

Reliving His Past Onstage

by Bob Criso

A Scottish playwright turns memories of sexual abuse into riveting theater

Most men have great difficulty talking about childhood sexual abuse. Matthew McVarish has turned his trauma into art. In his candid and compelling one-act play, "To Kill a Kelpie," twin brothers are reunited at the funeral of their uncle and confront the horrific secrets of their past. Doogal, seemingly untroubled, has returned home after years of working with children in Asia. Finnгал, confused and struggling, has stayed at home and sought psychological help. During a night of heavy drinking after their uncle's funeral they confront the ugly truths of their past and the toll it has taken on their lives. The results are poignant and dramatic.

"Writers are often encouraged to write about what they know," McVarish says. "I wanted to face my demons and tell a story based on what happened in my family."

It took years for McVarish to begin writing the play especially after he learned that his uncle had also abused three older brothers. It has taken a heavy toll on their lives. They have struggled with substance abuse and depression ever since, one brother so withdrawn that he became almost totally mute at one point. "Initially, I thought I was the only one," he says solemnly.

McVarish, whose dark brooding eyes convey a serious tone when he speaks, has a BA in acting from Queen Margaret University and a MA in Classical and Contemporary Text from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. He initially achieved success as an actor and musician in television, theater and radio. He plays Finnгал in the drama, a character loosely based on himself, an experience that he says "never fails to jolt me."

Allan Lindsay, a classically-trained actor from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, plays his twin brother Doogal. The sensitive material combined with the emotional intensity of the play has resulted in a fraternal friendship between the two men and lends an added credibility to their performances.

In 2007 while looking for counseling help online, McVarish came across a website for *Stop the Silence*, a group based in Washington DC which promotes the awareness, prevention and healing of childhood sex abuse. He began an email correspondence with Dr. Pamela Pine, the CEO of the group and started to formulate his ideas for the play. As

the play began to take shape, he settled on the image of the kelpie, a well-known mythical sea creature in Scottish lore.

“It’s something in the water that comes at you from below the waist,” he explains, “and for me, it represented both the inner and outer terror that I felt.” He worked tirelessly to raise money from sponsors until the play was first performed in Glasgow in 2008. It played to sold-out audiences. Once the play was produced McVarish pressed charges against his uncle who is now serving a six year prison sentence.

McVarish maintained his correspondence with Dr. Pine, an international public health specialist, and sent her a copy of his script. She liked it immediately and saw it as a potential educational tool as well as a theatrical experience. She wanted to bring it to the US and wrote a grant proposal to the Department of Health and Human Services which resulted in \$20,000. When that grant was later matched by private donors, a plan was hatched to bring the play to San Francisco, Chicago and Washington DC in 2011. Another grant from Creative Scotland helped bring the play to off-off Broadway in the spring of 2012 with plans for a national tour starting this fall. A question and answer discussion, moderated by Pine, has been added at the end of the play to further the goals of teaching and awareness.

“We’ve heard some amazing stories,” Pine notes referring to those Q and A sessions. “This play touches people and encourages them to speak up.” She has been working on childhood sexual abuse for the past twelve years. “Once I was better informed, I realized what an extraordinary need there was out there for this work. There is so little money and so much psychological resistance to facing such a toxic issue.”

McVarish and Pine have become a team and hope to find even wider audiences on college campuses and counseling centers in the US and beyond. “I want as many people as possible to see it,” McVarish says, “It’s an opportunity to help others.” He has become the European Ambassador for *Stop the Silence*.

McVarish and Pine can be reached through the Stop the Silence website www.stopcsa.com.