Play explores effects of death row

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Scene Editor

In addition to challenging Creighton’s theatrical talent, “Dead Man Walking” examines difficult ethical issues and encourages reflection.

Tim Robbins’ “Dead Man Walking” is an adaptation of the screen actor's stage draft, as well as an academic endeavor for one of its stars. Most importantly, it is a drama that portrays the ordeal of nearly every party involved in capital punishment—an experience thankfully alien to most of us. And for that reason, it needs to be seen.

“Dead Man Walking” tells the story of Sister Helen Prejean (Arts & Sciences senior Jeanne Tiehen), a nun who befriends convicted murderer Matt Poncelet (Arts & Sciences senior Rusty Perry) on death row.

Tiehen’s portrayal of Prejean fulfills the thesis project requirement for her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theater. Following her performance, Tiehen will complete her thesis with an in-depth paper about her journey as an actor. One of the reasons “Dead Man Walking” was selected was for the character of Sister Helen Prejean.

“Part of the thesis project is challenging the actor, making them stretch and do things they haven’t done,” Tiehen said. “It’s difficult because she narrates the play and is involved in all the action. It’s a large role, it’s emotionally challenging, and it’s based on a real person, which requires research.”

To prepare, Tiehen read Prejean’s book, which the play is based on. She researched capital punishment, visited Prejean’s Web site and watched a tape of Prejean speaking at Creighton in 1998.

“You hear an emotional quality when she talks about certain aspects of this story,” Tiehen said. “She’s a pretty forward woman. She’s a likable woman, but she’s also honest.”

Tiehen said the powerful script generates genuine emotion as the audience hears all sides of the story.

“You hear the parents of the kids that were murdered...How hurt they are,” Tiehen said. “There are people like this all over our nation. There are people like Matthew Poncelet, in prison right now, on death row, with their families and these people that just got bum deals in life,” Tiehen said. “You kind of feel that empathy naturally. I don’t think anyone in this play is forcing emotion. It just kind of happens.”

The cast of “Dead Man Walking” has been preparing for the performance since December Professor Christine Wiseman, vice president for Academic Affairs, provided the cast with her own experience of life on death row. Wiseman represented convicted death row inmate Billy Conn Gardner for seven years until his execution in 1995. Wiseman shared her extensive defense of Gardner and subsequent experiences visiting death row at the Huntsville Prison in Huntsville, Texas. Wiseman called the play an appropriate forum because it will give students a different experience with the issue of capital punishment.

“It’s very much something they will experience by doing the play,” Wiseman said. “I used to say to my children, ‘You have a right to your opinion, but you do not have a right to pollute the air with your opinion until you have done some research to fully understand the issue.’ I think if more people held to that view, we would have greater thought and less conflict.”

Wiseman also provided a pictorial of can did shots of life on death row, which was used on the show’s technical work.

Alan Klem, assistant professor of Theatre, is proud of the crew’s technical and design accomplishments, which include slides, sound effects and a multiple-level set. “Dead Man Walking,” like any other show, presents its own set of complications, according to Klem.

“Part of the complication is the very difficult subject matter,” Klem said, which includes an execution being carried out onstage.

Klem said Robbins’ script was very good, but also very difficult, calling the script “cinematic.” The play contains many elements of film such as flashbacks and fade-ins.

“I think that [film] is his major medium. It’s much easier to be able to use the medium of film to do [those elements],” Klem said. “To be able to do that on a live stage presents a new challenge for all of us to make that happen, because that’s not normally how plays are written.”

Klem said the production was successful in adapting this unique approach.

“It is a little bit of an untested style,” Klem said. “From a theatrical standpoint, I think the audience will like it.”

While the relationship between Poncelet and Prejean certainly anchors the play, Klem said the play also presents a look at the entire system of capital punishment in the United States, presenting both sides of the issue.

“It presents a whole picture of this world that so many of us don’t know about if we’ve never been to prison — what it’s like for guards, victims of the crime and inmates themselves,” Klem said. “Executions are not public. Just a very select few, either relatives of victims or of the condemned, are allowed to witness the execution. Why is that the case? I think when they see what that is like, maybe that will answer the question.”

“Dead Man Walking” plays Feb. 24 to 26 and March 3 to 5, with a matinee performance on Sunday, Feb. 27, at 2 p.m. Following the opening night performance on Thursday, Feb. 24, a panel discussion will be held to discuss issues raised in the play. The final brown bag lunch series, “Pro and Con: Legal and Moral Perspectives,” will be held on Tuesday, March 1