

SOLANO COLLEGE THEATERS' "DEAD MAN WALKING" RACES MINDS TOWARDS LIFE

Lady Justice, a mythological Titan who ruled heavens and earth even before Zeus, stands as an icon in our consciousness conjuring a perfect notion in an imperfect world- justice. With her broadsword of reason in her right hand cutting both ways, blindfolded and thus impervious to prejudice, favor and corruption, she weighs in her scales the balance of evidence for and against those accused.

The Dead Man Walking Theatre Project gives high schools, colleges and universities rights to perform the stage play version of the academy award winning film based on the 1993 non fiction book by Sister Helen Prejean. Participating schools commit to community and multidisciplinary campus discourse on capital punishment.

The central characters are Matthew Poncelet, a readily despicable murderer from backwater Louisiana whose stories are as grandiose as his hairdo and as impotent as his goatee. He is awaiting execution. Sister Helen Prejean, sincere, devout and somewhat protected by her naiveté, is trying to save him-body and soul. Poncelet's prison is not only Angola; it is his fetid and obnoxious bravado, his seemingly insolent arrogance to the last, and his denial. His spirit has been incarcerated long ago in the prison of a decrepit youth. He pathetically decries his innocence in the brutal rape and execution style murder of two sweethearts on a rural Louisiana lover's lane. He will not own his guilt or his soul.

Sister Helen answers his desperate jailhouse letter and soon finds herself on an intimidating, inspired and almost addicting existential journey becoming young Poncelet's spiritual advisor. All the while she is walloped with the reality and heinousness of his crime through the hearts and minds of the victims' families. Appeals to man to save Poncelet fail. All that is left is to appeal to the man Poncelet perhaps could be and to heal and save his soul before the 5 days hence lethal administration of what society deems to be justice..

In the final hour, we see Poncelet make one last redemptive step. Through gripping video footage flashbacks we see the crime, learn of his guilt and are then confronted with weighing the measure of his remorse.

We quickly learn that the victims, as characterized by Tim Robbins stage play, are far more in number than what you may originally have thought. They are emblematic of the logic land mines and reasoning road markers along the agonizing trek of a superb script. Thus, this is an ensemble piece at its core with cast and crew bonding and supporting each other on a difficult and personal journey. Inasmuch, the cast did their job extremely well by keeping the focus on the issues scorching a path in their characters hearts and minds. Just when you think you have solid footing this talented ensemble inhabits the script, pummeling you with reason and emotion and challenging you anew

The grey set reflects the issue of capital punishment, neither black nor white. Authentic appearing still photographs and videos portray essential plot points in dioramic windows flanking a stark, large brick prison interior facade. Its center doorway serves metaphorically in turn as a spiritual entrance, tabernacle and ultimately, a sacrificial alter quenching society's demand for justice. Sound, lighting and costumes are spot on. The robust utilization of total theatre space, wherein actors frequently issue forth suddenly from seating areas, serves to pull the audience in further. This is quintessential director George Maguire mastery; engage the audience.

The play compels us to ask if the question is not who deserves to die, but rather who deserves to kill? One can not escape bias with such a gripping story. The play trumpets the hopelessness of perfect justice. How can imperfect beings mete out errorless punishment? Yet capital punishment perfectly ceases life

We are holding the proverbial scales of justice. We must weigh if the circle of violence can be mitigated by hopes of redemption? Is death bed remorse merely a foxhole conversion, and even if sincere, is salvation the province of God and separate from punishment? Is execution to vindicate the law and not to exact vengeance? Is deterrence not the point? Is capital punishment a statement by society regarding the sanctity of the unjustly taken life where failing to punish murder is barbaric? Is execution murder?

Although the play and the program tout very troubling statistics regarding misdistribution of justice, it is clear that capital punishment is a statement by us about us

The gist of wonderful post performance discussion was this; Dead Man Walking puts us all adrift in tumultuous seas trying with our moral compass to negotiate true north and safe harbor for our hearts, minds and loved ones in a dangerous world.

Don't be a spectator of the grand stage of life. Balcony seats are reserved for God. Get up; get engaged and go see Dead Man Walking.

FOUR STARS

Kevin Ryan is a retired Colonel, physician, musician and author who lives in Fairfield.