

Hearing Voices

(Speaking in Tongues)

**Schizophrenia touches
one in every hundred people
saints and sinners alike**

**A family's true story of
madness, love & redemption**

"Exquisite, heartbreaking . . . will truly resonate with those who know that awful place where insanity and love collide."

—**National Public Radio**

"Transcendent art that reaches out with unblinking honesty . . . *Hearing Voices* grew out of Mack's poems, works of devastating clarity that use simple language and rich metaphor to create a powerful evocation of his and his mother's life."

—**Boston Globe**

"Moments of great warmth come through this family chronicle . . . it is a work of redemption."

—**Philadelphia Weekly**

"Mack's breathtaking performance casts vivid poetic light on one of life's most inexpressible and commonplace sorrows . . . telling an untellable tale of human pain and transcendence."

—**Minneapolis Star Tribune**

"It is art for the sake of art and memory and healing."

—**Washington Post**

"Has the power to entertain, transport, and transform . . . a vivid snapshot of one family's journey."

—**Showcase Magazine**

Find out more
about Michael Mack's
feature-length one-man play

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THE SUN

From the Baltimore Sun

'Voices' speaks of poet's painful childhood

By Susan Reimer
Sun Reporter

April 26, 2007; Page E1

Michael Mack was only 5 when the brainstorm of schizophrenia swept his mother up in its turbulent embrace.

She had shown signs of fatigue and depression after the birth of each of her four children - Michael is the oldest - but nothing like this.

She thought she was the Virgin Mary. She chopped off her waist-length hair. She ranted that Lucifer ran her house. She trashed her son's room. She said an angel visited her on a bus. She threw a party for the neighborhood children, gave out cigarettes and her children's toys. She would disappear, leaving the children alone and untended.



In his one-man show "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)," poet Michael Mack shares what it was like growing up with a schizophrenic mother. The production is coming to McDaniel College. (WILLIAM B. PLOWMAN, ASSOCIATED PRESS)

It was pure craziness, but he was a kid. What do kids know about mental illness? All they know is what they are living.

"When she was the most ill, she was the most animated," said Mack, who spent some of those turbulent years in Baltimore but now lives in Cambridge, Mass.

"She had so much life, so much spirit and vigor. Over the top, yeah. But so much life."

Mack, 50, celebrates that life with a 90-minute, one-man poetry show, Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues), that he will be performing at McDaniel College Sunday through Tuesday.

A poetry slam champion who worked through pieces of this play in competitions and on open-mike nights, he first performed it in its entirety in 1995 in Boston and has performed it perhaps 100 times since - at theaters and in clinical settings.

"He channels his mother," says Dr. Laurence B. Guttmacher, chief of psychiatry and acting clinical director at Rochester Psychiatric Center.

Though skeptical, he invited Mack to perform last fall for his long-term patients, some of whom are very ill.

"I am a big believer in traditional lectures. Here was some sort of poet doing some sort of play. This is not an easy crowd, and they were rapt. Afterward, they said, 'He gets it. He understands'," Guttmacher says.

It took a long time for Mack to understand his mother - he calls her Annie in the play, and he has taken a stage name to protect his family's privacy - and his feelings about her illness and about the "shadow," as he calls it, that schizophrenia casts over the children who fear they will inherit the storm.

And he just kind of stumbled into the vehicle for that understanding. Poetry.

"When I was a kid, I kind of went with what was happening. There was no reason to think other households might be different.

"In my late teens and early 20s, I started to wrestle with it. I just made up some story about it to tell people," he says.

After a stint in the Air Force, Mack was accepted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Business.

He registered for a poetry class as an elective, hoping for an easy 'A.' "I found myself writing about my mother. I had found a venue for something I had been holding inside me for decades."

In the late 1980s, Mack studied under Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Maxine Kumin.

His poetry is more than cathartic. It is remarkable.

"I encouraged him to write what he knew and to write out of his very difficult childhood," says Kumin, who remembers Mack as a student on the edge, very conflicted, almost troubled. "I often wondered which way he was going to jump.

"I remember telling him: 'You have fabulous material to work with, and you have a moral obligation to use it wisely and to write from the heart.' He did. He does. I hope he continues."

Mack was born in Washington, D.C., and was living in Takoma Park when his mother first became ill. She had always been timid about leaving the house, but the onset of her schizophrenia was devastatingly sudden.

Her husband went to the grocery store just five weeks after her fourth child was born. When he returned, she had cut off all her hair and was saying that his face had changed. He looked like Jesus.

She was hospitalized within the week for the first of perhaps 20 times.

Mack's father, who taught electronics at a trade school, lost the family house trying to pay for her treatment.

He moved Mack, his brother and two sisters into a building his uncle owned in Baltimore - near Chase and Calvert streets.

After repeated attempts to bring his wife home from mental hospitals, only to have her give up her medicine and be forced to return, Mack's father packed the kids up and sent them to North Carolina to live with family.

"I think my father thought my mother's behavior was having a bad effect on us kids, so he send us to North Carolina for a year until he was able to come up with a new plan."

By the time Mack was 10, his parents had split up. Well, not exactly split up. His mother just sort of floated away.

"She'd be living on the streets. Then she would get picked up and hospitalized. They'd stabilize her medication and release her to a group home or something," Mack says.

"She'd start to think the medication was making her sick, and she'd stop taking it. And the whole thing would start again."

When his mother was hospitalized, he would visit with his father.

It was like visiting someone under water. Everything was morbidly slow-mo.

He liked her better when he saw her on the street, he said. Outrageous, loud, alive.

Psychiatric medicine caught up with his mother in the mid-1980s and she stabilized enough to live in a group setting.

For the last decade of her life, she lived in a family-type home on White Avenue in Hamilton, run by Jack McKeon and Mark DiDomenico.

"I will never forget her," McKeon says. He and his partner continue to care for mentally challenged elderly in a home in Aberdeen.

"When she came to us, she had walked away from an institution, and they found she'd been living on the streets for about 18 months."

But she stabilized remarkably at that group home, where all four children visited her regularly. She died at 73 in 2002 of pneumonia, after receiving a diagnosis of cancer. Mack's father and his siblings were at her side.

But there were no grandchildren there that day. Neither Mack nor any of his siblings, all of whom feared they would inherit the storm, have had children.

"Yeah," he says, ruefully. "We joke that the line stops here."

Mack's mother knew he was writing poetry and that some of it was about her.

"At first she didn't want to talk about those old days. She felt it brought up too many painful memories," he says. "But she was flattered that anyone would want to hear her story."

The poetry slams at which Mack was so successful were a mystery to his mother until he took her to an open mike night at a place near the Johns Hopkins University.

"She was just amazed. And for weeks, that's all she could talk about was this place. And how the FBI didn't come and get the performers."

His mother died within months of that visit. Though she never saw Mack perform his act, his father, brother and two sisters have seen it. All are of the same opinion: It is heartbreakingly beautiful.

Says Janet Jump, former president of the Maryland chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, who arranged for Mack to perform at McDaniel: "He captures the raw agony of it and the mystery and he still gives you comic relief."

Mack says, "The dream that I had for a long time was that at the very end of the play, I would invite her up to take a bow."

The Boston Globe

Shedding light on the shadows of a mother's hidden affliction

By Louise Kennedy

Globe Staff

May 1, 2003; Living/Arts, page D1

Michael Mack grew up in a shadow. It is a shadow that falls on one out of every five families in this country, but it has the strange power of making every person it touches feel, in its darkness, utterly alone.

