

Composer Jake Heggie on his death-row opera, *Dead Man Walking*

The most performed opera written in the 21st century opens the Met's new season

Richard Fairman 11 HOURS AGO

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An expectant crowd had gathered outside the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco. It was October 2000, the opening night of a new opera by a hitherto unknown composer, and even in this cultured city it seemed extraordinary that an opera should be causing such a stir. Then a limousine drew up and Julie Andrews stepped out. There was enthusiastic applause, she went inside and the crowd promptly dispersed.

“As I grew up in the 1960s, she was a huge icon for me,” says composer Jake Heggie. “I thought, ‘Here is Julie Andrews coming to my opera. What if she leaves and I don’t know if she liked it?’ So I introduced myself as the composer. ‘But you are so young!’ she said.”

Heggie was 39 at the time of the premiere of *Dead Man Walking*. He had been working in San Francisco Opera’s public relations office and entrusting him with a commission for his first opera must have been a big gamble, but it certainly paid off.



Heggie with Julie Andrews at the premiere of 'Dead Man Walking' in 2000 © Janna Waldinger

Two decades on, *Dead Man Walking* is said to be the most performed opera written in the 21st century. It has received nearly 80 productions, from Montreal to Sydney, Copenhagen to Cape Town, and has been chosen to open the 2023-24 season at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, in a new production by Ivo van Hove.

Even Heggie cannot explain how the opera, a powerful drama about a nun's fight for the soul of a murderer on death row, has proved to be so lasting, though it clearly helped that it had been preceded by Sister Helen Prejean's 1993 book of the same title and the 1995 film starring Susan Sarandon, who won an Academy Award for her performance. (How apt that Julie Andrews, a nun in *The Sound of Music*, should go see Heggie's opera.)

"I can only think that somehow we told this human drama very well," he says modestly. "It is an intimate story with massive forces at work, very American but universal, timely but timeless. The opera seems to work not only here in the US, where we have the death penalty, but also in abolitionist countries around the world, and that surprised me."

He praises his librettist, the late Terrence McNally, for not making the opera an academic debate about the death penalty. "He put a human face on it, so you get drawn into the lives of these people and their families. The opera doesn't tell you how to feel, and I think people appreciate that, because I don't like being preached to myself. They get fresh perspective on a big human experience and maybe that makes them consider their own feelings in a different way.

“That is the magic of the performing arts. In an opera audience, you don’t know who the other people are, how they think about certain issues, how they voted, and you may be polar opposites — but for this period of time you have a common experience. At the opening night there was a profound silence at the end of the performance, which was very focused and powerful. I don’t know how we did that, but we did.”

It is hardly surprising that a success on that scale catapulted Heggie into the top league of American composers. He has followed up with more than a dozen operas of assorted shapes and sizes, a veritable pick ’n’ mix, as each is so different. He says he has tried to challenge himself so as not to repeat what he has done before, though it is “hard work, climbing the mountain every single time”.



Heggie's 2016 work 'It's a Wonderful Life' performed by English National Opera in London in 2022 © John Snelling/Getty Images

At two extremes are *It's a Wonderful Life*, based on the Christmastide film, and the challenging *Three Decembers*, which tackles Aids, addiction and mental illness. Arguably the most ambitious to date is *Moby-Dick*, based on Herman Melville’s novel, which had a [highly praised premiere in Dallas](#) in 2010. That is also slated to come to the Metropolitan Opera in a future season.

There is no sign that Heggie is putting his feet up. Coming hot on the heels of *Dead Man Walking* at the Met is the premiere of his next opera in Houston in October. *Intelligence* tells the little-known true story of two women spies who infiltrated the Confederate White House during the American civil war.

He says he has always been drawn to stories about strong women and *Intelligence* will be exploring “all the racial imbalances and struggles we have in this country”. With a leading role for dance, this promises to be different again, tapping into a highly rhythmical style of music that will surely give it popular appeal.

Writing operas that speak to a wide audience has always been a recognisably American trait. As film has inspired a couple of Heggie’s operas, and musical comedy at least one other, it seems reasonable to assume that Hollywood and Broadway may be lurking in the background.

“When I was growing up, I went to every movie and show I could, seeing what worked and what didn’t,” Heggie says. “Some were great, some not, as with Sondheim, but he kept trying, and it is the same with film directors. Aren’t we surprised that the big hit of the year is *Barbie*? I have seen it twice. It is smart, funny, touching, because the film is about what it is to be human. You can’t argue that it has resonated with a vast audience.”



Joyce DiDonato as Sister Helen Prejean and Ryan McKinny as Joseph De Rocher in the Metropolitan Opera's new production of 'Dead Man Walking' © Paola Kudacki /Met Opera

Will a *Barbie* opera be next? Before he can answer, Heggie throws in a wild card. Apparently, San Francisco has been having its first experience with pantomime over the past few years and the city, he says, has loved it.

“My husband Curt [Branom] plays Widow Twankey and that has opened my eyes to another possibility. In the opera world what do we have for families, where kids can dress up, and everybody can participate, boo the villain, cheer the hero? I am trying to work out what that story might be in opera.

“I am in my early sixties now and the number of four- or five-year periods that I can dedicate to a new opera is dwindling, so whatever the new opera is, I would like to have a great time working on it. Comedy is much more difficult in the opera house than drama. Trying to unlock one that works is a goal of mine for the future.”

‘Dead Man Walking’ opens the Metropolitan Opera’s season on September 26, [metopera.org](https://www.metopera.org)

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