

Stage of healing

A pedophile preyed on Martin Moran at 12. But the tricky part would be his struggle to come to terms with his own complicity in allowing one stolen sexual moment to grow into a three-year relationship with a sex offender.



A photo of a triumphant 12-year-old Martin Moran, then of Denver, accompanies the playwright onstage in 'The Tricky Part,' reminding the audience of his frame of reference. The photo was taken at St. Malo Center Catholic retreat near Allenspark by camp counselor Robert Kosanke — the man who would later sexually abuse him over the next three years.

“That was, in fact, my sexual awakening, and there was beauty in it. There was horror in it, too. This was a man who was screwed up and deficient and sick.” - Martin Moran

By John Moore, Denver Post Theater Critic

NEW YORK -- Martin Moran was like a lot of altar boys in 1972. He had just received the sacrament of confirmation, welcoming the Holy Spirit into his life as an adult Christian, and everywhere he looked he saw God - in his Denver neighborhood, at his Christ the King grade school, even in the mirror.

He relished placing calls on behalf of his grade-school student council. “Hello,” he would proclaim to an

unsuspecting recipient, “This is Christ the King calling!”

“And right here in my breast I’d get this little burst of ... ‘Maybe I am!’” he would later recall.

That same year, seconds after his first sexual experience of any kind, 72 miles removed from the protection of his church or family, Martin was filled with nothing approaching the Holy Spirit. Instead guilt and pleasure battled for his soul as the boy lay naked in a sleeping bag, his back cradled in the arms of a 27-year-old man, wondering,

“God, oh God. Is that you?”

Martin pleaded for God’s presence, but deep down,

he suspected he “had just entered into a compact with the devil.” Martin looked down at his forbidden place, that place where his priest had repeatedly told him, “There’s nothing down there to be toying with,” and he saw spilled before him “the sacred seed of God.” A thousand murdered Catholics.

It would be years of confusion, two suicide attempts, therapy and now an upcoming off-Broadway play about his “journey toward grace” before Moran would embrace a fundamental truth about a man who still affects his life, 32 years later.

“I was 12, Bob. I was a child. I did not have consent to give.”

Martin had met Bob two years earlier at Camp St. Malo, since 1916 a holy retreat for Catholics at the eastern base of Mount Meeker northwest of Allenspark. Bob was not a priest. He was not even a Catholic. But he was in his third summer as a lay counselor there. Martin remembered him as the engaging Vietnam vet who had told “amazing campfire stories about jungle ghosts and war.” Bob was now starting his own boys ranch just 15 miles east of St. Malo, and he had offered Martin 10 bucks to spend the weekend fixing up the place with him.

Martin’s unsuspecting parents gave their permission, provided he covered his paper route and the Sunday Mass he was scheduled to serve, because “everybody,” he said, “trusted ‘Bob from St. Malo.’” Neither Martin nor his parents knew then that Bob had since been fired from the camp (but never prosecuted) for engaging in sexual activities with at least three boys there in 1970.

On April 8, 1972, the morning after their initial sexual encounter, Bob dropped Martin back at his middle-class home in the Virginia Vale neighborhood of Denver, and left him with a message that would resonate for decades.

“Marty, our friendship is different, you know? In another time and place, what we shared is good. You know why? Because there’s love ... and it’s between us.”

At the most confusing moment of the boy’s young life, Martin was now certain of only one thing:

*“God, please. ... This has to be just ours.
Top secret.”*

The words above in italics come directly from Moran’s one-man play, “The Tricky Part,” which opens March 28 in New York’s McGinn/Cazale Theatre. It traces his Catholic upbringing, his struggle to come to terms with his own homosexuality and his own complicity in allowing one stolen sexual moment to grow into a three-year relationship with a man who would one day become a convicted sex offender.

In truth, there is no part of this story that is not “the tricky part.”

“In my allegiance to my memory and in trying to be as deeply genuine as I possibly can be, my purpose with this play is to render the profound complexity of this experience,” said Moran, now 44 and living in New York City.

