

# THE ARTS

## Art therapy

Rita Bozi's play *The Damage is Done* explores healing through art, and the art of healing

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A lot of people know Dr. Gabor Mate for his groundbreaking work with hard-core drug addicts in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, but few know him for his budding work as a stage actor.

This month in Whitehorse, Mate performed in the world premier of *The Damage is Done - A True Story*, a play by Rita Bozi about the ways that our histories and our childhoods shape our lives.

Bozi's play began as an essay punctuated by YouTube clips, which she performed as part of a writer's retreat in Iceland.

The ideas in the essay were inspired in part by Gabor Mate's work, and she thought that it would be great to invite him to speak and lead a discussion after a performance.

"I pitched this to Gabor, who said, 'I don't have any time, I really don't have any time for a collaboration, but I'm very interested,'" said Bozi. "So I said, 'Great, I'll kind of work with you with no time.'"

Mate also told Bozi that he wanted it to be a great show, so the pressure was on.

She began to develop the performance with her husband Ken Cameron, and it took on a life of its own.

The characters in the essay started to jump off the page. They were given monologues. They started to sing and dance, and interact with Mate.

"One thing led to another, and before Gabor knew it he had been written into the play as a performer."

It wasn't what they had discussed. The first time Mate read the script, the experience was very odd, and everyone was nervous, said Bozi. Mate doesn't remember how exactly he ended up roped into it, she said.

"I came into it with trepidation." There was the performance anxiety, but also the fear that it wouldn't be good enough, said Mate.

"I didn't want to appear in something that I wasn't going to be proud of."

Bozi said she sweet-talked him in Hungarian.

Mate and Bozi are both Hungarian from families that immigrated to Canada. That is key to their relationship, and indeed central to the whole story.

That connection to language and culture is an important one, but it's not all sweet.

"We swear at each other a lot in Hungarian," said Bozi. "It's very fun. It's a great language to swear in. We get all that really dark stuff out on each other."

*The Damage is Done* weaves together the story of three Gabors, all linked through shared history as well



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Rita Bozi, left, and Gabor Mate perform in the play, *The Damage is Done*.

as the ways that they have helped to shape Bozi's life.

There's Bozi's brother Gabor, an infant during the 1956 Hungarian revolution, who helped Bozi through her young years by introducing her to punk rock.

Then there's B.B. Gabor, a Canadian punk rocker whose family fled Hungary when he was eight, who performed the soundtrack to many of the siblings' defiant dance parties. His suicide in 1990 touched Bozi and her brother deeply.

And of course there's Gabor Mate, born to a Jewish Hungarian family and a survivor of the Nazi genocide.

Taken together, the stories are about shared historical traumas that can touch a person even as they develop in the womb.

It plays out almost as a therapy session performed on stage, with Bozi's memories and ideas guided along by Mate's interjections and insights.

The damage is done. And understanding that fact, Mate and Bozi said, is crucial to healing.

Mate pointed to the experience of First Nations here in the Yukon as a perfect example.

The history of abuse in residential school and through other systemic injustice is visible today in higher rates of addiction, mental illness and physical illness.

"When you take people and you traumatize them, multiple generations, that can cause addictions and

cancer and arthritis and mental illness and suicide and all kinds of things," said Mate.

"They were traumatized heavily over generations, and look at the result. That doesn't mean that you have to be stuck in it. But if we think that there's something genetically wrong with us, or we're just bad people, then we're stuck."

But if you understand where the pain is coming from, then it is possible to let it go, he said.

"If I have a desire to escape into addictions, then I have to go, 'Well, what am I escaping from?'"

"Well, I'm escaping from pain."

"How did I get that pain?"

"Well, what happened to me?"

"Well, my parents hurt me."

"Why did they hurt me?"

"Well, what happened to them?"

Understanding how the damage was done helps make the damage undone. The message of the play is one of pain, but ultimately one of healing.

How to portray that healing was something the performers had to grapple with, too.

The day after the show's Friday night debut, Mate was approached by someone who recognized him in a grocery store. By the way they described the performance the night before, Mate could tell that some of the audience had had a very difficult experience watching the play, he said.

So he brought it up with Bozi. "We realized, if we're going to talk

about redemption and healing, it's not enough just to mention it at the end, in the last sentence. We need to actually portray it," he said.

So in Saturday's show they embodied that healing through lightness of movement and tone.

"Even if the words stay the same, how we relate to those words makes a huge difference," said Mate.

And the performers themselves had more fun onstage, allowing that feeling to be reflected in the audience.

"Simply by finding that place of joy within ourselves we could embody that despite whatever happens in childhood and how difficult your history could have been, people can transcend it, people can go from it, people can let go of it," said Mate.

"We said it on Friday but we felt it on Saturday."

This play isn't the first time Mate's ideas have inspired art.

Earlier this year T.J. Dawe performed in Whitehorse his one-man show *Medicine* about his experience at a healing retreat led by Mate.

There have been poems, pieces of music and paintings, too, inspired by his work, said Mate.

Art is a very effective way of communicating ideas, he said.

"What I talk about goes to the very heart of human experience, and that's what artists do as well. But they don't talk about them, they embody them. They portray them. That's why it's so powerful."

"T.J. presented the experience of those retreats much more accurately than I could have."

And *The Damage is Done* "presents so much of what I have to say very efficiently in an hour and a half," said Mate.

Stories are powerful because people can relate to them, said Bozi.

"By telling stories, there's a greater chance of learning. It's a really great way of bringing learning to art and art to learning. So instead of just kind of seeing something and going away and having feelings about it, we're finding a way for people to engage with this stuff, engage with healing but through storytelling and performance."

And, for one WestJet employee who checked Bozi in on her way out of town, it worked.

She, a woman of First Nation, Ukrainian and Polish descent, had attended the show the night before, said Bozi.

"She said, 'You made me feel normal.' And then she said, 'It was so healing for me.'"

She said it twice, said Bozi.

The woman also said, "It was easy to watch you."

That second performance, when the performers allowed themselves to let go and have fun, had allowed the audience to be comfortable in the painful moments, too.

"It was easy to be myself, that night," said Bozi.

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