That shadow is the mental illness of a close relative -- in Mack's case, the paranoid schizophrenia that first struck his mother when he was 5. He was the oldest of her four children; shortly after the youngest was born, she turned to her husband one day and asked him if she was the Blessed Virgin. For the next five years, the father struggled to hold the family together as Mack's mother went through cycles of



Michael Mack tells of his mother's mental illness in "Hearing Voices," a one-man play opening tonight at the Boston Center for the Arts. (Globe Staff Photo / Lane Turner)

breakdown, treatment, recovery, refusal to keep taking the medication that she insisted was causing her illness, and breakdown again.

Ultimately, Mack's father decided the toll on his children was too great. He sent them to live with his sister in North Carolina, where he would travel from his work in Washington, D. C., to visit them when he could.

As Mack grew older, he would drive with his father to visit his mother in one of the state hospitals around Baltimore or Washington where she would periodically land. For years, she was in and out of hospitals, sometimes homeless, sometimes in halfway houses, until she finally found a safe harbor in a group home in Baltimore. There she died of cancer last May, still fighting schizophrenia at 73.

All of this is the kind of story that people in the shadow know well. But it is also, as Mack points out, a story that many of those people never tell.

"A lot of people go through their whole lives without ever mentioning their mother or their sister," Mack says. That was true for him as a child, too. "We didn't really talk about it outside the family at all, and inside the family as little as possible."

He's talking now. In a one-man play called "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)," which opens tonight at the Boston Center for the Arts, Mack, who is now 46 and lives in Cambridge, talks for 90 minutes, sometimes in his own voice and sometimes in his mother's, about the shadow, with its visions and terrors and absurdities and, in spite of all that, moments of unexpected grace.

There was the time when young Michael came home from school to find his mother standing outside his bedroom, enraged that he had failed to put something away. He looked past her to see "the entire room just pretty much on the floor -- chairs overturned, the mattress, everything," he says. "I knew that something was terribly wrong. And I had a sudden sense of how to handle the situation. I knew exactly what to do, which was to say, 'Thank you.' I said, 'Thank you for being so strict with me.'"

"It worked, he says. The tension broke, and his mother helped him clean up his room. And he was left with a surprising feeling.

"One of the striking things about that," Mack says, "was how cared for I felt. I had just gotten a tremendous amount of attention from my mother." He laughs, then laughs again at another unexpected consequence of that day: "I am extremely neat, orderly, organized," he says. "One of the things I learned very early on was how to be very tidy. If I could keep my drawers in order, that would be one thing I could depend on.

"Meanwhile, even as a young child, he was trying to be someone on whom his mother could depend. "She would ask us kids to help her in the same way that she might ask another adult," he says. "I felt such a feeling of helplessness, wanting to help but not knowing how.

"Even once he started writing about his childhood and his mother's illness, he felt the need to protect her, not "to bring up old memories that for her were painful." She knew he was writing something, he says, but she never saw the play performed. His other family members have all seen it, though; his sister called it "heartbreaking but beautiful," and their father has seen it twice. Asked if he somehow ended up telling their story as well as his own, he smiles again.

"It's not what I set out to do, but it's what I seem to have done," Mack says. "A lot of what I was doing by writing about it was, 'Well, look what happened to me.' And, somewhere along the line, that changed.

"The very act of starting to write, he says, "was accidental and a discovery and maybe a

little miraculous." He was studying business at MIT's Sloan School when he decided to take a poetry course. "I thought it would be an easy grade, and it would free up time for the important stuff," he says. But "pretty early on, I started writing about my mother.

"His teachers, particularly Maxine Kumin, encouraged him to keep going. Fired by the surprising force of his memories, he did. He also started participating in poetry slams, eventually going to the national finals a couple of times. He switched to the writing program and eventually received a graduate degree from MIT, where he still works part time as a tech writer. And gradually, "Hearing Voices" grew out of his poems, works of devastating clarity that use simple language and rich metaphor to create a powerful evocation of his and his mother's life.

Sometimes, the poems take on the crackling hypersensitivity of a person suffering from hallucinations. Mack confesses to "a fascination with the inner experience of psychosis," a curiosity about the interior "landscape" of mental illness. He's quick to add, though, that he doesn't subscribe to the romantic sentimentality that suffuses most popular representations of mental illness.

Contrary to what Hollywood shows us, Mack says, "mental illness, for the people who suffer and the people around them, is bleak.

"But, always, Mack wants to remember that he's no longer facing that bleak landscape alone. He has performed "Hearing Voices" many times for various mental-health professionals and families' groups, particularly chapters of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. "It's stark; it's real; it's like living with somebody in a moment of real distress," says Moe Armstrong, who serves on NAMI's national board, of Mack's performance. And every time Mack performs, people come up to him afterward to share their own stories of the shadow.

"I invite that. I welcome that," Mack says. "I like to make a space available for people to talk in community about it. A lot of people who come have never talked about this with anybody. Once people realize that they're not alone in this, that's a tremendous burden lifted."

The Washington Post

Schizophrenia's Rhyme and Reason

Michael Mack Finds the Poetry
in His Mother's Long Battle With Mental Illness

By Lonnae O'Neal Parker
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, November 22, 2002; Page C01

The performance begins with faint whispers, like the rubbing of insect wings, inside the unlit theater. Then come the voices. Silly or loud or nonsensical words made sinister by repetition and darkness.

As the light comes up, a young boy tells of his mother, who chopped off all her hair one morning. Then she walked him to the bus stop holding his hand and sobbing uncontrollably while the other children looked on.



The Takoma Park native performs "Hearing Voices "Speaking in Tongues)" at the DC Arts Center (Post Staff Photo, Lucian Perkins)

When the bus clunked to a stop

*I climbed on last, grabbed a seat
in back*

*My mother outside, hands flat on
the window,*

her face a blur

when the bus jerked away.

*The kid beside me punched my
arm --*

Who was that man with you crying so hard?

I said I don't know. Three times I swore

I don't know him!

"Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)," the 90-minute monologue performed Wednesday night by Takoma Park native Michael Mack at the D.C. Arts Center in Northwest Washington and running through Sunday, is based on his experiences growing up with a mother who developed schizophrenia when he was a child. And it attempts to give voice to the one in 100 people who develops the disease, which is marked by auditory or visual hallucinations, delusional thinking and psychotic episodes.

Mack's mother once threw a big party, inviting all the neighborhood kids to their house, where she handed out cigarettes and gave away all of her children's toys. "I remember it being a real fun party, but at the same time having the feeling that something was really wrong," he says.

Since 1999, Mack, 45, a poet and technical writer who lives in Cambridge, Mass., has performed the piece mostly for mental health professionals and in small theaters. It is art for the sake of art and memory and healing. And it is art for the sake of publicly rendering the confusion and disquiet of lives altered by insanity.

"So often what we get is just a stereotypical view," Mack says. "Jim Carrey doing 'Me, Myself & Irene' -- mental illness is a big hoot. It's a good time."

Mack says he wanted to show the profound effects of schizophrenia on everyone in the family. "One of the amazing things in doing this story is having people share their stories as well," he says. There's something healing "and important in the experience of bearing witness."

Once when Mack was 5 he and his younger sister (he's the oldest of four) saw his father slap his mother. She was manic, laughing and crying and begging to go downtown, and Mack's father was demanding she pull herself together.

She left the house that night and returned the next morning, beginning a pattern of behavior that would define his childhood.

"She would go off on these sprees," often winding up downtown hollering into stores or singing on the streets, says Mack. "She'd get a notion to leave the house and she might be the only one caring for us, so we kids would be kind of left on our own."

