

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

DEAD MAN WALKING

Music by Jake Heggie; Libretto by Terrence McNally

MARCH 4, 8, 10 AND 12, 2017

The point of no return

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By Jordan Buchholtz



Should the phrase “an eye for an eye” still be pertinent in today’s justice system? Jake Heggie’s opera “Dead Man Walking,” presented by the Lyric Opera of Kansas City, wrestles with this idea, and prompts audiences to question the morality of the death penalty.

What makes *Dead Man Walking* a notable opera is its basis on a true story written by Sister Helen Prejean. Her character plays the main role in the opera as we follow her on a spiritual journey, which leads her to performing duties she never would have guessed or wanted. Her life was forever altered when she agreed to become the spiritual advisor to an inmate on death row, Joseph de Rocher.

During the prologue of the opera, the audience is immediately thrown into nudity and graphic violence. Depicting the scene of Joseph and his brother’s crime of raping and murdering a young couple, the gravity of Joseph’s offense is illustrated by this gruesome and disturbing episode. Some may wonder “was this necessary?” and, unfortunately yes, it was, because it shows the savageness of the crime, and amply provides the justification of Joseph’s death sentence. The performers in this scene definitely achieved the goal of making it uncomfortable to watch, as it should be.

The next scene contrasted well to the first, displaying Sister Helen, sung by Kate Aldrich, leading children singing a hymn tune, the choice of bright colors, lighting, and costumes lifted the stressful mood. This ‘hymn’ becomes Sister Helen’s theme, serving as a grounding tactic throughout the opera as she continues to sing “He will gather us around.” The audience seemed receptive to the light humor presented throughout Act 1 in order to break up the serious subject matter. A notable illustration of this light-hearted humor occurred during Sister Helen’s first drive to the prison while encouraging herself by singing “Don’t despair, you’re almost there.” A motorcycle cop, played by John Viscardi, pulls her over for speeding and decides to not give her a ticket because she’s a nun, and he doesn’t want bad karma again.

There were four KC Lyric debuts on Saturday, mezzo-soprano Kate Aldrich, baritone David Adam Moore, mezzo-soprano Maria Zifchak, and tenor Casey Candebat. Each of them brought a strong and confident stage presence with their own character, that became vital to the story. Aldrich sang with passion with her brilliant but modest voice, as she subtly developed the Sister Helen character throughout the opera. A pivotal moment was

during the final scene of Act 1 when everyone sings simultaneously, creating a collage of sound in order to exert intense pressure upon Sister Helen.

Soprano Karen Slack sang the role of Sister Rose with conviction as her illuminated and exuberant voice rang throughout the theatre. I wish Sister Rose had a bigger role so we could have heard her sing more. The set design for the Angola State Penitentiary included bars and gates covering the stage to mimic the various cells and areas within the prison. The grey tones and props enhanced the set, which made it look even more real, I commend set designer R. Keith Brumley on achieving an appropriate and believable layout for the prison. The Warden, George Benton, was sung by bass Jeffrey Beruan who sang admirably with his striking deep voice. Casey Candebat as Father Grenville obtained his character immediately and sang confidently with his radiant and resonant voice.

Adam Moore as Joseph de Rocher along with Maria Zifchak as Mrs. Patrick de Rocher, Joseph's mother, were by far the most interesting people on stage; and it was interesting to see their developing characters throughout the opera. Moore was phenomenal in the way he approached playing and singing the role of Joseph. His reactions and gestures on stage caused the audience to obviously despise his character, but also recognize his humanity. His indicative and stimulated singing raised the question of the morality of lethal injection during the final scenes of Act 2. Zifchak's impressive singing in the role of Joseph's mother made her the most relatable character. Her voice brilliantly soared on the high notes, and her expressive, emotionally-charged singing helped bring light to Joseph's humanity as she continued to believe her son could be saved.

The four parents of the victims also played an important role throughout the opera, as their characters continued to seek justice for their murdered children. Baritone Daniel Belcher played Owen Hart who sang exceptionally well with his rich and vibrant voice while effectively portraying a grieving father seeking punishment. Soprano April Martin played his wife, Kitty Hart, her vivid and spirited singing matched the intensity Belcher was exerting in his character. The other couple, Howard and Jade Boucher, are sung by tenor Brian Frutiger and mezzo-soprano Samantha Gossard. They both displayed more reserved personalities as mourning parents, but sang with certainty and passion. It was great to see the Lyric making good use of their resident artists and artist apprentices in the casting of this show.

This Opera would not be complete without the assistance of the chorus, children's chorus, and smaller roles. Their energy on stage helped underline and feature the principal characters and the overall streaming of ethical issues. Conductor Steven Osgood directed the Orchestra with touching and sensitive direction especially during Act 2, and the longer scenes with Joseph, Sister Helen, and Mrs. de Rocher, where they were controlled and impassioned. It was a pity the principals couldn't be heard well in the first few scenes; the orchestra was too loud in the beginning, but adjusted shortly thereafter.

Dead Man Walking is not a "feel good" opera, but instead raises uncomfortable moral questions that may not ever be answered. I was surprised to see the theatre only three-quarters full for a Kansas City premiere, but perhaps the unfamiliarity to the only 17-year old opera, and as well as the intense theme played a part in the attendance.

