Performance offers a window to mental illness

'Good Enough' tells real-life stories in hopes of raising awareness and lessening stigma of mental illness

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Meredith Berman rehearses her role of April. Performances of "Good Enough" close the group's first season. (Roland C. Portal For the Chicago Tri, Chicago Tribune / May 12, 2012)

Barbara Brotman
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Live on stage, opening tonight:


And therapy, medication, people who stick around despite everything and finally, painstakingly, rebuilt lives.

"Jersey Boys," it isn't. But a theatrical production that offers a window into mental illness, opened by women who have experienced it.

That it is.
"Good Enough" is a production of Erasing the Distance, a nonprofit organization that uses performance to raise awareness and lessen the stigma of mental illness. The show, at the Center on Halsted's Hoover-Leippen Theatre, comprises five monologues by women about depression or bipolar disorder.

Performed by professional actors, they were crafted from the words of five real women. One of them is Julie.

She sat in a North Side cafe, a friendly and smart 27-year-old writer and director in Chicago theater. Her manner was warm, her scarf fashionable.

What will it be like, watching some of the hardest times of her life recounted on stage?

"I don't know how I'll feel," she said. "I'm extremely nervous."

Julie is no stranger to the stage. But when Brighid O'Shaughnessy, founder and executive artistic director of Erasing the Distance, asked if her story could be included in this show, "I was terrified," Julie said. "I'm still terrified of having my story heard by so many people."

But she had a story to tell. It began after college, when she found herself overwhelmed with life but with no one to talk to. She descended into darkness and thoughts of suicide.

She remembers the time as utterly draining. "It's the most exhausting thing in the world to actively keep yourself alive, to have this discussion with yourself all the time," she said. "You can't do anything else. ... The thought of having to go to the grocery store was overwhelming."

She moved to Idaho, where amid quiet and loneliness she learned who she was and what she needed to keep herself emotionally healthy. She returned to Chicago and began to thrive.

A close friend, however, did not. The friend grew troubled, then distant. Then she committed suicide.

In her grief, Julie became a volunteer with Erasing the Distance. The group's work dovetailed with her theater interests.

Using trained volunteers, many of them clinical students at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, Erasing the Distance collects the stories of people who have been affected by mental health problems. The stories are transcribed and turned into theatrical productions performed at locations like schools or churches, or on stage like this week's show, which ends Erasing the Distance's first theatrical season.

Julie made an appointment to tell her story, which she sees as touching on two stories—hers and her friend's (it was to protect her friend's privacy that Julie asked to be identified by only her first name).

She sat down with her interviewer and "I pretty much immediately started crying, and didn't stop," she said. "I said things I didn't even know I felt until they came out of my mouth."

Much of what she said ended up in the script.

I just felt like I was drowning all the time. ... Any time waiting for the train or the bus, like when it would be coming up, there would just be this split second in my mind where it was like, "I could jump in front of this right now."

She told, too, of the last time she saw her friend:

I was like, "Do you need help with anything?" and she said, "No, I think I'm fine."

Meaning carrying things out to the van, you know, but I wish that I had been like, "Do you need help with anything?"
The show does not promise to be easy listening. Erase the Distance knows the charged nature of its work and limits shows to no more than an hour.

"That's just about as much emotional experience as our audiences can take," O'Shaughnessy said.

People who have lived through mental illness, their own or a family member's, may simply find the subject too painful to revisit. "Our work isn't for everybody," O'Shaughnessy said.

But the shows, which are followed by conversations with the audience, are an unmatched way to address mental health issues, she said.

"Narrative is a lot more effective than handing out a pamphlet. When you hear someone's direct experience and it's told in story form, people have the ability to say, 'Wait a minute. I said something like that. I thought something like that. I felt something like that,'" she said.

To Julie, the performances are comforting. "You hear these stories, and you know it happens to other people," she said.

She is not sure what she will feel seeing her own. She has not seen the script. She has told only two people that her story is included.

Her boyfriend is one of them. She told him when the show's postcard arrived in the mail. She was about to toss the card into the recycling bin when he stopped her.

"He said, 'No, we're going to put it on the fridge,'" she said.

In telling her story, "it stops being mine, in a way," she said. And hearing it being retold, she thinks, may be a kind of unburdening.

"If there are all these other people to carry it," she said, "it's not just me."

"Good Enough" will be performed tonight (May 14), May 15, May 21 and May 29 at the Center on Halsted, 3636 N. Halsted St., Chicago. More information is at erasingthedistance.org.

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