

styling that could reflect the times surrounding World War II, the designs—by takis, with Bernie Tan-Hayes's lighting mirroring the narrative mood—instilled a universality that resonated with both the work and a contemporary world.

The children reappeared at various stages as a reminder of the madness of ongoing feuding and Roméo and Juliette's dreams of their union ending hostilities. As Juliette expressed her love for Roméo in Act 2, in the background the children were carried as corpses in a funeral procession; following the killings of Mercutio and Tybalt at the conclusion of Act 3, they placed candles at their sides before taking the lifeless hands and resting them on the chest of the victims.

With Mercutio's murder, convincingly staged, came the loss of Morgan Pearse's impetuous presence and his heroic baritone. Tomas Dalton leaned into Tybalt's uncompromising nature with impressive fierceness, Pelham Andrews provided distinctively soothing compassion as Frère Laurent and Charlotte Kelso delighted as Stéphano, with Act 3's 'Que fais-tu, blanche tourterelle' among the evening's many highlights. But nothing surpassed the heartbeat of humanity conveyed by the two titular characters, both in role debuts. Physically buff and ardent of voice, Kyle Stegall paced his performance splendidly as Roméo. Siobhan Stagg's portrayal of Juliette was one of unforgettable radiance and thrilling vocal flexibility. Their four duets had an effortless chemistry.

Every link in the cast proved strong, including Catriona Barr's soberly drawn Gertrude, Oliver Dinnessen's zealous Paris and Eugene Raggio's staunch and assertive Capulet. Fine in voice and movement, the SOSA chorus added to the splendid exhilaration that SOSA's artistic director Dane Lam provided in the pit with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. Lam's handle on the intricacies of the music never lapsed and the lush score soared without overpowering the singers.

PAUL SELAR

## Perth

Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's *Dead Man Walking* (seen on September 21) has finally made it to Perth, thanks to the bravery of FREEZE FRAME OPERA, Western Australia's newest opera company. Since its formation in 2016 FFO has performed in locations as diverse as a quarry and from the back of a truck but the World Heritage-listed FREMANTLE PRISON (built by convicts and now a ghoulish tourist attraction) couldn't be topped for the West Australian first performance of this particular opera.

The last execution occurred at Fremantle Prison in 1964 and it was decommissioned in 1991. Audience members walked past rows of cell windows to arrive at the steel and concrete prison workshop, a set which—with notices to prisoners still hanging on the walls—required little dressing. Jerry Reinhardt's cool, stark lighting and Rhiannon Walker's sparse props and plain costumes intensified the grimness.

The score was likewise stripped back to a four-piece arrangement by the music director and pianist Tommaso Pollio. The nimbleness of accordion, cello, clarinet and piano accentuated the character of the American folk music in Heggie's score,

rising in waves of confronting power in the climactic scenes.

It takes courage to put on a production of this now legendary contemporary opera, not just due to the weightiness of its capital punishment theme, but because of the heightened theatrical skills it requires of the cast. Fortunately the director Adam Mitchell's background in theatre enabled him to extract from the all-West-Australian cast the physicality and nuance this opera demands. Both the emerging artists and the seasoned professionals proved themselves not just strong singers but also persuasive actors, presenting the multiple perspectives that swirl around a death sentence with compassion and deep feeling.

Harriet Marshall (soprano and founder of FFO) was a riveting Sister Helen Prejean, moving fluidly between intimate recitative and full-blown ballad

numbers. Her character evolved from implacable religious belief to confused, exhausted and ultimately heroic in the heart-stopping finale as she held the gaze of Joseph De Rocher at his execution. De Rocher was played by the young baritone Lachlan Higgins, recently returned from postgraduate studies at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. Higgins inhabited the role of a convicted murderer with grim surliness softened by youthful vulnerability and backed by impeccable vocal technique.

His mother Mrs De Rocher was sung with raw emotion by Lisa Harper-Brown, and her ensemble number 'You don't know what it's like' with the parents of the victims (sung by Brett Peart, Prudence Sanders, Perry Joyce and Brigitte Heuser) hit one of the many emotional peaks of the night. Sara MacIver sang Sister Rose with clarion sweetness, while Robert Hofmann was an impressive Prison Warden. The remainder of the excellent cast included Charis Postmus, Caitlin Cassidy, Kohsei Gilkes and Tom Buckmaster, plus children's chorus and a menacing chorus of inmates.

This was opera up close and personal, with the audience in raked seating just metres from the action so the singers could stare seemingly into our souls. The result was both chilling and deeply heartwarming as the message of suffering and forgiveness played out.

ROSALIND APPLEBY



Lachlan Higgins as Joseph De Rocher in 'Dead Man Walking' in Perth