When she was not sick, Mack remembers his mother as attentive and fun. She would take the family for walks to the park or the thrift store. She would fry potato chips for them. But the lucid times never lasted.

Through her periods of illness and hospitalization, in which she would take stupefying medications or undergo electroshock therapy, the Macks remained intact as a family for five years. Then his father, an electronics engineer and teacher, decided to remove the children from their mother, first sending them to live with a sister in North Carolina and later moving with them to Woodbridge.

By this time Mack's father was broke, having exhausted his insurance benefits as his wife was processed through state hospitals and halfway houses around the Washington area. Beginning at age 12, Mack would accompany his father to visit his mother at places like the Crownsville State Hospital near Annapolis or St. Elizabeths in Washington. His father later divorced his mother, who continued to live in and out of hospitals and on the street, before landing at what Mack calls a dignified group home in Baltimore. She lived her last five years there, dying of cancer in May at the age of 73.

As a young adult, Mack did a stint in the Air Force, worked as a machine repairman, attended Northern Virginia Community College, then enrolled in business school at MIT. An elective poetry class changed his career path. Encouraged by MIT mentor Maxine Kumin, a Pulitzer-winning poet, he wrote about his childhood, performing his work at "poetry slams" while working as a part-time technical writer for MIT.

In 1999 at an open-mike night, an audience member from the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill invited him to perform. The pieces he selected became "Hearing Voices."

In performance, Mack often shifts perspective. We hear him as a boy riding with his dad to the asylum or discarding wads of notebook paper as he searches vainly for words to describe himself and his family for a school composition.

"Mama, when will you be better?" the child asks.

The adult intellectualizes his mother's illness with statistics and humor and gives a rhythmic litany of inelegant drugs -- Thorazine, Haldol, Lithane, Prolixin -- that numb the disease and the mind that has it.

And there are moments of levity when Mack takes us inside a mind crowded out by the white noise of "word salads" and delusions of being the Blessed Virgin and seeing Frank Sinatra.

He thought it important to share not only his experience as the child of a schizophrenic, but also to try to share something of his mother's life. "I've done something in memory of my mother and in the spirit of my mother to validate her experience," he says. "It's a devastating illness and there are people who face that challenge and people who opt out."

According to the Arlington-based National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, between 10 and 15 percent of schizophrenics commit suicide because of despair or in a delusional act. My mother fought, Mack says. She "stayed with it until the final years of her life."

Bob Carolla, a spokesman for the National Alliance, has seen Mack perform and says that "people never exposed to mental illness will be both chilled but also surprised by the warmth of family affection that comes out of storm."

At the end of the Wednesday night performance, members of the small audience greeted Mack onstage, exchanging cards and handshakes and bits of personal history.

One woman lingered longer than the others and Mack hugged her.

It was his sister Mary, from Manassas. She declined to give her last name. She hadn't seen the play before; she said she wasn't ready. She thought it would hurt too much to watch.

"Can I say that?" she asked her brother. "I just dreaded it," she said. "It was heartbreaking, but beautiful."

The brother and sister who shared a house and a journey and the effects of a deeply painful disease exchanged a wordless glance, briefly, before it turned into another deep hug.



Michael Mack holds a photograph of his mother, who died of cancer in May (Post Staff Photo, Lucian Perkins)

Backstage

Larger Possibilities

By Jane Horwitz
Special to The Washington Post
Tuesday, November 19, 2002; Page C5

Performance poet Michael Mack wants to change how people think about schizophrenia with his "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)," at the D.C. Arts Center tomorrow through Sunday.



The solo piece consists mostly of poems Mack began writing in his student days at MIT. They trace his mother's descent into schizophrenia -- a tragedy that began when he was 5 years old.

After witnessing a poetry slam at a popular Cambridge venue called the Cantab Lounge, he recalled from his Massachusetts home last week, "the sky opened up for me. I began to see the . . . larger possibilities of poetry as performance art."

Mack, 45, is a part-time technical writer at MIT. He grew up in and around Washington and Baltimore, the oldest of four kids. About five years after his mother became ill, his father "just felt like it was having a bad effect on us kids. . . . He never knew what he was going to come home to," Mack said. She was institutionalized and found solace only in her later years in a Baltimore group home, where she died this year.

Though he often performs "Hearing Voices" at conferences of mental health professionals, it's the misperceptions of the general public he'd like change with his poems. "The fare that we have been given from the media and from popular culture has been closer to the Jim Carrey film 'Me, Myself and Irene' . . . than to 'A Beautiful Mind,'" Mack said.

MINNEAPOLIS – ST. PAUL

Star Tribune

NEWSPAPER OF THE TWIN CITIES

Editorial

Hearing Voices: A poet tells life's hard tales

Published May 22, 2004

Poetry gets a bad rap these days, and for no good reason. It remains still what it has always been: humankind's surest way -- only way -- to describe the indescribable. If you doubt it, take time this weekend to see Michael Mack's breathtaking performance of "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)," which opened last night at Mixed Blood Theatre. The one-man show casts vivid poetic light on one of life's most inexpressible -- and commonplace -- sorrows.

Which sorrow? The one most of us would rather not discuss: the experience of living with mental illness. Though one family in five is affected by some form of the ailment, it remains for many an emblem of shame. Indeed, so it was for Michael Mack, whose mother developed schizophrenia when he was 5. The years that followed were marked by secret-keeping and lies -- the family's only defense against a brain disorder society could not bother to recognize, let alone understand.

But times have changed since a second-grader named Michael denied knowing the odd "man" with chopped-off hair who'd walked him to the school-bus stop. The decades his mother spent cycling between institutions and life on the streets eventually drew to a close as newer treatments appeared. Mack's mother was able to live out her final years in the comfort of a group home -- the sort of community-based facility long promised to people with mental illness, and still in lamentably short supply.

Times have changed, and yet they haven't. Citizens with schizophrenia still face incredible hurdles in securing the lifelong, supervised care they need. And they still suffer greatly from society's misapprehensions about their illness: that they're more crime-prone than other people (they're less); that they can't hold jobs (they can); that they're unintelligent (quite the contrary); that they're somehow the authors of their own illness (best to blame bad genetic luck for that).

Now in his 40s and living in Boston, Mack would certainly grant all these points. But this performer isn't really an evangelist. He's a true lyricist -- a protégé of Irish Nobel-winner Seamus Heaney and Pulitzer-winner Maxine Kumin -- and his offering this weekend brims with poetry, not proselytism. It tells an untellable tale of human pain and transcendence -- reminding us all of what we secretly know to be true: Some among us hear voices, and we must not cast them away.

"Hearing Voices" is sponsored by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill of Minneapolis to commemorate National Mental Health Month. Mack's performance continues tonight at 7:30 and Sunday at 3 p.m. at Mixed Blood, 1501 S. 4th St. in Minneapolis. For ticketing details, call the box office at 612-338-6131.

Boston Sunday Globe

City Weekly

A poet speaks his mother's language

Through poetry, he hopes to shed light on schizophrenia

By Sarah Tomlinson, Globe Correspondent, 7/22/2001

A boy grapples with the school assignment to describe himself and his home in Michael Mack's poem, "Hearing Voices, Speaking in Tongues," based on his experience with his mother developing schizophrenia when he was 5.

As the lanky 44-year-old performance poet sits onstage, he becomes the boy, repeatedly crossing out words on an imaginary blackboard, attempting to describe his mother's strange behavior. The only constant in his essay remains his name and address. The vignette powerfully represents the confusion of growing up in unstable conditions, fearing judgment from outside the family.

