

Review: 'Dead Man Walking' at City Lights in San Jose

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An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.

Gandhi's insight into the dark side of vengeance is just one of the bits of wisdom woven into "Dead Man Walking." Adapted by Tim Robbins from the autobiographical book by Sister Helen Prejean, this provocative piece of political theater examines the morality of the death penalty from all sides.

This hard-hitting production runs through Feb. 21 at City Lights Theater Company in a coproduction with Notre Dame High School as part of the "Dead Man Walking" School Theatre Project.

Keenly directed by Amanda Folena, this probing death penalty drama unfolds in a bleak universe of iron bars, chain-link fence and concrete (design by Ron Gasparinetti). This death row, where time and mercy are in equally short supply, is etched with a stark Brechtian flair.

Robbins, who wrote and directed the Oscar-winning film version of the tale starring Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon, is a stalwart figure in political theater circles. He takes pains to give the wider context of the issues behind the economics of justice in America. Ninety-nine percent of the people on death row are poor. Sadly, the bottom line seems to be you get the justice you pay for.

But the genius of this parable is that there are no absolutes. The death row inmate in question — Matthew Poncelet (City Lights regular Thomas Gorrebeeck) — is no saint. He's a swastika-bearing thug and a bigot who may well have committed the grotesque crimes of which he is accused, the rape and murder of two teenagers.

And yet Sister Helen (City Lights artistic director Lisa Mallette) finds herself moved to protest his death. She can't sit idly by as the state takes a human life in the name of peace.

Mallette, in a rare stint on the boards, mines the guts and sass that make Sister Helen an irresistible force in a world of immovable objects. The actress nails the passion and drive that make someone willing to renounce personal comfort and dedicate their life to others.

Gorrebeeck gives Matthew a vulnerability that softens the character's grimness, but he misses the rage that drives a man to such acts of self-destruction. The character's racist screeds seem to come out of nowhere.

There are also times when the pacing feels spotty, and the emotional weight of the play doesn't build as vividly as it should as the day of reckoning approaches. But these are quibbles in the face of an ambitious production.

Perhaps the most moving moments focus on the families of the victims. In one scene, a chorus of voices speak at once, their words coalescing in a fugue of anguish. Each of them has lost a loved one to an act of violence. It's as if no one knows their pain, as if each of them is trapped in their little silo of grief. Their calls for vengeance cut to the bone.

Robbins' script cleverly weaves the factual with the supernatural in a compelling narrative arc. Watching the ghosts of the slain teenagers (Ligia Law and David Madwin) stalk the stage, peering into the face of the man who put them in the grave, is an eerie experience.

Still, there's nothing quite as powerful as the penultimate moments where we watch Matthew strapped down and executed. The words "lethal injection" seem so clinical and humane, but the act of ending someone's life is never that detached. Prejean's account of being in the chamber of death makes us confront what the costs are, not in dollars, but in dignity, to all involved.

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