

# INTERVIEW MOMENT

**JOYCE  
DIDONATO  
& JAKE  
HEGGIE  
JOIN FORCES  
FOR THE MET  
PREMIERE  
OF *DEAD MAN  
WALKING*.**

**BY FRED COHN**

**PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY CHRIS SINGER**

**HAIR AND MAKEUP  
BY AFFAN GRABER MALIK**

**D****AD MAN WALKING** is the most successful of all contemporary American operas, with seventy-four productions on five continents since its premiere at San Francisco Opera in 2000. Sister Helen Prejean's memoir of counseling a death-row prisoner at the Louisiana State Penitentiary had served as the basis for the acclaimed 1995 film, but composer Jake Heggie and librettist Terrence McNally turned it into a full-scale grand opera—one that has been seen at large companies and small, at conservatories and on concert stages.

The work finally reaches the Met at this month's opening-night performance, in a production by Ivo van Hove that was delayed by Covid. Joyce DiDonato will star as Sister Helen, reprising a role she has portrayed in Houston, Madrid and London, as well as at New York City Opera. *Dead Man Walking* forms the backbone of a longstanding collaboration between the mezzo-soprano and the composer; she sang the world premieres of his song cycles *The Breaking Waves* (2011) and the orchestral version of *The Deepest Desire* (2005), both settings of Prejean texts, as well as *Camille Claudel: Into the Fire* (2012); and in 2015, she starred in the world premiere of his *Great Scott* at the Dallas Opera.

We talked to DiDonato and Heggie in March, directly after the photo shoot whose results you see on these pages.



Opposite page:  
Anthony Roth  
Costanzo,  
DiDonato and  
Frederica von  
Stade in Heggie's  
Great Scott at  
Dallas Opera,  
2015

**OPERA NEWS:** How did the shoot go?

**JOYCE DIDONATO:** I was smiling through the whole thing, because this is such a beautiful earned moment for Jake. It's a moment of arrival.

**JAKE HEGGIE:** It still feels like a miracle.

**JD:** It's not a miracle.

**JH:** Yes, I've put in a lot of hard work—but a lot of people work hard, and things like this don't necessarily happen. I remember the day in San Francisco when I first met with Terrence. He had a list of ten ideas, but when he said *Dead Man Walking*—this was a few years after the brilliant movie—literally, my hair stood up. I said, "Whoa—stop right there." I was taken with how big it was emotionally. It felt very much of our time—but timeless. It fits right into the canon of great operatic stories that fill the house with emotions.

**JD:** When I saw the movie and read the book, my first impression was, "Oh right, this is about the death penalty." But once you experience the story, you realize the death penalty is just a plot point. This is about the capacity of the human heart—the ability to look at another human being and say, "You have worth."

**JH:** I've always told people that this is not necessarily a debate about the death penalty. The death penalty is the backdrop that raises the life-or-death stakes in every moment.

**JD:** We did it semistaged at the Barbican [in London, in 2018]. The audience in the front row was a meter and a half away. There was nowhere to hide from it. It showed me the efficacy of it as a theatrical piece, because it works with nothing onstage—just the music and the emotion. That's a huge testament to what you guys created.

**JH:** It surprised everyone on opening night in San Francisco, too.

**JD:** Did you and Terrence know what would happen?

**JH:** We had a very good feeling about it. But when you're that deeply involved, you lose perspective. We had no idea how an audience was really going to react to it. And opening night was shattering. What was most surprising to me was the audience's silence at the end. Opening night, I remember the feeling in the house—and that Julie Andrews hugged me! She came backstage afterward and just opened her arms and gave me this massive hug. The piece opened the door for me to have this wondrous life, writing new operas and watching new American operas start to flourish in a way you could never have imagined before.

**JD:** And there's an appetite for it.

**JH:** When I was a composition student, opera was never even a consideration. Writing operas? *No!* Now there are composers coming along who want

to write *opera*, who see it as a viable channel into a career.

**ON:** Before *Dead Man* opened, you must have wondered whether it was a viable channel for you.

**JH:** I was on unemployment at that point. The company had engaged me as their composer in residence for two years to write the piece, but that ended several months before the premiere. It was a real throw of the dice, but then other companies started talking about picking it up and started asking me about doing things.

**JD:** Fast!

**JH:** I thought, "I guess I'm a full-time composer now."

**JD:** That's a big identity shift from working in the press department and dabbling in songwriting. That's a lot to take on.

**JH:** But it's what I always wanted. At one point I thought I would have a life adjacent to music. And now here was a chance to be in the middle of it, and to explore and create with amazing colleagues.

**ON:** When did you two first encounter each other?

**JH:** I heard Joyce's Schwabacher recital [at San Francisco Opera, in 1998]. It was clear this was someone very special, and I started talking



© KAREN ALMOND/DALLAS OPERA (GREAT SCOTT); © CHRIS SINGER (HEGGIE)

about her to everyone. We became very good friends right off the bat. Then New York City Opera was talking about doing *Dead Man*, and they were going through a roster of ideas about casting, and I said, "Do you know Joyce DiDonato? Because she is ideal for the role." Lo and behold, it happened [in 2002]. Sister Helen was there, and she was thrilled right off the bat. She said, "Joyce gets me."

**JD:** I think Patrick Summers connected us. He had just been appointed music director of Houston Grand Opera, and he became a champion of mine. I didn't have a lot of champions in those days!

