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Across a Wilderness to an Obscure Place Called 'Self'

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THEATER REVIEW

Martin Moran has spent time with more than a few therapists. He mentions a Sanskrit mantra that he recites in moments of stress, so you assume there's been a meditation guru somewhere in his life. And he quotes the eternally helpful words of philosophers like Seneca and Aristotle. But when it comes to locating his place within the vastness of the cosmos

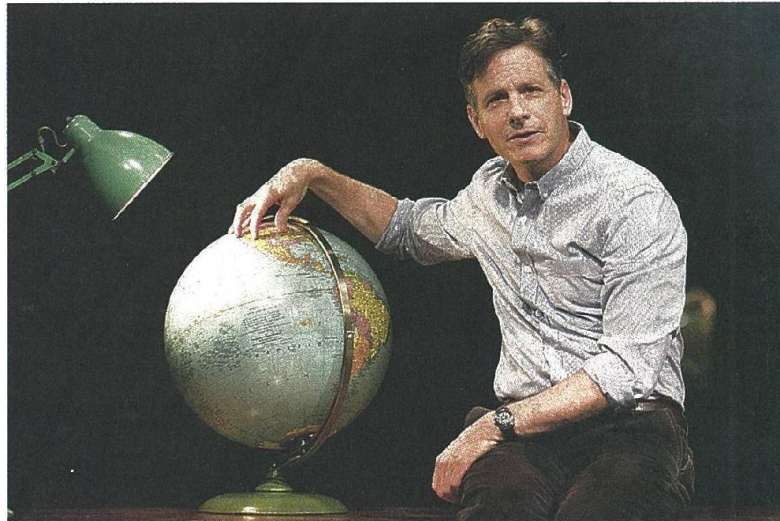
Mr. Moran is his own tour guide, as we all have to be in the long run. The map of self-discovery he lays out in "All the Rage," his artfully rambling one-man show, is part of no known GPS program. It loops and doubles back and slides off the page, as if dictated by a broken compass. Nonetheless "All the Rage," which opened on Wednesday night at the Peter Jay Sharp Theater on West 42nd Street in Manhattan, is agreeably easy

All the Rage
Peter Jay Sharp Theater

to follow. And if not every stop on its itinerary comes into equally clear focus, this chatty but soulful show leads you into thought- and emotion-stirring territory that you don't often visit at the theater. Rage is the subject of "All the Rage."

This is a condition that you might expect Mr. Moran to be well acquainted with. He is the author of the memoir "The Tricky Part," the basis of his 2004 Obie-winning play of the same title, which described his relationship with the counselor at a church camp who seduced him when he was 12. As anyone who saw or read "The Tricky Part" knows, full-blown rage

Continued on Page 4



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Martin Moran in his one-man show "All the Rage" at the Peter Jay Sharp Theater.

Toward an Obscure Place Called 'Self'

From First Arts Page

does not come naturally to the instinctively polite Mr. Moran. That work found him grown-up and reunited with his abuser, then a patient in a veteran's hospital, in a confrontation that was most remarkable for its nonconfrontational nature.

In "All the Rage" Mr. Moran quotes from a review of "The Tricky Part" that marveled at his refusal "to blame or despise his molester." It was, he says, as if "I were being called out for missing an essential piece — for skipping on, or being frightened of, anger."

So Mr. Moran has now gone in pursuit of the anger not only within himself but also around him. Living in Manhattan, he is not hard-pressed to find local specimens, and he comes up with two classic variations involving drivers and pedestrians at crosswalks.

But he also ventures much further afield: to a sun-stroked Las Vegas (where his loathed stepmother resides); to the freezing mountains of Colorado (where his younger brother lives in hostile isolation); to the Denver home of his childhood (where his mother kept a cathartic makeshift punching bag in the garage). Then there are the examples he culls from a visit to South Africa and his experience of working as a French-to-English translator for a refugee from Chad.

With the man from Chad, who has been separated from his wife and child and undergone torture by guerrillas, it is Mr. Moran's turn to wonder at someone else's equanimity. But he continues to surprise himself as well, as when a palm he raises to strike an ev-

All the Rage

Written and performed by Martin Moran; directed by Seth Barrish; sets by Mark Wendland; costumes by Clint Ramms; lighting by Russell H. Champa; sound by Leon Rothenberg; video by Bart Cortright; production manager, Robert Saenz de Viteri; production stage manager, Tom Taylor; general manager, Snug Harbor Productions/Steven Chaiselson and Kendra Eator. Presented by Piece by Piece Productions and Rising Phoenix Repertory, in association with the Barrow Group. At the Peter Jay Sharp Theater, 416 West 42nd Street, Manhattan, (212) 279-4200, ticketcentral.com. Through Feb. 24. Running time: 1 hour 20 minutes.

eryday antagonist (it's the stepmom) somehow turns into a caressing hand.

Each of these instances of rage expressed or sublimated might be subjected to endless explication, psychological and sociological. Mr. Moran is neither equipped nor disposed to do that. His journey and his point of view are strictly personal, with the proviso that he is trying to extrapolate something universal from the personal.

That, of course, is what we expect from stand-up memoirists, even hard-core solipsists like Spalding Gray, whose work remains the genre's gold standard nine years after his death. Mr. Moran (whose résumé includes appearances in many Broadway musicals) is less the complete narcissist and more obviously eager to please. He retains the courteous, ingratiating, gently self-mocking manner of the high school class president (who played Jesus in "Godspell" the same year) that he was.

Working with the director Seth Barrish, who also staged "The Tricky Part," Mr. Moran explores

and exploits his own diffidence. His very performance style becomes Exhibit A of his strengths and limitations in dealing with anger. (It feels physically shocking whenever he raises his voice.) And his good-student sensibility is made use of in a continuing show-and-tell presentation that involves assorted visual aids, including pinpointed maps.

The maps are only a diversion, finally. The destination that Mr. Moran is trying to achieve is both too fraught and elusive for cartography. "All the Rage" doesn't have the natural emotional arc provided by the personal history of "The Tricky Part"; in its diffuseness it is less dramatically satisfying.

But there's something profoundly touching in the show's greater ambition, in Mr. Moran's desire to connect his introspective travels with the larger world. Because he has a novelist's command of the evocative detail, there are times when a precisely rendered moment seems to open a window onto a hauntingly expansive view.

Or as Mr. Moran puts it, describing the occasion when he almost punched out his stepmother, onto the sense of life "being lived in a dream." We all experience such moments of heightened, fleeting clarity, and they are as hard to capture and freeze as lightning.

Mr. Moran has the true artist's gift for sharing such moments: If "All the Rage" sometimes seems caught in the conventional undergrowth of one man's midlife crisis, lightning flashes often enough to surprise us into seeing exactly where he is — and perhaps where we are — on a dark planet.