

DEADMANWALKING

The New Stage Play by Tim Robbins
March 3-13, 2005 -- Marilyn Moyer Theatre

When we met with Sister Helen Prejean in October, she told us that her reason for encouraging Tim Robbins to create a stage version of her story centers on a desire to keep a dialogue going. She wants people to talk. She wants them to talk about the death penalty, of course ... it's her cause. But she also wants people – especially young people – to talk about how they can affect change in their world, on a wide range of issues that may be important to them.

By joining the handful of Jesuit colleges and secondary schools who have agreed to produce DEAD MAN WALKING this year, we pledged to do everything we could to make our production the center of something much greater. Please join us in linking this story, your curriculum, and this year's school-wide theme, in an exploration of ways we can all be *committed to doing justice*.

For the 24 ensemble members who make up our cast, learning this story will entail a much deeper process than a typical rehearsal period. The bias of the author is clear in DEAD MAN WALKING, but the play itself is careful to give a voice to the many sides of this complex issue. Our cast will have the opportunity speak with one of Oregon's death penalty judges, a prosecutor, public defender, and representatives from victims' families organizations. It's our hope that our cast will have the chance to meet with Sr Helen, as well, but we may have to bus ourselves to Seattle for that (she's a very busy woman).

We will let you know about any resources we bring to campus that may be of specific interest to your classes. Please let us know if you have any ideas. We'll do the legwork to pursue whatever we can to deepen this experience for all involved.

Most of all, let's begin a dialogue that begins now and becomes a part of our school community in a way that can't be avoided. Our Fine Arts Assembly on March 3 will center on the idea of working for justice through art. That evening, DEAD MAN WALKING will open and we are anticipating considerable public attention.

This is an opportunity we do not want to let pass without every attempt to fully realize the potential it represents.

On the reverse side of this sheet are ideas we've had about ways our production of DEAD MAN WALKING can intersect with your curriculum. We want this opportunity to add resources and depth to the great work already being done in the classroom. Our hope is that, by planning now, the second semester can begin with a focus on themes, activities, and discussions which set a meaningful context for this story.

Please help us make this a school-wide model of interdisciplinary education.

PLEASE NOTE: While DEAD MAN WALKING is a story that centers on the death penalty, the following ideas and explorations can be directed toward a wide range of justice issues. Sr Helen herself admits that chances are remote that any of her readers (or audience members) will go on to be directly and concretely exposed to death penalty issues. But we are all in a position to express our viewpoint based on how we process the truth ... through language, through science, through media, through art ... and, in so doing, affect positive change. *It is an interdisciplinary pursuit.*

This year, our Drama Season Theme is COMING TO THE EDGE. It's taken from the song "Let the River Run" by Carly Simon. In the song, Simon sings of the *New Jerusalem* (in John's Revelation, the world as God intended):

*Let the river run
Let all the dreamers wake the nations
Come
The New Jerusalem*

Our collection of plays and musicals this year celebrates characters who work to affect change in their community. We are all in a position to do just that ... whether scientist or poet.

DEADMANWALKING Interdisciplinary Ideas

This collection of ideas is intended to start a brainstorming session within your Department. We want to find ways to make our production a resource for you. We want to hear your ideas and plans as they develop!

English – The first thing Sister Helen said to us was “I’m a storyteller.” Her story was first told as a book. She hoped that by telling her story she could “put a human face on an issue that too often remains abstract.” How have other authors managed to attempt or accomplish this through literature? What other literary works were created to affect social or political change? How successful were they?

Modern Language – Each culture represented in our Modern Language Department has faced this very issue, and nations around the globe have developed laws and policies that are deeply tied to tradition and heritage. What are the laws of the people represented by your specific language? Are they new? What cultural forces are at work when governments enact legislation on such things as capital punishment?

Math – The original book by Sister Helen is very careful to verify and cite every fact and statistic. One foundation of her argument is the disproportion of people who are poor who face the death penalty (versus others, with resources, who receive lesser penalties for similar crimes). The numbers are out there, and readily available. Rather than taking our word for it when they’re cited in the play, help us verify the current, accurate information. What are the percentages ... of minorities, of those ultimately exonerated, of executions by region, of changes in crime rates? It’s a multi-faceted issue.

PE/Health – Many states have gone to great lengths in an effort to make their method of execution “more humane.” The most acceptable method today, in our country, is lethal injection. What are the biological effects that lead to the ultimate death of the prisoner? How do we catalog degrees of “humane” when it comes to an act that ultimately kills the person to whom it’s being done?

Science – A similar question can be explored here. How does the method of execution biologically end the life of the person being executed? How have the advances in science affected the changes in how the death penalty is carried out? How have advances in forensic science made it easier to determine certain guilt, before the ultimate, irreversible sentence is carried out? Can such determinations be certain?

History – How has our society, or any other society, evolved in terms of the use and acceptance of the death penalty? Conflicting values in this area are not new. What is the history of capital punishment (in the US or any other country being studied)? When laws, practices, or public opinions have shifted (either way), what were the contextual forces that lead to those changes?

Fine Arts – How do artists work to affect social change? Sr Helen said that she wants to put a “human face” on the issue. Can art do the that? Can it go deeper? How has a culture’s artwork, through history, reflected changing tides (around this issue or others)? Now a play, DEAD MAN WALKING has been a book, a movie, and an *opera*. How has the shift in medium affected the story being told?

Media and Technology – Availability of images and information has advanced at a rapid pace, along with advances in media and technology. How does this affect public perception and policy around controversial issues such as the death penalty? How has the immediate reporting and visual information from Iraq, for instance, changed public understanding and opinion of the war?

Religion - Ultimately, DEAD MAN WALKING is about one Christian’s journey into a complex mire of conflicting moral and ethical values. By standing with those on both sides of the issue (her work with victim’s families, for instance) Sr Helen provides an excellent model for involvement and interaction within the community. It is a story that leads to hope and redemption, and the “hard work” of forgiveness and understanding. There’s *something* here for this department, we’re thinking.