“What rests at the core of it, for me, is an examination of the paradox. By that I mean, yes, what happened to me when I was 12 was horrifically wrong. A man committed a crime. He crossed the line and entered into a sexual relationship with a 12-year-old boy in a culture where that is instantly and automatically damaging. We are

talking Denver in 1972, a Republican household, Catholic upbringing -- colliding with sex. And that collision is so rife with trauma and complexity.

“But that was, in fact, my sexual awakening, and there was beauty in it. There was horror in it, too. This was a man who was screwed up and deficient and sick.

“But in that man was a human being, and he wasn’t violent, and he paid attention to me. And that love, which some people will bristle at hearing, was a life preserver, as well as a destroyer.”

On April 4, 2002, Moran stood before a white mop of hair inside a Los Angeles veterans hospital and saw what looked more like a 59-year-old diabetic woman in a wheelchair than the vigorous young man who taught him to drive a tractor, build a geodesic dome and took

him glacier sliding. He barely recognized this as the man he had sneaked away to be with so many times so many years before.

Playgoers will soon be introduced to this man as "Bob Kominsky."

But in Colorado, he already is known in Catholic and legal circles as a problem named Robert C. Kosanke.

"My first love," Moran said.

'I don't have anything'

Moran did not track Kosanke down to vilify or assail him.

"It was important to me that he know I turned out all right, and that I've found something like stability and success in my life," he said.

Kosanke's concern was elsewhere.

"If you're thinking of suing me," Moran recalls Kosanke saying to him, "I don't have anything."

Moran's psychological and artistic journey, which began in dark confusion and brought him to this California hospital, does not come to an end next month in the catharsis of a New York stage.

"Sexual abuse is not like an infection where you treat the infection with medicine and it goes away," Boulder sexual-abuse expert Kitty Sargent said. "It's a process that will always be a part of the person's life."

Sargent is an education-resource coordinator for Blue Sky Bridge, which works to prevent the sexual abuse of children. She does not know Moran, but she has known many Kosankes. She said pedophiles disrupt the ordered physical, psychological and social development of a child without regard to the consequences that can last well into adulthood. These include isolation, distrust, shame, anger, grief, betrayal, fear of intimacy and hypersexual activity.

Moran's case is an unsettling cautionary tale not only for parents but for anyone who thinks they understand the psychology and pathology of how sexual abuse affects kids. It might be difficult for anyone to

understand how it affected Moran.

Like when he was in the seventh grade and he was assigned to write an essay about his living hero. Martin wrote about Kosanke -- and that was more than a year into their relationship.

"Talk about a double life," he said. "When I was in eighth grade, I was president of the student council at Christ the King. I often thought I might title my memoirs, 'The Altar Boy and the Slut.'"

A lifetime of questions

When Moran tells his story in the public intimacy of a 110-seat New York theater, he is aware it will raise many questions with audiences: How could he have remained involved with this man for so long without telling anyone? Where were his parents through all of this? And the question his own father later raised.

"When I finally told my father what happened between Bob and me," Moran said, "his response was, 'So, he's the man who made you gay?'"

Sexual abuse, Sargent said, is more about sexual power than sexual orientation. But Moran knows his own homosexuality is a very tricky part of his story. Part of what kept him coming back to Kosanke was isolation and shame, but another was pleasure. Sargent said abusers prey on that confusion and contradiction.

"When the abuse is not inflicting pain, any 12-year-old's body will respond positively to sexual stimulation, regardless," she said. "And the guilt and confusion that results from feeling pleasure is a common issue that haunts some of these kids for the rest of their lives."

Moran believes he was born gay, "and I was always meant to be gay," he said. "But when I was 12, I knew nothing about sex of any kind."

As he lay with Kosanke that first time, he remembers thinking, "This must be what a man does with a woman, and so what does that make me?"

Part of the trauma for him became "trying to sort through a genuine notion of my own sexuality

within the realm of a religion that told me this was a mortal sin.”

“For me it was double indemnity, and it was really painful.

“And yet deep within was also this sense of truth that ‘this is where my body is leading me. This is what I want. It’s telling me something about myself.’”

