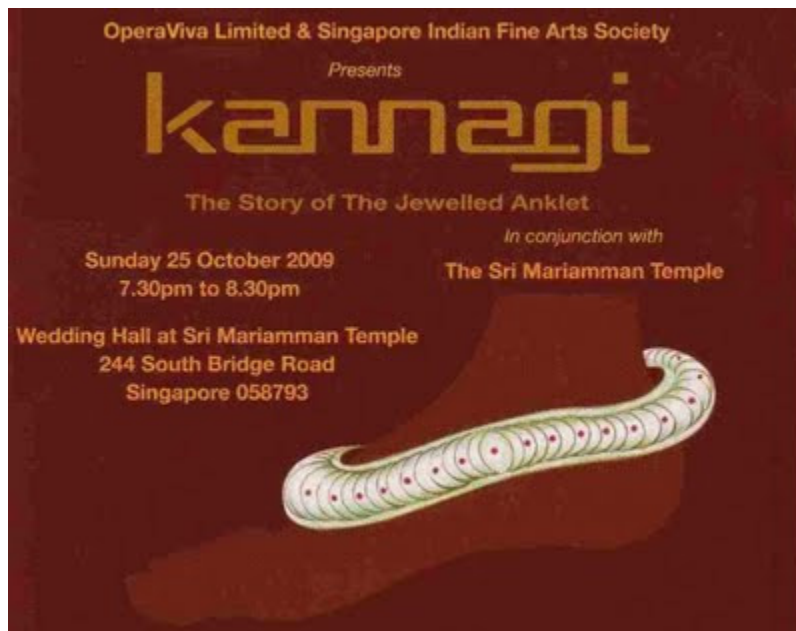


THURSDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2009 BY DR CHANG TOU LIANG

John Sharpley's KANNAGI, The Story of the Jewelled Anklet / Review



KANNAGI, THE STORY OF THE JEWELLED ANKLET

A joint-production by OperaViva Ltd. & Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society

Sri Mariammam Temple

Sunday (25 October 2009, 7.30 pm)

The epic Singapore-centred opera *Fences* by John Sharpley and Robert Yeo is still under wraps, but opera lovers had a good view of a smaller production (of an epic story nonetheless) in *Kannagi, The Story of The Jewelled Anklet* – a chamber opera in 6 scenes - based on the Indian legend of *Silappadikaram* by Prince Illango Adigal.

To cut the story short: Kannagi, whose unfaithful husband Kovalan is unjustly executed for theft after selling off one of her jewelled anklets, reaps a harvest of death and destruction on the city of Madurai. Her subsequent deification unites all the facets of womanhood, restoring peace and balance in the universe.

The setting for this World Premiere was unique; the Wedding Hall of Sri Mariammam Temple with its elaborately decorated bridal platform, clothed with a proscenium of veils, and overlooking the temple courtyard was both apt and atmospheric. The carefully arranged petals on the stage, symbolising the broken band or anklet added an authentic touch.

The cast was small, comprising soprano Amanda Colliver (Kannagi), Kathak dancer Anjum Bharti (in a non-singing role as temptress Madhavi) and John Sharpley (pianist). The *Overture – The Burning of Madurai* – performed on the piano provided a stirring and dramatic opening, as well as the recurrent theme of destruction. The musical idiom was typical Sharpley – original music in his accessible tonal style, using Asian / Oriental scales without quoting actual ethnic

melodies. Sharpley's evocative playing in the *Interludes* separated each of the scenes in this hour-long melodrama.



The cast of *Kannagi* (from L):
Bharti, Colliver, Sharpley and Robert Yeo

Colliver delivered a one-woman tour de force in her performance, alternating between keen storyteller, the protagonist Kannagi (*In the Flush of First Love*), her antithesis Madhavi (*What are my Arts for if not to Snare?*), and the devastating force of Kali. Her arias also included aspects of *coloratura* and *Sprechstimme*, in short the full gamut of vocal and narrative devices. That injection of much-needed variation was necessary, in the absence of a truly memorable melody, excepting the final apotheosis. Here one would have appreciated the presence of a male voice in solo or duet, either Kovalan or the King of Madurai, even in a cameo role. Colliver's task was also greatly aided by Bharti's seductive movements, which made this diminutive and totally graceful dancer stand like a Colossus on stage.

Restored, Returned, Regained provided for a big bang of an ending, with all cosmic forces in alignment. Here a taped female chorus (in effect Colliver's voice overdubbed many times) with piano and glockenspiel accompaniment and Colliver herself delivered the refrain of *Shantih, Shantih, Shantih*. As petals rained from the heavens, this was the one big moment that rang in the ears long after the opera had ended.

Kannagi is a truly worthy effort, one befitting the complementary and alternative role that OperaViva (headed by ultimate operaphile Leow Siak Fah) plays in the small Singapore opera scene. The long-awaited *Fences* should be a spectacle to behold.



Lots of lovely decorative touches distinguished this production of *Kannagi*.

http://pianofortephilia.blogspot.com/2009_10_01_archive.html