

# Perfect execution of a spiritual tale

## Dead Man Walking

State Theatre

### Review



The lead-up to this show has been as drawn-out and complex as a legal appeal against a death sentence. Producer Nicole Alexander has worked long and hard to persuade a stellar cast and crew to get involved.

She has succeeded in getting talkback radio king Alan Jones to give her money for the show (and then gave him a small part in it), secured genius director Nigel Jamieson, and lured some seriously powerhouse players in Kirsti Harms, Teddy Tahu Rhodes, Anthony Callea and Hayden Tee.

As soon as you see the set it becomes obvious nothing has been spared. Designer Dan Potra has built a convincing version of Louisiana's Angola State Penitentiary.

*Dead Man Walking* is based on the autobiographical novel by Sister Helen Prejean, who documents her experience as a spiritual adviser to a death row inmate convicted of killing two teenagers. The book was turned into a haunting film by Tim Robbins and starred Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon.



Devastating . . . Kirsti Harms during rehearsals.

Picture: JUSTIN LLOYD

This operatic version by composer Jake Heggie and librettist Terrence McNally sticks to the same story, and similarly avoids judgments on whether the death penalty is right.

Instead it elegantly shows the lead-up to the execution of the murderer. It's slowish in the first act, though director Jamieson fills the dramatic gaps with some excellent video footage by Scott Anderson. With more than 120 people in the cast and orchestra, Jamieson along with conductor Paul Kildea has a big job.

Much has been made of beefcake baritone Teddy Tahu

Rhodes playing the condemned murderer Joseph De Rocher.

But this production truly belongs to Harms, who delivers a touching take on central character Sister Helen.

This is opera that will not necessarily have you singing for days, but it will certainly hover in a corner of your imagination and force you to reflect on what is, at its core, a devastating human story based on fact.

□ 49 Market St, City, Nightly 8pm until Monday, \$80-\$210, 136 100, [ticketmaster.com.au](http://ticketmaster.com.au)

**NICHOLAS PICKARD**