Central City Opera

2014 Festival

Opera Insider

The Marriage of Figaro
by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart & Lorenzo Da Ponte

Dead Man Walking
by Jake Heggie & Terrence McNally

Trouble in Tahiti
by Leonard Bernstein

The Sound of Music
in Denver
by Richard Rodgers & Oscar Hammerstein II

CentralCityOpera.org

Central City Opera Box Office: 303-292-6700


Pelham G. “Pat” Pearce, General/Artistic Director
Music by Jake Heggie
Based on the book by Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J.

Libretto by Terrence McNally
Premiered in 2000, San Francisco Opera

Rated R (17+) - Mature Audiences Only: Violence, Language & Nudity

Based on the book by Sister Helen Prejean, which also inspired the award-winning movie, Jake Heggie’s powerful opera follows the true story of a nun’s spiritual journey as she counsels a Louisiana death row inmate. Sister Helen struggles with her own religious convictions as she leads the prisoner down a path to redemption.

**The Setting**

*Louisiana, early 1980s*

**Act I:** Rural Louisiana; Hope House in New Orleans; Louisiana State Penitentiary (known as “Angola”); a courthouse; Death Row Visiting Room

**Act II:** Louisiana State Penitentiary; Hope House in New Orleans; the Death House at the prison

**The Characters**

*Sister Helen Prejean* — a young nun from Louisiana who believes deeply in the power of God’s love and forgiveness, but who struggles with her own shock and horror about the crime

*Joseph De Rocher* — a death row inmate at Angola, convicted of rape and murder and who resists taking responsibility for his actions.

*Mrs. Patrick De Rocher* — Joseph’s mother, who does not want to believe her son is a murderer

*Sister Rose* — co-worker and close friend to Sister Helen who helps Sister Helen find peace

*George Benton* — prison warden, a thoughtful and pragmatic man

*Father Grenville* — prison chaplain, who is not quite the forgiving father that Sister Helen expects

*Kitty Hart* — mother of the murdered girl

*Own Hart* — father of the murdered girl, whose anger is fueled by the conflict between overwhelming grief and his long-held belief in forgiveness

*Jade Boucher* — mother of the murdered boy

*Howard Boucher* — father of the murdered boy

*Motorcycle Cop* — who stops Sister Helen on her way to Angola

Brothers of Joseph De Rocher; other nuns; prison guards and inmates; teenage victims; a paralegal; children at Hope House
“You did a terrible thing, Joe... but you are still a son of God.”
-Sister Helen Prejean

Conductor: John Baril
Director: Ken Cazan

CAST
Sister Helen Prejean: Jennifer Rivera
Joseph De Rocher: Michael Mayes
Mrs. De Rocher: Maria Zifchak
Sister Rose: Jeanine de Bique
George Benton: Thomas Hammons
Owen Hart: Robert Orth
Howard Boucher: Joseph Gaines
Jade Boucher: Claire Shackleton
Father Grenville: Jason Baldwin

Performance Dates:
Matinees at 2:30 pm: July 9, 13, 19, 23, 25
Evenings at 8:00 pm: July 5, 11, 17

Performed in English with English supertitles
Venue: Central City Opera House
In the Beginning

In 1982, Sister Helen Prejean was asked by the Louisiana Coalition on Jails and Prisons to begin a pen pal relationship with a death row inmate at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola. She agreed, and her relationship with Elmo Patrick Sonnier began. Sonnier had been convicted and sentenced to death for a horrible crime: he and his brother Eddie abducted a teenage couple, raped the girl, then forced the two teens to lie face down and shot them both in the head. Sister Helen did not know what she would say to Sonnier, or what he would say to her. However, she had come to work in St. Thomas, a New Orleans housing project, as part of a Catholic reform movement which sought to connect religious faith to social justice. As a result, she agreed to communicate with Sonnier because it fit in with that mission. After writing back and forth for several months, the two met face-to-face in July 1982. Sister Helen became Sonnier’s spiritual advisor, which meant she could appear on his behalf in court, offer him guidance and comfort, and be with him at his execution. Sonnier was executed on April 5, 1984. Her experience with Sonnier solidified her life’s work as an activist against capital punishment, and a few months after Sonnier’s execution, Sister Helen became spiritual advisor to Robert Lee Willie, another death-row inmate at Angola. Willie was executed on December 28, 1984. Sister Helen has continued this work and has now witnessed six executions.

