

# Friends of Opera



Volume 7, Number 2

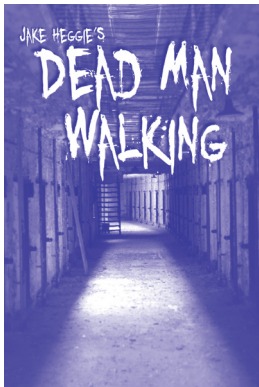
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA – LINCOLN

February 2008

## Heggie's *Dead Man* Challenges Students, Stirs Emotions

By William Shomos, UNL Director of Opera

Three years ago, Jim and Rhonda Seacrest were hosting a retreat for the Board of Directors of Friends of Opera. There was lively speculation about upcoming operas to be produced at UNL. *The Merry Widow?* *La Bohème?* *Carmen?* Everyone had a favorite pick. It was then that I first bounced the idea of *Dead Man Walking*. I remember the response...general silence along with a few polite head nods. *Dead Man Walking* is not your typical opera fare. Many people are familiar with the hit movie of the same name, starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Most of the public, however-- even many of those in the music business--are not aware of the operatic version. With so many popular titles out there, why choose *Dead Man Walking* for UNL Opera? For me, there are three compelling reasons.



First, this is an opera for our times. Based on the writings of death penalty activist Sister Helen Prejean, the context of the opera is a front page issue for Nebraskans these days. Last year, repeal of the death penalty fell one vote short in our state legislature; and the debate continues. In the opera, Sister Helen has been called upon to be the spiritual advisor to a death row convict in the final days leading up to his state execution. To be sure, the subject matter is politically charged. But librettist Terence McNally leaves the audience with a choice to make. We hear compelling arguments from families of the victims as

well as the mother of the condemned. The opera's focus is not so much the pros and cons of capital punishment, as it is the greater universals of accountability, forgiveness, and redemption.

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### Prejean Will Present Preview Talk on February 22

Sister Helen Prejean, whose story led to the acclaimed movie *Dead Man Walking* and the Jake Heggie opera of the same name, will attend the UNL Opera production of *Dead Man Walking* on February 22. Sister Helen will present the Opera Preview talk at 6:45 p.m. in the lower lobby of Kimball Recital Hall, and plans to attend the reception for Friends of Opera members and their guests following the performance. The complete schedule of performances is set forth as follows:

### **DEAD MAN WALKING**

By Jake Heggie

Thursday, Feb. 21 . . . . .12 Noon

Friday, Feb. 22 . . . . . 7:30 p.m.

Sunday, Feb. 24 . . . . . 3:00 p.m.

### **Kimball Recital Hall**

11th & R Streets

Adults . . . . . \$20

Faculty, students and seniors . . . . . \$10

Tickets available at the door or through Lied Center Box Office, 472-4747

### **Opera Preview**

Kimball Hall Lower Lobby

6:45 p.m. on Feb. 22 (Sr. Helen Prejean)

2:15 p.m. on Feb. 24 (William Shomos)

### **Friends of Opera Reception**

Friends of Opera members and their guests are invited to a reception in the Kimball Hall lower lobby following the February 22 performance. Principal cast members will attend, as well as Sister Helen Prejean.

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## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

*Dear Friends,*

**A** riddle: What do a former high school basketball player from Nebraska, a baseball lover from Illinois, an opera star from New York and \$200,000 have in common? The answer: Friends of Opera. Let me explain.

It was about 10 years ago that the former basketball player (me) contacted the baseball lover (UNL Director of Opera Bill Shomos) about taking voice lessons. As I have told Bill many times since, I have no idea why he said “yes” – there was absolutely nothing in it for him. Through Bill, I met the opera star, his faculty colleague Ariel Bybee. About two years later, a group of perceived opera lovers was invited to a reception after one of Ariel’s recitals, and later to a dinner sponsored by the University of Nebraska Foundation, and organized by Lucy Buntain Comine. At that dinner, the idea of a support group for UNL Opera was circulated, and shortly thereafter Friends of Opera was born, under the early leadership of Ginny Parker.

