



PATRICK PRENDERGAST promoter / producer **NICOLE ALEXANDER** producer of opera, singer

PASSION AND PRIORITIES

It's the story of a man's imminent death, but these two talents hope their new opera production breathes vigorous new life into a genre defined by tradition

Patrick Prendergast is a man of pop and rock. Skid Row, Tina Turner, Bon Jovi – that sort of thing. Nicole Alexander took out a personal loan as a 25-year-old opera singer to purchase the rights to the opera *Dead Man Walking*. Unusual combination? You bet. But together, they bring the controversial opera to the Sydney stage.

PATRICK PRENDERGAST

With you background in pop, why did you get involved with *Dead Man Walking*?

Patrick Prendergast: As a promoter [Andrew McManus Presents], we're looking to entertain the masses and we're always looking for a good idea. Everybody had seen the movie and we were familiar with

the Adelaide performance. Nicole's quite passionate about things that she likes, and talking about it, we decided to have a crack.

So it's about drawing new audiences?

PP: That's all we're trying to do. Trying to crossover the rock industry with the opera purists, because really if it doesn't

regenerate...Look, it's always better if you bring new blood to the table and we've also done it in a rock promoter sort of way. In the opera world, you've got to follow suit and you've got to do this and you've got to pay that, and it's got to be these amounts of hours and we've just gone: "None of that. If we do any of that, you won't have a performance. We need to do it this way so it's cost

effective and come out with something good”.

What's it like working with Nicole Alexander?

PP: We educate each other, but as I said earlier Nicole is very passionate: when she puts her teeth into something she doesn't let go very easily, and you've got to applaud it.

Do you disagree?

PP: I don't know that we disagree, but because she comes from the arts she would have set her mind the way things should be done because that's the way they do it in the arts. We would go, “Well OK, you do it this way and you're not going to have a performance because we can't afford it.”

For opening night you can't give all the cast tickets because you're losing half a performance and if you look at the back end, that could be the difference between a break even and making some money. If we lose money on it, we're never going to do it again, or we might, but we're going to be reluctant. If we make a little more money or break even we'll keep doing it and isn't that better for the arts in the long run?

Do you like opera?

PP: Some opera I do, some bores me senseless. Some I like it for a few minutes, but if I don't understand the language, I don't get it.

Do you always like the music of artists you're touring with?

If we make a little money or break even, we'll keep doing it and isn't that better for the arts in the long run? Patrick Prendergast

PP: Eventually! Not necessarily initially. A lot of times I was doing personal security, I was on the stage and certain songs would become appealing to you.

Over all the years of organising tours, what was the biggest thing that went wrong?

PP: We've had bombs thrown on stage, I had to take a knife off a guy

Patrick Prendergast: enjoys the mix of opera and rock in his life!



who got up on stage, and bombs threats and all that – but that was potentially the worst. At a Skid Row show, someone threw a cherry bomb onstage and I think there were 15 or 16 people injured – someone lost an eye. It wasn't good but America can do that.

How do you manage the egos?

PP: You just don't take anything personally. You try and understand them. You're talking about people – they love what they do, they love

their music and they're touring. But ultimately they're playing the same songs five times a week and they have certain requirements to make them feel comfortable. They try and copy their home every night in a different hotel. They try and find some place to hide away after the event or before the event, where people won't drive them nuts. I'd never want to be in their position,

no matter how much money you give me.

Toughest country to tour in?

PP: Iceland was pretty tough. They drink pretty heavily there and they rock pretty hard and they're fairly unforgiving people. The funny thing is I got the most death threats with Sade and the most bomb threats was Tina Turner. So, go figure.

Can you see yourself taking on more opera projects?

PP: I've enjoyed it. The first time I did anything with the arts was with Andrea Bocelli. We had to put an orchestra together in each state, and that was sort of my apprenticeship. And now to have done a bit more in the opera world as well, I'm learning more about it and I've really enjoyed it. There are some incredibly talented people.

NICOLE ALEXANDER

You originally wanted to be an opera singer?

Nicole Alexander: I went to the Sydney Conservatorium with the aim of being an opera singer, absolutely. But I've always produced, even when I was at school. I started

teaching and producing musical theatre workshops through teaching, for kids, giving them performing opportunities. I've always loved having creative control over a project.

