

Dead Man Walking

Audition dates:

- Monday, September 11 3:30-6:00
- Tuesday, September 11, 3:30-6:00

Possible Callbacks:

- Thursday, September 14, 3:30-6:00

First Rehearsal:

- Monday, September 18, 2023, 3:30-6:00

Meet in the lobby of Founders Hall

You only need to be present for one of the two audition days, and will not be needed for the entire time.

Dead Man Walking by Tim Robbins is a play based on Sister Helen Prejean's memoir of the same name, as well as the academy award winning film of the same name. It explores the emotional and moral complexities surrounding capital punishment. Centering on her relationship with a death row inmate, the play offers a gripping portrayal of the human side of both the condemned and the victims' families. *Dead Man Walking* challenges the audience to confront their beliefs about justice and forgiveness while shedding light on the deeply divisive issue of the death penalty.

Selected Character Breakdowns:

Sister Helen Prejean (female presenting) is a Catholic nun from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She has dedicated her work to help the poor and is a leader in the movement to abolish the death penalty. Sister Helen is the spiritual advisor to death row inmate Matthew Poncelet. Her order of nuns are activists and rather atypical, they don't wear habits and they live and work among the poor for whom they advocate. She is strong, kind, loving, and compassionate.

Chaplain Farley (male presenting) is a Catholic priest and resident Chaplain at Angola Prison. His approach to Catholicism as well as his job at the prison is traditional in every sense of the word. He and Sister Helen often don't see eye to eye. He is rather reserved in his approach, yet strong and very opinionated.

Matthew Poncelet (male presenting) is a death-row inmate at Angola Prison. He and an accomplice have been convicted for the murder and rape of two teenagers. Matt is cocky, arrogant, and racist. Sister Prejean's spiritual guidance and love unlocks Matt's humanity which enables him to admit his crimes and take full responsibility for what he has done. What he did was monstrous but he is not a monster. This character must be able to access deep emotion.

Luis Montoya (any gender) is a co-worker of Sister Helen's. Responsible in the play for bringing Matt Poncelet and Sister Helen together.

Lucille Poncelet (female presenting) is Matt's mother. She is a poor widow raising four sons. Matt is the eldest and her youngest son is 10. Her whole world has been rocked by Matt's crime and impending execution. This character must be able to access a wide range of emotions from anger and suspicion to sorrow and deep despair.

Guy Gilardi (any gender) is the assistant DA. Gilardi wants to make sure that the execution of Matt Poncelet isn't pardoned.

Hilton Barber (any gender) is a death-penalty attorney. Reluctantly takes on Matt's case at the behest of Sister Helen. Hilton is a tough lawyer with a big heart.

Earl Delacroix (male presenting) is the father of one of Matt's teenage victims. Mr. Delacroix is a broken man whose life has been devastated by the murder of his son Walter. He is furious with

Sister Helen for advocating on behalf of Matt Poncelet and isn't shy about telling her how he feels. He wants Matt dead.

Clyde Percy (male presenting) is the father of the other of Matt's teenage murder victims, Hope Percy. Like Mr. Delacroix, Mr. Percy's life has also been devastated by the rape and murder of his daughter Hope. He deals with it in a less aggressive manner than Mr. Delacroix. He and Marybeth also have a 14 year-old daughter.

Marybeth Percy (female presenting) is the mother of Hope Percy. She too has been devastated by the loss of Hope both literally and figuratively. She has a 14 year old daughter who she struggles to keep it together for.

Sister Prejean and Chaplain Farley scene

PREJEAN waits. CHAPLAIN FARLEY enters. His face is kind but tired. Farley is a Catholic Priest and the chief chaplain of the prison.

FARLEY: Good morning, Sister.

PREJEAN: Good morning, Father.

PREJEAN shakes his hand, firmly. A pause.

FARLEY: Have you ever been in a prison before?

PREJEAN: No. But one time Sister Clement and I sang some songs at a Juvenile Detention Center in New Orleans.

PREJEAN laughs.

