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New, Catholic 'Monologues'

Jeremy Stanbary Makes a Pro-Life Statement With His New Play

BY ANTHONY FLOTT

June 7-13, 2009 Issue | Posted 5/29/09 at 1:49 PM

Jeremy Stanbary stood with other pro-lifers in St. Paul, Minn., and heard the pain pour out in waves — men and women at a Silent No More Minnesota rally publicly testifying about the abortions in their pasts.

"There wasn't a dry eye among those who were there," Stanbary recalled. "Very emotional, painful and really gripping testimonies. I'd never heard these stories before. Hearing these very compelling testimonies for the first time really planted a seed in me."

The fruit took stage when the curtain rose on the premiere of "The Vitae Monologues," Stanbary's two-person, one-act play produced by his Epiphany Studio Productions, on the University of St. Thomas campus in St. Paul in early 2009.

Translated as "The Monologues of Life," the play, Epiphany's fifth production, gives voice to women and men "who have experienced profound healing and forgiveness in Christ after suffering in silence for years from the aftermath of abortion."

Yes, the title is familiar. Stanbary intentionally mimicked the radical, sexually explicit "The Vagina Monologues," a play publicized as a counterpoint to violence against women. The play typically is presented around Valentine's Day at colleges across the country, including a handful of Catholic campuses.

Bishop John D'Arcy of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., said on the occasion of the play's presentation at the University of Notre Dame:

"The Vagina Monologues' is offensive to women; it is antithetical to Catholic teaching on the beautiful gift of human sexuality and also to the teachings of the Church on the human body relative to its purpose and to its status as a temple of the Holy Spirit. The human body and the human person, in the tradition of the Church, must never be seen as an object."

Stanbary's title can cause confusion. While handing out promotional flyers for the play during the Minnesota Walk for Life in January, Stanbary had one man tell him he, at first, was going to knock the

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flyers from Stanbary's hands, thinking they were performing "The Vagina Monologues." A second look changed his mind.

"He was sensitive to it because he has a son going off to college," said Stanbary. "That has kind of been on his mind."

While both plays contain monologues, the similarities end there.

"The Vagina Monologues' exalts the radical feminist movement," said Stanbary, "and I think one of the worst fruits of the radical feminist movement is abortion. It's having devastating effects on our culture and the men and women who have bought into the lies."

Stanbary based his play on research and testimonies heard while interviewing post-abortive women and men connected with Silent No More Minnesota.

Though many had experienced healing and were able to speak publicly about the abortions in their lives, it remained "a very real and painful thing for them to talk about," said Stanbary. "This was a baby, a human life, and to come to terms with that full reality is, I think, never something that you fully or are completely healed from."

Common themes emerged from the testimonies. Stanbary said many were lied to and told that the baby was "just a blob of tissue." Many repressed their emotions about the abortion for years and, told that abortion was "no big deal," figured something else was wrong with them. Some turned to alcohol or drugs to kill the pain.

Others said that if just one person had been supportive of the pregnancy they never would have had an abortion. Some spoke of sitting in a waiting room or recovery room and hearing the screams of other women as their abortions were taking place.

"Hearing women describe what their abortion experience felt like to me was eye-opening," said Stanbary, who began writing the script in the summer of 2007 and had it mostly finished that fall.

The drama is presented through the perspectives of characters portrayed by Stanbary and his wife, Sarah. The two married in May 2008.

Stanbary's aim was to weave together the many different stories he heard in a way that made sense while remaining interesting "and not too heavy."

But more important, he said, was "to balance out the heaviness of the post-abortion grief and trauma with a message of healing and a message of hope. God loves these people, despite a really awful choice they made in their lives. Nothing we do is beyond God's forgiveness. Nothing we do is beyond God's scope of grace."

The play ran for three days on the St. Thomas campus. Stanbary said he hoped his performance, like the explicit counterpart, could be taken on the road to college campuses across the country. That could start close to home; through St. Paul's Outreach, a Catholic college ministry, there are plans to perform at the University of Minnesota.

It was on a college campus that Stanbary experienced what he calls his "Augustinian conversion." He was a 19-year-old freshman at the University of Nebraska majoring in performance arts — and partying.

"I was living that very self-focused, if-it-feels-good-do-it sort of lifestyle," he said. "The theater world of entertainment is very dominated by this very self-focused, anything-goes mentality, and I got caught up in that."

That changed when Stanbary fathered a child out of wedlock.

"That completely flipped my life upside down," he said. "My life was a mess, but thanks be to God the seeds of faith had been planted in my life growing up, and, eventually, through a series of people and experiences and coming back to the sacraments, a really profound conversion set in."

It also led to his pro-life convictions.

"My son [Aidan] could have very easily been a victim of abortion," he said. "Thanks be to God he's not. He has been the biggest part of my life over the past 10 1/2 years now. He was really the instrument that God used to spark my conversion and open my heart to his grace."

That, in turn, sparked Stanbary's formation of Epiphany Studio Productions in 2003. He was inspired, in part, by the long-running St. Luke Productions, begun by Leonardo DeFilippis and based in Battle Ground, Wash.

"It turned a light on in my head how God can use this, and that there's a demand and need for Catholic theater," he said. "It planted the seeds for me wanting to combine my passion for the Catholic faith and passion and talents for the theater."

Stanbary since has performed for thousands in the United States and internationally, as well as appeared on Eternal Word Television Network's "Life on the Rock."

He performed "Alessandro," a play about early 20th-century virgin-martyr St. Maria Goretti, at World Youth Day 2005 in Cologne, Germany.

Just recently, he finished a weeklong tour in Canada with eight performances of "Lolek," a portrayal of Pope John Paul II's formative years in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Later this month the company will present "Paul of Tarsus" in Minnesota, at the Cathedral of Saint Paul in St. Paul.

Stanbary said the company will continue to develop new plays. The goal is to have multiple plays traveling simultaneously and, eventually, to secure local studio theater space.

He is driven by a desire to erase negative stereotypes of "cheesy" Christian theater and to raise the bar of professionalism and artistic creativity in Christian-based, Catholic-inspired theater.

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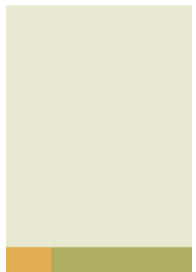
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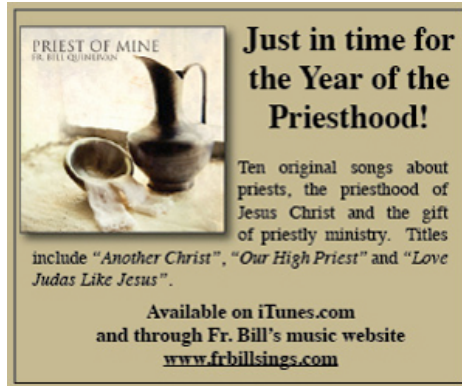
Stanbary emphasized, "It is a means of evangelization."

Anthony Flott writes
from Papillion, Nebraska.

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