**JH:** He was a champion of mine as well, and he conducted the premiere of *Dead Man Walking*. I met him when I was working in the San Francisco Opera press department and he was the head of the Opera Center. We became friends very early on. He didn't even know I was a composer. Then I got up the courage to show him some of my stuff, and he said, "Jake, you're a real composer. You need to write an opera someday." And I was like, "Yeah, right."

**ON:** Weren't some of the singers you had met as a press person already taking up your songs?

**JH:** I had a focal dystonia in my late twenties, which stopped me from playing the piano. I sort of stopped writing music, because it was a hard, depressed time. I even threw away a lot of my early compositions. It seemed like a painful reminder of something that would never happen. Then I moved to San Francisco and got the job at the opera. I would go to rehearsals, talk to singers, take them to interviews, get to know them. And they're the most fun, wonderful people. All of a sudden I really wanted to write songs again.

I gave some songs to Flicka [Frederica von Stade] at the opening of *Dangerous Liaisons* in the fall of '94. She had this look of terror—like, "Oh, goody! The PR guy writes songs." Then I came to check on her at intermission, and she was playing through them. She said, "These are wonderful. Do you want to do a recital sometime?" It was a very Flicka moment—she's just so generous. Flicka likes to tell people about things, so then I wrote something for Renée [Fleming], and suddenly Marilyn Horne was asking, and Martin Katz, and all these great people. Then Lotfi [Mansouri, then San Francisco Opera's general director] said, "Have you ever thought about writing an opera?"

**JD:** I will circle back and defend my point that all this isn't a miracle. I'm going to make you take credit for some of this. You wrote great songs, and people recognized that.

**ON:** What makes Jake's music so gratifying for a singer?

**JD:** The easy answer is that it's a joy to sing. It's lyrical, it's melodic—your voice can open up on it. But the thing that makes me keep coming back to it is that I feel the effect it has on the audience.



*“IT’S TWENTY YEARS LATER.  
**I’m a different person  
and composer.**  
But that’s who I was  
at that moment.”*



He writes about universal things, things that matter. I want people to go home thinking about what it is to *love*—and “Am I doing it hard enough?”

**JH:** I have to tell you this one story, because it was a real turning point for me. When I was at UCLA in the '80s, they would bring in great performers, and I would be the page-turner—people like Kiri Te Kanawa, Renata Scottò and Tatiana Troyanos, as well as Isaac Stern. Leontyne Price came through, with [pianist] David Garvey. To be behind a singer like that onstage and feel this massive wave of love coming at her, and watching her take it in and give it back—it was a circular motion of sound and beauty and sharing.

It was the height of the AIDS crisis, and in the middle of the encores, she fell apart backstage in the arms of her brother, General Price. She said, “George, I don’t think I can go back out there. There’s a young man in a wheelchair in the front row dying of AIDS, and he keeps trying to stand up to applaud for me.” He said, “Lee, you go back out there, and the next one, you sing directly to him.” So she went out and looked at the man and sang “Vissi d’arte.” I tell that story to young composers and performers all the time, because she changed that man’s life. It was heroic, and it was beautiful, and

it’s what motivates me to keep going every time.

**JD:** I’ve never heard you tell that story before. But it’s like something we’ve talked about a lot—when you’re on that stage, it’s not about you. No matter where you are in that moment, you have a job to do. It reminds me of the performance I just did in Paris of your *Camille Claudel* songs. It was like bringing Camille’s story home to Paris. We put it in front of the Parisian audience, and they received it in silence—the same silence Jake described at the end of *Dead Man Walking*. I felt Jake in that room. I felt Gene [Scheer, author of the text] in that room. I felt Camille in that room. Just like when Leontyne did “Vissi d’arte,” Puccini was in that room. And whenever we do *Dead Man Walking*, Sister Helen is in the room.

**ON:** Will Sister Helen be coming to the Met premiere?

**JH:** Oh yes. She’s so enthusiastic about the project.

**JD:** [imitating Sister Helen’s Baton Rouge drawl] “Joyce, we gotta get those people *fahred up*. They gotta know what we’re talking about!”

**JH:** When the idea for the opera had first been brought up, I was in my tiny little studio in San Francisco, and the phone rings. I pick it up, and she goes, “This Jake Haggy? This is Sister Helen Prejean. I hear that y’all wanna make an opera of *Dead Man Walking*. You know what I say to that, Jake?” I said, “No...,” and she said, “Of *course* we’re gonna make an opera of *Dead Man Walking*! I don’t know boo-scat about opera, so you’re gonna have to educate me. Now Jake, this isn’t going to be any of that atonal stuff—we have to have a tune we can hum. I know you’re gonna have to change things for the stage, and I trust you. The one thing I ask is that it remain a story of redemption.”

**ON:** Has the piece changed at all since its premiere? Have you tweaked it?

**JD:** I’ll answer that. I once asked Jake if he goes back and edits his things, and he said, “You know, I don’t, because the piece is a fingerprint of time.”

**JH:** I get to a point where I’m done. People ask me, “Would you write it differently now?” Of course! It’s twenty years later. I’m a different person and composer. But that’s who I was at that moment.

**JD:** Oh, by the way—sorry, I want an additional aria. An eleven-o’clock number.

**ON:** How ’bout an immolation scene?

**JD:** Yeah!!

**ON:** Do either of you have any idea of what the Met production will be like?

**JH:** Not at all. But Ivo van Hove is a visionary, so I know it’s going to be bold.

**JD:** This is a piece that can handle a lot of different treatments. I won’t say it’s bulletproof, but it *works*.

**JH:** It’s a grand opera, so it’s going to feel very much at home on that stage. ■



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NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE  
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