PREJEAN: We sang "Kumbaya" and the boys really liked it. They started making up their own verses, singing, "Someone's escapin' my Lord, Kumbaya ... " The guards made us sing a different song.

FARLEY laughs lightly.

FARLEY: Where is your habit?

PREJEAN: Our Sisters haven't worn the habit for twenty years.

FARLEY: You are aware of the Papal request regarding nuns' garments aren't you?

PREJEAN: The pope said "distinctive clothing" not habits.

FARLEY: I'm sure you will interpret it your own way. Whatever's convenient.

A pause. FARLEY is looking at a paper on his desk.

FARLEY: Matthew Poncelet. I remember him from the news. Him and another fella shot two children in the back of the head on Lover's Lane. Raped the girl and stabbed her several times. Do you know what you're getting into?

PREJEAN is at a loss for words.

FARLEY: So what is this, Sister? Morbid fascination? Bleeding heart sympathy?

PREJEAN: No. He wrote me and asked me to come.

FARLEY: There is no romance here, Sister. No Jimmy Cagney, "I've been wrongly accused if only I had someone who believed in me," nonsense. This is a bunch of con men and they'll take advantage of you every way they can. You must be very, very careful. Do you understand?

PREJEAN: Yes, Father.

FARLEY: These men don't see many females. Wearing the habit would help instill respect. For you to flout authority will only encourage them to do the same.

Sister Prejean and Matt Poncelet scene 1

MATT enters. He is freshly shaven and his brown hair is combed into a wave in the front. He has a handsome face, open, smiling. Not the face she had seen in the photo. He has on a blue denim shirt and jeans. His hands are cuffed to a wide brown leather belt at his waist.

PREJEAN: Hi, Matthew. I made it.

MATT: Thanks for coming to see me, ma'am. Never thought I'd be visitin' with no nun.

They sit down in one of the booths. There is a pause. He lights a cigarette. Another pause.

MATT: So, you're a nun.

PREJEAN: Yep.

A pause.

PREJEAN: I want you to know, Matthew, that I'm here to listen. We can talk about whatever you want.

MATT: You're very sincere.

PREJEAN: What do you mean?

MATT: You've never done this before.

PREJEAN: No.

MATT: Never been this close to a murderer before?

PREJEAN: Not that I know of.

MATT: Well you live in St. Thomas. Lots of blacks around there. They knock each other off like beer cans on a fence.

An awkward pause.

MATT: You know when I first got your letter and I seen Helen on it, I thought it was my first ex-old lady. I almost ripped it up. She turned me in,

told the sheriff where to find me. Orphaned our kid, the stupid bitch.

PREJEAN: You have a kid?

MATT: Yes. A con with a kid.

PREJEAN: Boy or a girl?

MATT: Girl.

PREJEAN: What's her name?

MATT: You have a lot of questions.

PREJEAN: I don't know you.

MATT: Well, never mind.

A pause.

MATT: Do I scare you?

A long pause.

MATT: You told me in your letter you work with poor people. Your daddy was a lawyer? You come from money, don't you?

PREJEAN: Some.

MATT: And you live in the St. Thomas projects? I don't get that. I don't know who's more crazy. You or me.

PREJEAN: I live where I work.

MATT: In a slum.

PREJEAN: How about you?

MATT: I live here.

PREJEAN: You grew up poor?

MATT: Shit. Nobody from money on the Row.

A pause.

PREJEAN: Then you and I have something in common.

MATT: What's that?

PREJEAN: We both live with the poor.

Luis Montoya and Sister Prejean scene

PREJEAN: Poncelet claims that Vitello killed them both. Y'all think he's lying?

MONTOYA: Vitello accuses Poncelet. Both say the other did the actual killing. Somebody's lying to somebody.

PREJEAN: Well how is it possible that one man gets life and one gets death?

MONTOYA: The State only goes after death in 1 out of 50 cases.

PREJEAN: Why's that?

MONTOYA: Too expensive. Costs two million to kill a man, half a mil to keep him in for life. State probably had a stronger case against Poncelet or Vitello had a better lawyer, was able to create doubt in the jury's mind.

