

OPERA REVIEW

John Adams conducts his brilliant 'Tree' at Harris Theatre

By John von Rhein | Chicago Tribune Critic
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Chicago Opera Theater isn't billing it as such, but the local premiere of "A Flowering Tree," now delighting audiences at the Harris Music and Dance Theater, is the first fully staged production of composer John Adams' latest collaboration with co-librettist Peter Sellars to be given in the U.S. The American premiere, in San Francisco in March 2007, was a semistaged concert performance.

With "A Flowering Tree," Adams turns from the contemporary political and moral issues of his earlier operas to the simple beauty of an ancient folk tale from southern India about hope, renewal and the magic of transformation. You could think of his newest opera as the luminous yin to the dark yang of "Doctor Atomic," which Lyric Opera mounted last winter.

"A Flowering Tree" also has a cautionary message to impart, but it does so as a gentle fantasy rather than as a dense docudrama. Its fairy tale blend of light and shadow is conveyed directly, without a jot of postmodernist irony. If parallels with Mozart's "The Magic Flute" suggest themselves, that's very much Adams' intention: He in fact wrote the work for a 2006 festival in Vienna celebrating the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth.

The story has a local link. Adams and Sellars drew on an English translation of an ancient tale in the native Kannada language of the Indian poet and scholar A.K. Ramanujan, who unearthed it from an archive at the University of Chicago and translated it into English.

The story line, interwoven with a dozen ancient Tamil love poems, concerns Kumudha, a poor but beautiful young girl who can transform herself into a tree whose blossoms she and her sister sell at a market to support their elderly mother. She and a handsome prince fall in love, are married, then are separated through the vicious actions of the prince's jealous sister. As in all fairy tales, the lovers are happily reunited at the end.

The two-act opera also is about multicultural connections, with a prominent choral part sung in Spanish and an equally prominent dance element that laces Western contemporary choreography with Indian

dance motifs. At times the stylized movements of director Nicola Raab's exquisite staging, dressed in simple design elements by George Souglides, brought to mind Japanese Noh theater.

The transformations and other fantasy effects come off brilliantly, notably in the scenes where ensemble members depict an elephant and bird heads using simple pieces of cardboard. Renato Zanella's clean-lined choreography echoes that of Adams and Sellars' regular collaborator, Lucinda Childs. This show attests to the miracles of stagecraft COT is able to achieve on an austerity budget.

All this understated stage magic is united in Adams' luminous, lyrical, accessible music. The score is alive with pulsing strings, glinting metallic percussion and his trademark jumpy rhythmic patter. That said, the music could stand a few nips and tucks about halfway through the second act when it seems to run out of gas. The score nonetheless is a compelling achievement.

At Wednesday's opening performance, the music was nimbly attended to by the hardworking orchestra and choral ensemble under the composer's vigorous and decisive direction. Adams will conduct one more performance Saturday night before turning over the baton to Joana Carneiro for the remaining three.

The two-hour opera calls for only three singers, and all three performed splendidly. Natasha Jouhl traced the long, radiant lines of Kumudha's music with exactly the "clear and beautiful voice" described in the text. Noah Stewart sustained the prince's high-lying tenor part with heroic force and lyric tenderness. Sanford Sylvan, a longtime stalwart of the Adams-Sellars stock company, made a clear and engrossing Storyteller. Bravos as well to the 24 choristers and nine dancers.

This is COT doing what it does best, contemporary music theater in its purest form.

COT's "The Flowering Tree" runs through May 25 at the Harris Theater, Millennium Park. Call 312-704-8414.

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