



# The Great Connector

By Hannah Edgar

This autumn, Ryan McKinny stars in the Met's season-opening production of *Dead Man Walking*. Like everything the bass-baritone does, he's using the role to tell stories we need to hear

**W**ho is given a second chance? Who isn't – and pays the price with their lives? That question is at the heart of Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's 2000

opera *Dead Man Walking*, opening the Metropolitan Opera's new season. But it has also been weighing heavily on bass-baritone Ryan McKinny, starring in the production as death-row prisoner Joseph De Rocher.

For six years, McKinny corresponded with Terrence Andrus, a gifted poet and painter who was on death row in Texas, in a facility north-east of Houston. Earlier this year, Andrus took his own life, two months before his 35th birthday and six months after the Supreme Court declined to review his case a second time.

What that original double murder case, in 2012, had not accounted for was that Andrus had been the primary caretaker for his siblings by the time he was a preteen. Or that, after acting as a lookout while two friends stole a woman's purse, 16-year-old Andrus endured traumatising conditions in a youth penitentiary system later overhauled after sexual abuse scandals. Nor did Andrus' trial acknowledge that he had schizoaffective disorder, which went largely untreated for most of his life. All wouldn't have kept him from prison time, but they likely would have kept him off death row.

McKinny, 42, began visiting and corresponding with Andrus while living in Houston. He sees more parallels between himself and Andrus than outside observers might. Splitting his childhood between Los Angeles and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, McKinny says he was a near-high-school dropout, a 'troubled kid' who only found solace in choir class. McKinny's younger brother also had schizoaffective disorder and died last year at 34, the same age as Andrus when he died.

But the ways McKinny's and Andrus' experiences diverged ended up making all the difference: in race, class, location, resources. And that doesn't sit well with McKinny.

'I vandalised things. I did drugs. I did not do well in school. But I had a lot of teachers and family members who said, "We shouldn't give up on this person",' he says. 'I don't know what would have happened to Terrence – a person that had the kind of talent he had as an artist – if somebody had shown up and given him more chances. It's really hard for me to say that he and I are different people.'

Opera might have saved Ryan McKinny's life. After 'barely graduating' from high school, he enrolled at Pasadena City College, a two-year community college outside Los Angeles. A choir teacher there took an interest in his voice and plucked him out of the ranks with an assignment: go listen to opera.

'I knew very little about it. My grandmother was really into musicals, and she would take me to *Les Mis* and *Phantom of the Opera* and stuff like that,' McKinny says.

He pulled reams of LPs from the public library and found the iconic Vienna Philharmonic/Solti *Rheingold* recording, with George London singing Wotan. That, he says, was one of his 'Oh my God' moments, as was hearing Samuel Ramey in *Faust* at LA Opera.

'Even from a recording, you can't quite understand how a voice can wrap around you in real space,' McKinny says. 'I thought, I *need* to learn how to do this.'

From there, in his words, 'It got out of control quickly.' He moved to New York to attend Juilliard, kick-starting his career. One of his early auditions was, in fact, for *Dead Man Walking*. McKinny auditioned for the 2011 Houston Grand Opera production that would become the basis for the opera's world premiere recording the following year. He didn't get cast. But he got an essential endorsement from the most important man in the room.

'I remember Jake [Heggie] was there, and he was like, "I like Ryan, but not yet",' McKinny recalls.

His moment would come a number of years later, when he was cast as Joseph De Rocher in Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of *Dead Man Walking* in 2019. McKinny felt like he had found the role of a lifetime.

'It's brutal. It's emotionally exhausting. Everybody wants to talk about the scene with the push-ups [in

*'Before the pandemic, nobody was really interested in opera or classical music movies. It wasn't really a thing'*

the second act, when the singer playing De Rocher must count push-ups then sing an aria immediately afterwards], but to me, that's kind of the least stressful thing in the show,' he says, chuckling. 'But I just love the role. In terms of singing it, it just felt like this is exactly what I should be doing.'

Critics agreed. The *Chicago Tribune* called his performance 'indelible... an acting tour de force buttressed by a warmly inviting voice.' *Opera News* likewise enthused about his voice, 'capable of delicate floated beauty in the upper register as well as dramatic power'.