PREJEAN: And Vitello gets life, Poncelet death.

MONTOYA: Yep.

PREJEAN: Bad luck.

MONTOYA: He needs help, Helen. There is a lawyer by the name of Hilton Barber. He's aware of the case, told me no. Maybe you could change his mind.

PREJEAN: With the aim of getting him a new trial? What if he gets off? I'm not sure I'd want to run into this guy at the Piggly Wiggly.

MONTOYA: There's no way he's going to get off. He was there. He was an accomplice and that's life. Life sentences in Louisiana are for real. We're just trying to keep the state from killing him. Listen, you want out. That's cool with me. You don't have to go back there.

PREJEAN: I'd like to read more about it.

MONTOYA: I've got a file. I'll give you that.

PREJEAN: Luis, do you know if Hope Percy was an only child?

MONTOYA: What?

PREJEAN: I'm just thinking of her mama and daddy. God! How do they put their heads on their pillows at night knowing what happened to their daughter?

Lucille Poncelet and Sister Prejean scene

PREJEAN: I took a drive a couple of days later on Easter Sunday to visit Matt's mother

PREJEAN stands in a rectangle of light, facing the audience. LUCILLE stands in darkness also facing the audience.

VOICE: Yes?

PREJEAN: Mrs. Poncelet?

VOICE: No.

PREJEAN: Mrs. Poncelet?

VOICE: Don't live here. Who is it?

PREJEAN: My name is Sister Prejean. I know your son.

A pause.

LUCILLE: My son don't know any Sisters. What do you want?

PREJEAN: Just to talk. Can you open the door?

LUCILLE: You really a Sister?

PREJEAN: Yes.

LUCILLE: You're not from the T.V.?

PREJEAN: No.

LUCILLE: You sure?

PREJEAN: Yes.

The lights fade up slowly to reveal LUCILLE who flinches, as if expecting to be hit. She looks at PREJEAN suspiciously.

LUCILLE: How do you know Mattie?

PREJEAN: I met your son on death row.

LUCILLE: You never know who is at your front door. I get a lot of attention, you know? Everybody knows who I am. So what do you want? Mattie send you to get money for cigarettes?

PREJEAN: No.

LUCILLE: Well, that's a first. Why you here?

PREJEAN: You know that they have set a date for Matt's execution?

LUCILLE: Yeh. Got a call from the prison. Said if it goes down do I got death insurance. What a laugh. I ain't even got food money.

PREJEAN: Matt goes before the Pardon Board this week. His lawyer thinks it would be a good idea for you to be there.

LUCILLE: What does Mattie think?

PREJEAN: He's worried. He wants to protect you.

LUCILLE: Well, it's a little late for that. Sit down.

PREJEAN and LUCILLE sit across from one another.

LUCILLE: That show, Inside Crime, made a story about Mattie and they told how I tried to help him and all, a regular Ma Barker or something. Now I'm famous. I was in a store yesterday and I seen these two ladies eyeing me and as I get closer to them I hear one of them say, "I just can't wait to hear that they have executed that monster, Matt Poncelet. That's the mother of that killer!" they say.

PREJEAN: That's cruel.

LUCILLE: Talking about me like I wasn't there. Hmm. But they're right. I don't know. They think I wasn't there for him. They think I taught him to kill.

A pause.

LUCILLE: What do you think, Sister? You think I look like the mother of a killer?

Matt Poncelet and Sister Prejean scene 2

MATT: My Daddy took me to a bar when I was twelve and told me to choose your whiskey and there was all these bottles behind the bar and I pointed and said I'd take the one with the pretty turkey on it. Them guys in the bar laughed they butts off.

He laughs.

MATT: We got drunk as a couple of coots that night, boy.

Matt smiles.

MATT: Daddy was a good man, a sharecropper, worked hard. That's one thing I got from him. Working hands.

PREJEAN: How old were you when he died?

MATT: Fourteen.

There is a pause.