But what he was hearing about homosexuality in sixth grade was another matter. That’s just one reason he instinctively knew from that first sexual encounter that his life was a closed book.

“I could no longer belong,” he said. “And when your life is top secret like that, the only way you can find solace again, to a 12-year-old brain, is to return to what you crave, to the only person who knows your secret. That’s destructive and complicated and bizarre, but you might find that’s not unique in terms of sexuality between adults and children.”

Sargent said hidden, long-term relationships between pedophiles and children are more common than not.

“And that not only points out just how strongly manipulative these older men can be when they prey on a child,” she said, “it also points out how kids are not at all empowered in these situations. It’s very difficult for them to break free. It’s important to

remember that a 12-year-old is not emotionally capable of entering into a consensual sexual relationship with a 30-year-old. It’s just not possible.

“That’s why it’s against the law.”

Three years of hiding

Moran described his relationship with Kosanke as catch-as-catch-can: two weeks at summer camp, a weekend above Boulder here, a weekend at the ranch there.

“But I always looked forward to it because every meeting had the promise of that connection, and that intimacy of being with the guy who knows my secret

and shares it,” he said. “I looked forward to that companionship.”

Moran’s father, a former Denver journalist, was a typical dad in an era when the role of a father was primarily that of a financial rather than emotional provider.

“He is such a good man, but he was distant,” Moran said.

Moran was the second oldest of four siblings, but his parents divorced when he was 15 - the same year his relationship with Kosanke came to an end.

“My family was like a group of satellites floating around, each in our own orbit, and everyone was finding what they needed somewhere other than in the house,” he said. “My parents are kind, good and responsible people who were going through a really tough time emotionally. And while the fact Bob came into my life via St. Malo does not excuse what he did, that did give him the aura of being someone my parents could trust.

“It’s deeply painful to them that this happened. If there is a lesson for parents today, it’s that they have to be absolutely aware of what is going on at all times, and they need to be absolutely present.”

So when Moran grew consumed with guilt over the issue of homosexuality, the person he turned to was Kosanke.

“I expressed to Bob my deep sadness at the fact that I may be turning out gay, and it was screwing with my head,” Moran said.

“Bob told me, ‘Marty, homosexuals are really just troubled creatures who have no love in their lives. So you can’t be homosexual, because you have love in your life. ... We have love. You and I. So what we share is not homosexuality.’”

Only in retrospect did Moran recognize the “odd and terribly twisted way” in which he was being led. He continued to assume that when he got to be 16 or 17, he would be OK because by then he would have a girlfriend. But as his relationship with Kosanke intensified, doubts about his sexuality continued to plague him. So Kosanke, whose 19-year-old girlfriend was a co-counsel-

or at his ranch, took an extreme step to reassure him.

“He began taking me to bed with both of them on occasion,” Moran said. “It was strange and perfunctory, but I kept thinking, ‘I am doing that thing that men are supposed to do with women, so now I know I am going to be OK.’ And she was just lying there like a stone. The implicit message was, ‘See? You’re not gay. You are a guy.’”

But the boy knew next to nothing about female sexuality, and he woke up one day in horror.

“There was blood on the sheets, and I was terrified - until Bob explained to me it was her period,” he said.

His confusion led to a failed suicide attempt that involved an overdose with his mother’s prescription medicine.

In 1975, Moran’s freshman year at Regis High School, he began to distance himself from Kosanke. Six months had passed since he had last seen him when word spread that Kosanke was going to jail.

Moran didn’t know specifics, but he was terrified he might be pulled into a public legal mess.

Still not yet old enough for a driver’s license, Moran jumped into his mother’s car to confront Kosanke.

“I was afraid I would never have another chance to tell him I was angry and ashamed, and I was sorry we ever met,” he said.

Moran would like to say it was only his fear of being exposed that compelled the break. But here, once again, is a tricky part: A big reason was jealousy.

“As I got older - and we’re still talking 15 - the sense of guilt and shame and chaos about being in any way involved with this man grew along with a more keen awareness that there were other boys,” Moran said.

“So we shook hands and Bob wished me luck.”