This boy is among several identities assumed by the Cambridge-based poet, and one of two central narratives. He also speaks from the perspective of his adult self, who has come to terms with his mother. And by making schizophrenia real for the audience, he becomes someone with the illness in the poem's second, interwoven narrative.

Mack felt it was important to get inside schizophrenia, as an artist and the child of someone with the disease. "I want people to have a better sense of the anxiety, the confusion, the desperation, the terror," he said.

"Because it is a completely revolutionary illness - we can get cancer or diabetes, and still our mind is pretty much intact. But what do we do when our whole world-view just goes through an irrevocable overhaul?"



Michael Mack, whose mother has lived in various facilities because she is schizophrenic, will perform "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)" at the Boston Public Library Thursday. (Globe Staff Photo / Pat Greenhouse)

He hoped a realistic representation of schizophrenia would illicit greater compassion from audience members, but the poem also tackled his fears. Mack, one of four children, cites the statistic that 25 percent of the children of schizophrenics become ill. Fortunately, neither he nor his siblings developed schizophrenia, but during the ages 17 to 27, when symptoms usually appear, "it was a shadow behind me," Mack said.

Although poetry became central in confronting this shadow, he discovered his passion accidentally, through an elective class he took while attending the MIT Sloan School of Management. His teacher, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Maxine Kumin, encouraged him to write about his mother and became a mentor.

After the class, Mack changed majors to creative writing and began the poems that became "Hearing Voices," now a book-length manuscript he is circulating to publishers. Since graduating in 1988, Mack has worked as a technical writer, and is currently employed part time by MIT. His poems have appeared in literary journals, including Beloit Poetry Journal and New York Quarterly and he has performed at hospitals, galleries and mental health conferences.

Mack decided to make the poem a performance piece partly because he has always been a natural ham, he said. He has been part of poetry slams at the Cantab Lounge in Cambridge, led by poet Michael Brown, and said the feedback at those events helped him edit the piece. He also values the response of audience members who share their own experiences of family members with schizophrenia.

Mack considers addressing the illness publicly an important part of overcoming negative perceptions. "When we were growing up, there was a tremendous amount of shame around it," he said. "I think there is less stigma these days, but there is still a lot," he said.

"And if you consider the typical media portrayals of mental illness, there is a lot of misinformation. So I'm not trying to be a poster child, but I find it personally rewarding to talk about something that a lot of people are just keeping inside of them."

The piece succeeds, according to Dr. James C. Beck, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and associate chair of the Department of Psychiatry at Cambridge Health Alliance.

"I think his performance evokes in a remarkably realistic, and at the same time dramatic way, the experience of having a close relative with schizophrenia," he said. "I think it's unusual for a dramatic performance to be artistically satisfying and to educate in the way his performance does."

Mack also hopes to inform about how greatly treatment has improved since his mother was diagnosed and prescribed Thorazine in the early 1960s.

"It's such a gift to us to be able to see her as herself, which is at times cranky and cantankerous and annoying, and at other times loving and funny. When she was on Thorazine, we would never see that. We would see someone in a coma basically," he said.

Mack's mother, 72, spent the years since her schizophrenia emerged living on the streets and in state and private hospitals and halfway houses. She is now in a home with only five clients in the Baltimore area.

"It's a remarkable household, and she receives a dignity and respect that she hasn't had before."

While his mother has not read his poem, Mack said the initial discomfort she felt about him discussing her illness publicly has been replaced with surprise that people are interested in her story. Mack's father was the first person in his family to see the entire piece performed last March, and the poet was relieved when his father was pleased with the poem. "What I heard through the family grapevine afterwards was that he said, 'You think you know your kids, and one of your kids gets to be 44 years old, and then he turns around and does something marvelous,' " Mack said.

Through the process of writing the poem, Mack himself has gained a greater understanding of what his parents struggled with during his childhood. He praises groups such as the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, a grass-roots advocacy organization started by parents of mentally-ill children, which provides a community in which to face these issues. When he was growing up, his family did not have such support.

"When I first started writing, I was more self-centered, saying, 'Look what happened to me,' " Mack said. "But then it became about what happened to my mom and my dad, and I got a greater appreciation of my mother that I would not have had if I was not sharing her experience in this way."

Michael Mack will perform "Hearing Voices, Speaking in Tongues" Thursday, at 6:30 p.m. in the Mezzanine Conference Room at the Boston Public Library 700 Boylston St., 617-536-5400.



nami

The Nation's Voice on Mental Illness

Winter 2003

Advocate

NAMI Promotes *Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)*

by **Bob Corolla, J.D.**, NAMI News Director

Michael Mack's mother once lived on the streets of Washington, D.C. Other times she resided in St. Elizabeth's Hospital in the District, or at Crownsville State Hospital near Annapolis, Maryland.

Last spring, she died of cancer in a dignified group home in Baltimore at the age of 73, shortly before her son performed a short segment of a 90-minute monologue at the NAMI national convention in Cincinnati. Near Thanksgiving, Mack returned home to Washington, where he was profiled in *The Washington Post* (November 22, 2002), and interviewed on National Public Radio.

Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues) is Mack's tribute to his mother, and a stark reminder that people with schizophrenia, including those who live homeless on the streets and whose names we may never know, are still individuals with families who love them and have a story to tell.

Mack's performance is intense, heartbreaking, funny, and heartwarming as it depicts the effects of mental illness on a family. It resonates deeply with his audiences and inspires many to share their own experiences. It's important, says Mack, to "bear witness" and seek redemption from the past.



Poetry and Passion: Michael Mack educates audiences about schizophrenia through performances of *Hearing Voices (Speaking In Tongues)*, a different kind of love story.

“His story about his mother has brought tears of sadness and joy to many people,” said NAMI national board member Moe Armstrong. “I have attended several performances and can say without reservation that Michael is an artist par excellence.”

People never before exposed to mental illness may be startled or chilled by his imitations of auditory hallucinations, but surprised at the warmth of love and affection that endures at the center of the storm. For NAMI affiliates, Mack offers an important tool for public education as part of

NAMI's *Campaign for the Mind of America*. During all his programs, he includes a reference to NAMI, its Web site, and its HelpLine. “It’s an organization I believe in,” he says.

“Recovery can mean more than a return to conventional life,” Mack explains. “For as long as my mother lived, she struggled with schizophrenia and needed special care. But she recovered in the sense that—after years of living homeless and locked away in hospitals—she found stability and dignity in a community that accepted her for who she was.”

Mack, 45, is a poet and technical writer who lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He once started working toward a business degree at MIT, but shifted his life’s focus after taking a poetry workshop. Encouraged by his mentor Maxine Kumin (winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry) and Seamus Heaney (winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature), he mined his childhood memories for images and themes.

Besides the national convention, Mack has performed for NAMI Massachusetts and NAMI Pennsylvania audiences. He is interested in giving performances sponsored by NAMI state organizations, affiliates or friends in other communities nationwide and can be contacted at mmack@alum.mit.edu.

“My mother’s illness profoundly shaped me,” he says. Through him, her influence continues to move others. Today her own voice reaches those who never knew her name. ☺

Our Lady of Sorrows

from *Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)*

Why my mother chopped off her hair,
followed me to the school bus stop
that morning in second grade,
I didn’t know. Or why

she bent down sobbing
don’t let go of my hand.
How long did we stand by the 7-11?
Other kids hushed, watching.