MATT: Why's you a nun?

A pause.

PREJEAN: I was drawn to it, I guess. That's a hard question. Like asking you why you're a convict.

MATT: Bad luck.

PREJEAN: Then good luck. I had a loving family, a lot of support. I guess I felt obliged to give some of it back.

MATT: Don't you miss having a man? Don't you want to fall in love, get married? Have sex?

A pause.

MATT: What? You don't want to talk about it?

PREJEAN: I have close friends - men and women. I haven't experienced sexual intimacy with anyone. But there are other ways to be close. Sharing your feelings and thoughts... your dreams; that's intimacy too.

MATT: We got intimacy right now, you and me. Don't we, Sister?

He snickers. She gives him a hard look.

PREJEAN: I went to see your mother. She's willing to go to the pardon board tomorrow if you'll have her.

MATT: I like being alone with you. You're looking real good to me.

PREJEAN: Look at you. Death is breathing down your neck and here you are, playing your lil' Matt-on-the-make games. I'm not here for your amusement, Matt, so have some respect.

MATT: Why should I respect you? Because you a nun and wear a cross around your neck?

PREJEAN: Because I'm a person, Matt and we all deserve respect. Now what's your answer? What's it going to be with your mama?

Gilardi and Hilton scene (choose one monologue)

GILARDI: Ladies and gentlemen, why does the State call for the death penalty in the case of Matthew Poncelet? Well, let's take a look. In your files you will see pictures from the murder scene, pictures that testify to the depravity and degeneracy of this most brutal and subhuman act of violence. It has been six years since the murders of Hope Percy and Walter Delacroix and justice is long past due. Matt Poncelet has had a lengthy, thorough court review, not only a trial but a retrial as well as numerous appeals to state and federal courts and successor petitions filed by Mr. Barber, quite obviously a most excellent attorney at the service of Mr. Poncelet. There has been no doubt in the court's mind at any time about who did the murder.

Hilton stands.

HILTON: The death penalty. It's nothing new. Been around for centuries. Used to nail people's hands and feet to wood, then lash their sides and bleed them. Throughout the centuries we buried people alive, lopped their heads off with an axe, a guillotine, burned them in public squares, gruesome spectacles all. In this century in the search for more humane ways to execute we have hung people from the gallows, shot them in firing squads, suffocated them in the gas chamber and cooked them alive in the electric chair. We've got something even more "humane" now. Lethal injection.

GILARDI: Matthew Poncelet was not a good boy. He was a heartless killer. These murders were calculated, disgusting and cruel. This man shot Walter Delacroix two times in the back of his head, then raped Hope Percy and stabbed her 17 times before shooting this sweet girl two times in the back of her head. Since the murder Matthew Poncelet has shown no remorse. In the courtroom when he was sentenced he was smiling and chewing his gum. He is an unfeeling, perverse misfit and it is time, way past time for Mr. Poncelet to pay the consequences of his horrifying deed.

HILTON: Lethal injection. We strap the guy up, anesthetize him with shot number one, then we give him shot number two that implodes the lungs, then shot number three that stops the heart. We put him to death like an old horse. His face just goes to sleep while inside his organs are going through Armageddon. His muscles would seize up and twitch and contort and pull, but shot number one relaxes all those muscles. So we don't have to see any horror show. We don't have to taste the blood of ruthlessness on our lips. While this human being's organs writhe and twist and choke we just sit there and nod our heads and say, "Justice has been done."

What we have to ask ourselves is, "What kind of justice has been done?" I have already shown how inadequately prepared Matt's lawyer was. I have documented procedural errors. When he wasn't sleeping, Matt's lawyer raised only one objection this entire trial. One objection! What kind of justice are we supporting, here today, ladies and gentlemen?

GILARDI points at the PERCYS and DELACROIXS.