That Lyric production of *Dead Man Walking* ended up being one of McKinny's last engagements before the pandemic shutdown. Worried about his long-term employment prospects, he, his wife Tonya, and their two kids, Emma and Louis, now 17 and 13, left Houston to move back to Asheville, North Carolina, where they had briefly lived before the pandemic. There, they would be closer to family, including McKinny's father and stepmother, former professors in the film department at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts.

McKinny grew up around movie sets – it was practically inevitable, as his father was the director of photography for TV series like *Beverly Hills, 90210* >





KEN HOWARD

*The role of a lifetime: McKinny in Jake Heggie's Dead Man Walking at the Lyric Opera of Chicago in 2019*

*Inset: As a filmmaker, McKinny launched his production company Helio Arts*



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and *Perry Mason*. However, as an adult, filmmaking 'was not part of my life at all,' McKinny says, beyond flirting with a *Winterreise* film concept.

'I hadn't made anything on my own, I didn't really know how to use cameras, I didn't have any of that stuff,' he says. 'Plus, before the pandemic, nobody was really interested in opera or classical music movies. It wasn't really a thing.'

But if staring down an empty gig calendar was the only alternative, McKinny was determined to make it a thing. Leveraging his family connections, he connected with musical colleagues to produce videos together during the first few months of lockdown. Some were hopeful, and many humorous – like a spoof *Coronadämmerung* with mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton, or a sing-off with fellow bass-baritone Nicholas Brownlee. Almost all were brief. In due time, McKinny's ambitions outpaced the videos he was making, and he found his peers were just as eager to sink their teeth into more substantial undertakings.

Thus, Helio Arts, his production company, was born. Artists like J'Nai Bridges, Russell Thomas, John Holiday, and Julia Bullock would be given creative free rein for video projects, while he and his wife Tonya provided the production know-how. Before it was acquired by Marquee TV, Helio partnered with companies like Lyric Opera, Dallas Opera, Minnesota Opera, On Site Opera, the Glimmerglass Festival, and Houston Grand Opera, for whom McKinny recently created the 10-minute promotional short *The Real Divas of Houston Grand Opera*.

That *Winterreise* film never came to pass, but an award-winning cinematic interpretation of *Dichterliebe* (called *After/Glow*, starring John Holiday) did, as did a riff on Janáček's *The Diary of One Who Disappeared* (*Vanished*, starring Holiday and Thomas). Still in progress is a documentary about Chicago Opera Theater's concert *Carmen* production in 2021, which featured Barton as Carmen and Stephanie Blythe singing Don José at pitch.

'I have ADHD, and I can't sit still for too long without a project. But also, I wanted to be helpful,' McKinny says, with characteristic understatement.

Thankfully, McKinny's singing engagements are many and mighty again, including his long-awaited Met debut last year, singing the title role in *Le nozze di Figaro*. He is touring, and his family is able to travel with him. (McKinny and his wife have homeschooled their children so they can pursue their schoolwork on the road.) Being busy is a blessing, of course. He's just not sure where that leaves filmmaking.

'The film stuff isn't over for me. It's just having a little pause for a while,' he says. 'I think there's a future for me in directing, potentially onstage, but I've turned back to really focusing on my career at the moment.'

This coming season, in addition to reprising *Dead Man Walking*, *Parsifal* and *Don Giovanni* (with Houston Grand Opera, this time as Leporello), McKinny was hand-picked by Heggie to originate the lead role in a new opera, *Before It All Goes Dark* – a casting choice inspired, in part, by his showing in Lyric's *Dead Man Walking*. Commissioned by the Holocaust awareness nonprofit Music of Remembrance, the work is based on a true story about a veteran who discovers he is the heir to a valuable art collection looted by the Nazis.

Likewise, when McKinny steps on the Met stage this autumn for *Dead Man Walking*, the opera's real-life echoes, and Andrus, will never be far from his mind. It's but a mere glimpse into the American prison system. But if there is anything McKinny has demonstrated in his two-decade-long career, it's that he has two gifts: a luxurious, dramatic bass-baritone voice, and the know-how to use that voice to spotlight others' stories.

'Anytime I talk about the piece, I try to talk about who Terence was as a human being. The fact that he was where he was says a lot about how our system works,' he says. 'My goal is just to shine a light on it. These are human beings, and we're treating them poorly.' ON