When the bus clunked to a stop
I climbed on last, grabbed a seat in back,
my mother outside, hands on my window,
her face a blur

as the bus jerked away.
The kid beside me punched my arm.
*Who was that man with you
crying so hard?*

I said I didn’t know.
Three times I swore *I don’t know him.*

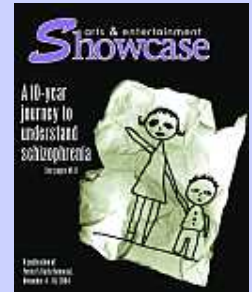


A Tribute to His Mother: Mack’s mother died last year at age 73. “I was five years old when my mother suffered her first psychotic break,” he recalls. “The change was devastating. My father struggled alone to cope . . . raising four small children and navigating a dismal mental health care system The life we had known was over.”

(poem appearing in *Best Catholic Writing 2005*)

Showcase Magazine

Thursday, November 4, 2004



Cover Story

Lifting the shroud off mental illness

A decade in the making, this one-man, nationally-touring monologue shares the experiences of one man, his siblings and father living with schizophrenic mother

By LAURA POPE

Showcase Correspondent

Spoken word performance — whether a play or poem — has at its heart the power to transport, entertain and transform those who witness and perform it.

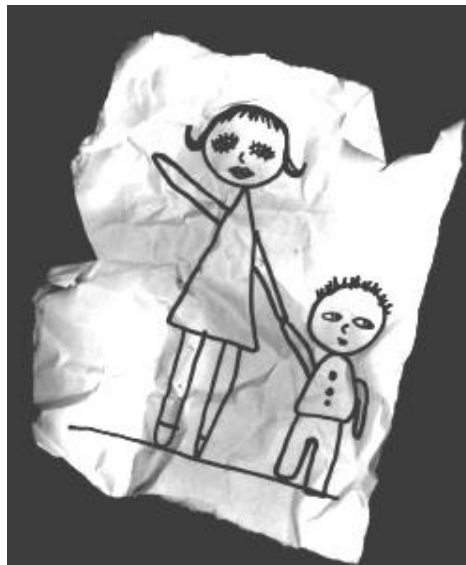
Such is the case with "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)," a 90-minute play/monologue written and performed by Michael Mack, a Boston-based slam poet champion, touring performer and MIT grad.

Serving as an entertaining, compelling and informative narrative about schizophrenia, "Hearing Voices" has earned Mack national acclaim from both general public and mental health care professional audiences. An unpremeditated poet, Mack, formerly a tech writer, gravitated more and more in slam competitions to poems about his early years as the oldest of four children dealing with his mother Annie's schizophrenia.

Studies reveal that 1 in 100 individuals will be diagnosed with the disease characterized by auditory or visual hallucinations, delusions, psychotic behavior and many times, depression. Periods of lucid and calm behavior are periodically interrupted by abrupt swings or breaks into distinctly chaotic or wild behavior, though new approaches to recovery have come to the fore that include better medicines and psychotherapy along with a united front of support systems and coping skills.

By 1997, Mack began performing just these poems, "Hearing Voices", accumulated over a decade, all over the country with the intent of casting light on how this disease affected him, his three siblings and father. Detailed in the poems are Annie's lucid times and hospitalizations, the horror of crushing drugs and electro-shock treatments, visitations to see her and the way he and his family managed to stay together. After increasingly longer stays in hospitals and stints on the street, Annie Mack eventually found solace in a Baltimore group home where she lived out the last five years of her life. She died of cancer three years ago.

The performance, sponsored by NAMI-NH, the state chapter of the non-profit National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, takes place Friday evening, Nov. 5, at the Middle Street Baptist Church at 18 Court Street in Portsmouth at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$16; for ticketing information call 436-3264, fax 431-5570, or email seacoastnami@eml.cc. A question and answer program follows the performance, led by a panel consisting of Mack, the Reverend Vivan Martindale of the Middle Street Baptist Church and Jackie Ellis, a leader of the NAMI-NH Support Group.



Michael Mack's Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues) takes place Friday evening, Nov. 5, at the Middle Street Baptist Church at 18 Court Street in Portsmouth at 8 p.m.

Describing himself as "shy and retiring," it is hard to imagine Michael Mack as a two-time slam poet champion representing Boston in national contests.



Michael Mack

done before."

Since that first immersion in Howe's poetry class in 1986, Mack explored various topics to ground his poetry, but he invariably moved toward the personal topic of growing up in a household struggling to understand and cope with his mother's disease.

"I found myself returning to the topic of my mother's mental illness and my family's experiences again and again. The poetry became a labor of love and a transformative experience," he said. "I found that this focused interest on those early experiences brought me to a compassion and understanding I would not have had otherwise."

Mack depicts poetry performance as a "very energizing experience. As a younger performer I was very much into the high energy and high drama of performing. When I was competing early on, I would perform a few pieces about my mother. They had a lot of energy and drama and always netted high scores. Somehow, I felt that I wasn't doing a service to the higher story this way, by continuing the stereotypes or stigma of mental illness. The only way to do justice to the topic in a larger context was to perform with love about a spiritual journey."

"Hearing Voices," Mack explained, "is always in flux, always a work in progress even after 15 years of writing poetry. It would be more like a two-and-one-half hour show if I included all the material I've written. I'm constantly tweaking and exploring the events behind what I'm saying."

Audience response to "Hearing Voices," which is excerpted in his book of poems called "Homework," has been one of the major reasons Mack has increased his performance schedule to approximately 25 performances per year.

"The public usually has a reason for coming to the performance," he added. Most people would not come to a show about mental illness as they wouldn't consider it entertainment," he confided. "But I have worked it as an entertaining, educational, serious art."

There are those who would attend his performance just to witness a champion poet at work, while others come out of curiosity or because they know someone or have a relationship with someone dealing with mental illness. In "Hearing Voices," Mack performs poetry but also speaks informally and clinically about several aspects of schizophrenia.

Throughout the staging, Mack instills a vivid snapshot of one family's journey with the disease, from his father's devotion in caring for his wife, Annie, paying for her treatments and keeping the family together and the many times he and his siblings stayed with a family in the neighborhood to trips to various hospitals and calls from Annie when she was homeless.

Mack cites the particulars of Annie's life and illness with great clarity and the reverence of a son for a beloved mother.

"She was first diagnosed with schizophrenia in her late 20s after a bout of post-partum psychosis with the birth of her fourth and last child. The diagnosis changed over the years to bipolar or manic depressive disorder to schizoaffective disorder."

The poet further explains that the term schizophrenia was coined at the beginning of the 20th century and covered a whole spectrum of illnesses. Different diagnoses or labels have surfaced as medical advances and brain science have more accurately refined the identification of mental illnesses.

"Being a poet was a big surprise to me," said the one-time student of business at the prestigious Sloan School at MIT. "I had dabbled in the arts; sang and played guitar. I really didn't have any inkling of my interest in writing and poetry. I took a poetry class to write better songs."

His experience in Fanny Howe's poetry class would rattle his cage; instigate him to take a year off to think about what he really wanted to do, which was to change his college major from the world of finance and economy to the world of words. Mentored by Pulitzer Prize-winning New Hampshire poet, Maxine Kumin and Nobel Prize laureate Seamus Heaney, Mack followed his heart and memories to write poetry.

"I found poetry was an outlet for things I had kept to myself for years," he recalled. "It is very therapeutic way for me to frame and to see from an adult perspective the formative events of my youth; to give shape and meaning to these events as I hadn't

"I was five or six when she was first hospitalized," he recalled, "and 10 when my parents separated. Her stays in the hospitals became longer as time went on. My father went into debt and eventually he and my mother were forced to deal with the state hospital system in and around Washington, D.C., which was not so great. At times, she would be on the street.