For me, Friends of Opera was initially an interest, but became a passion. The difference was Ariel Bybee. Sometime in 2000, as FOO was getting started, Ariel asked me to perform a small role in the February 2001 production of *Die Fledermaus*, which she directed with assistance from husband Jim Ford. Rehearsals started in January, and within two weeks I was forever hooked on the creative process.

It was an absolute revelation for me to watch a true opera star, one who had sung over 400 performances at the Met, directing college students, most of whom could never approach her level of talent. Her ability to motivate young people is remarkable. She demands excellence, precision and continued improvement, while exploiting each singer’s strengths instead of dwelling on their weaknesses. By

opening night, the cast of *Fledermaus* would have stormed the Bastille if Ariel had asked them. The energy, exuberance and determination of our budding UNL Opera stars had become intoxicating and addictive for me.

Oh, about the \$200,000 – that’s the amount that you – through Friends of Opera – have contributed to UNL Opera over the past seven years. (That doesn’t include many, many thousands more contributed by our most generous Friends, Jim and Rhonda Seacrest). You have been part of a process that is undeniably yielding results: National Opera Association honors; Waterford Festival awards; Metropolitan Opera Audition success; and overall increased quality in student and faculty applicants.

As many of you know, Ariel has taken a leave of absence to deal with some health issues. Even though she may not be at Westbrook Music Building on a daily basis, we know her influence will be felt through her wisdom and experience, her passion for opera and her love for her students. It’s hard to find the right words to say to a New York opera star who invited an old basketball player into her world of creative artistry, and turned an interest into a passion. Brava, Ariel, and heartfelt thanks!

Sincerely,



Don Burt, President

### *Friends of Opera* Board of Directors

Don Burt, President    Kathy Friedman, Vice President    Judy Amber, Secretary    Diana Warner, Treasurer  
Ellen Baldwin, Kate Butler, Ariel Bybee, Lucy Buntain Comine, IV Dickson, Kim Einspahr, Mike Fardella, George Hancock,  
Raymond Lowther, Regina Noble, Joey Northrup, Ginny Parker, Bill Shomos, Jo Stewart, Michael Tully, Carol Walker, James Weesner

*Friends of Opera is a tax-exempt, nonprofit corporation supporting opera at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and throughout Nebraska.*

*Continued from cover*

A second persuasive reason to produce *Dead Man Walking* is Jake Heggie's wonderful musical score. At every turn, the intense emotional content of the story is revealed in the sounds of the voices and orchestra. Heggie composes in a contemporary idiom, but the music is quite accessible. (One criticism of the opera has been that Heggie's approach is *too* traditional.) There are arias with soaring vocal lines of exquisite beauty, ensemble numbers of heart wrenching poignancy, choruses of electrifying brilliance, and a rhythmic energy, reminiscent of Bernstein, that propels the story relentlessly onward. A master of characterization in sound, Heggie stamps each player in the opera with a unique musical fingerprint.

What is the third reason to produce *Dead Man Walking* at UNL? We have the students to pull it off. Whenever choosing an opera for the season, I have to give top consideration to the strengths of the students enrolled in

our voice program. Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* is tailor made for the current crew. I think few of these outstanding young artists would deny the fact that this has been some of the most challenging music they have ever sung, as well as some of the most challenging drama they've ever had to play. But with these challenges have come bountiful rewards. I hope you will be impressed with the way our graduate and under-graduate students respond to both the musical and emotional challenges of this work. Headlining the cast in the role of Sister Helen is doctoral student Adrienne Dickson, who you may have seen in many UNL Opera productions, including *Julius Caesar*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Gondoliers*. Playing convicted murderer Joseph DeRocher is masters candidate Thom Gunther, who has recently been seen as Marcello in *La Bohème* and Guglielmo in *Così fan Tutte*.

Is *Dead Man Walking* an opera for everyone? Probably not. Is it an opera for you? Join us at Kimball Hall on February 21, 22 or 24, and find out for yourself.

