

'Trust' playwright's goal: Do right by work's difficult subject



Michael Schwengel, left, is Michael Connor and James Hanson is Allen Connor in "Trust." (Photo by Rich Remedios)

By **CHRIS HEWITT** | chewitt@pioneerpress.com

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"Trust" is fictitious play, but the story will be eerily familiar to anyone who hasn't been living in a cave for the past several decades.

A young man, Michael, becomes withdrawn and starts doing poorly at school. His father tries to figure out what's going on while, about the same time, the family's former priest becomes the president of a fictitious college. The link between those events becomes clear when it's revealed that Michael is coming to terms with the fact that the now-even-more-powerful priest abused him for years.

If the story has the ring of truth, it's because it's based in fact. Playwright John Woehrle, who also plays the priest, began writing scenes after meeting James Hanson in classes Woehrle teaches at MacPhail Center for Music. Woehrle advised Hanson on a project he was working on about the apostle Paul and, as they become friends, Hanson shared stories about being abused for years by a Lutheran pastor at his Moorhead church (in "Trust," Hanson plays the father of Michael, the young man whose story is similar to his own).

'He was abused, starting when he was 13, and he's in his late 50s now,' Woehrle says of his friend. "I went through a (master of fine arts) program in acting and I've been around people with tons of theater experience but, I'm telling you, this play is a manifestation of everything I've ever learned. I couldn't have written something I didn't know, so Jim helped guide the process. We needed to get the victim's perspective right."

Getting it right also meant putting the play through a rigorous series of readings and workshops, and consulting with the national Survivor Network of those Abused by Priests.

In addition to emotional veracity, of course, Woehrle had to make sure "Trust" works as an evening of theater. With the human drama of Michael's relationships with family and friends as well as suspense, early in the play, around the issues that trouble Michael, Woehrle says audiences have told him the play works on several levels.

"The subject matter might make people balk, yes, but I think word of mouth is very powerful," says Woehrle, noting that the cast just performed "Trust" in St. Cloud. "We had medium houses every night but they responded very positively. People were surprised, I think, that they were engaged and that there's laughter."

Woehrle is glad audiences are finally getting to see the play, which has been in the works a couple of years and which was partially funded by an online campaign. When he first considered doing something inspired by Hanson's story, he thought of a screenplay but he believes it was meant to be a play.

"My brother was the one who said, 'Why don't you write a play?' And that rang true in terms of getting it seen," says Woehrle, whose play shares some themes with the Oscar-winning film, "Spotlight." "We wanted to get the conversation started sooner and this was a way to do that."

IF YOU GO

What: "Trust"

When: Aug. 17-28

Where: Lab Theater, 700 First St. N., Minneapolis

Tickets: \$25-\$15, 612-333-7977 or thelabtheater.org

Tags: Theater

Chris Hewitt

A self-identified expert on Agatha Christie, "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and the making of chewy molasses cookies, Chris Hewitt has written for the Pioneer Press since "Grumpy Old Men" came out.

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