Telling the Story

In 1993, Sister Helen published her memoir of her experiences with Sonnier and Willie, titled *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*. The book was on the *New York Times*’ Best Sellers list for eight straight months and started a national conversation about the death penalty. But it wasn’t until 1995, when Tim Robbins wrote, directed, and produced a movie starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn, that the nation’s attention was fully focused on the death penalty debate. *Dead Man Walking* the movie was nominated for several Academy Awards in 1996: Best Actress (Susan Sarandon – who won the Oscar); Best Actor (Sean Penn); Best Director (Tim Robbins); and Best Original Song (Bruce Springsteen for the song “Dead Man Walking”). The movie fictionalized Sister Helen’s book by combining the two real-life death row inmates and their crimes into one composite character, a fictional crime, and fictional victims. But the gist of the book is there – Sister Helen serves as Matthew Poncelet’s spiritual advisor and persuades him to take responsibility for his actions while embodying the love and acceptance of God. The actors’ performances highlight the main themes of love, compassion, redemption, and forgiveness.
The Opera

Skip ahead a few years to San Francisco. Lotfi Mansouri, then General Director of San Francisco Opera, took a leap of faith and commissioned an opera from composer Jake Heggie to debut in the millennial year 2000. Heggie had never written an opera before, but Mr. Mansouri wisely paired the composer with award-winning playwright Terrence McNally, requesting a comedic opera. Little did he know that they would deliver something of a completely different nature.

Terrence McNally – who, incidentally, had never written an opera libretto— had no interest in writing a comedy. He had just seen the movie Dead Man Walking and was so moved by it, he couldn’t stop thinking about it. In one of their first meetings, McNally suggested Dead Man Walking, and from there it took little work to convince Heggie that this story needed to be told on the operatic stage.

What makes this story so operatic? Isn’t it about crime and punishment? Heggie has continually said that the opera is not about the death penalty. In a 2002 interview with Jason Serinus for the online audio-video journal Secrets: Home Fidelity High Fi, the composer said, “It’s not an opera about the death penalty. Everyone thinks immediately it’s an opera about the death penalty, but nowhere in the opera is it even debated. It’s an opera about love and redemption; the death penalty forms a backdrop to it because it tears at the core of it. It’s about parents and children. It’s an opera about how love can transform and redeem your life. It’s a very intimate story with enormous forces at work behind it. And it’s not an opera that preaches. It’s an opera that we hope takes people to a place of reflection where they can make up their own minds about their response. It doesn’t tell you what to feel.” Dead Man Walking is a story with bigger-than-normal-life emotions, plenty of suspense, and both inner and outer conflict – all the elements that creative teams strive for when creating an opera.

The Opera’s Impact

Dead Man Walking has had unusually tremendous success for being a new work by a composer and librettist who had never written an opera before. Since its premiere in 2000, it has been produced more than 35 separate times by professional opera companies and universities. In 2014 alone, three companies will produce the opera: Central City Opera, Madison Opera, and Staatstheater Schwerin in Germany. It isn’t just the sheer frequency of performances that has impacted so many audiences. Often opera companies and universities will add a series of forums, art installations,
or other reactionary events to accompany the production. More often than not, Sister Helen Prejean and Jake Heggie travel to the producers’ community and join the conversation. How many times does an audience get the chance to ask questions of not only the composer of an opera, but the person on whom the opera is based? Can you imagine being able to talk to Mozart about *The Marriage of Figaro* and how the themes in that opera were politically controversial? Being able to discuss a work of art with its creators is a highly effective way to engage audiences, and this kind of engagement is crucial to the survival of art in general, and opera in particular.