"Thorazine was the mainstay drug in the hospitals at the time and it made her into a shell of her normal self. On the street she could be wild and loud but to me that seemed better than her being in a drugged or subdued state. Today, the medicines are much better, the therapy is helpful and there is so much promising stuff happening with diagnoses, treatment and recovery."

Mack is most grateful for the "dignified" group home setting where Annie spent her last years.

Mack points out that while writing and performing poetry has been a great healing process for him, his siblings have also found ways to come to terms with their childhood experiences relating to Annie's illness.

"For many years, my older sister would have nothing to do with mama. She was frightened about the memories and what mama would be like. Then she started tagging along on visits to mama with our youngest sister. Eventually, my older sister became mama's primary caregiver and emotionally connected."

Throughout the touching and alarming scenes, the descriptions of despair and hope in "Hearing Voices," Mack's biggest hope is to "convey a tremendous quality of love."

BOSTON Herald

Playwright 'Voices' struggle with mother's mental illness

by Aiden Fitzgerald
Thursday, May 1, 2003

For Michael Mack, performing is therapy.

In his one-man show, "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)," opening tonight at the Boston Center for the Arts, he attempts to bring mental illness "out of the darkness and into the light."

Mack's story defies stereotypes of mental illness as it probes his mother's struggle with schizophrenia.

"This is about reliving, embodying and bearing witness" to the trauma, said Mack, 46, who was 5 when his mother began slipping into schizophrenia.

"Hearing Voices," a compilation of poetic vignettes, spans moments from Mack's childhood to his adulthood, interspersed with roles of his mother and father.



FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS: Michael Mack performs in "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)"

Delusions began for Mack's mother a couple of weeks after she gave birth to her fourth and youngest child.

She spent subsequent years in and out of state mental institutions and halfway houses and lived on the streets. As treatment improved and medicine came out of what Mack calls the "dark ages," his mother was able to live her final years in a group home in Baltimore.

"People say, 'Wow. That must have been so hard to deal with as a kid,' but really, I found it harder as a young adult to handle all of this, because while it was happening, I was doing what kids do, just going along," said Mack, a poet and part-time technical writer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who lives in Cambridge.

"The most difficult part is figuring it out - how do you put this all together? For me, it's about telling a story."

Mack's story strives to give voice to the 1 percent of people with schizophrenia, which is marked by delusional thoughts, auditory or visual hallucinations and psychotic episodes. The play helps to validate their experiences in a society that often treats mental illness as a stigma.

"We felt extremely isolated," said Mack, whose family never talked about his mother's illness with others.

"The household became very chaotic and unsettling. There was an uncertainty about home life and the world in general," he said, recalling times he had to explain his mother's wild behavior to perplexed peers.

Once, he even denied he was her son.

Now, after years of mining his childhood experiences and dealing with the past, Mack said he finds redemption through sharing his story. He understands that "mental illness is a lot more common than we let on," and he values other people's stories, too.

"There is tremendous healing that comes from opening the door for conversation."

"Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)" at the Boston Center for the Arts, 539 Tremont St., Boston, tonight through May 17. Tickets: \$15-\$18. Call 617-426-2787.

ARTIFACTS**A Place in the Son****THEATER**

Onstage, Michael Mack is becoming his mother. He hugs his arms around his chest; his fingers gingerly flutter up his arms to his neck and then to his face, which he contorts as he shifts from sadness to anger to frustration to confusion and back to anger. "This is not my body; this is a house of demons," he whimpers painfully. "This is a palace of demons," he calls out. Then he freezes. Then he shakes. Then he's himself again.

Offstage, Mack, 45,

is the composed and compassionate son of a schizophrenic parent. He has spent the past four years performing and tweaking his one-man show, *Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)*, which premieres in Washington this week at the District of Columbia Arts Center. "It has been an evolution. I really had to find a way to work through those experiences with my mother, because they were so formative for me," says Mack, a DC-area native who now lives in Boston. "The show is really a series of moments, because I found while writing that there were . . . particular times in my life that had special meaning and poignancy for me." Those moments span from childhood to adulthood: from a 7-year-old Mack having to explain his mom's erratic behavior to his perplexed elementary school peers to an adult Mack receiving a collect call from his mother, who had been missing and living on the streets for months, asking him to pick her up at an intersection somewhere in Washington.

There is no shortage of stories for the performer, the oldest of four kids, who was 5 years old when his mother began slipping into schizophrenia. She spent subsequent years in and out of state mental institutions, as she vacillated between the stability brought on by her medications and the unpredictability of being off them. Mack didn't start writing about it all until college.

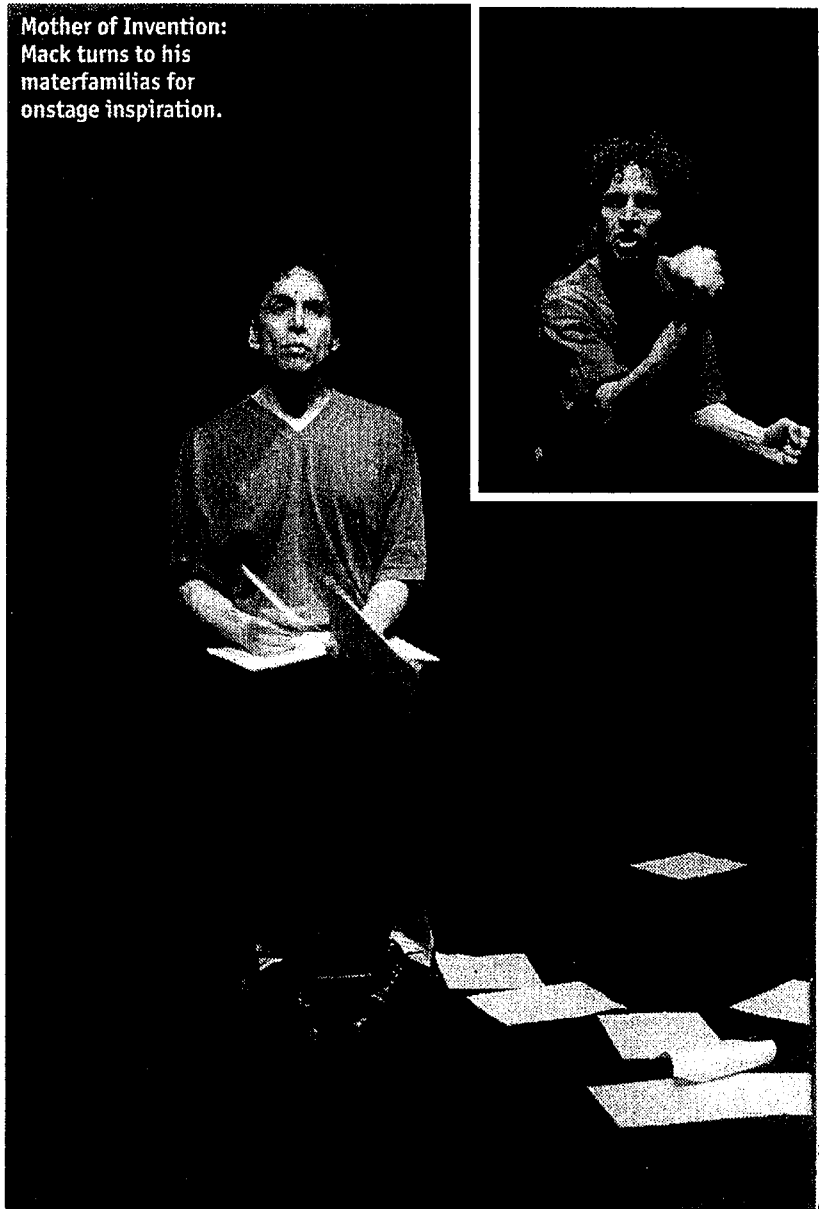
As a business major at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he took a poetry class for fun, plumbed his childhood for writing material, and ended up switching majors. He honed his performance chops in the Boston poetry-slam scene, competed in national slam competitions, and eventually began developing some of his pieces into a complete work that became *Hearing Voices*.