When I came out of the Con, I was a bit confused about what I wanted to. I was a bit disillusioned with performing, to be perfectly honest. So I started a TAFE course in accounting and I got into arts administration.

You set up your own company in 2004. What was the reaction?

NA: People's reactions were fantastic, at first. There was some scepticism, young people and opera and all that – but on the whole, it was really supported back then, which was great...

Any negative, judgmental attitudes?

NA: I've definitely encountered that, but it's as the program grew. It is such an important thing to do, I'm so passionate about developing that age group [14-28 year olds]. The world of teaching singing is split in two. There's the old school thought where you can't have kids younger than a certain age doing it, >

TWO PERFECT

and there's the new school where if you're taught properly, you can. We speak all day, every day, so we can also sing. That's the way I teach.

I've decided if people want to put me down – because you know what it's like in Australia, they just do – I wear it as a badge of honour now. If I let it get to me, I wouldn't keep going. Patrick sat me down one day and said, "Ignore it, wear it as a badge of honour" and I have.

How many productions have you done so far?

NA: Close to about 15.

Do you feel content and happy with your work?

NA: I'm content. I've worked really really hard. I'm a dreadful insomniac which I suppose is good at the moment, but it will probably kill me! I do love what I do, I feel fantastic about it all.

It must be a tough job though, realistically. Have you ever wanted to throw it all in?

NA: I lost my fiancée over this. There were other reasons too, but my work played a big part in our break-up. Last year was very hard for me, personally. Before Andrew McManus became involved in *Dead Man*, I'd been trying to raise money endlessly. I'd got so far, but not far enough and that was the difficult

I've decided if people want to put me down – because you know what it's like in Australia, they just do – I wear it as a badge of honour. *Nicole Alexander*



Nicole Alexander: combines her love of opera and an enterprising spirit

thing. There's only been one day when I considered not doing it. It's hard, but I wouldn't want to do anything else.

How did you meet Patrick from AM Presents?

NA: It was in 2004, through the singer Russell Watson. I was a singer on his tour but managing the artists as well. I'd just purchased the rights to *Dead Man*, I took out a personal

loan to do that, and it all came through on that tour. Patrick loved the concept of it, and he said if I needed any help, to come to him. We spoke about it over the next few years. Patrick has really believed in my vision, albeit mad...

What's your ultimate vision?

NA: I really want to bring opera back into the arena, make it a spectacle again. Then again I also love the concept of chamber opera. We're hoping to get a new opera out by the end of the year too for five young girls. I want to bring excitement back into the genre, I think it's just missing something at the moment. We're not doing it

right, and not just by our audiences but by our singers. Australia excels in music, as we do in sport, but I don't know what that missing ingredient is. I can only try different things and see what works.

I've heard rumours about a certain tattoo...

NA: (laughs) Everyone thinks I'm nuts! We had a marketing meeting yesterday and the tattoo came up again! It's DMW, so the initials of *Dead Man Walking*, in Chinese symbols. It also stands for other things, it's ridiculously symbolic for me, but it's important. I got it done at a low time last year; I just thought it would inspire me to keep going.

So why are you so passionate about this project in particular?

NA: When the film came out ten years ago, it really changed my life. It had a profound effect on how I think. I've always been fascinated by capital punishment, always. The movie haunted me. When I listened to the opera, the mix of music, pop, Negro spiritual etc. I thought "This is pushing opera to where we are now as an audience". It's shorter, which is catering to what the modern audience can handle. It's got a story, which is a love story between a convict and a nun, but not a traditional one, it's the whole development of a human relationship, I love it.

Dead Man Walking

27 September – 8 October: State Theatre, Sydney, Tickets: \$80-\$210, Book: 136 100
www.deadmanwalking.com.au

ALL ABOUT OPERA

Nicole Alexander's top 5 tips for successful opera

- 1 Provide shows that are relevant, modern and accessible, dealing with current topics.
- 2 Keep the casting true to the story but without compromising the sound. Make it real! Make it sexy!
- 3 Keep the prices competitive and accessible to all age groups.
- 4 Involve younger performers – they are the future and we need to capture their interest early.
- 5 Don't do what you're "supposed to do". Don't be conventional, always be prepared to experiment.

