

# Arts

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## Dead man warbling Producer risks all to bring story to stage

Nicole Alexander wants to bring a musical version of the film *Dead Man Walking* to Sydney, writes **Lyndall Crisp**.

It was a huge hit when it premiered in San Francisco in 2000 and then Adelaide in 2003, but *Dead Man Walking* is an expensive opera to stage, so no one put their hand up to tour it interstate.

But producer Nicole Alexander was determined not to be put off by the cost. She believes so strongly in the opera by composer Jake Heggie and playwright Terrence McNally that she has already raised nearly half the \$1.4 million needed to cover costs, including shipping the sets from the US, an orchestra of about 70 players, a male and a female chorus, a children's chorus and a large number of principals and supernumeraries.

The Capitol Theatre in Sydney has her pencilled in for six performances from January 4 next year. But much depends on what happens next Tuesday when Alexander launches her production at the Justice and Police Museum in Sydney at a party for about 160 corporate bosses in a bid to drum up more sponsorship.

Businessman Michael Yabsley helped point her towards the A-list.

"I made some suggestions to her of people who are well established in the corporate world who have a passion for the performing arts and who have, frankly, the wherewithal to provide some meaningful support," he says.

"It's hard without it boiling down to the grubby subject of money. Success boils down to two things: bumps on seats and sponsorship. If you've got those two ducks lined up then the rest is relatively easy."

The museum, formerly a court house, is an appropriate venue given the opera, based on the book by social worker Sister Helen Prejean, is about capital punishment, evil and redemption. Prejean was the spiritual adviser to death-row inmates in Louisiana in the 1980s.

The invitation to next week's party features a raunchy photo of baritone Teddy Tahu Rhodes, who plays de Rocher, lying bare-



The invitation to the launch of *Dead Man Walking* shows Teddy Tahu Rhodes, who plays death-row inmate Joseph de Rocher.

Photo: PETER BREW-BEVEN

chested and with bedroom eyes on a prison bed. Nothing like sex to sell an idea.

Alexander's company, Alexander Productions, has the rights to the opera until 2009. Box office takings will go to the Alexander Performing Arts Board, a non-profit trust company that is funding the production and hopes to stage the opera again in 2008.

"It's so important that we as a nation are able to put on productions with contemporary themes that are about who we are today rather than who we were," she says. "The arts should enrich our whole culture and community."

Alexander's passion is developing and creating opportunities for singers in Australia. She's responsible for A Mid-Summer Opera, held every January over a week at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music for 16- to 23-year-olds. About 2000 students

from around Australia and New Zealand audition.

A vocal teacher, Alexander also heads the Alexander Performing Arts Academy for 8- to 19-year-olds.

"Without developing our youth we can't put on productions like *Dead Man Walking*," she says.

"We should be staging more stories about people who are part of our society. It's the way we'll grow artistically and culturally."

"We have so many artists in Australia who are wonderful and we owe it to them to provide springboards to showcase their talent."

The opera, 2½ hours long, is a powerful voyage for both cast and audience, but Rhodes says he doesn't think of de Rocher as a difficult role.

"It's taxing in the sense that it's a huge emotional path that you take," the baritone says. "From curtain up to curtain down it's an amazing

journey and you're left emotionally drained in a way I can't say I've ever been emotionally drained on stage.

"I love doing modern opera because it touches on things we're very aware of today, and that means that you have a different grasp of the situation you put into play."

"It seems to be an area I'm more comfortable in and it comes down to the fact that it has an immediacy about it in terms of the society we live in today, rather than recreating what are classics and wonderful works of the past."

Rhodes hadn't read the book but he had seen the movie when he was approached to play the role in the United States. Conductor Patrick Summers, who was aware of the New Zealander through Opera Australia, suggested he audition.

"On opening night in San Francisco there were protesters for and against the death penalty

outside the Opera House, and after that it had the fastest ticket sales in the history of San Francisco opera," Rhodes says.

"It's not classical opera. I think of it as theatre sung by opera singers. It's so much about the story that the music just enhances."

"So in a way, although the music is extraordinary and important, it's the story you're telling that makes it so important. Whereas with the greats such as Mozart it's the music which is the wonder of the work."

"There's a place for this and a place for the classics. I see the new works in opera as so important because otherwise you have a stagnating art form. Having this aligned with what Opera Australia does as well is fantastic."

The New Zealander swears it's the last time he'll sing the role of de Rocher. "I'm too old for that," Rhodes, 38, says.