

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

DEAD MAN WALKING

Music by Jake Heggie; Libretto by Terrence McNally

MARCH 4, 8, 10 AND 12, 2017

Lyric Opera's controversial 'Dead Man Walking' raises conflicts of justice and forgiveness

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By Libby Hanssen

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In "Dead Man Walking," presented by the Lyric Opera of Kansas City, the characters journeyed from fear to forgiveness and from conflict to compassion.

The opera by Jake Heggie, with libretto by Terrence McNally, is based on the book of the same name by Sister Helen Prejean, her memoir as spiritual adviser to convicted murders on death row. It is a powerful work, brutal, unrelenting at times, displaying the fragility and coarseness of human interactions.

Heggie used a range of reference and allusion in the score to craft a motivic story from the first flash of violence, harsh and stomach-turning, to the final lonely cadence. Rippling, repeated string figures, wandering winds, touches of percussion, and blasting brass indicated the emotional force of the text. McNally's language was simple, vernacular, and effective (though it was an odd choice to make the most important dramatic moments spoken, after hours of awkward recitative), levity delivered somewhat laboriously, but necessary.

Steven Osgood conducted the Kansas City Symphony in the busy, churning score, generally balancing to and supporting the voices, in spite of pitch issues, though the cacophony of the final chorus covered primary voices.

Director Kristine McIntyre had a large cast to manipulate and the difficulty of staging two main characters who cannot physically interact. Oddly, the larger the group on stage, the more static the scene. R. Keith Brumley's set design of prison walkways and shifting fences for the cell block allowed for versatile staging while the score included loud bursts between scenes, but even so entrances and exits lacked organic flow. Lighting, by Marcus Dilliard, was mostly subtle, with a few striking exceptions in the final scenes.

Kate Aldrich played a sympathetic and committed, if conflicted, Sister Helen. Act I's monologue echoed her emotional journey, driving to the prison, a display of her humor and her fears. Physically, Aldrich maintained an awkward posture throughout, and her voice, while impassioned, was at first stilted. Her final moment, though, cleansed with purity.

David Adam Moore was excellent as the killer Joseph De Rocher, shackled, shadowed and intimidating. His

nuanced voice, with a sweet top range against a broad, strong baritone, came from a muscular, tattooed frame (complete with swastika), masking a fragile masculinity, yet revealing a swirl of lies and fear. His gentleness with his mother induced tears, while his Elvis impersonation was loose-hipped and humanizing.

Maria Zifchak was his mother, her pleading, desperate confusion the best acting in this production, her voice gorgeous and her scenes heartbreaking.

The victims' parents were an intense, superb quartet, with their cringing, suffering, and anger, performed by April Martin, Samantha Gossard, Brian Frutiger and Daniel Belcher, particularly impressive as the demanding Owen Hart, challenging Sister Helen's motivations and loyalties.

Smaller roles were well filled out by Karen Slack (as friend and counsel Sister Rose), Jeffrey Beruan (Warden), John Viscardi (cop), Casey Candebat (priest) and Rhys Lloyd Talbot and Armando Contreras (guards). Actors Alisa Lynn and Jonathan D. Strom played the victims in the brutal opening scene.

During intermission, I was asked if I was enjoying the opera. It is not, to my view, an opera meant to be enjoyed. It is meant to be experienced, to generate a conversation, to stir up unfamiliar and complex emotions. What would you do in the place of these characters? The parents of the victims, the family of the convicted, a nun, a murderer? This opera is neither for nor against the death penalty, though certainly productions could take a political stance. Nor does the opera necessarily advocate for salvation through a belief in God, though that is Sister Helen's view point.

It is an opera that presents the challenges of forgiveness, the strength required to speak truth, to approach fears, to bear consequences and to love each other in a desolate and unkind world, to heal its unjust wounds. And it can't be done alone. It is for that reason this opera is the most successful opera of the 21st century so far, with more than 50 productions since its premiere in San Francisco in 2000.