Years later, at the veterans hospital, Kosanke told Moran his rejection that day caused him to crawl into a shell for two months.

Moran stopped attending Mass and transferred in 1976 from Regis to the public George Washington High

School, where he would graduate in 1978. It was his way of trying to distance himself from the Catholic world that had not only formed him, but also had brought this man into his life.

“Breaking away from Regis and going to a new school was all an effort to say, ‘I am a different person. I am burying that whole chapter of my life,’” he said. “I wanted to get away from what felt oppressive. But I lived in terror that someone was going to come knocking on my door and say, ‘We know what you did,’ and I felt that would destroy me.”

Moran thought his breakup with Kosanke “would be the beginning of my getting better,” he said. Instead it was the beginning of a long struggle with depression that brought a second suicide attempt, this time a wayward gunshot that landed in the banister of his basement steps.

“That was wrapped up partly in the trauma of what happened with Bob, but it was also the complexity of owning up to being gay, and wanting very much not to be,” he said. “I wanted to be an upstanding Catholic father, citizen and husband. I had dreamed about being a senator, and all I kept thinking was, ‘I can’t possibly be gay because then I will never amount to anything.’”

Moran was a junior when he heard Kosanke had been convicted of sexually assaulting another boy in Boulder County. The next year, Kosanke served four months in the Colorado State Reformatory in Buena Vista.

The anger one might presume Moran harbors for Kosanke feels to him lost or buried somehow in complicity. It was as if the fact that he not only allowed this to happen but also at some level wanted it to continue squelched any right he had to feel wrath.

“I felt the loss of the right to feel any anger by my own participation in the relationship because I did enjoy it, because I did go back,” he said. “I don’t think by definition a 12-year-old can be complicit, but that doesn’t mean the 44-year-old man I am

today can’t still feel encoded in my bones a sense of being complicit. Did I somehow attract it?”

Onstage redemption

Moran's lifeline during his teen years was the discovery that he could sing, and he credits the opportunity to express himself artistically as the most important factor in his eventual happiness. He attended Stanford University with thoughts of becoming a lawyer, but a legal career lost out to his love for the stage, and he has been gainfully employed in the New York theater since 1984, including roles in "Floyd Collins" and on Broadway in "Titanic" and "Cabaret."

"Finding the theater in high school was the beginning of a kind of redemption for me, though I didn't know it then," he said. "I always have felt the theater is a kind of church in which hopefully some kind of transubstantiation or epiphany takes place."

In his late 20s, Moran started to express himself on paper, scribbling fragmented notes about his childhood, such as, "What happened when you were 12?"

"I was in agony one way or the other, but the agony was slightly eased by trying to make sense of what happened to me with words," he said.

That writing evolved slowly over 10 years. In 1999 he won a \$7,000 New York Foundation of the Arts creative nonfiction grant to complete his story, and last year Beacon Press bought the rights to his memoirs, which will be released as a book next year.

The work took the form of a play only after he read his notes to director Seth Barrish, who convinced Moran it should be performed onstage. Last summer, Moran was one of eight playwrights selected from a field of 1,000 for a place in the prestigious Sundance Summer Theatre Laboratory in Park City, Utah. Since then, "The Tricky Part" has been performed in Princeton, N.J.; New Haven, Conn.; and in Albany, N.Y., in preparation for its off-Broadway debut.

Moran would love to bring his piece to a Denver theater one day, but it's unlikely any performance anywhere could be more powerful than the one he delivered last year in the Park Hill living room of his high school pal David Fine.

"I flew to Denver and performed it for 16 childhood

friends," Moran said. "It was deeply important for me to do that. It was like coming home. The folks who came were friends I made after I left Regis who didn't know anything about this part of my life.

Their reactions were really deep and difficult, but it turned out to be pivotal in the development of the piece."

Fine said the monologue left the group in stunned silence.

"It was like being pasted to the back of your chair," said Fine, a Denver lawyer. "None of us ever knew the extent of what had happened to him while we were in high school, and I think there was horror and sadness in the room at the realization that he basically had to go through this alone."