In keeping with this unspoken tradition of events surrounding the opera, Central City Opera presented the Prisons, Compassion and Redemption Project starting this spring. In March, we offered a screening of the film with a book signing and discussion with Sister Helen Prejean, as well as performances of excerpts from the opera by our Ensemble Artists. We also organized a symposium about the death penalty with Jake Heggie, Sister Helen Prejean, District Attorney George Brauchler of Arapahoe County, Defense Mitigation Specialist Greta Lindecrantz, and victim survivor Dana Sampson. This symposium drew a large audience and resulted in respectful in-depth discussion amongst the panelists and audience. Jake Heggie held a master class with students of the Colorado Springs Conservatory in Colorado Springs on modern music and composition. We also arranged for a Religious Round Table in April featuring interfaith religious leaders of our community discussing the morality of the death penalty. All these events were held not only to generate interest and ticket buyers for our production of *Dead Man Walking*, but also to help make our community aware of the fact that art, and specifically opera, is relevant to today’s society and is important in helping people process big issues. This is the lasting impact of *Dead Man Walking*, and why it will continue to be one of the most performed new operas of our time.

Check out additional events of the Prisons, Compassion and Redemption Project continuing throughout the summer.

Pictured, events of Central City Opera’s Prisons, Compassion and Redemption Project (clockwise from top): Sister Helen Prejean with students at Arrupe Jesuit High School; she and Composer Jake Heggie at the Death Penalty Symposium (also available to view online*); Heggie’s Master Class with Soprano Judeth Shay Comstock. Photos by Heather Brecl and Erin Joy Swank.

Resources and Weblinks


Scene from 1995 Movie: “Reconciliation scene” with Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon, in which the character Matthew Poncelet finally confesses the truth about the murders and rape: [http://youtu.be/xQyYa3DBhNA?t=1m05s](http://youtu.be/xQyYa3DBhNA?t=1m05s)

Audio from Opera: sung by John Packard and Susan Graham at San Francisco Opera in 2000: [http://youtu.be/juVsnShYkfU?t=1m46s](http://youtu.be/juVsnShYkfU?t=1m46s)

Central City Opera’s Death Penalty Symposium: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBP5xa97lQT8fGe2BGYSmeh2cvHYa5Nzx](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBP5xa97lQT8fGe2BGYSmeh2cvHYa5Nzx)

Central City Opera’s Prisons, Compassion and Redemption Project: [http://centralcityopera.org/project](http://centralcityopera.org/project)
How do you prepare for an opera you haven’t conducted before?

Ideally, I like to see a live performance of it in order to experience it as an audience member. How do I feel about the piece? Does it move me as theatre? Does it have moments of, well, languor, and can they be overcome? Do I even like the music? (Not always.) Last year, I flew to Eugene to see *Dead Man Walking* with Mike Mayes as Joseph. I had the luck to meet with the director and cast and spend some social time with them as well.

I start looking at the score and doing my organizational “thing” to it, which is to highlight important tempi changes (yellow), instrumental cues (blue or purple), rubati or ritardandi and the like (red), meter changes (also red; this piece has a lot of them), etc. While doing that, I begin to notice specific things (“oh, the second violins divide into four parts here….how will we accomplish that?”) and try to figure out why it was written that way. Is there a point to this specific orchestration here? What will I/we need to do to keep this from overwhelming the singer in these bars? You find reoccurring themes (leitmotivs* and such). *Dead Man Walking* has several challenges, many of which involve the constant meter changes, starting with the very first bars, which are in 10/8. How, technically and physically, am I going to show those (what patterns) to the pianist and orchestra so that they make sense and are economical and clear—meaning involving as little conversation about it as possible. Though it’s sometimes scary, I have to leave the possibility open that I’m wrong—and accordingly change something entirely if it’s not working.

On the last few works I’ve studied for the first time, I’ve made a conscious decision to start with the scene/aria/piece that I liked or knew least well when last I heard/saw it. I tear apart that scene to find what my reticence is; thus it becomes the first scene that I know really well! Doesn’t necessarily mean I like it any better, but at least I know it!

