

# An Actor Confronts A Wrenching Rite of Passage

By BEN BRANTLEY

Toward the end of "The Tricky Part," Martin Moran's translucent memoir of a play, a man who might be called the villain of the piece is quoted to shattering effect: "There were a lot of levels to what we shared."

It is a bland enough sentence out of context. But what is being remembered is the sexual relationship between a 30-year-old man and a 12-year-old boy, the playwright three decades ago. Talking about "a lot of levels" might be appropriate to a post-mortem of a more conventional love affair. As a self-defense of or apology for

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pedophilia, it is unforgivable. Even so, there are a lot of levels to the autobiographical story that Mr. Moran tells in "The Tricky Part," which opened last night at the McGinn/Cazale Theater on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The show's quiet victory comes from its insistence on carefully mapping out each tier. Mr. Moran doesn't underplay the damage of his sexual initiation. It appears to have been considerable. At the same time he refuses to reduce a life-warping experience to a one-note cry of pain and accusation.

"The Tricky Part" is frills-free theater. There's not much more to it than an actor and his audience. You may feel you've had quite enough of confessional one-person plays. But at a moment when child molestation is an ever-present and incendiary topic, especially in connection with the Roman Catholic Church, Mr. Moran offers a remarkably coherent yet complicated first-hand perspective.

Mr. Moran, a 44-year-old actor best known for his work in musicals ("Titanic," "Floyd Collins"), is not a chameleon performance artist of many voices like Anna Deavere Smith or Danny Hoch. What he is presenting is himself, or rather a polished stage version of himself, that occasionally betrays cracks in his actorly self-assurance. His face is boyish, open and ingratiating, and its lines of middle age, as they come into focus, are as startling as scars. Mr. Moran's bruised innocence gives "The Tricky Part"

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an authenticity that a more carefully composed persona could not. And it makes this 80-minute work, directed by Seth Barrish, all the more affecting as it examines the abrupt end to one boy's childhood.

The show's first part is devoted to Mr. Moran's wry recollections of attending Catholic school in Denver and of how the church's theology and imagery shaped his vision of himself. The rest of the play shifts between accounts of the beginning of his affair in early adolescence with a church camp counselor and former seminarian, and of the brief reunion between them in 2002, when the older man (identified by a pseudonym in the play) was a patient in a veteran's hospital.

What gives "The Tricky Part" its disturbing immediacy is Mr. Moran's gift for summoning the confused boy he was with exact

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Written and performed by Martin Moran; directed by Seth Barrish; sets by Paul Steinberg; lighting by Heather Carson; producing associate, Doug MacArthur; production stage manager, Tom Taylor; production manager, Kai Production Strategies; general management, Snug Harbor Productions. Presented by James B. Freyberg, CTM Productions, Wendy Vanden Heuvel and Sharon Rosen, in association with True Love Productions. At the McGinn/Cazale Theater, 2162 Broadway, at 76th Street.

sensory detail. His systematic seduction, on an overnight trip to a mountain ranch, is rendered as a crystalline accumulation of moments, couched in organic metaphors of religion and nature.

The emotions being stirred here are not simple. As the older man drags the boy into his sleeping bag, the young Martin thinks that he has to "stop the accident." At the same time, "it was as though he was touching me into being, and I was dying to find out who I was." Guilt and liberation jostle for dominance in one heady, hurtful breath. Mr.

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Moran gives such urgent life to these memories that you have no difficulty in believing that he has remained in their thrall ever since. His encounter as an adult with the man who seduced him vibrates with the vertigo that descends when past and present coexist. Clearly there is no possibility of that absolving phenomenon called closure.

The show's title refer to accepting divine grace in unlikely, often ugly forms. It could just as easily have to do with the difficulty in finding patterns in moral and emotional conflict without oversimplifying. Mr. Moran may say he has yet to let go of the wounded child he was. But there is surely some redemption in rendering chaos with this kind of clarity.



Martin Moran in "The Tricky Part," his one-man play about his own sexual initiation, at the age of 12, with a 30-year-old man, a counselor at a church camp.