



move over bialystock and bloom

Producer Nicole Alexander tells **Shamistha de Soya**
how she gets acts together

These days Sydney audiences don't have to travel far to see musical productions that audiences in other cities enjoy. Not long after an opening season in that 'other' hemisphere, Sydneysiders like New Yorkers or Londoners, are able to enjoy a live production from Broadway or the West End, performed here with an Australian cast.

Mel Brooks' Broadway musical *The Producers*, which recently ended its Sydney season, took an irreverent swipe at the manoeuvring involved in transforming a theatrical idea from paper to premiere. And nobody knows better than Nicole Alexander that the producer is the force behind the creative process 'pulling together' the project.

'From a concept, I assemble a creative team, production team, select or audition performers and most importantly, oversee the entire budget and financial status of a project', she explains, having formed Alexander Productions in 2004. Her aim? 'To develop brave and breathtaking operatic works that reinvent the Australian opera audience'.

On leaving school, Alexander received a scholarship to study voice at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Simultaneously, she taught singing and initiated the Sydney Musical Theatre Camps – holiday intensives that offered students regular opportunities to perform. Adding to her teaching experience, she worked in arts administration and accounting before establishing her production company.

The holiday camps have now grown into the Mid-Summer Opera and Mid-Winter Music Workshops, held annually for students from around Australia, and there are several exciting projects ahead.

In September/October 2007, Sydney theatregoers will get the opportunity to see for themselves the powerful new American opera *Dead Man Walking* by composer Jake Heggie and librettist Terence McNally, which Alexander is producing for presenter Andrew McManus. The opera was commissioned by the San Francisco Opera from the eponymous bestselling book by Sister Helen Prejean, based on her real-life relationship

with a convicted murderer as she counsels him in preparation for his execution.

The opera premiered in San Francisco in October 2000 with conductor Patrick Summers and Susan Graham and Frederike von Stade amongst the cast. It was performed in Australia by the State Opera of South Australia in August 2003 with Teddy Tahu Rhodes as the prisoner on death row. Alexander plans to stage a new production in Sydney with Rhodes and an Australian cast and production team.

Meanwhile, January 2007 sees the return of the Mid-Summer Opera, along with a treat for lovers of choral music when Alexander brings the Tallis Scholars to Sydney. Credited with the revival and historically accurate performance of early vocal music, especially from English composers, the Tallis Scholars will conduct a week-long intensive at the University of Sydney. They will also perform a series of concerts at the City Recital Hall where Alexander finds the acoustics 'absolutely divine.'

'Sydney is home to some incredible venues... the Opera House Concert Hall, the State Theatre, the Capitol Theatre, and the City Recital Hall,' she says. 'I also like to look at less familiar options such as the Hordern Pavilion, the Parade Theatre, and even old warehouses. Sometimes the better known venues do not create the right "vibe". Because a venue needs to be aimed at the audience you are trying to attract, it can make or break a piece.'

Alexander believes that Sydney has a diverse and dynamic network of arts supporters, which is one reason why many artists choose to base themselves in Sydney, and a factor that reduces the financial risk to a Sydney production. 'I believe that any risk needs to be calculated. You can't survive in the arts in Australia if you aren't sensible about your project decisions.' Her decision to produce *Dead Man Walking* was not taken lightly, as its content is confronting and at odds with audiences seeking pure entertainment. But as Alexander says, 'the entertainment is in the fascination of the story, and the incredible display of musicianship and drama that surrounds this piece. It is so relevant to our society. Capital punishment exists... Whether you believe in it or not; we as a developed society need to confront it and discuss it. That is why we do what we do in the arts, because of the power to persuade, involve and influence peoples' lives.'

Describing herself as a "hands on" producer, Alexander says, 'I don't dream – I do. I am constantly trying to create ongoing opportunities not just for established artists but for emerging artists as well. I am passionate about engaging new audiences to support the wealth of talented Australian singers and by producing accessible and contemporary works, and I believe we're starting to achieve this.'