

CV

NAME: Nicole Alexander.
AGE: 27.
EDUCATION: Ravenswood Sydney, Sydney University.
WORK EXPERIENCE: Conservatorium of Music, singing teacher, opera producer.
WORK MOTTO: "Don't be a gunna - be a doer."



Photo: Tamara Dean

THE LOWDOWN

Opera producer

Roles in the performing arts world are limited, so Nicole Alexander created her own, writes **Vivienne Skinner**.

Leo Schofield has called her nuts and it's hard to disagree. Two minutes into a conversation with 27-year-old Nicole Alexander you realise, with horror, that this is a woman who feels no fear. You want to protect her, yell at her to stop, to get real, get a day job. Because Alexander, with no personal fortune to her name, no rich prince by her side, somehow thinks she can produce her way into that costliest form of live artistic expression - opera - and succeed.

And why start small? The budget for her first big opera - *Dead Man Walking* - is \$2 million. She will shortly book Sydney's Capitol Theatre and expects at least 15,000 patrons to front up in February next year for seven, maybe more, performances. Until then, there's a bit of fund-raising to be done.

From Sunday, at the Conservatorium of Music, she's running a week of workshops and masterclasses for 120 singers aged 14 to 21, with the help of leading opera professionals. Eight hundred young singers auditioned, some via DVD, and the rest Alexander and her small team personally listened to in a series of gruelling sessions in Melbourne and Sydney. The singers have come from every state in the country, from cities, country towns and the outback. Alexander has had to find billets for them all.

At the end of the week will be five performances of *A Mid-Summer Opera* - the first act a collection of baroque solos by Monteverdi, Handel and Purcell and the second a newly commissioned work called *Love's Lessons Learned*, about the dramas of a high school formal. Perfect for opera.

Alexander is a singer - one good enough to have won a scholarship to university. However, the singing alone has never been enough for her.

"I get bored if I am not organising. But more than anything, I do this to expand the very limited opportunities for operatic performance in Australia."

With no rich prince to fund her, Alexander needs a day job. She teaches singing for five hours each afternoon and evening and all day Saturday. Sunday is her day off. The teaching earns her about \$65,000 a year and she takes a salary of \$8000 in total for the summer masterclass program.

This in no way covers the hours she puts in. "I was

up until three last night emailing students and each morning I devote to administration. That's the hardest thing about my job - if I had the money I'd employ someone to help me with all the office work."

So, what about the small matter of \$2 million she has to find for *Dead Man Walking*? Is she crazy? "No, not at all. It is a very calculated risk. How can you go wrong with a phenomenal story and an amazing cast?"

The opera - a huge hit in the United States and for a production in Adelaide last year - tells the true story of a death-row prisoner, Joe de Rocher, and the unconventional nun Sister Helen who accompanies him to his death. The music straddles jazz, pop, negro spiritual and opera.

LUCKY BREAK

'Alan Jones coming on board ... he is so well-connected and a big supporter of the arts.'

NICOLE ALEXANDER

Alexander has already raised \$1.2 million and, with freshly granted tax-deductibility status, she is about to begin a fresh round of corporate approaches.

Already there are some big names behind her, including the law firm Allens Arthur Robinson, which is doing all the legal work for free, and - out of the blue - radio announcer Alan Jones.

"He did a sponsor launch for us in September, he's officiating at the opening night of *Mid-Summer Opera* next week. He's also helping with fund-raising. And recently a group of 300 mothers of our singers and their friends each pledged to raise \$1000."

Does she like fund-raising? "No. I hate it. I get very nervous but keep telling myself: 'It's not for me, it's not for personal profit.'"

The show's linchpin is the presence of the charismatic baritone Teddy Tahu Rhodes in the lead, plus a cast including Catherine Carby (Sister Helen) and Elizabeth Campbell as the condemned man's mother.

Alexander says the demands of her job have been taxing on her relationship. She is engaged to Opera Australia's principal bass, Richard Anderson, who at times puts his foot down. "And rightly so. This job consumes me and it's so hard to get time together. That's why Sunday for us is so special."

In five years' time, she wants her own opera company - one that performs modern works. "There is so much talent in this country, yet many wonderful performers are out of work. I want to give them opportunities and hope and a professional future."

Somehow, it's hard to imagine her failing.