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News, Analysis and Comment Nicole Alexander: recalibrating Australian opera

by Nicholas Pickard Arts Hub Tuesday, May 08, 2007

Most things you read about Nicole Alexander are centred on how young she is. It's almost an obsession for writers. However, it's not really Alexander's youth that stands out but rather the passion and confidence she has for her work along with the belief she has for her productions that is most impressive.

It is so acute that it rubs off on you. If she decided not to pursue her career as a producer she could certainly make a big living as a motivational speaker standing in front of a hundred thousand people getting them all to rise to their feet.

Right now, however, she is motivated to get the Australian public to rise to their feet in the name of opera. Viewed by many as an antiquated art form, Alexander is determined to make it not only accessible to audiences, but also accessible to the young talent emerging from the recital halls of the Conservatorium of Music.

"I am critical of the fact that it's very hard for a younger performer to break into the industry even if they are as good as the older performers," she says. "I am trying not only to provide opportunities but also attract the attention of a wider audience from the established opera audiences.

"I really believe in developing younger performers and I don't think there is nearly enough opportunities for up and coming artists and that's been my whole thing. We have one national opera company and they are a great company, but there really isn't anyone in Sydney giving the opportunity. We have the most incredible talent here. It's quite disturbing."

Her newest venture is the opera Dead Man Walking, a multi-million dollar production that she has been trying to get off the ground for almost two years. Originally a book written by Sister Helen Prejean and then made famous by the 1995 film starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn, the opera is the debut of American composer Jake Heggie.

The pride with which she talks about this production shows that this is something very close to her heart, not only for its subject matter, but also its creative possibility. "I watched the film and then I read the book and when I heard that there was an opera I went and got archival copies of the DVD from the Adelaide and overseas productions. I just fell in love with the music. It's very romantic. It may be a modern opera but its not a-tonal, it's lyrical, it's got heart.

"The movie is one thing but to heighten the drama of it through music is just another thing. Dead Man Walking is a great conglomeration of different genres. There's pop, there's

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Nicole Alexander -- the young Australian talent turning operatic tradition on its head.

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rock, there's opera, there's negro spiritual.

Putting this production together has been one of the hardest tests that Alexander has been through. "There were people when I started campaigning for this that said 'you will never get this up'. Two years ago we had a sponsorship launch and I said I am not going to stop till I succeed in this. I went and got a tattoo of *Dead Man Walking* on my hip and I said I am not going to stop till I get this up. It's about the piece, it's a work that's really important."

Talk about dogged determination. At first, the conservatorium trained singing graduate attempted to raise the funds to tour an American production to Australian capitals. She aggressively fundraised for a number of years till she exhausted the local philanthropy market. When that reached a dead-end, she changed tact. The result is an all-Australian cast in an all-new Australian production that hopes to tour overseas.

"When I couldn't raise the funds," Alexander explains, "I went back to the drawing board. If we put together a brand new Australian production there must be an Australian producer out there that would get behind it. But I thought, cost-wise, it would be more effective to bring in a production but it's not the case at all.

"So I took this to Andrew McManus who I had done some work with in the past and he was very interested in taking this on. For rock-n-roll producers their philosophy is that you don't have to treat classical music the way you are 'meant to'. You must think outside the square. Just because Opera Australia will produce events a certain way - we don't have to".

This attitude is central to what sets Alexander apart from the opera establishment. It is a risk-taking conviction to produce work that not only incorporates the talent of new and emerging artists but to also bring together the skills of people who wouldn't normally be involved in an opera production.

We need to continue to develop our audiences for the future otherwise we aren't going to have an industry.

Nigel Jamieson, whose latest success was *Honour Bound*, a physical theatre show that explored David Hicks' five-year incarceration in Guantanamo Bay is

the director. New Zealand opera pin-up Teddy Tahu Rhodes who adorns the hero-image of the marketing collateral takes the lead role of Joseph de Rocher. Hayden Tee, a familiar face on the Sydney cabaret circuit also makes an appearance, as well as *Australian Idol* celebrity Anthony Callea. Put radio personality Alan Jones into the mix as the para-legal character and the show is a marketing managers dream.

Alexander talks of Jones with a great deal of affection. "Alan has been a fantastic patron who has helped raise money for our trust over the last couple of years. He has been an amazing supporter of the project from day one and he feels so strongly against the death penalty the he wanted to be involved to make people aware of this".

It's clear that Alexander wants to open up her preferred art form to a wider and more appreciative audience, particularly when it comes to serious social issues. "We need to continue to develop our audiences for the future otherwise we aren't going to have an industry. We also need to be putting on works that open up discussions about things that we are facing as a society. Capital punishment is relevant to what's happening in Australia right now. The Bali nine, the hanging of Van Nguyen. We're having to deal with this issue at the moment even though we don't impose the death penalty. It's something that we have to face. We should discuss it."

Her point of difference is also ensuring that the seasoned professionals are teamed up with the young talent of the country whom Alexander is totally dedicated to. "Not only do we have the cream of the cream in terms of the best performers in the country, we also have a cast of 15 children between the ages of 7 and 10. We have a very talented 16 year old who played Escamillo in my production of *Carmen* as well as a mix of older and younger singers straight of the conservatorium."

Alexander has found a rare niche in the performing arts. With that space now filled by



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her ambition and drive, the only thing left is to continue ensuring the longevity of her love of opera and to keep audiences coming back. And no one will be able to tell her otherwise.

"There are so many people that are put down in industry and give up. But it's so important to not to listen and to just keep going. Particularly in opera, otherwise it just won't evolve."

Dead Man Walking

10 performances only, commencing Thursday 27 September at 8pm.

Venue : State Theatre, 49 Market Street, Sydney

Tickets On Sale now at Ticketmaster 136 100 or www.ticketmaster.com.au



Nicholas Pickard

A director and arts writer, Nicholas has worked in both Australia and Europe for a variety of theatre events and festivals. A directing graduate of the Akademija za Gledališče, Radio, Film in Televizijo (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia), Nicholas' experience also includes working for the Sydney Festival, Sydney Film Festival, Sarajevo TeaterFest and the Belgrade International Arts Festival.

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