

## Social Transformation: The Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project Comes to Augustana College

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 31 January 2007 03:43

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Explaining the decision to turn Tim Robbins' Oscar-winning *Dead Man Walking* into a work for the stage, Sister Maureen Fenlon begins with six simple words: "A stage play can go *anywhere* ." And she would like the show to be seen *everywhere* .

"If you want to have a transformation," Fenlon continues, "a *social* transformation, then minds need to be engaged so they [people] can be open to learning, and hearts have to be opened so that that learning can go *furth* *er* and seep into your own soul. When people's minds and hearts have been opened through the arts, the quality of your exchange is more than a conversation, it's surely not [merely] a debate ... and here, it's a powerful art form dealing with a *very* powerful issue."

She isn't kidding. Robbins' 1995 movie, based on the acclaimed nonfiction book by Sister Helen Prejean, dramatized Prejean's experiences in the weeks leading up to the execution of a convicted murderer; the film was a probing, heart-wrenching look at those affected by capital punishment, received Academy Award nominations for director Robbins and star Sean Penn, and earned Susan Sarandon the Best Actress Oscar for her performance as Sister Prejean.

Yet the story didn't end with a film. Through the *Dead Man Walking* School Theatre Project - for which Fenlon, an Adrian Dominican nun based in New Orleans, serves as the National Coordinator - Robbins' work has been given a new life on the stage, and one that, for the foreseeable future, is only available to schools; despite nearly 100 productions of *Dead Man Walking*

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since its debut on October 22, 2004, rights to the play have not been granted to any professional theatre companies. (Augustana College will produce the show February 2 through 11.)

For years, explains Fenlon, Prejean had urged Robbins to adapt his screenplay for the stage, which he finally did in 2002. His original plan was to workshop the play through school performances during its first year; Robbins would receive feedback from the participants on how to improve the work for its subsequent, professional debut. Thirty colleges and universities agreed to stage the piece in its first year, yet in the fall of 2004 - when Robbins joined Bruce Springsteen for his cross-country tour, drumming up interest in the electoral process among youths - the play's author had a change of heart about his *Dead Man Walking* plans.

"Tim saw how energetic the young people are when they get turned on to a good cause," says Fenlon, a self-described "social activist" who, since the 1970s, has worked to humanize the U.S. prison system. "And he realized, 'I'm not gonna *put* the play on Broadway. I'm gonna let it stay out there and let *more* schools do it.'

"Because this project is, like, exactly what Tim was wanting to see happen - let the younger generation grapple with the play's issues, because *they're* the ones, he believes, that can make the changes."

Along with Prejean and Fenlon, Robbins formed the *Dead Man Walking* School Theatre Project, so-called because participating schools are asked to do more than merely produce the play. "At least two academic departments must incorporate the issue of the death penalty into their curriculum," says Fenlon, "so there would be a *study* of the issue and a discourse on it. That's a requirement that Tim Robbins has placed on this. He's not wanting this play to be like any other play that has social content, of course, but then people go on with their lives."

Such a project was exactly what Augustana theatre professor - and *Dead Man Walking* director - Jeff Coussens was looking for during his department's 2005-6 season, themed "Issues of Our Times."

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"Before even knowing much about the script or the production history of it," says Coussens, "it appealed to us in a season where we're exploring social issues. The fact that this project was designed to generate discussion - campus-wide, community-wide discussion on the issue - was the most appealing part of the project."

Coussens is no stranger to works that deal with prominent social issues, as evidenced by his 2005 staging of *The Laramie Project*; the play analyzed the homophobia and hatred behind the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard. And the issues grappled with in *Dead Man Walking* were ones that Coussens, himself, had long considered.

"I came in with pretty strong views," he says. "I've always been against the death penalty for many of the reasons that are illustrated in the play's action. The fact that most death-row inmates don't have access to wealth or power or education - or good lawyers - and so it's unfairly meted out. The fact that so many people in recent history have been exonerated through DNA testing; it kind of reveals flaws in the system that are bound to happen. The fact that there's no evidence of any deterrence value to the death penalty. The fact that it costs more to execute somebody than to put them in prison for life."