One thing you’ll note I haven’t mentioned: play it through on the piano. I can’t play so I have to learn things differently; it’s a curse and a blessing. A curse in that I can’t immediately sit down and figure something out in a tactile, hands-on (literally!) manner. A blessing? Well, most

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*Letimotiv and other “Words to know before you go” can be found on page 53.*
conductors are either pianists or violinists, certainly the former in opera. They started coaching and became conductors because they could do it better than the symphonic conductor who was giving it a shot. Some, of course, become really good, important conductors—people I admire. Some, because they never studied conducting or orchestration, do not, although they can be really excellent musicians when playing the piano and coaching. Since I don’t possess the [piano] skills, I have to constantly look at the whole picture.

Everyone is afraid to admit they listen to recordings in order to prepare. Recordings are all-important to me and have always been, not only for reasons cited previously. When I was preparing Cavalleria, I listened to six recordings and watched a couple of DVDs besides. There is a point when I stop; it’s usually a week or so before the cast convenes and we have our first rehearsal. I know of conductors (have worked with some) who have some kind of soundtrack in their head and therefore insist everyone does exactly what he/she wants, leaving little or no room for singers to have any input or leeway. There’s no collaboration in that kind of music-making and I find it, well, unmusical and dictatorial. I think, for instance, Mike Mayes* knows a lot about his role in Dead Man Walking that I couldn’t possibly at this point. That doesn’t mean I can’t and won’t make suggestions about some details, but I’m eager to share his knowledge.

An opera conductor not only waves the stick at performances to keep everyone together and in tempo, but is the overall Music Director for the piece. What duties does that entail?

I have to make sure everyone has the tools (read: music) to ensure a smooth performance—all the required percussion equipment, sound cues, etc. I don’t do this alone, of course, but it’s my ultimate responsibility. I have to give notes (usually written) to the orchestra at the next rehearsal/performance to try and fix or solve a problem. Having music staff in place to take notes for me and for the singers and to fix problems is key. There’s a lot of off-stage singing for the chorus—a talented assistant is important. I’m lucky to work with some wonderfully talented colleagues in helping to shape performances of this important work.

What should the audience listen for in Dead Man Walking?

Well, I mentioned meter changes. Helen is represented by the number 2. A great deal of the music in Dead Man Walking is written in alla breve time (half note gets the beat). When you are working within two half notes, a lot of possibilities arise for the micro-rhythms in-between and Jake [Heggie] has exploited many of them. Similarly, Joseph is represented by the number 5 (his prisoner number; 9-5-2-8-1 and the syllables of his name: Jo-seph -de-Ro-cher) and lots of 5/8 bars, which, of course, is a jarring, odd, keep-you-on-your-toes meter. The two meters combine at the very beginning and end of the opera: a very slow 10/8, which is to be conducted in two, slow beats, each beat having 5 eighths in it. So, 2 and 5, together.

A theme representing Helen is heard throughout the opera in various guises and that is, of course, the gospel hymn she sings a capella at the beginning and the end of the opera (“He will gather us around, all around”). There is also a 5-note theme (9-5-2-8-1) that gets bandied

*An interview with Michael Mayes can be found on page 30.
This is your fourth production of Dead Man Walking as Joseph De Rocher. Does it get any easier, emotionally, to portray this character?

Well, I mean, of course with anything, the more you do it...I don’t know if the word “easy” works or not, but it does get easier to access those emotions and then leave them. Because it’s like a muscle, you know, you exercise that emotional muscle. I’m able to go in and find these really intense emotions and show them onstage, whereas when I first did the role, I had to live in that place the whole time. It was a dark time, a dark place. In order to have easy access to those emotions, I had to live with them all the time. Now I’m able to get there quicker and get away quicker and actually have a decent day instead of living in this terrible psychological landscape that this guy [Joseph De Rocher] has. When I did it in Tulsa for the first time, it WAS—up until that point—the hardest thing I’d ever done onstage. Not because of anything technical, just because of the emotional component. I had to really get inside this guy’s head...it’s not a happy place. He’s not a nice guy.

Do you have any ways of coping with the emotional toll these performances take on you — meditation, a pet, exercise?

