

# Seeking to reinvent Sydney opera audience

There was a buzz of expectant excitement at the sponsorship launch for a production of *Dead Man Walking* scheduled for 2007 at the Capitol Theatre.

If everything goes to plan, this will not only be a high-profile cast in a remarkable contemporary opera, it will be the start of a fresh and youthful operatic venture in Sydney.

At the core of it is Nicole Alexander. To watch her work that room of keen, affluent and powerful people was to wonder if she wasn't setting her sights for Australia's first female prime minister. She is undoubtedly dynamic and she is pursuing her goals with passion.

Of course, these have to involve the raising of money. Hence the call for commitments of \$50,000, \$220,000 and \$500,000 with appropriate levels of sponsorship rewards in terms of naming rights, free seats, use of logos and so on. The money would be invested in a not-for-profit trust company established to support this and any future operatic ven-

tures, large or small, by Alexander Productions.

This is the team determined to strike a blow for opera in Sydney. Nicole Alexander, who trained as a singer, has worked as a producer, manager, artistic administrator and vocal teacher. Joanna Buggy is a producer and manager of artists and events. Margot Woodward has been management consultant to a variety of Australian performing arts companies.

Alexander has an inspiring pitch for their aims, printed on leaflets and letters. But it sounds even better when she speaks the words. The opera lovers at this gathering hung on every one of them.

She talks about her passion for music, for opera and for the development of artists — particularly young ones — in this country; the contemporary relevance of opera and its accessibility for everyone in the Australian audience.

As the project's mission statement puts it: "Alexander Productions was set up to develop brave and breathtaking operatic works that reinvent the Australian opera audience. We're a young and dynamic company that aims to take the grand passion of opera and

By  
JILL  
SYKES

make audiences swoon. For those familiar with opera, we hope to deliver extraordinary, memorable performances which reframe the whole opera experience. We believe in actively creating popularity and demand for this art form by producing shows that are wildly emotional and intensely evocative."

*Dead Man Walking* is the opera they have chosen to start with. It was first seen in this country two years ago in a powerful, award-winning production by the State Opera of South Australia with Teddy Tahu Rhodes repeating the pivotal role in which he made his U.S. debut.

It is the story of Joseph de Rocher, a convicted murder on death row in a US prison, and the vigorous campaign against capital punishment by Sister Helen Prejean — who is still campaigning and is looking forward to coming to Sydney for the production in 2007.

*Dead Man Walking* was

originally a book, selling so well that it was top of the *New York Times* bestseller list for 31 weeks. Then it was a film starring Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon, who won an Oscar for her performance.

The opera is an intense piece of music theatre, drawing on Negro spirituals, jazz and pop music as well as operatic conventions to tell its tragic tale of violence balanced by love and compassion. Words by Terrence McNally and music by Jake Heggie emphasise the spiritual and social aspects rather than taking any political line.

"It is important that we tell our stories and put them on the stage," Alexander says. "And never has there been more relevance to us in *Dead Man Walking* than now, with nine Australians on death row in Bali."

Teddy Tahu Rhodes, the tall, good-looking and vocally accomplished baritone star of Opera Australia — most recently, as Don Giovanni — earned a variety of accolades from his American performances. "Ferociously gifted," said the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Handsome of the opera," said *Who* magazine. He has promised an unusual degree of involvement in raising corpo-

rate sponsorship — even a private recital for select clients — to help the production get up.

It is an extraordinary role for him, as he outlined at the corporate launch. He was part of the original production in 2000, covering the leading role and getting the chance to play it several times. "Being part of such an amazing work was a privilege. It has affected me in so many ways, including shaping my career. And opening my eyes up to a piece of theatre that reflected real life. On the first night in San Francisco we had demonstrations outside the opera house, some for and some against — talk about opera and a topic that is relevant to people today! You don't want opera to stagnate.

"On the first night I stood on stage, it was like a roller coaster. You know the audience is behind you. There are parts of the opera when there is a bit of silence. You didn't hear

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## Spot

16-Year-Old Mathy Finalist  
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## Passion for opera

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a cough or anyone move. You could have heard a pin drop. Then you got to the end and there was dead silence while people caught their breath — and then there was this eruption of emotion."

As well as the impact of

## bites

The 2005-06 Israeli Opera season will see Julian Gavin in the title role of *Don Carlo*, Jonathan Summers as Renato in *Un Ballo in Maschera* and Sarah Castle as Sesto in *Giulio Cesare*.

Sara Macliver will appear with the Australian Chamber Orchestra in Mozart's *Mass in C Minor*, *the Great*, in October.

the opera, there was the impression left by Sister Helen Prejean. "I went to the 'do' after the opening night, and I had a picture of what a nun would look like. But she was in a denim shirt and skirt and just nothing like I had expected. She has this quietness about her, this silence, this amazing intensity. It grips you. I became very good friends with her."

As well as a memorable baritone role, *Dead Man Walking* has strong roles for the stage character of Sister Helen, to be sung by Leanne Kenneally, and Joseph de Rocher's mother — played by Elizabeth Campbell in the Adelaide production, where she almost stole the show with the emotional impact of her singing. And she has been engaged to repeat the experience in 2007.

"It is a very special role, emotionally charged," says

Campbell. "It is harrowing. It was the first time I had to learn something so emotional. I was actually crying at home as I learned it. It is so painful — I never got used to it."

Other cast members will include Catherine Carby, Tiffany Speight and Andrew Brunson. The conductor will be John DeMain and the director, Broadway award-winner Leonard Foglia.

A quick poll amongst the people attending the sponsorship for *Dead Man Walking* revealed a variety of people amongst the enthusiasts. They included the businessman father of one of Alexander's students, staff and supporters of Opera Australia, corporate leaders with a love of opera and some who appeared to be new to it. With a bit of luck added to the purpose and energy around, this project should take off.



Producer Nicole Alexander with Alan Bond (centre) and members of the cast of *Dead Man Walking* for its Sydney debut in 2007: Andrew Brunson, Elizabeth Campbell, Teddy Tahu Rhodes, Catherine Carby.

# 16-year-old for

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