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With Tim Robbins' capital-punishment drama *Dead Man Walking*, Augustana College's theatre department has crafted a moving and impressive play, and I can't fully express how difficult that task must have been, because it really
isn't
a play; it's a
screen
play. Scene for scene, sometimes even word for word, this 2002 piece replicates Robbins' 1995 movie to the letter, and in doing so, points out the deep chasm that exists between theatre and film. As a stage piece,
Dead Man Walking
shouldn't work, but director Jeff Coussens and his fiercely committed cast do everything in their power to keep you from noticing, and more often than not, succeed beautifully.

Oftentimes, when thrilling theatrical material is transferred to the screen, the results feel static and unconvincing, as film - an inherently more realistic medium than theatre - requires a degree of nuance, a trust in the visual over the verbal, that eludes many stage adaptations. (In movies such as *Proof, The Producers,* and *Rent*, you can all but see the proscenium arch overhead.) Transferring a film to the stage, though, is another animal entirely.

In the film, the conflicting emotions of Sister Helen Prejean - spiritual counselor to convicted murderer Matthew Poncelet - can be read in the subtlest of Susan Sarandon's expressions, or in a close-up that reveals more than words could, or in a series of cannily edited images; what keeps the movie from being an anti-capital punishment tract (and saves it from obviousness) has nothing to do with the dialogue, and everything to do with the shadings *behind* the dialogue. But theatre, of course, can't rely on close-ups and editing - audiences, at least with a work of this sort, have to be *told* more than they're *shown* - and with *Dead Man Walking*, this poses some serious obstacles.

The one major difference between Robbins' film and play is that the stage work is now narrated by Prejean (played here by Kyle Roggenbuck), which is a sensible choice, as nearly all of the work's events are seen from her perspective. Dramatically, though, this also turns out to be a *bad* choice, as it dispenses with much of the movie's subtlety; ideas that were clear with a simple look or gesture on-screen are made all too verbally explicit. (Prejean's attitudes toward Poncelet's crimes, once apparent through a reaction shot, are now delivered with heavy-handed verbiage such as "The depths of depravity stunned me.") Every time Prejean steps forward to address the audience, the lecturing that was happily absent - or, at the very least, disguised - in the film comes out in full force.

And there are other problems, all stemming from Robbins' unwillingness to deviate from the movie's blueprint. A subplot involving Prejean neglecting her teaching duties, which added dimension to the character's on-screen struggle, feels tacked-on and unnecessary here. Likewise, Prejean's conversations with her mother (Rachel Krein) and a fellow nun (Jessica Benson) - which provided respite from the prison sequences - now seem distractingly like filler. And several transition scenes, though ably accomplished, are awkward; after the opening half hour, in which Coussens finds an appropriately fluid, cinematic style for the material, the lights dim for an extensive scene change that disrupts the play's rhythm - and, unfortunately, it's not the last time this happens. Most of what's wrong with *Dead Man Walking* could have been fixed by Robbins simply re-thinking the piece for the stage; Augustana's participants, doing their best to cover holes in the material, are doing more work than they should *have* to.

Thankfully, though, that work is superb. When the script allows him to, Coussens - a wizard at large-scale ensemble pieces - gives his scenes the ebb and flow of real life, and comes through with breathtakingly human touches: the overlapping, escalating passion of the opposing lawyers (Krein and a spectacularly commanding Jeff LaRocque), competing for our empathy; the lingering silences when Poncelet (Brian Bengtson) meets with his family for the last time. And Coussens' staging is often more even-handed than the material. When Prejean converses with the parents (Jennifer Altenbernd and Ben Webb) of the murdered girl, the director has her facing upstage, so the point of the scene becomes the parents' agony and not Prejean's reaction to it; despite the work's anti-death penalty leanings, Coussens respects the dignity of those whose grief demands an execution.

As Prejean, Roggenbuck displays a commitment to character that's truly inspiring. Prejean's frequently didactic narration leads to her seeming more humorless than I'd have liked - I longed to see Roggenbuck smile more - but she's focused and exudes an effortless gravitas, and when she finally unleashes the character's impatience, her power is intimidating; Roggenbuck owns the show by dint of natural authority.

Bengtson, meanwhile, does something very shrewd with his Poncelet portrayal; he refuses to showboat, underplaying even the character's most virulent rants. The closer he gets to his demise (and ultimate redemption), the more haunted and introverted Bengtson becomes; this Poncelet seems to be disappearing right before your eyes.

Sterling work is delivered all throughout *Dead Man Walking*. Sara Potts, as Poncelet's mother, hits extraordinary notes of suffering and loss - her climactic pose, behind a stage-left scrim, is a lovely piece of voiceless acting - and her emotionalism is matched by that of Altenbernd, who relates her character's last encounter with her daughter with heart-melting grace. Kevin Wender's delicate transformation from incensed to accepting is marvelously textured; Charles Zamastil brings some crackling rhythms to his scenes as the prison chaplain. Actor for actor, the cast appears to truly *believe* in the show, and the sincerity they lend the piece is more than admirable. (It also bodes well for future Augustana productions, as more than half the cast is composed of first- or second-year students, or some - such as the touching seventh-grader Ben Stewart - who aren't in college *yet*.) As a work for the stage, *Dead Man Walking* may be wanting, but considering Augustana's efforts, it certainly couldn't want for a better presentation.

For tickets, call (309) 794-7306.