## Osher Institute Class Reviews Met Telecasts

UNL's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) is partnering with the UNL School of Music to present a class on the operas featured in the "Live from the Metropolitan Opera" telecasts co-sponsored by Friends of Opera and the Mary Riepma Ross Media Arts Center. The six-lecture class will meet on consecutive Wednesdays in Room 121 of the Home Economics Building on the UNL East Campus beginning March 26. The course is open to OLLI members at a cost of \$25. Persons who wish to join OLLI (\$50 annual membership) or register for the class should call 472-6265 or visit [www.lli.unl.edu](http://www.lli.unl.edu). The course is entitled "Live from the Metropolitan Opera: from Lincoln Center to Lincoln, Nebraska".

The schedule of class times, lecturers and operas is as follows:

### **Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette***

Wednesday, March 26<sup>th</sup>

1-2:30 p.m., East Campus

Lecturer, Jamie Reimer, Graduate Student UNL School of Music

### **Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* and *La Bohème***

Wednesday, April 9<sup>th</sup>

3-4:30 p.m., East Campus

Lecturer, Ariel Bybee, Associate Professor UNL School of Music

### **Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde***

Wednesday, April 23<sup>rd</sup>

3-4:30 p.m., East Campus

Lecturer, Michael Cotton, accompanist and vocal coach, UNL School of Music

### **Verdi's *Macbeth***

Wednesday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>

1-2:30 p.m., East Campus

Lecturer, Sarah Baldus, Graduate Student UNL School of Music

### **Britten's *Peter Grimes***

Wednesday, April 16<sup>th</sup>

3-4:30 p.m., East Campus

Lecturer, Dr. Kevin Hanrahan, Assistant Professor UNL School of Music

### **Donizetti's *La Fille du Regiment***

Wednesday, April 30<sup>th</sup>

3-4:30 p.m., East Campus

Lecturer, Alisa Belflower, Sr. Lecturer UNL School of Music

# Calendar of Events

## UNL Opera

### *Dead Man Walking*

February 21 at Noon  
February 22 at 7:30 p.m.  
February 24 at 3:00 p.m.  
Kimball Recital Hall  
Tickets: 472-4747

## Opera Omaha

### *The Tragedy of Carmen*

March 5, 6, 8 and 9  
Witherspoon Concert Hall  
Joslyn Art Museum

## *Aida*

April 4, 6, 9, 11 and 13  
Orpheum Theater  
877-346-7372  
www.operaoama.org

## Nebraska Wesleyan Opera Theater

### *Die Fledermaus*

April 4 at 7:30 p.m.  
April 6 at 3:00 p.m.  
O'Donnell Auditorium  
Admission \$5 at the door

## Metropolitan Opera Telecasts

Mary Riepma Ross Media Arts Center  
(www.TheRoss.org)

- *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini)  
February 16, 2008 (12:00 p.m.)  
February 17, 2008 (1:00 p.m.)
- *Peter Grimes* (Britten)  
March 15, 2008 (12:30 p.m.)  
March 16, 2008 (1:00 p.m.)
- *Tristan und Isolde* (Wagner)  
March 22, 2008 (11:30 a.m.)  
March 23, 2008 (1:00 p.m.)
- *La Bohème* (Puccini)  
April 5, 2008 (12:30 p.m.)  
April 6, 2008 (1:00 p.m.)
- *La Fille du Regiment* (Donizetti)  
April 26, 2008 (12:30 p.m.)  
April 27, 2008 (1:00 p.m.)

## Wesleyan Presents...

### *Die Fledermaus*

Enjoy an evening of the great Viennese waltzes of Johann Strauss as Nebraska Wesleyan Opera Theater presents one of the most famous operettas in music history, *Die Fledermaus*. Talea Schroeder stars as Rosalinda and Zachary Schroeder as Gabriel von Eisenstein in this updated version, which will be performed in English and will also feature the Nebraska Wesleyan University Choir. The orchestra will be under the direction of William A. Wyman with stage direction by Dawn Pawlewski Krogh. Performances are Friday, April 4<sup>th</sup> at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, April 6<sup>th</sup> at 3:00 p.m. in O'Donnell Auditorium, 50<sup>th</sup> and Huntington, on the Nebraska Wesleyan University campus. Admission is \$5.00, and tickets will be available at the door.



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