

'Blessed be the Dysfunction that Binds'



Photo by Peter Welch

Greenville native Anne Pasquale will perform a one-woman show called "BOB: Blessed Be the Dysfunction That Binds," which will have its Rhode Island premiere this weekend at the Artists Exchange in Cranston.

Local actress, writer presents one-person play on mental illness

By FRANK O'DONNELL, Valley Breeze Entertainment Writer
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Anne Pasquale grew up with mental illness. Not her own. Her brother Bob's. But as she points out, "When one person has mental illness, the whole family has special needs."

Pasquale, an actress and writer now living in New York, was born in Greenville and grew up in the Lymanville section of North Providence with her older brother Bob and two sisters. "Through most of our childhood, we called Bob emotionally disturbed."

Pasquale has taken her life with Bob and turned it into a one-woman show called "BOB: Blessed Be the Dysfunction That Binds," which will have its Rhode Island premiere this weekend at the Artists Exchange in Cranston.

"It's about my brother, from diagnosis to his breakthrough. The show travels with Bob from his diagnosis, and shows how the family changed because of it and what home life was like."

Pasquale invites her audience, she says in press materials, "to meet her special needs brother Bob, her family, and share with them in the crisis, craziness, laughter, tears and triumph that highlight this coming-of-age journey. This 90-minute solo show promises to shed light on the lives of folks with disabilities and those who love them."

Pasquale says that because of the nature of her brother's illness, "we couldn't do what we wanted to do. We couldn't watch television, or listen to music, because he'd throw a fit, be out of control."

When Bob was diagnosed, Pasquale explains, "they called him schizophrenic. If you look at him now, he's on the autistic scale." Although Bob's psychologist doesn't necessarily agree with that, says Pasquale.

The show follows Bob's life, from 1954 through the present. "The big transition happens in 1988, when he was moved out of the IMH (Institute of Mental Health) and into a group home. That basically changed his life. They gave him certain occupational skills. Now he's able to come home and be with his family. Now he can handle himself."

Pasquale plays 20 characters in the show - including her "Old World Italian" grandparents, her parents, "myself at different stages in my life," and Bob.

"I've made my living writing a lot of one-person shows," says Pasquale, "mostly historical characters, looking at people's timelines." The shows are created for and presented to schools.

In many ways, "BOB" is a similar project. "Seeing an era through a character's eyes. This looks at mental illness from the 1800s through the present day" through the eyes of her brother.

As she dug into her research for the show, Pasquale turned her attention to the old Howard Complex in Cranston, aka the Institute of Mental Health.

"I learned that the model for the Howard Center was Blackwell's Island." Blackwell's was an infamous asylum in New York on what is now known as Roosevelt Island. In the late 1800s, journalist Nellie Bly "feigned insanity, got admitted, and uncovered how people were being mistreated. Based on that, there was an overhaul," which Pasquale sees as a turning point in the treatment of the mentally ill.

What intrigued Pasquale most is that she's been doing a one-woman show about Bly for the past 10 years, and she never realized the connection between the character and the institution that one housed her brother. "I just found my way to that intuitively and now I can say something about coming out on the other side."

The show is produced with support of the Fountain House and VSA arts Rhode Island, both serving the needs of the mental health community.

Pasquale is an established teaching artist, recipient of the Young Audiences New York 2009 Roster Artist of the Year Award. She creates and tours her repertoire of educational assemblies under the banner of "Living History Programs" for audiences of all ages in venues along the East Coast. She is also a member of The Actors Studio.

"BOB: Blessed Be the Dysfunction That Binds" runs Sept. 6-9, Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 7 p.m., and Sunday at 2 p.m., at The Artists Exchange, 50 Rolfe Square, Cranston. Tickets are \$15. Thursday night's performance will be ASL interpreted. Visit www.artists-exchange.org, or call 401-490-9475 for more information.

You can learn more about Pasquale's project at www.bobtheshow.com.