News



Writer and actor Patrick Sandford rehearses "Groomed" with saxophone player Marcus Benoit before their performance Oct. 20, 2024, at Siena College in Loudonville, N.Y. The play addresses child sexual abuse. (OSV News/Cindy Schultz, The Evangelist)

William Schmitt

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An award-winning, one-man play that made its U.S. public premiere in the Diocese of Albany was a breakthrough event, but not for reasons one might associate with a night at the theater.

The Oct. 20 presentation of "Groomed" gave its writer-performer, its audience and those who brought the project to life an opportunity to share intense, personal reflections about sexual abuse of children.

Patrick Sandford, whose acting portrayed the aftermath of abuse inflicted by his elementary school teacher in England, has explained he wrote the play as a kind of release from his own inner turmoil.

He said he hopes additional presentations now planned will continue to promote understanding, conversation, prevention and healing among victims of similar suffering and supporters of solutions.

Sandford's performance of the 55-minute play was followed by heartfelt questions and answers in a modest classroom-theater on the Siena College campus in Loudonville.

The Hope and Healing Committee of the Diocese of Albany hosted the evening as a free-of-charge gathering for survivors of child abuse, for those who might desire relevant counseling and for anyone wanting to learn more about the subject. The committee also coordinated the cross-Atlantic planning for the premiere — a process which began in March.

The effort toward this expansion of dialogue received encouragement from Albany Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger, and he was in the audience for the weekend premiere.

The play itself, which included occasional punctuation by saxophonist Marcus Benoit, placed the audience inside a painful, decades-long journey. It included what

Sandford at one point called "the alchemy of anger," interacting with shame, silence and a range of other emotional after-effects, such as mixed feelings about one's openness to love.

The abusive practices took place when Sandford was 10 years old, but he opened up to talk about the experiences only in his mid-30s, he said. He did not discuss it with many friends until his 50s, he acknowledged in conversations after the play. Sandford is now 72.

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Victims of childhood sexual abuse postpone talking about those memories for about 25 years on average, said Sandford, who was a finalist for best male performer in the 2023 London of West End Awards. "Groomed" has also won three Outstanding Theatre Awards at the Brighton Fringe, a British theatrical festival, and it was performed for a month at the Soho Theatre in London. Sandford also performed the play at the Vatican last year.

He is now writing a second play on the subject, focusing on the silence in which it has too often been cloaked.

Back on the Siena campus, other statistics on the topic of abuse came up during the post-performance discussion. For example, according to one participant, one in four women and one in six men worldwide are said to have been subjected to child sexual abuse.

Audience members expressed various other concerns, largely calling for more support groups and initiatives to build back trust in institutions and to spread awareness, early intervention, therapy, better listening and preventive services to all the affected population segments.

These segments range from abuse victims to their families, from schools to churches, from young children to older age groups, also extending to those feeling inclinations that might later do harm.

Noelle Marie, victim assistance coordinator for the Diocese of Albany, said the church in Albany has made extensive progress establishing training programs and enforcement of safe-environment policies. But she added that the wider problems

with trauma of different sorts in different segments of society must be addressed. She said the Diocese of Albany is working to extend the range of its trauma training for personnel.

Another speaker noted that the Vatican has formed a Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, an advisory agency for the pope instituted by Pope Francis in 2014. He said the panel must take a "generational," long-term approach to reducing child sex abuse while also taking short-term actions.

"This stuff is insidious, and there's no simple answer," Sandford said to the gathering of about 40 people. He noted that groups striving for better prevention need more input from abuse survivors, but too many survivors are themselves struggling with repressed memories or an unwarranted sense of shame.

Despite the long list of challenges posed, audience members praised the play, both for its artistry and for its courage in "breaking the silence," as one person put it. Another called "Groomed" a "witness to the truth."

Sandford expressed gratitude for the U.S. premiere, which launched a six-show tour of upstate New York and New England.

"I am so thrilled that you are all here," he said, "because it means you are hearing and thinking, and that just warms my heart."