Culture



Jay Sefton appears in "Unreconciled," the one-person play he co-wrote. Sefton's abuser, Fr. Thomas J. Smith, was defrocked in 2007 after the Philadelphia district attorneys released a report that found "credible allegations" that Smith engaged in "depraved and sadistic behavior with many boys," especially those who had played the role of Christ in the priest’s play. (Andrew Greto)



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In 2021, the Pennsylvania House of Representatives passed a bill to provide a two-year window to allow sex abuse survivors to file civil lawsuits, no matter the statute of limitations.

It came in the wake of a 2018 state grand jury report that found more than 300 Catholic clergy in Pennsylvania had abused more than 1,000 victims since the 1940s.

The legislation still had to pass through the state senate, then have voters approve it as a ballot initiative before it became law. But due to a clerical error by the Department of State, those steps never happened and the bill had to start all over again.

In the wake of this fiasco, actor Jay Sefton co-wrote (with Mark Basquill) a one-man play starring himself. "Unreconciled" tells the story of how Sefton played Jesus in an eighth-grade Catholic school passion play in the Philadelphia suburb of Havertown under the direction of the priest that abused him —and the personal and community reverberations that last to this day.

It debuted last summer, and on March 31 it ended a successful run at Moving Arts Theater in Los Angeles. The play's schedule includes a performance today (April 5) at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman Center for Political Science and Economics.

The play opens with Sefton sitting in a chair next to a small table (the only props in the play), reenacting the day he opened a large envelope that held a settlement offer from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. He quickly transforms into his father, a grizzled wiseacre with an Irish American accent out of "Archie Bunker's Place." Sefton pinches an imaginary cigarette, squints his sparkling eyes and lets the audience know that what they're about to see "kinda has the feel" of Thornton Wilder's classic play "Our Town." It's a call for the audience to appreciate the universality of the tragedy.



Jay Sefton co-wrote and performed the one-man play "Unreconciled," the story of how he played Jesus in an eighth-grade Catholic school passion play in a Philadelphia suburb under the direction of the priest that abused him. (Andrew Greto)

The play flashes back to 1985, where a 13-year-old Jay beats the classroom joker for the coveted role of Jesus in the annual passion play of his parish, Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. "That spring," Sefton said, "everything smelled of possibility."

One-man shows are always risky affairs. The actor needs to imbue each character with distinct intonations, facial gestures and body language lest they meld into a confusing blob for the audience. The lanky Sefton — who wears an open flannel shirt, jeans, gray T-shirt and work boots throughout the play — is, thankfully, able to switch personas with ease.

Among the characters he portrays: His nervous eighth-grade self, an Irish nun, a middle-aged neighborhood gossip queen, a taunting schoolmate who predicts the abuse to come, even the garrulous church lawyer and his prim assistant who tries to

convince the audience they're on the side of survivors. But Sefton breaks the proverbial fourth wall to explain the methodology in his acting for only one role: his abuser, Fr. Thomas J. Smith.

The priest was laicized in 2007 after the Philadelphia district attorneys released a report that found "credible allegations" that Smith engaged in "depraved and sadistic behavior with many boys," especially those who had played the role of Christ in the priest's play. Sefton practically chortles as he mimics Smith's stiff upper lip, flat face and unfocused eyes until the actor looks like a sleepy-eyed ventriloquist dummy.

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Yet Sefton challenges playgoers to consider Smith's pitiable demands for sympathy. The disgraced cleric utters again and again, "*Ego te absolvo*" — "I absolve you," the statement offered by pre-Vatican II priests to forgive the sins of confessors — as if trying to will it into life. "Why do I not get that grace from you?" Sefton's Smith demands. The uncomfortable question lingers in the air long after Sefton proposes it.

This is no lugubrious 80 minutes, however: Sefton's Philly roots won't allow it. His sharp-elbowed humor makes the plot rather rollicking, along with judicious use of archival footage projected on a wall. That includes the real-life David-and-Goliath triumph that was Villanova's 1985 NCAA men's basketball championship victory, and Desean Jackson’s heaven-sent 2010 punt return for a touchdown against the hated New York Giants. The Via Dolorosa that is the Philadelphia Phillies gets a shout-out as well.

Even when it comes to grainy VHS video of the play that brought Sefton into his abuser's grubby hands, the actor deftly finds the hilarity in the horror. He says that his friends, who were playing apostles, wrote vulgar notes on their feet when Sefton-as-Jesus had to wash them. Cheerful laughs erupt from the audience when he shares that his younger, shirtless self was able to pry a small smile out of Lisa Boyle, his middle school crush who just happened to play the Virgin Mary and cradled him in her arms, Pieta style.

The heart of "Unreconciled," however, is Sefton's father. The actor embodies his father's heartbreak with the right pathos and empathy as Dad transforms from a

happy-go-lucky pops to vengeful patriarch when Smith's perversions become public. "I didn't know that my dad knew how to attach an article to an email," Sefton cracks after receiving a note with the subject line "The Bastard!," one of many successful deadpan observations.

A former AAA agent, his father sends then-Archbishop Charles Chaput multiple strongly worded letters demanding justice for his son and others before realizing the church isn't going to respond.

"You turn your eyes away, you trust," Dad says in the final monologue, "and you pay the price."

The play ends with slides that state multiple states have temporarily scrapped their statutes of limitations so sex abuse survivors can sue — but Pennsylvania still isn't one of them.

Sefton stumbles only a few times. Reenacting his teenage self's crucifixion while it screens behind him is too on the nose. When multiple characters utter a famous line from Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" — "Attention must be paid" — it evokes a drama major trying to impress an instructor, even if it's apropos. Those are trifles, though: "Unreconciled" will make you laugh, think, cry and seethe: Theater at its finest.

After the performance I attended, Sefton and his wife, "Unreconciled" stage manager Melenie Freedom Flynn, spoke to the audience for about half an hour. Sefton said his first draft clocked in at nearly three hours before he whittled it down to its present form. He vowed that if Pennsylvania's sex abuse survivor bill ever again goes up for discussion in the state legislature, "I have a dream of renting a theater [in the state capital of Harrisburg] for 24 hours, and running the play when the vote happens."

One audience member expressed gratitude that Sefton shared his story. "Thank you for talking about [what Sefton went through]," they said, loud enough for the rest of us to hear. "Because most people don't have the chance."