

LIFE *or* DEATH?

Play and symposium
about capital punishment
opens dialog among
students, faculty and
community

BY JANET WALDMAN

Casey Manning '07 ponders his fate as
an inmate on death row in Quinnipiac's
production of *Dead Man Walking*.

JOHN HASSETT

Casey Manning had no idea how to portray the evil rapist and murderer he would come to embody for weeks. As Matt Poncelet, the convict on death row in *Dead Man Walking*, Manning rehearsed his execution many times and was “put to death” nine times during the run of the play presented in March and April by the Theater for Community at Quinnipiac.

“Everyone has a dark side, but most are afraid to show it. I found my dark side—that little bitty badness—and I grew it till it filled me for 2-1/2 hours a night,” said the broadcast journalism major from Bayport, N.Y., who will begin his senior year this fall.

Before winning the part played by Sean Penn in the 1996 film by the same name, Manning never gave capital punishment much thought. After reading the script, he was fairly sure he supported it. “And I remain pro-death penalty,” he said two-thirds of the way through the play’s run, still scratching the scraggly beard he grew for the part.

“For certain crimes, I think the death penalty is warranted, but I have come to realize that the system is very flawed,” he said.

Quinnipiac shined the spotlight on the death penalty this past semester. The *Dead Man Walking* Theater Project allows universities and high schools to use the play so long as they pledge to involve multiple academic disciplines in a study project on capital punishment. The play and several panel discussions comprised a symposium aimed at stimulating discourse among members of the university community and the greater New Haven community.

In addition to the play and student forum on the death penalty, other events included a discussion before opening night, moderated by criminal justice professor Alan Bruce, with a panel composed of death penalty opponents; and a discussion at the School of Law, moderated by professor Linda Meyer, that featured attorneys, a victim’s advocate, and an anti-death penalty advocate.

Actor Tim Robbins wrote the screenplay for the film and the play based on Sister Helen Prejean’s book, which details her role as spiritual adviser to several death row inmates at Angola Prison in Louisiana. Manning had the chance to meet Prejean when the cast traveled to Baton Rouge, La., in March during spring break. He and castmates also toured the prison. They would meet Robbins later in the semester. The Poncelet character Manning played is actually an amalgam of two inmates in the book.

Drama professor and play director Crystal Brian said the goal of the symposium was to initiate discourse, not to change minds, but some young minds were changed in the process.

Samantha Smith had no opinion on the death penalty when the semester began. The senior political science major hails from Buxton, Maine, where capital crimes are few. Once the semester began, however, she was immersed in the topic with a capital C. Her philosophy professor, David Ives, executive director of the Albert Schweitzer Institute, announced that the class would be talking about the issue during the semester in relation to the play that Theater for Community was staging. “And then he said the institute would co-sponsor the symposium, and he needed a volunteer to help. He explained that it would

count as this course’s service learning requirement, so I volunteered,” Smith said.