Though Mack still has a day job—he works as a tech writer for one of MIT's research centers—lately he's been spending more time on his show. He's often the scheduled entertainment at mental-health conferences across the country, where he always gets a warm reception from people who can relate to his tales. "The thing that I've been realizing is it's such a universal story, because mental illness is a lot more common than we let on: one in every four families has somebody who

suffers from a psychotic break," says Mack. "When people tell me their stories, it's like I'm hearing my story all over again, because there are so many components that repeat themselves."

These days, Mack's mother is living in a group home in Baltimore, and the two talk weekly. She hasn't been to the show, but Mack's father saw it last year. "He found it interesting that the same experiences that he had as an adult, I could convey as a child. It gave him a perspective that he didn't have before," says Mack, who hopes to bring the show back to Washington again later this year. "He was impressed, and he said I handled

Mother of Invention:
Mack turns to his
materfamilias for
onstage inspiration.



Darrow Montgomery

it well, I'm glad to say, because, as you can imagine, I was really nervous."
-Aimee Agresti

Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues) runs to Saturday, Feb. 16, at the District of Columbia Arts Center, 2438 18th Street NW. For more information, call (202) 462-7833.



Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)

Arts and Entertainment

A-LIST!

Monday September 2, 2002

Michael Mack knows the story of his family is not unique. And it is for that reason that Mack continues to do what he does: perform a one-man show about growing up with a mother who has schizophrenia. Mack was 5 when his mother had her first psychotic break. From then on the family's home life was plagued by turmoil and bizarre events. Still, in Mack's show it's clear that despite all her troubles, his mother loved him and his siblings deeply. Moments of great warmth come through in this family chronicle, and it is to Mack's credit that the spoken-word piece feels sympathetic rather than

angry. This is no vengeful effort; it's a work of redemption. In his program book, Mack notes that mental illness is pervasive and stigmatizing. In presenting a three-dimensional portrait of his mother, Mack defies stereotypes that cause prejudice. "How can we better understand this complex illness and the relationships that form around it?" asks Mack. The first step, as he is well aware, is empathy. (*Liz Spikol*)

Starts Sunday, Sept. 1. 3:30pm. \$10. Mum Puppettheatre, 115 Arch St. 215.925.7MUM

THE IMPROPER BOSTONIAN

BRUTAL, TRAGIC, AND SURPRISINGLY BEAUTIFUL

BY MOPSY STRANGE KENNEDY

June 15, 2005

"Hearing Voices" is a performance piece by Michael Mack about his mother's schizophrenia, which surfaced when she was in her late twenties, the mother of four small children under age five.

The painful experience and the wide-ranging fallout from his mother's schizophrenia has blown like a lifelong wind through the heart and soul of Michael Mack. His performance piece – evolved through poetry slams – concerns the whole 9,000 yards, full of mournful period detail of what the family endured. Michael, looking rather like an archangel, becomes his mother's empathic inner and outer voice, constructing her fractured, tortured experience. ("Lucifer rules this house / he knocks the light / it swings from the ceiling / glass and shadows fly at the walls"). The lives of the husband and children are sent skittering around the illness as Mack poignantly describes countless hospital visits ("Dad? Why is Mama there?"), the helpmeet, otherwise-chaotic neighbors with 13 kids of their own ("Mrs. Cramer, huge, buttery, sat in a permanent squat, one wet kid or another hammering on her seat") and nutty Uncle Bill's letters "plastered with stickers: happy moons, funny hats." At one point, Mack faces away and has his audience close their eyes while he whispers hisses, and shouts an approximation of the sounds of the voices, often threatening, he imagines his mother hears. Mack manages to find "something artful in a subject people might think of as awful and nothing else."

Mack is available to perform his work in theatrical and mental health settings. E-mail mmack@alum.mit.edu for performances and booking opportunities.

NPR Affiliates



**Radio Times
with Marty Moss-Coane**



Friday, August 29th, 2002

Performance artist MICHAEL MACK was five years old when his mother was diagnosed as a schizophrenic. He's in Philadelphia for the Fringe Festival where he will perform his multi-character solo show called "Hearing Voices." Michael joins guest host Dave Davies.

<http://www.whyy.org/91FM/RadioTimes.html> (search archives for "Michael Mack")

WAMU 88.5FM

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY RADIO



Friday November 22, 2002

Michael Mack, poet and performer of his one-man play, "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)." One man's artistic response to his mother's battle with schizophrenia.

http://www.wamu.org/kojo/shows/knarc_021118.html

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Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)

March 15, 2001

When Michael Mack was a little boy, his mother suffered a psychotic break, and his entire family boarded the terrifying, distorting, hallucinogenic roller coaster of schizophrenia. One out of five families is affected by mental illness of some form. The horrifying transformation of a loved one can strike a child mute.

But now, an adult, Michael has found his voice and is sharing it with others. He's written a one man show called "Hearing Voices, Speaking in Tongues," poetry and performance art that fearlessly examines schizophrenia, and he performs to rave reviews from doctors, mental health support groups, and other health care professionals.

Read Poems:

She Helped Me Slide the Mattress Back
Seven

Information on Schizophrenia:

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
Call 1-800-950-6264

Information on the Performance:

Michael Mack's one-man show is performed March 16-18 and 23-25

http://archives.here-now.org/topics/poetry/poems/2001/poems_01031



JAMES C. BECK, M.D., PH.D.
Professor of Psychiatry

Associate Chairman, Department of Psychiatry

January 10, 2000

Dear Michael,

I write to thank you for the performance you gave at our psychiatry grand rounds. It was truly inspiring and many of us were deeply touched by your work. You portrayed in a very moving way what it means to be a member of a family in which one person has schizophrenia.

An experiential presentation like yours plays a unique role in helping all of us understand what it is that we deal with professionally. It complements all our medical/psychiatric data and helps us to build a stronger capacity for caring for our patients.

I am happy to serve as a reference, because I think many others in the mental health professions could benefit as we did from seeing your work.

With appreciation,



BOSTON INSTITUTE
for **PSYCHOTHERAPY**



April 19, 2004

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Sarah A. Bins, M.D.
Ann R. Epstein, M.D.
Co-Directors,
Infant Mental Health Program

Dear Michael,

I want to thank you so much for bringing such creativity to our annual Boston Institute for Psychotherapy/Museum of Fine Arts symposium, "Creativity in Psychotherapy and Ordinary Life."

Your performance was magnificent! Every organizer, as well as every performer, dreams of a standing ovation such as you received. But you bring healing, wisdom, and compassion to the performance as well. It is rare to find someone who is such a gifted poet, playwright, and actor.

But you offer an even rarer gift. Although I have treated schizophrenics, it was not until your performance that I felt I could enter the body and mind of a schizophrenic. I think of you as an alchemist: you work with base human experience and transform it into a shining work of art.

