, there are no arias, but Adams wrote soaring melody for the soprano and a rapt, utterly beautiful duet for the separated lovers in Act II.

In the pit, Joana Carneiro led the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra with authority and propelled the music in a seamless arc from beginning to end. She was an excellent accompanist and brought out details of Adams' scintillating orchestral palette. The musicians performed wonderfully. Still, even though the singers were amplified (a practice of Adams' operas), there were some balance problems between pit and stage.

Robertson effectively staged the tale on David Centers' set of three floating discs. The collaboration with Cincinnati Ballet choreographer Devon Carney added an inventive touch as well as the element of spectacle.

It gave the opera a ballet-like feel. Using the dancers in the transformations was a stroke of genius. The dancers' fluid movements echoed the main characters and also represented roles such as the peasant mother, king and sister. There were powerful numbers, such as a bold Act II dance (as minstrels), using primitive movements and stylized poses.

Henri Venanzi's chorus, singing in Spanish, added to the drama and added atmosphere. One of their most arresting moments was an Act II chorus as beggar-minstrels, using guttural grunts and shouts – inspired, Adams said, by Balinese "monkey chant."

Adams was in the audience and joined the cast for bows.

"A Flowering Tree" repeats at 7:30 p.m. Saturday in Music Hall. Tickets: 513-241-2742, www.cincinnatiopera.org.