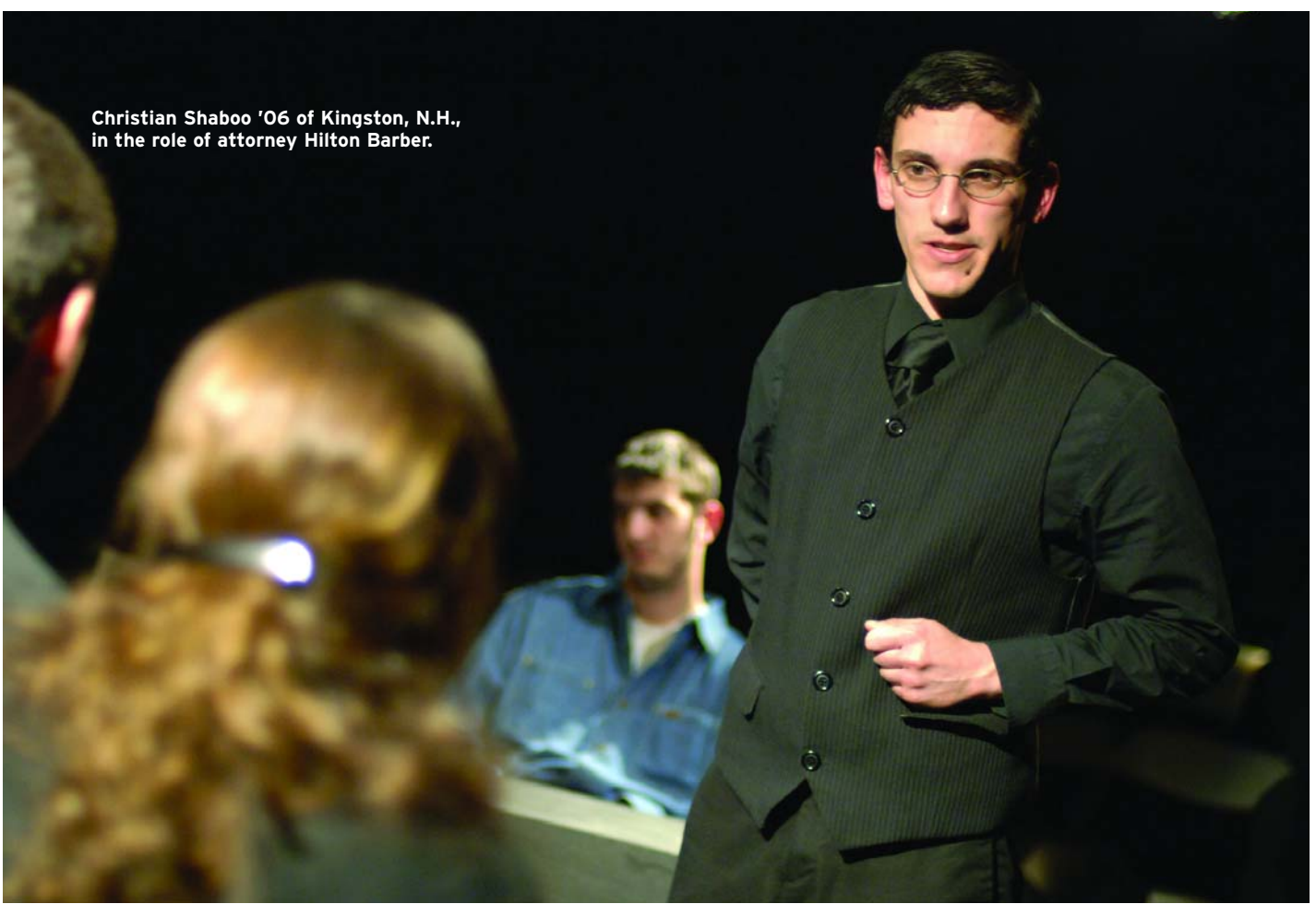
In Smith’s Youth Crime class, criminal justice professor Alan Bruce also said they’d be talking about the book *Dead Man Walking*. Ditto for her senior seminar class with political science professor Sean Duffy. She decided to write her senior thesis on international points of view of U.S. capital punishment policies and how they affect international relations. She helped plan a public discussion about the topic presented by the class of 14 students, each of whom was responsible for researching one aspect.

For Smith, there was no escaping the topic. “My only exposure before this was reading about it in the news and the Michael Ross case in Connecticut last year.” She watched *The Green Mile* and *The Exonerated* before selecting the latter for a screening and discussion as part of the symposium.

Samantha Smith '06 used the whole semester to form her opinion on capital punishment.



Christian Shaboo '06 of Kingston, N.H.,
in the role of attorney Hilton Barber.



“It is thought that the death penalty is reserved for the worst of the worst, but that is not always the case.” —SAMANTHA SMITH '06

Totally immersed in the issue, Smith found herself leaning toward a pro-death penalty stance, like Manning. “I can see both sides. The family of a victim thinks they are getting justice and closure, and some think it’s a deterrent. On the other hand, some innocent people have been put to death. The European Union is against it, so a lot of times, we can’t get people extradited here to stand trial.”

In Duffy’s class, she and other students researched such topics as differential application by race and gender, prevalence of violent crime by race and gender and corresponding conviction rates, comparisons with other countries that have or don’t have the death penalty, political factors, use of pardons, errors in application and use, and execution methods. They also examined who the death penalty was for—the victim’s family or the criminal—and talked about whether a government has the right to preserve order by taking the life of one who steps out of line.

Her philosophy class delved into the teachings of Albert Schweitzer. “From what I’ve read, he encouraged a reverence for life, but wanted to rid the world of evil, so I’m not sure where he’d stand.”

After finishing the book, she remained pro-death penalty. “The author did not make any convincing arguments to make me think, ‘Oh, this is so wrong.’” She continued her research.

Manning also had read the book, and found it difficult to muster any sympathy for the character he played. “He was so unremorseful, it scared me. He blamed drugs, friends and the victims for his crime. ‘Poncellet denies the crime in the beginning, but at the end, he breaks

down and admits it when the reality sinks in that he’s going to die,” Manning explained.