GILARDI: The Delacroixs and the Percys will never see their children graduate from college, they will never attend their wedding, they will never have a Christmas with them again. There will be no grandchildren. They will bear this grief for the rest of their lives. All they ask of you is simple justice for their unbearable loss. You have a responsibility to these families and you have a responsibility to society at large to show that horrible crimes have horrible consequences. It is only through deterrence that we can prevent this happening again. I ask you to take a breath, steel your spine and proceed with the execution of Matthew Poncelet.

HILTON: The state of Louisiana does not have to kill Matthew Poncelet to protect its citizens. This man is locked away for the rest of his days at Angola Prison. He's not getting out. We can protect society without imitating the very violence we seek to eliminate. Let us have dignity. Please, let us not be complicit in the butchery of another human life.

Earl Delacroix and Sister Prejean scene

EARL DELACROIX approaches.

DELACROIX: I'm Walter Delacroix's father.

PREJEAN: Oh. Mr. Delacroix, I'm so sorry about your son.

DELACROIX: Sister, I'm a Catholic. How can you sit by Matt Poncelet's side without ever having come to visit with me and my wife or the Percys to hear our side? How can you spend all your time worrying about Poncelet and not think that maybe we needed you too?

PREJEAN is taken aback.

PREJEAN: Oh, Mr. Delacroix. I'm so sorry.

DELACROIX: Listen, Sister, I'm sure you've seen a side of Matt Poncelet that none of us has seen. I'm sure he must be pretty sympathetic to you. I'm sure he's on his best behavior. But Sister, this is a man that hung out in bars with thieves. This is an evil man. That scum robbed me of my only son, my name. My family name dies with me. There will be no more Delacroixs, Sister.

PREJEAN: Listen Mr. Delacroix, I want you to know that I care about you and your family and what happened to your son.

She takes out a pen and pad.

PREJEAN: Here's my phone number. Please call if there's anything I can do to help.

DELACROIX: Me call you? Think about that Sister. Think about how arrogant and self-righteous that is. Excuse me.

Clyde and Marybeth Percy scene

MARYBETH: Hope had just graduated from high school in early May. She was to join the Air Force on June 15th, the day it happened. She almost got out of Slidell.

CLYDE: She was hoping to be stationed overseas. She always liked traveling, being with people of different cultures.

MARYBETH: On June 15th a recruiting sergeant was going to meet Hope at her apartment and drive her to Baton Rouge for induction. I had taken her shopping the day before to get some things she would be needing. You know, practical things, new bras with plenty of support, dental floss, medicine for menstrual cramps, stuff like that.

CLYDE: At about five in the evening, Hope left to go to work at Corey's where she waitressed. After work she had a date with Walter.

MARYBETH: As she was leaving I noticed that part of her hem was coming out of her skirt. She was in such a hurry I pinned it for her with one of those tiny safety pins and she was gone, out the door. You don't know when you see your child leave through a door that you are never going to see her alive again. If I had known I would have told her how much I loved her. My last words to her - the last she ever heard from me - was about the hem of a skirt.

A pause.

CLYDE: The next morning we waited for Hope to come through her door; the big day! Our baby was leaving home.

MARYBETH: I called the Delacroixs. It was strange that she did not call. She would always telephone me and tell me where she was.

CLYDE: Our hearts sank when the Delacroixs said Walter didn't come home either. And for a brief moment it crossed our minds that maybe they had run off and gotten married or something.

MARYBETH: But we knew Hope was too sensible a girl to do a thing like that.

CLYDE: I went to the police, filed a missing person's report. Three days passed. The Sheriff's office finally formed a search party. I went with them.

MARYBETH: They looked all day, walked for miles. Nothing. On Thursday, June 20th - some kids walking near Frank's Cove found a purse, clothes and a wallet and handed them over to the police. A friend of ours called us to tell us that they had heard that some of Hope's things had been found. We got that information from our own resources, not from the police. They never called up. We called them.

CLYDE: They found their bodies on Friday, six days after her disappearance.

MARYBETH: My daughter's body was nude, supine, legs spread-eagled. The coroner's report said her vagina was all tore up. At first they couldn't find the class pin she was wearing because it was embedded so deep from the stabbing. She had been so proud of that pin. She wore it all the time. It said: "Class of '78, Making a difference."

