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Somtow transcendent

'The Silent Prince' is a stunning opera – and a lesson for our times

JONATHAN RICHMOND
SPECIAL TO THE NATION

In Somtow Sucharitkul's opera "The Silent Prince", which had its Bangkok premiere at the Thailand Cultural Centre on December 5 in honour of His Majesty the King, Jak Cholvijarn – not just Prince Temiya, the character he played – meditated for almost the entire length of the production. Finally, in the last astonishing five minutes, the Prince revealed himself as a bodhisattva, a man about to become a god.

As in Mozart's operas, where brief silence between notes can speak as eloquently as the music, Jak's enduring quiet made for a transfixing, drawn-out prelude. Temiya withstands incessant distractions and hindrances, then turns to meditate with eyes firmly shut, the better to see the road to becoming the Buddha. Jak, a student of Buddhism, has said that meditating onstage just as surely blocks out distractions so that his soul projects only transcendent good. The power of his silence was riveting.

The show's spirituality was itself a form of meditation, taking audience members to a new understanding of their role in the world. That, Jak explained, was the intention.

Imbued by Wagner, Somtow's newest – and greatest – opera, is composed of the most evocative leitmotifs for violins. It's ethereal, with a seemingly impossible, unworldly beauty, repeatedly drawing the audience to a Buddhist message of goodwill and hope. It's Mozartean in the sense that it operates on many levels, complex sets of themes depicting the battle between good and evil in each of us. "The Silent Prince" is indeed modern-day Mozart: unfathomably profound and yet highly communicative.

Somtow wanted more people to hear about the lives of the Buddha. Temiya was the first of his final 10 reincarnations, a son forced by compassion to disobey his father's command, a sin, to execute a prisoner, also a sin. Temiya retreats into meditation to banish the evil that torments him.

The score was composed with a classicist's clarity, leaving to Trisdee na Patalung and the Siam Philharmonic Orchestra the formidable task of bringing it to life with precision – and without any cloying romance. Trisdee, tolerating my questions while he lay exhausted on a sofa after the performance, acknowledged that the complexity of the music taxed the youthful ensemble pulled into the ranks of world-class musicians.

As Somtow said, the opera has a relatively small cast of 25 performers, but the sound has to be very big. The orchestra's nine strings tackled nine parts in a terrifyingly complex score and the result was



SEDUCTRESSES attempt to prove that Temiya is a mere mortal after all.



CELESTIAL spirits dance with precision and grace.

quite natural – when not supernatural – leading us into deep reflection. Meanwhile the woodwinds offered intense colour and great beauty and the brass and percussion conjured the forces of Hell with brutish force. It was extraordinary music, played by brilliant musicians!

It is rare when no fault can be found in a production, yet the virtuosity and brilliance in every component of Somtow's tribute to His Majesty allowed for no error.

The cast was as superb as the King of Banares frustrated and angry that his son, unwilling to kill, would never reign. His singing was savage, wild, gripped in the perverse evil it conveyed, and his acting was top-scale. When the Prince refused to execute the prisoner, the King wielded the knife himself with the insane brutality demanded by Somtow's music.

STAGE REVIEW

Grace Echaury, as Temiya's mother Chandra Devi, was of penetrating voice, yet poetically lyrical in her musically and spiritually complex arias. Accompanying her meditating son, Echaury showed immense passion, grace and courage while a gentle harp illuminated Chandra's soul.

Nadlada Thamtanakorm as the Queen of Heaven and Goddess of Illusion was simply stunning. Somtow's high notes for her were reminiscent of Mozart's Queen of the Night – and demanding beyond belief. Nadlada had no trouble at all, in a breathtaking display that puts her in the highest class of today's operatic singers. John Ames, in mellifluous bass voice and direct in his enunciation, brought a depth and celestial presence to the King of Heaven, even if his Queen clearly wore the family trousers!

As Sunanda, whom the King of Banares sends to dig a grave for his son (Somtow's libretto here conveyed the macabre genius

of his namesake, horror writer SP Somtow), Duo Pan portrayed the compelling power of evil. He was forced to keep digging amid unbearable guilt. "O darkness, hide my crime," he sang with horrible pain. Drums, dark brass and ethereal strings brought into focus a fantastical world of lost souls until Sunanda was finally released from his obscene task by the power of the Buddha's revelation that it is impossible to dig deep enough to evade the light of truth.

Zion Daoratanahong, as Amba and an apsara, had strong presence both vocally and dramatically. And the choral sound was focused, mysterious and often terrifying.

Yet Jak Cholvijarn's performance as Prince Temiya remained the focus of the whole evening. It was extraordinary to watch him sit in meditation, oblivious of swarming seductresses seeking to arouse him and thus prove he was a normal human being. The girls wrapping around the motionless Temiya was hideously sexual, but Jak's frozen features showed that Temiya was no normal human. His rejection of evil was so sublime and powerful that, when Jak finally sang, it was a revelation.

Jak is a true male soprano, his sound pure, without question the voice of an angel from Heaven. As Jak revealed Temiya to be the Buddha, his singing projected one of the finest moments in the history of opera, spirituality made possible through the greatest of music enriching the best that can be found in humanity. It offered hope that we might all embrace the truth of universal love.

As a tribute to His Majesty, on the very day the King exhorted his devoted people to follow the dharma and hold harmony in their hearts, Somtow could not have come up with a better endorsement of the triumphant power of the path to love and truth. "The Silent Prince" is an extraordinary achievement for Thailand, and a gift to the world.

SOOPSiP

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Nong Pat's folks are the best

Celebrity couple MJ Pachara "Bank" and Sathita "Nina" Panyayong are excellent parents. At least that's what they say about each other.

Bank regularly tells the press and repeats on the social media that Nina has been a great mummy to their baby Patrick since his birth in August. And Nina recently appeared alongside Bank on a Channel 7 show to declare that he "stopped smoking as soon as he learned I was pregnant".

"Not only that, since Nong Pat's birth he hardly ever goes out partying, and that's really something because he loves going to parties!"

Bank and Nina take turns tending to the little one. "He goes on duty at midnight, when he has to change the nappy," says Nina, adding that she breastfeeds the baby earlier in the evening before heading off to bed.



PROUD mum and dad Nina and Bank.



JACKIE scoots along in 'Chinese Zodiac'.

Jackie at record speed

You can always count on extra sparkle when a new Jackie Chan movie opens. With "Chinese Zodiac", it's not one but two Guinness World Records – Most Credits in a Movie and the amusingly worded Most Stunts Performed by a Living Actor.

In one action scene he wears a "rolling suit" designed by French "rollerman" Jean-Yves Blondeau, which has 31 wheels strategically placed at key body points. The wearer can race along at up to 126 kilometres per hour.

Chan had three months to get accustomed to the 17-kilogram outfit before shooting of the sequence began. The scene flashes by in the film, but it took 45 days to shoot. "I had to slide between the road and a car that was travelling fast," he says. "I had to stay in perfect balance – otherwise the car would hit me. I know the scene gave all my staff a lot of stress, because I'm not Superman! But I was determined to do it."

Chan says he's gone back to his action-packed basics in response to today's typical Hollywood films with their computer-generated effects and massive budgets. He'd rather just do what he's good at.



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