

Off-Off Broadway Review

Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith

By Jacquelyn Claire
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Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith is a spiritual autobiographical one-man show written and performed by award-winning poet, playwright, and actor Michael Mack. The play chronicles his personal experience of being sexually molested by a parish priest in North Carolina at age 11.

For 40 years, Mack wrestled with the traumatic effects of this defining derailment, and battled through endless imaginary conversations with his perpetrator in an attempt to seek understanding. Eventually age, experience, and a drive to free himself from the abuser's hold on his psyche, deposits him at the door of the priest to have those conversations in the flesh. What follows is a deeply powerful experience of forgiveness, and a moving rejuvenation of "heart and soul".

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The intimate space of The Bridge Theatre created an intense confessional. In a series of exquisitely crafted episodes, we are asked to bear witness to one man's resuscitating of his 11-year-old wounded self.

In 2002 when the Catholic Church abuse scandal was exposed dramatically in the media, Mack started to gather the courage to find his perpetrator. However, it was only in 2005 that he typed the priest's name into Google and discovered he was living very nearby. The play expertly places us into these heart palpitating, life-changing moments where we walk alongside the boy/man who is attempting to reclaim his truth in the face of his abuser in his "waterfall of robes".

Mack's presence is immediately captivating, as he inhabits "God's proscenium stage" with wit, honesty and ease. He is a consummate performer whose epic personal sermon succeeds in taking us on a worthwhile journey that deepens our connection to the power of healing. He lays himself bare with raw vulnerability as he grapples with the twisted formation of his sexuality and its impact on his adult life.

Director Daniel Gidron has crafted a nurturing frame for this delicate testimony. The staging is sparse, with each set piece becoming a representation of an iconic childhood memory frozen in time. The various uses of the piano and the blackboard to evoke memory are chilling and unforgettable. He ensures a perfect pace for Mack's storytelling with inventive devices to keep our attention, effectively moving the plotline to its well-constructed climax. The clever use of lighting to create the jagged moments from the past is expertly designed in this small space.

The text is magnificent. As Mack delivered each oracle of insight, I would turn the phrase over and over in my head, savoring the genius of the line only to realize I was missing out on the next pearl. The "Mouth Memory" episode stood out as particularly heart-wrenching. This is a play I would love to read, slowly, to marvel at each syllable that has created this masterpiece. Mack studied under Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Maxine Kumin during his Writing Program studies at MIT, and this play shows his genius as a wordsmith.

When this piece was performed in 2013, it coincided with the Archdiocese of Boston – the epicenter of the pedophile priest scandal – announcing the dire situation its parishes faced with continued low attendance, a priest shortage, and lackluster fundraising. In 2015, on my way to the theater, I had to navigate the road closures due to the Papal visit to New York City after watching a news segment showing opinion polls on the Catholic Church. To watch this play at this moment was incredibly pertinent. In the face of his hardships, Mack reinforces his commitment to his faith, to his connection to God, and reclaims the church as a space for his healing – for his salvation and not his trauma. This provocative piece asks us to confess our own relationship to faith and our current perceptions of organized religion.

During the post-show talkbacks in this run, Michael shares his experiences with one of the Voice of the Faithful major initiatives – the Healing Circle. This non-profit organization of Catholic laity and clergy is devoted to helping heal the wounds from the clergy sexual abuse crisis – with special emphasis on the support of survivors.

Advisory: Mature subject matter.

Running Time: 90 minutes, no intermission.

Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith runs in The Bridge Theatre at Shetler Studios until October 4, 2015, located at 244 West 54th, New York City.