Well you know, it’s funny...a natural component of this role is the physical component — you have to be in shape, go to the gym, etc., and that does go the distance to sort of equalize things out, burning off some of that energy. And when I can, I always have my dog Pete with me. He’s a 70-lb rescue dog, and when I have him along with me when I’ve done these crazy roles, he’s always been a nice thing to come home to. When I did this in Tulsa, he wasn’t with me, and I would come home to this empty apartment and just sit there and brew and just dwell on these terrible things. You know, the great thing about animals — I don’t know if you have a dog or anything — but you understand that they sort of necessarily keep you out of your head because they require a lot of attention and it’s like something you have to take care of. So every morning, I have to get out of bed and go walk him, and have to come home from rehearsals and walk him, and it has this really interesting side effect of keeping me much more centered and much more out of myself and out of a role where I’m just in another world and I’m going through all this crap. Having Pete with me, I come home, and he doesn’t know anything about rape or murder or any of that stuff — he’s just a dog! And just seeing his little face look up at you and be like, “Hey, you want to play today? Wanna go the dog park? What’s up?” You know that it’s kind of hard to be miserable when you have this wonderful animal. He’s been a real great asset to me.

You were a Bonfils-Stanton Foundation Apprentice Artist with Central City Opera in 2000. What are you most looking forward to upon your return this summer?

Oh, just walking down the streets of Central City again. I have to go to Dostal Alley again and get myself a beer for old times’ sake. I think that was the first microbrew I ever had [in 2000]. I remember going there and getting a beer and thinking, “Man, can’t you just get a regular beer in this place?” [laughs] You know, it was 2000 before the big revolution in beer happened. It didn’t slow me down any once I discovered it of course. It will be good to go and see
the old house I stayed in when I was there, and to go check out the [Face] bar there where they did the Face on the Barroom Floor because I was one of the baritones that did that opera when you guys were still doing it. And, you know -- I think this could go on and on and on, because Central City was my first big sort of professional opera experience where I wasn’t a chorister. Going to Central City and seeing everybody...it was my first summer after getting my undergraduate degree. And being there, and understanding the whole world and meeting these professional singers that I’d later go on to work with as a “grown-up” opera singer — it was just really amazing. We did Candide and Traviata, and [Dialogues of the Carmelites and The Face on the Barroom Floor]. That summer Will Burden was there, Jane Jennings, Grant Youngwood was there — a guy I’d always looked up to, who I followed my whole career. I can’t tell you how excited I was when John [Baril*] told me they were doing Dead Man and they wanted to bring me in...I’ve been waiting for YEARS to come back to Central City. It’s a little bit like coming home. Going back to a place where you sort of had your first formative experience as a little larval opera singer. I won the John Moriarty Award back then, so that was kind of a neat thing...it showed me that they believed in me back then. It’s really cool. It’s a lot of things -- I just can’t wait, I just can’t wait.

What advice do you have for young singers trying to make the leap from young artist programs to full-fledged professional career?

You know, you go online right now, on Facebook, et cetera, and there’s a glut of advice being given to young singers all the time by some people who think they’re experts or some people who ARE experts, or whatever. And you know, the only advice I could ever give anybody doing this, is just to make sure you’re doing it for the right reasons. And you know that you’re gonna have to sacrifice a lot of things, and it’s a long, long game. It’s not something where you’re gonna work real hard for two or three years, or four or five years, become established, and then you’ve got it made....And so, for young singers, you’ve got to know when to say when, to know when to say, well, maybe this is not for me, because at some point, you’re gonna be making sacrifices, and you’re going to start sacrificing quality of life. Surround yourself with really smart people, and really knowledgeable people. So when you’ve come down and you’re asking yourself that question, you’re getting really good input and really good advice from them. Because there were so many times throughout my life when I wanted to quit. And I’m not talking about back when I was a kid – for me and the opera singers I know, who I’ve surrounded myself with, you maybe wake up once or twice a week where you get up and think, why am I doing this? It’s this question you keep asking yourself because you’re living out of a suitcase, and you’re always on the road, and you miss your family, you miss your girlfriend, and you miss your dog because you can’t take him with you. So you know, you have to make sure that the reasons you’re doing aren’t because you like all the attention you get or all those things – you’ve got to find a purpose, a reason that’s deeper than just, “I’m doing this to get attention.” It really took me a long time to find that in my life – it’s only recently that I’ve been able to find where I fit in in the business and the story I’m trying to tell. A lot it is due to Dead Man Walking....Dead Man Walking is such an incredible piece and has such an important role to play in the national debate about the death penalty. When you become a part of that and you’re telling stories to people and you’re changing lives in that way....Bohème can change lives of course, but it doesn’t make you ask these really personal questions. The great thing about Dead Man Walking, regardless of your opinion on the death penalty, is that it’s a piece that doesn’t take a position [on the death penalty] — it just makes you ask the question. Regardless of my position on this particular issue, why do I hold that position? Is it cultural, is it something I’ve just always said, or is it part of my family belief, my religious belief...this show makes you ask those questions. And getting involved in that