Thank you for making this symposium such a huge success. You were a total pleasure to work with. Please let me know how I can continue to support this important work.

With warmest regards,

Dr. Susan Pollak

Clinical Instructor in Psychology, Harvard Medical School

BIP-MFA Symposium Chair

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FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY, INC.

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SUSAN WHITEHEAD

November 22, 2005

Dear Mr. Mack:

Your performance was absolutely terrific. It was spellbinding, and I marvel at how you captured the essence of mental illness, and the profound, unsettling effect it has on family members.

All of us on the McLean National Council thank you for your moving performance. In addition, it was a pleasure to meet you.

Best wishes for all that your future holds.

Warm regards,

Jeanne Robertson
Chairperson, McLean National Council



BETH ISRAEL DEACONESS
MEDICAL CENTER
A member of CAREGROUP



A major teaching hospital
of Harvard Medical School

November 3, 2000

Dear Michael:

On behalf of the Social Work Department at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, I would like to thank you for your outstanding performance on September 28, 2000. Over the past month, several staff members have stopped by my office to let me know how much they enjoyed your performance and how grateful they were for the experience.

All of the comments we received through our evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. Several attendees remarked that this was “the best” grand rounds that they had ever attended. Words like “brilliant,” “extraordinary,” “unbelievable,” “wonderful,” and “moving” were used to describe the experience. One person commented that you were “wonderful in every way.”

I felt similarly impressed. I am deeply moved by your personal journey through this experience and by your ability to transform something so personal into an instrument to captivate and educate others. In general, I felt that the movement of the piece (for lack of a better phrase) spoke to a universal experience of healing, beginning with the trauma of the experience and moving through the shame, loss, and grief to a place of acceptance. These few words cannot adequately capture all of the layers to your performance and to the experience of witnessing it; it was an honor to witness and a gift to experience.

Sincerely,

Jacqui Turpin



St. Peter's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF GERMANTOWN

May 19, 2004

Dear Michael,

It was a privilege and a great pleasure to have you perform Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues) at St. Peter's. I want to repeat what I told you while you were here: having seen Hearing Voices in a church, it is difficult to imagine it being performed in another venue.

I hope that more churches will host performances of your work. Hearing Voices is a profoundly spiritual theater piece. A key part of Jesus' ministry was healing mental and emotional illness (understood in his day as demonic possession), so I believe that Christian churches in particular are charged with the responsibility to reach out to the mentally ill and those affected by mental illness. Sadly, we usually do a poor job of this. Your work is one way we can meet our responsibility. Hearing Voices is a message of comfort to the mentally ill and their families, and a wake-up call to all of us to the challenge presented by mental illness. I would go even further: Hearing Voices not only communicates, but by dispelling the shadows around mental illness, it allows those struggling with such disorders to bring their wounds out into the light where they can be healed.

Thank you again for presenting your work at St. Peter's. I wish you all the best in the future.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barry Vaughn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Rev. J. Barry Vaughn, Ph.D.,
Rector

6008 WAYNE AVENUE, PHILADELPHIA, PA 19144
(215) 844-1203



Community Mental Health

Ottawa County



Joint Commission
on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations

Gerard Cyranowski, *Executive Director*

October 4, 2004

Dear Michael,

Thank you so much for bringing your play *Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)* to Ottawa County Community Mental Health. Your performance at our annual All Staff Meeting was riveting. You managed to touch the hearts of even our most war weary staff, and, equally important, you educated us. Your performance honors your mother, not only by remembering her with great compassion and love, but by teaching others whose lives are touched by mental illness.

The response to your performance from all staff, including those who work with people with developmental disabilities, and those in clerical and administrative positions, was overwhelmingly positive. The standing ovation that you received was heartfelt and well deserved. Some of the comments we received were: "Left me speechless! Excellent," "Thunderous applause for Michael Mack," "Fascinating, moving, exceptional delivery, mind-boggling use of words and sounds," "Wow, this was fabulous! Michael is incredibly talented, insightful, and a powerful performer."

Again, thank you. We will remember your performance, and hopefully, be changed by it, for a long time to come.

Sincerely,

Dana Gezon
Staff Development Coordinator
Community Mental Health of Ottawa County
12263 James Street
Holland, Michigan 49424

More Endorsements for *Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)*

Poignant, funny, sad, raucous, tender and very skillfully performed, Michael Mack's 'Hearing Voices' deserves wide attention.

— Maxine Kumin
Pulitzer Prize for Poetry

Michael Mack's narratives about his mother's mental illness have brought tears of sadness and joy to many people. I have attended several performances and can say without reservation that Michael is an artist par excellence. He must be heard.

— Moe Armstrong, Board of Directors
National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)

Mack's wonderfully compelling and moving performances reveal special insights into the lives of those with mental illness.

— Jay Neugeboren, author of
Remembering Robert: My Brother, Madness, and Survival, and
Transforming Madness: New Lives for People with Mental Illness

Compelling, informative, a vivid snapshot of one family's journey. This spoken word performance has at its heart the power to entertain, transport, and transform those who witness it.

— *Showcase Magazine*

A rich and moving window into the lives of families struggling with major mental illness, Michael Mack's deeply human presentation brought a vivid, powerful experience to our National Conference.

— Midge Williams, President
American Mental Health Counselors Association

Michael Mack's brilliant and courageous one-man drama is the most powerful and unique form of art I have ever experienced.

— Edie Mannion, Director and Co-Founder
Mental Health Association TEC Family Center, Philadelphia PA

Few works of art are as forceful a commentary on severe mental illnesses and how they affect individuals and their families as Michael Mack's one-man play, "Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues). Mack's message resonates because of its truth—a many-faceted, even convoluted truth of sadness, ache, factual information, humor, confusion—but above all, love. Mack's play is infused with it. It is the constant emotion that back-lights everything else in the play.

— *Reintegration Today*

An especially poignant look at the fuzzy line between illness and religious illumination. Tender, stirring, uplifting . . . a must see.

— *The Rake*, Minneapolis

Brilliant work. Michael Mack is a most gifted poet and performing artist. By touching our hearts with his poignantly told story, he brought our social work staff into the lives of families with major mental illness. This was a truly wonderful educational experience.

— Pat Hertz, Director
Department of Social Work, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston

We received Michael Mack's remarkable and touching work with rave reviews and a sense of awe.

— Joan Rosenson, Director of Social Work Training
South Shore Mental Health Center

More than a story about mental illness, Michael Mack's stunning one-man drama explores the nature of human relationships, and gives an intimate portrait of the complexity of family dynamics. This work is universal.

— Victor Tang, Vice President (ret.)
IBM

Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!

— Rev. Vivian Martindale, Pastor
Middle Street Baptist Church, Portsmouth NH

In this beautiful, compelling memoir, Mack switches seamlessly between past and present voices – his current perspective, his brave 5-year-old self, his younger siblings, and both of his parents. He portrays a triumphant life – his mom didn't give up. She died at age 73 still combating her demons. Graphic, fragmented, and honest, Mack gracefully enlightens.

— Skyway News, Minneapolis

A vivid performer, Michael Mack gives an authentic, sensitive portrayal of a family experiencing mental illness. While he speaks with compassion, his language remains lean and clear. Don't miss an opportunity to hear this gifted poet.

— Jane Moser, President
National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) of Western Massachusetts

I have worked in the mental health field for sixteen years, and have attended many conferences, workshops, and seminars, but never have I seen such a creative expression of someone's experience around mental illness. Michael Mack is magic.

— Linda Nardella, Director
Atlantic House, Quincy MA