Moran broke the tension in typical fashion - with a joke.

"But that's just Marty," Fine said. "Only Marty could tell this story in such an incredibly intimate and in-depth way that is not angry or hateful at all. And when this opens in New York City, Marty will be telling a story that is shared by many people. I mean, you read about these things, but you never really learn much about who these people are and how it affected their lives. I think this will have a profound and hopeful effect on anyone who has been affected by sexual abuse."

When the play opens in New York, Moran's mother will be in attendance. His father, who lives in Las Vegas, "is not ready for this yet, but he is extremely proud of what I am doing as a writer," Moran said. "And I loved my mom's reaction. She said,

"Martin, you must honor your own memories and tell your story."

The Archdiocese of Denver could not comment on Kosanke's case because its personnel records for Camp St. Malo were destroyed in a 1979 fire. But Moran does not want his play to bring further condemnation to either Kosanke or the archdiocese, though he thinks the church bears some responsibility for what happened.

"What started at St. Malo was frighteningly pervasive, and yes, there was institutional complicity and

covering up," Moran said. "But I think a lot of that has to do with a basic and profound terror of the human body that exists in a Catholic upbringing.

There is a complete inability to discuss these things.

"When you are talking about a bunch of 12-year-olds running up to Camp St. Malo, you're talking about a place that is steeped in the gorgeous metaphors and mysteries of the Catholic Church, but an institution that is also profoundly naive about matters of the body. And then when you suddenly collide that with the naked reality of sex, and you don't have a coping mechanism in a cultural atmosphere that allows no outlet to discuss it, it's a recipe for disaster."

But Moran remains a man who still has the teachings of the Catholic Church encoded in his bones.

"Being raised Catholic was filled with grace and brilliant people who cared about education and yearned to understand a deeper reality. The Catholic Church formed me. And this play is the construct of a Catholic man. I don't enter into a church that often now, but the church is in me. It is a part of my being. And what do I ultimately turn to now, when I come up against the ultimate paradox? I turn to the notion of grace, something that is a part of the very fiber of my being as a Catholic man.

"What happened to me happened in the context of a Catholic upbringing, and that was part of what made it violent, and was part of what ultimately helped me to sort it out."

Kosanke, who was convicted a second time in 1983 for third-degree assault on a child, is now 60 and believed to be living in Southern California. But Moran cannot retroactively categorize him as evil.

"It's so easy to turn the man into a monster and not see the child of God within," Moran said. "Opening my eyes about what was good about him was actually part of the process of forgiving the 12-year-old in me. Rather than saying, 'You bad kid,' it was

saying, 'Oh, I understand. He taught you how to drive a tractor.' It's like looking at that child that is you and saying, 'Hey, I understand. You went toward a

certain kind of light, and I feel compassion for you for having done that. You weren't an idiot. You weren't a bad kid."

A picture of innocence

At a recent workshop performance of "The Tricky Part" in New York City, Moran drew his audience in with his warm humor and gentle nostalgia before entering the trickiest part of his life story. His only onstage prop is a framed photograph of a smiling, blond-banged boy standing in a canoe on the bank of a pond. The boy wears a swimsuit and a life preserver while raising a paddle in triumph.

The boy is Martin Moran, age 12. It is a haunting visual reminder for the audience of just how young and innocent he was when the abuse against him started.

"In a sense, that photograph says everything, and in a sense, it has become my scene partner," he said. "It's important for the audience to see that these aren't the words of a 44-year-old; they are the thoughts and choices of that 12-year-old with the cherubic face.

"I do not want to be seen as a victim. I have a fantastic life with my partner of 19 years, Henry. But clearly this thing still has a hold of me. I mean, here I am at 44 and I am still writing about it."

But that fingerless grip Kosanke held for so long from a distance started to loosen moments after that 2002 encounter at the veterans hospital.

"As I left, I kept hearing in my head this prayer, a plea repeating: 'OK, grace, please, let it go. Let him be. Let him rest.' I mean Bob, of course, but then I realize I'm really talking about the 12-year-old, the sweet kid caught in the photo ... still talking his way out."