

Conversation With 14's John Cameron



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If Brigham Young University has an infamous reputation in the GLBT community, it is, in part, because of the so called “reparative therapy” experiments performed on gay students in the mid-1970s. As part of these experiments, Max Ford McBride, then a graduate student in psychology, exposed gay male students to male pornography and delivered shocks of up to 4.5 miliamperes of electricity in hope of “curing” them of their “condition.” These procedures, deemed today both ineffective and barbaric, are documented in several sources, including a documentary called [Legacies](#), a published account written by Affirmation member [Don Harryman](#), and McBride’s own 1976 dissertation. Fourteen students completed the experiment that earned McBride his Ph.D.—hence 14, the title of [John Cameron’s new play](#).

In the mid 1970s, you were one of the subjects of Max Ford McBride’s experiments on so-called “reparative therapy” at BYU. Why did you decide to write a play about what must have been a very painful experience?

The decision to write the play was a very long time coming. In the 25 years before I began work on the script, the idea never crossed my mind. To begin with I was not overly proud of my decision to do the therapy and told very few people about it. It wasn’t a subject that I wanted to share. Also, I



had spent so much of my life trying to forget and minimize what I had done that I had somehow convinced myself that most people would find it more disgusting than interesting. I thought the subject matter just wasn't worthy of attention.

Then two things happened that changed everything. I stumbled onto the Affirmation website by total accident and read Connell O'Donovan's History of Homosexuality at Brigham Young University. I was stunned by what I read. I learned that my experience belonged to a much larger community. I learned about the purge. I learned that my therapy was not an isolated event, but simply one of the more visible elements in a long history of abuse. It really shook up my very safe, insulated life. I made brief contact with Connell to thank him. That led to the second event. I was contacted by a journalist who Connell had referred, asking for an interview. At first I was very skeptical of doing it, but when I learned of Merrill Bateman's denial I was infuriated. So I agreed to it, but had no idea what I was getting myself into. As we talked by email and phone over a period of a few weeks I was forced to relive the experience in detail for the first time in over two decades. The result was a three year depression. I finally began to deal for with what I had done to my life and it was pretty hard to face. Writing the play was a way for me to work though my anger and isolation.

What kind of emotional or spiritual scars did those experiments leave? Did you ever go to therapy to undo the damage the BYU experiments may have caused?

I'm going to be very honest with you, so I hope I don't offend anyone. I've only recently begun to realize that I have completely shut down my sexual life for the last twenty-five years. I have never been able to maintain a long-term relationship with another man. Instead I have substituted a number of ill-advised and emotionally destructive relationships with women. Looking back I can honestly say that I was afraid of gay men. I felt true resentment and disgust for the gay community while simultaneously



John Cameron

wishing I could somehow participate. The recognition of this and my efforts to change it have only begun within the last two or three years and I am still struggling. I recently began to make some gay friends and make my first steps into this new world. Ironically, one of my new friends was raised LDS and served a mission. He is the music director for this production. I don't think the experiment was the sole cause of my dysfunction, but I think it's fair to say it was a major contributor. Have you ever met other "reparative therapy" subjects? How did you research the topic for your play?

No, I've never met another one of the 14. But I do know two men who went through similar therapy. I'm ashamed to say that I know them because I referred them to McBride shortly after my own experience was completed. It was during that time in which I chose to believe that the therapy had been successful. The result was that I deceived myself and them.

The research was slow. I had to educate myself and rebuild memories. I was surprised at how much has been written regarding the church and homosexuality in the time since the experiments. Books by Michael Quinn, Carol Lynn Pearson, and others, were very helpful. Connell O'Donovan's article was also significant. Other articles and the memorials at the Affirmation website helped. But the best source was a copy of the McBride dissertation that I acquired. As I read it, memories came back almost faster than I could process. It was amazing. Additionally, I had kept a diary during my years at BYU. I dug it out of a box and read it for the first time.

Why is there so much violence in the play?

The violence is there for many reasons. Here are just three. (1) The therapy itself is violent. It didn't happen in our heads, it happened to our bodies. It was not a logical event. It was visceral and painful. I don't think you can just talk about it and make the experience clear. I didn't want to reduce it to an intellectual discussion. (2) I have put myself through a lot of emotional abuse in the last few years. The main character is based on me, and I felt it was important to physically manifest that abuse on the stage if people were to understand the scope of the therapy's effects. A picture is worth a thousand words. (3) There is a murder in the play. I can't easily explain that out of context. But for what it's worth, the killing

is a symbolic and metaphoric rite of passage for the main character. It is something he must do to begin his journey to freedom from his past. It was very difficult to write.

There are actually many more reasons for the violence, but I think they're probably too numerous to cover in this interview.

Was it hard to get approval to stage the play? Did the Theatre Arts Department express concerns or suggest changes to your draft?

No. Not at all! It wasn't my idea. I did a public reading of the play last year, and many of my colleagues attended. A few weeks later they proposed that we do a production. They felt it was an important topic that deserved to be heard. I was flabbergasted and thrilled. I work with some amazing artists here and I'm very proud of them. Those who are familiar with the University of Iowa know that it has a long tradition of developing new and controversial work. If anything, they have encouraged me to take the truth of the topic as far as I possibly can.

Several LDS hymns are interpolated at different parts of the play. What is their function?

Two reasons. First, the hymns are there in the role of a Greek chorus. They comment on the action rather than advance it. For example, the main character must decide if he should agree to an interview about the experiment. When he learns that President Bateman claimed that he could find no evidence that the experiment ever took place on campus, the cast of fourteen sings "Oh Say, What is Truth?" Secondly, for so many ex-Mormons, the hymns remain a powerful memory that keeps us connected to our past. I don't think I could have written the play without them.

Ron, the main character, struck me as a cynical and bitter atheist. Would it be fair to characterize the play as an angry and bitter statement against all organized religion?

Yes, I think Ron is cynical and bitter. At the end of the play he is only at the beginning of his healing journey. His anger is very present. I didn't want him to appear to be the good guy or the victim, and so we frequently see him as the abuser and the victimizer. That was intentional. As an audience member, I don't like characters who are too easily definable or neatly drawn. I love the flaws of our humanity. It would be unfair to call Ron the protagonist or the antagonist. He is both. Most of us are.

Whether he's an atheist or not is up for debate. I think of him as an agnostic who rejects the silliness that most organized religions present as the work of God. He loves rationality because he feels that his emotionality is weakening him in so many ways. I think his attacks on God are the acts of a terrified man. But I don't think the play is a statement about organized religion. I think it's about a journey that has been radically impacted by organized religion.

How is the process of rehearsing the play? Is it emotionally taxing on you and the actors?

It's great. We're workshopping and developing all the time. The script is now in its fourth rewrite and has changed substantially. Thanks to the cast and my colleagues, I have been able to develop a healthier distance from the subject matter and really focus on the structure of the work. It is emotionally challenging, but exciting and invigorating. We have a great cast and wonderful support.

McBride wrote a 100-page dissertation documenting his experiments, yet in 1997 then-BYU President Merrill Bateman claimed that he was "unable to verify" that electroshock was ever used on gay and lesbian students at BYU. Do you think BYU will ever admit that it once sponsored these experiments?

How long can you tell a lie? A mighty long time when you're afraid of the truth. They may admit to it, but I would pass out if they ever apologized. Do you believe in forgiveness? Do you think there's a place for forgiveness in the process of healing from abuse?

You bet. I'm in the middle of it now. I don't think forgiveness is an event. It's a process, and I don't know if it ever ends. Sometimes I think it is too easily said. I don't believe in complete closure.



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