

Men's Fest: Taking Responsibility

Sexual abuse isn't a men's issue. It isn't a women's issue. It's something we all share and it will take all of us to make this epidemic destruction end.

— by Donna Call



Leaving no doubt as to her intentions, Camille Sullivan plays "the woman" in the new production, *mystics*, by patti howes.

Image by
Balz Bietenholz.

The arts provide an environment in which this message can be communicated and accessed by many people. The idea of taking action by bringing abuse out of the closet and putting it up for public viewing was taken on in this year's Men's Fest.

In a brave move, Men's Fest '95, and Vancouver's new arts society, "umbaUMBA presents..." joined forces to start talking about abuse. The result was a new work, "mystics," being featured at this year's Men's Fest. *Mystics* is a play that gives an inside glimpse into the consequences, and survival, of a lifetime of sexual abuse.

The work, by performance poet and playwright, patti howes, delivers to its audience the searing results of sexual abuse. Taking its

audience on a first-hand roller-coaster ride, *mystics* tells the story of one woman's life as a self-mutilator, searching for the answers to her own survival. Uncovering the path that leads from her childhood through to tomorrow, howes shows us the journey into our own centre, into the patterns that unite and control us all.

Why a woman's story in a man's festival? "What better way to take responsibility for the pain we've caused than to hear it from the mouths of those we hurt?" says festival director, Richard Lett.

The theme for this year's festival is, actually, "Taking Responsibility." "It's the active part that matters: taking, not accepting, responsibility," Lett explains.

"The Men's Fest actually lets men look at themselves, which is definitely not what men have done with theatre before. Men's Fest is a place where men can look inward, see themselves from a new perspective, and learn something."

family of psychological breakdowns, paralysis and trauma can result directly from sexual abuse. This crime belongs to all of us.

And it is ignorance which is intolerable. The fact that a woman is raped every 17 minutes in Canada, with 60 per cent of those reported occurring at home, is an ugly one. But we will see even worse consequences of sexual abuse if we continue to tolerate a preference for ignorance over knowledge, denial over confrontation, invisibility over visibility.

Now we can come out of the closet about sexual abuse and its long term effects. It hurts us all. It's everywhere. It has to stop. We must begin to see it, to speak about it, to learn about it, and then we can learn something about stopping it.

How many more people will die at the hands of abuse? How many already have? To battle the ignorance which permits sexual abuse to continue, we must educate ourselves.

We all carry a little of the ignorance that led to the tragedy of Susan Smith choosing to drown her own children.

Susan Smith's stepfather confessed his ignorance, shock and remorse over the horrible consequences of molesting her for more than a decade. In his words to her from a pain-filled Father's Day letter, "...had I known at the time the result of my sin, I could have mustered enough strength to assume my responsibilities."

Our response? Off with her head. Lock her up. Throw away the key.

Is blaming Susan Smith for the death of her two young sons, then debating whether or not we should execute her, too, the best we can do? Is our most valuable response to this human catastrophe to put a victim of abuse behind bars for the rest of her life, or better, to kill her outright?

We have, I believe, a more challenging journey ahead. A whole