Brian said, “Matt is not a sympathetic character, but Sister Helen treated him like a human being. At the same time, she was haunted by what she would do had he hurt someone in her family.”

Manning struggled with the role at times. “I play a character who is gonna die, but I know my character killed and raped someone and hurt other people, and I think he deserved the death penalty. Even the character the book was based on was pro-death penalty, and I used that as justification for my own self being pro-death penalty.”

At Angola Prison, the students toured the death house and death row cell block. “I chose to go into the holding cell. They shut the door and I sat on the bed, stared at the concrete floor and imagined what it would be like to spend my final hours here,” Manning shared. “Then I said ‘Oh my God, get me out of here, wow, wow, wow’—it was just too creepy. I found my character there, felt the fear he felt, saw the last things he saw before he walked down the hallway to the execution chamber and was strapped in to die.”

Manning concluded from his research that, “if you are white, have a

family and money for a lawyer, you'll probably get life in prison. If you're black and poor, with no money for a lawyer, you more likely will end up on death row. It's unfortunate, but your standing in life gets in the way."

Manning thinks the book and play have an anti-death penalty agenda. "Tim Robbins is liberal, anti-death penalty, and everyone knows where he stands. He wants to open discussion, but I think he had an underlying agenda in writing this," said the aspiring actor.

Four days before the play opened, cast members got together to see if their experiences had prompted anyone to form an opinion on the death penalty. Manning said three students said they had, but did not reveal their positions to the rest. Some who were solidly for or against it beforehand reported that they had climbed back on the fence, he said, adding that he felt he had moved "from far right to a little right of center."

"The play is heavy, dark, depressing and compelling. There are a few light moments, but nobody in the audience laughs. They don't know if they should," Manning said. He perused his audience during the times his character was bathed in darkness. "Ninety-nine percent had their eyes wide open, just staring, enthralled. They were into it, I could tell. There's a difference between silence and heavy silence—it's deafening! They have no choice but to be pulled in."

As for Smith, her research and discussions resulted in a different kind of a pull.

"When I researched and wrote my literature review for my thesis, I came to realize that I do not wholeheartedly agree with the death penalty. My biggest thing has become—if a government condemns the crime of murder, then how can you punish it by the very same act? And, it upsets me that an innocent person could be executed. It is thought that the death penalty is reserved for the worst of the worst, but that is not always the case."

Allison Schleck '06 of New Rochelle, N.Y., who participated in the student forum, said she feels a "more powerful" punishment is to make a convicted killer think about the crime for the rest of his/her life.

STAN GODLEWSKI



TIM ROBBINS APPLAUDS EFFORT

As the curtain went down on the April 13th performance of *Dead Man Walking*, audience members found actor and playwright Tim Robbins clapping along with them. Robbins is a fellow '80s UCLA classmate of Crystal Brian, play director and chair of the drama department at Quinnipiac. He occasionally attends productions in support of the *Dead Man Walking* Theater Project. He joined Brian and the cast on stage afterward for an audience discussion.

Brian told Robbins last fall that she chose his play for the spring performance, and he advised her to use an abstract background and create different "worlds" with lighting.

"Tim is passionate, smart and articulate, and he shared

inspirational ideas with us about actors becoming citizen artists and vocal members of the community," Brian said. "Tim has always spoken his beliefs. I remember him when he was the age of my students, and he was always committed to using art to make people think."



Tim Robbins with several cast members

That was the goal of the *Dead Man Walking*

Symposium this semester,

of which the play was a central part. A Quinnipiac Poll in January 2005 found that 59 percent of Connecticut voters surveyed supported the death penalty, and 70 percent in the case of convicted murderer Michael Ross, who was executed in Connecticut last year. When offered the alternative of life in prison with no chance of parole, voters preferred the life option 49-37 percent.

In light of evidence that the death penalty doesn't deter criminals, and it actually costs more to execute them than imprison them for life, why do more support it than oppose it? Brian thinks the need for retribution may play a role.

"Theater for Community has looked at conflict in our productions of *The Troubles*, *Antigone* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and what they have in common with *Dead Man Walking* is the human need for vengeance," Brian said. "If someone hurts you or people you love, you want to hurt them back. In exploring these issues, we hoped to provoke questions that might lead to a way to break the cycle of violence. Our work is driven by the hope that witnessing our darker natures can lead to an epiphany," she said, quoting Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking*.

Brian noted that executions are performed in the middle of the night, with only a few allowed to witness them. "Why aren't we all watching? One reason is because it makes us more complicitous. As long as it's done legally as policy by our government, then it's who we are, but it may not be who we think we are," she said.