

Jake Heggie: DEAD MAN WALKING
Lyric Opera of Chicago, November 16 2019



*Patricia Racette as Sister Helen Prejean,
Ryan McKinny as Joseph De Rocher*

Lyric scored an absolute triumph with this performance. This is a truly moving story with lots of emotional high points, but with some comic relief now and then. The singing, even in the minor roles, was absolutely excellent throughout, and the production made full use of Lyric's vast stage space, with some smaller-scale scenes delimited with backdrops.

The two female leads were sung by superstars of the operatic stage – soprano Patricia Racette as Sister Helen Prejean, the nun who becomes a spiritual advisor to the condemned murderer, and mezzo Susan Graham as his tormented mother. Racette sang with a consistently clear voice in every one of her many scenes, modulating from delicate pianos to strong fortissimos. Graham was costumed as a drab elderly woman, quite a ways from her natural glamorous persona (I met her several years ago when she signed autographs at Santa Fe Opera). Her two major arias were delivered with impeccable musicianship and great pathos, clearly expressing the anguish of a mother about to lose her child – a real tour de force of a performance. The role is written in a high register approaching that of a soprano, which she handled exquisitely – but then

soprano roles are well within her range, as she sang the soprano part of Sister Helen in previous productions of this work.

Bass-baritone Ryan McKinny as Joseph De Rocher, the convicted murderer, sang and acted superbly, with a robust physical performance (including clapped-hand pushups – not usually in the job description of an opera star!) His initial denials and subsequent confession of guilt create a dramatic arc that forms the gist of the narrative.

As mentioned, even the minor roles were sung extremely well. Soprano Whitney Morrison was outstanding in the role of Sister Rose, Helen's fellow nun. The quartet of parents of the murdered teenagers – contralto Lauren Decker, tenor Allan Glassman, soprano Talise Trevigne, bass-baritone Wayne Tigges – were truly spectacular. The quintet of these four, with Susan Graham, was an emotional high point of the opera, approaching, if not quite equaling, the splendor of the quartet in Verdi's *Rigoletto* or the trio in Gounod's *Faust*.

Another emotionally intense moment came when the parents confronted Sister Helen about her compassion for the murderer – you never knew, they sang, what it was like to bear children, to watch them grow up, to see them go on a date and never return. Powerful stuff.

Among these moments were interspersed interludes of comic relief. Sister Helen, driving to meet De Rocher at the prison, is stopped by a motorcycle cop for speeding (a real motorcycle on stage is a modern equivalent of the proverbial horses, camels and elephants of 19th C. grand opera). He lets her off, singing: "I never gave a ticket to a nun. I ticketed an IRS agent once. I was audited that year." So it can be inferred that he dreaded the consequences of ticketing a religious.

On the podium, conductor Nicole Paiement elicited a glorious sound from the orchestra. The music was spiky but melodious, with percussive accents at the more dramatic moments.

The staging, for the most part, represented the prison as a vast space, like a factory processing human beings. Partitions of chain link fencing divided the stage into separate areas, but with sight lines unobstructed. Regrettably, there was no sense of claustrophobic confinement, even when De Rocher was alone in his cell. The execution scene (by lethal injection) was extremely dramatic. The orchestra and singers fall silent; the only sound is the condemned man's beeping heart monitor until it finally flatlines. The tension in the audience was palpable.

I have not read Prejean's book nor seen the Tim Robbins movie of the same title, but in reviews I read that Sister Helen's faith was profoundly shaken by her experience with De Rocher. That did not come through in the opera. She seemed steadfast in her faith to the end, repeatedly calling him "a child of God" and exhorting him to confess his guilt – "the truth will set you free," she keeps telling him.

Overall, a superb experience, dramatically and musically.