*An interview with Conductor John Baril can be found on page 27.
[as an opera singer] makes you feel like you’re making a difference. You’re not just singing pretty sounds, you’re not just telling stories about dukes and princesses, but you’re actually out there changing hearts and minds. The first time I did Dead Man Walking, in Tulsa, a woman posted on my Facebook fan page wall. You get used to hearing the same things over and over again, you know, “Oh, that was so beautiful,” or “That was so moving,” or “You’ve got great acting.” Not that you’re so great that you hear that all the time, but you have a standard way to respond to those compliments. They’re nice to hear and it’s great. But this woman wrote, “My daughter was murdered seven years ago. And your portrayal of Joseph De Rocher changed the way I think about the man who murdered my daughter.” Now that’s a very different sort of reason for doing this business – when you hear that. Every time I do this show, I encounter somebody who has been personally affected to the point where – you know, people can be moved [by performances] but they never get to the point where they feel like they need to reach out and talk to that person who moved them. I don’t feel even when I watch a particularly touching movie [the need] to go to that actor and send him an email. But sometimes it happens. For somebody to be that motivated, you realize the power of this piece and the characters that you’re playing.

So I guess my advice for young singers – and this is not my advice that I’m coming up with, like I’m such a “deep thinker” – this is advice that was given to me at Santa Fe Opera by a famous baritone you may have heard of, a man named Mark Delavan. Mark’s a man of very passionate faith. But the thing that I respected about him is that when I had my coaching with him and we were talking about life and the business, that’s the one thing he told me. He said, “I happen to be a Christian and I believe in God and all that. And that’s why I do what I do. I do what I do for my faith. I don’t care what you believe in, it doesn’t matter to me if you believe in God or you believe in whatever, but you need to find a reason that you’re doing this outside of just yourself. Because if you’re only doing it for yourself, you’ll never be a truly satisfied artist. To be able to step out of yourself and do it for another reason, that’s what you’ve got to find, and when find that, you’ll be a much happier and successful artist.” And I didn’t know that at that young age - that it wouldn’t happen for many years. But when I found that reason for me doing this, which is to affect cultural change, to touch people in a way, to shake people up, to get them out of their comfort zone, to make them question strongly held beliefs and make sure they believe them because they actually believe them and not because that’s just what they’ve always believed. For me, that’s the reason I get up in the morning and do this. It’s the reason I travel across the country and give up a normal life. You know, I don’t even have an apartment any more. Haven’t had one in two years. I travel all the time, and it’s a big price to pay. And if you’re paying that price just for yourself, I just don’t know how fulfilling that is. But if I’m doing this because I’m part of a movement, part of something larger than myself, it gives it a lot of meaning and makes it much easier to tolerate the tough part of this business. It makes the joyful parts and the successes and all the wonderful things that we’re allowed to do – you know, it is simultaneously the best and the worst job in the world. Because we get to do these amazing things – right now [during the interview, March 2014] I’m singing Rigoletto in Boston, you know, a dream for me with this amazing cast and amazing director and conductor and at a great company – to be able to do that is just an enormous privilege and is so joyful, and then when it’s bad, it’s really bad too. But doing it for a reason that’s not just about yourself but is about something greater than yourself, just makes it so much more rewarding and bearable at the same time.

“The Michael Mayes, Baritone Facebook fan page can be found at https://www.facebook.com/pages/Michael-Mayes-Baritone/149167905122686.