

What drives a young woman to produce an opera about a nun who befriends a man on death row? And how does she persuade big names like charismatic New Zealand singer Teddy Tahu Rhodes and radio broadcaster Alan Jones to take roles in the opera?

**N**icole Alexander is a person who makes things happen. She heads one of Sydney's newest musical staging companies, Alexander Productions, which aims to stage works with contemporary themes and issues, to make opera accessible and provide support for emerging singers and composers.

Her current project is a production of the opera *Dead Man Walking* to be performed in Sydney in September and October this year. She says she was 'very lucky' to get people like Rhodes and Jones involved.

'Through my work I have built up a network of people and contacts', she says. 'When you put a production like *Dead Man Walking* out there with its wonderful story, they want to be part of it.'

Nicole believes that modern operas, like any art, can provoke discussion and can have stories that 'touch a chord with people'. The story of *Dead Man Walking* has done both of these since first told in the best-selling book by Sister Helen Prejean. It concerns the relationship between Sister Helen, a social worker, who became the spiritual advisor of convicted murderer Joseph de Rocher and ends with his execution.

Watching the award-winning film of the book, starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn, was a turning point for Nicole.

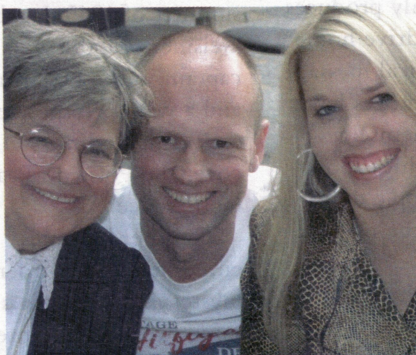
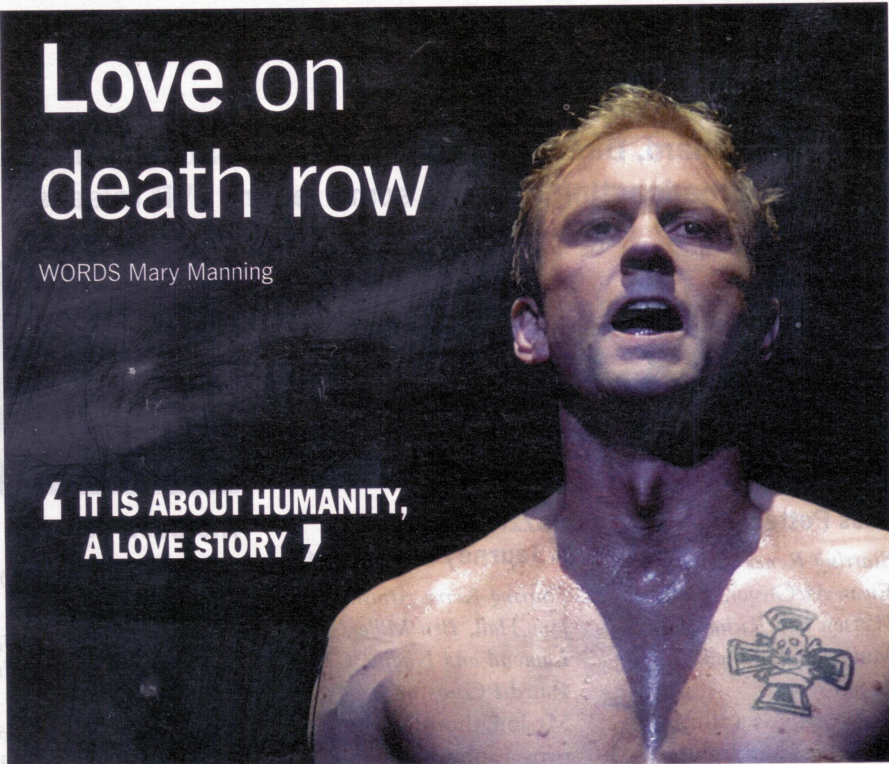
'It opened up my eyes to capital punishment, the wrongness of killing another human being', she says. 'I was also struck by the idea of a piece of art providing a forum for discussion of issues that are important to society.'

Nicole was able to see a recording of the first Australian production of the

# Love on death row

WORDS Mary Manning

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PICTURED Nicole with Sr Helen Prejean and Teddy Tahu Rhodes.

opera of *Dead Man Walking* in Adelaide in 1993. 'I fell in love with the music and everything fell into place, the music, the story, the journey of these very real people ... it's the power of the music as well as the drama that takes the story onto another level.'

Nicole says, 'I have strong ideas about the death penalty, but the opera does not lean to one side or the other and this is rather special. You go on a journey with all the characters, the nun, the bereaved parents and the murderer. The story ends with the death of the convict and leads us as a society to discuss the question, "Is this right or is it wrong?"'

But she says the story is about much more than the rights and wrongs of capital punishment.

'It is about humanity, a love story', says Nicole. 'Not love in the romantic sense but love between a man who has done something incredibly wrong and a nun who reaches out to help him. This is the kind of love that can turn something really bad into something good. She gave him the chance to redeem himself.'

Nicole describes the opera's ending as 'unbelievable, thick, dark and epic', and says the audience is left 'shattered'.

'There is no other opera in the world where the last minute is silence, Silences are as important as music. They give people space to think about the topic and this provokes discussion.'

It would seem that Nicole's success is as much due to her good judgment and enthusiasm as to being 'lucky'. When asked if she has a message for young people wondering about their direction in life, Nicole does not have to think hard for an answer. 'As clichéd as it may sound, this is true. Don't be a "gunner", be a doer. Follow your dreams. Go for it.'