A young girl enters. This is EMILY, Hope's sister, played by the same actress that plays Hope. She stands silently, unseen by her parents.

CLYDE: The police wouldn't let us come to the morgue to identify the body, said it would be too traumatic.

MARYBETH: But I couldn't bear the thought of the body being buried forever without being absolutely, positively sure without a doubt that it was Hope. What if, because of the decomposition and the clothes being nearby, they only thought it was Hope? I had to be sure. I called my brother in Metairie, a dentist, and I asked him to go to the funeral home and make an ID from dental records.

CLYDE: Marybeth's brother was pretty tore up when he came back from the funeral home. Before he reached his hand into that bag with all the lime in it and fished out Hope's jaw he said he had always been against the death penalty. But boy, after that, he was for it.

MARYBETH: I knew it had to be Hope, that's what my mind told me but I just had to be sure.

Sister Colleen and Sister Prejean scene

COLLEEN holds a man's suit.

COLLEEN: Got this at Goodwill. I talked to Bishop Norwich. He said he would say the funeral mass. The leaders of the congregation have met and we can use one of our own burial plots. I also found a funeral home willing to donate their services.

PREJEAN holds the suit.

COLLEEN: Guess who Matt Poncelet's going to be buried next to?

PREJEAN: Who was the last to die?

COLLEEN: Sister Celestine.

PREJEAN bursts out laughing.

PREJEAN: Oh, Lord.

COLLEEN: Remember when that sweet little girl came to the convent after her wedding to introduce her husband to us?

PREJEAN: And Celestine says, "I'm glad I don't have to share my bed with any man."

COLLEEN: She loved her celibacy so much.

PREJEAN: Now she'll have a man next to her forever.

They laugh. Then:

COLLEEN: How'd we ever get involved with this stuff anyway?

Sister Prejean and Matt Poncelet scene

MATT is crying, sobbing. He hangs up the phone, blows his nose and regains his composure. PREJEAN moves to him. There is a pause before he can speak.

MATT: I just let it flow. I told my mama that I loved her. I talked to each of the boys. I hated to say good-bye. I told them if I get a chance I'll call 'em back right before I go.

There is a pause. MATT breaks down. He begins to sob.

PREJEAN: What is it, Matt?

MATT: My mother said, "It was that Vitello. I'll always regret that you got involved with him." And I didn't want her to think that. Something you said. I could have walked away. But I didn't. I let myself listen to him. I was a victim, a fuckin' chicken. He was older, tough as hell. I was all boozed up, trying to be as tough as him. I didn't have the guts to stand up to him. I told my mother I was yellow goin' along with him. I didn't stand up to him. My mother kept saying, "No, Matt. It wasn't you. It wasn't you."

He sobs. Long beat.

PREJEAN: Your mama loves you, Matt.

MATT: That boy, Walter...

PREJEAN: Yeah, what Matt?

MATT: I killed him.

PREJEAN: And Hope?

MATT: No, ma'am.

PREJEAN: Did you rape her?

MATT: Yes, ma'am.

A pause.

MATT: Last night when they dimmed the lights on the tier I kneeled down

by my bunk and prayed for them kids. I never done that before.

The silence is heavy. PREJEAN stands up and puts her hands against the metal screen door, getting as close to him as possible.

PREJEAN: Oh, Matt. There are spaces of sorrow that only God can touch. You did a terrible thing, Matt, a terrible thing. But you have a dignity now and no one can take that from you. You are a son of God, Matthew Poncelet.

MATT: Ain't nobody never called me no son of God before.
(smiling) I've been called a son-of-a-you-know-what lots of times but never no son of God. I just hope my death gives their parents some relief. I really do.

PREJEAN: Maybe that's the best thing you can offer the Delacroixs and the Percys, a wish for their peace.

A pause.

MATT: You know I've never known real love, never loved women or anybody all that well myself. Figures I'd have to go to my death to find love.

He looks directly at PREJEAN

MATT: Thank you for loving me.