Yet Coussens believes that his latest production "does a nice job of balancing viewpoints and making you think about it [capital punishment] in a different way. One thing that the play does that the movie *doesn't* do so much is balance the viewpoint a little bit more by allowing us more of a glimpse into the victims' families and the turmoil that *they go through*."

The director also appreciates how *Dead Man Walking* manages to eschew conventional melodrama. "One of the things I like about the film, the book, *and*

the play," he says, "is that ordinarily, with pieces that are designed to provoke a stance on the death penalty, you see a sympathetic prisoner who is either wrongly convicted, or convicted on bad evidence, or whatever. And in this case," Coussens understates, "the prisoner's not all that sympathetic. Sister Prejean found a way to make this journey that she takes with a death-row inmate speak out against the death penalty, and yet he's not a sympathetic character at all. That's kind of amazing to me that she's able to do do that."

One of less than 100 schools in the country to produce the work thus far, Augustana has indeed

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incorporated *Dead Man Walking* into its curriculum - and the community. "We've enlisted campus ministers and the local chapter of Amnesty International," says Coussens, "and we've got departments - sociology, religion, political science - that are all involved in post-show panel discussions."

He does admit, though, that the play's production has posed difficulties, particularly in regard to Robbins' use of numerous locations and "sharp transitions" from one scene to the next. "It's very cinematic, as you can imagine. Tim Robbins is not a playwright, and he, I think, based the play on the screenplay in a lot of ways. I mean, Robbins uses stage directions like 'The couch falls away,' 'Prejean appears,' 'Fade in,' 'Fade out.' Whereas *Laramie Project* is clearly theatrical and developed for the stage, this one you have to kind of *translate* from the cinematic quality to the theatrical. And that's been a challenge for us.

"But the way you do that," he continues, "is by going minimalist, and looking for ways to *suggest* things and engage the audience's imagination." For Augustana's production, this minimalistic technique applies to everything from what Coussens calls a "postmodern production style" - the set, an assemblage of chairs and platforms, implies more than it reveals - to the music, which is light on traditional orchestrations but heavy on suggestions of realism. "Everything is recorded at Angola prison," the director explains. "It's all recordings of prisoners - prisoners' quartets and prisoners' solos - and it's all blues and spiritual. I think it's gonna add a lot to the production."

And the effects of the production are bound to be felt outside the theatre's walls, as well. Coussens reveals that the department is "also planning a kind of demonstration on the Quad, where we're going to plant crosses - I think 750 crosses - which represent the number of executions in the United States in the past decade." The idea for the demonstration came from a similar event held on December 1, 2005, at Elms College in Massachusetts, when the school's theatre department, in conjunction with *its* production of *Dead Man Walking*, planted 1,000 crosses to acknowledge the 1,000th U.S. execution, occurring that night in North Carolina.

Fenlon herself was at the Elms College event that evening and was asked by local media for her take on the demonstration. As she describes, her response reflected the discourse that she and those associated with the *Dead Man Walking* School Theatre Project are hoping to provoke.

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"I knew they were wanting me to either talk about the play," she says, "or about the person being executed. But I said, 'This 1,000th execution is not a reflection of the *person* [who was executed], but of the people of this country. It reflects

*us*

. This is a picture of who

*we*

are. We get fixated on the wrongdoer, but not about how this whole form of punishment is done in our name. Not that we're bad people, but this punishment reflects our decision to behave in this manner. What does it say about

*us*

? I think that's what we should be reflecting on."

*For more information on the Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project, visit ( <http://dmwplay.org> ). For tickets*

*to Augustana College's production of*

*Dead Man Walking,*

*performed in Potter Hall February 2 through 11, call (309) 794-7236.*