

Torment and touching humour inform mini-plays

Rik Jespersen / Coast Reporter

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Actors (from left): Jeanne Sommerfield, Julian Alphilbert, Pat Dorval and Pam Girone perform Jaeger Cormack's mini-play *The Birthday Party*, about a celebratory gathering in a tiny SRO room.
- RIK JESPERSEN PHOTO

"I hear voices all the time," says writer Ana Smith. "It started when I was a lonely teen, wishing I had friends. I began to talk to these voices. They would comfort me. I thought they were angels from beyond."

The quote is from Smith's mini-play, *This is My Art*, one of five autobiographical, theatrical stories written by people with mental health issues and performed by the Off the Page theatre troupe at its Heritage Playhouse production in Gibsons on Oct. 20. Smith's explanation of how she slipped into schizophrenia was typical of the touchingly insightful depictions of life with mental illness that were a feature of all five stories.

As Smith – played by actor Pam Girone – tells it, those independent voices at first were loving and supportive, making her "deliciously happy." But once they were established, they turned on her viciously, making her life hell. "I lost my life to psychosis. The voices took me down in the prime of my youth."

The collection of stories, titled *SRO Stars* ("SRO" referring to Single Room Occupancy buildings of Vancouver's Downtown East Side), was made possible by the work of Lenore Rowntree, playwright, retired lawyer and part-time Gibsons resident. Rowntree volunteered to do a series of workshops with would-be playwrights, under the auspices of the Vancouver non-profit Motivation, Power and Achievement (MPA) Society.

"We met at least once a month, for about nine months," Rowntree told Coast Reporter. "They would submit stuff to me online and then we would meet and read each other's pieces at the workshop and work with it. It was a collaborative effort to get everybody's piece into shape."

Rowntree's dedication to helping the MPA writers stemmed in large part from her family life – she has a sister living with schizophrenia. Rowntree, a published author who has had two full-length plays of her own produced, wrote a mini-play for *SRO Stars*, *The Bumblebee Effect*. It explores the conceit that "we're not crazy, but she is." The message was clear: the difference between mental illness and mental wellness is often paper-thin. We all have interior chatter in our daily lives. That it could, in certain circumstances, slip out of control and take on a life of its own is not far-fetched, and various aspects of that theme informed the whole production.

Ana Smith's play ended on a positive note, signalling that recovery is always possible. "I came out of it two years ago," Smith's character reported. "These voices in my head were just voices. Not one word of truth came from them. I was able to mostly push them away."

Rowntree is facilitating a free, four-part writing workshop series at Gibsons Public Library starting Nov. 2. More information is available on the library's website or from the author, lenore@lenorerowntree.com.

The next Off the Page production is Sunday, Nov. 17, with a reading-performance of Vancouver actor Jay Brazeau's play, *A Fortunate Son*.