Erasing the Distance aims to end mental health stigma

Brigid O’Shaughnessy, Founder and Executive Artistic Director of Erasing the Distance

The power of performance and visual arts. She founded Erasing the Distance with a mission to “disarm stigma, generate awareness, educate and ignite healing about mental illness through theater.” O’Shaughnessy adds, “a lot of times people have the wrong information or biased information, and we want to actually use people’s real narratives to help shine the light and say what [mental illness] really is versus what people might think it is.”

After personally experiencing mental health illness with her close friends and loved ones, O’Shaughnessy was determined to help eliminate negative associations with mental health. “These are biologically-based brain disorders that are often triggered by our brain chemistry but have many different triggers in our environment,” she explains. “I think a lot of people just don’t realize that [mental illnesses] are actually medical illnesses, similar to diabetes or cancer that, with treatment, can get better. I think that because they manifest as behavior, a lot of people think that people should be able to snap out of it.”

On November 12, Erasing the Distance begins its 2012-2013 season with Will You Stand Up? The production, remounted since its premiere in December 2011, will include five theatrical monologues of real stories from victims of violence at various stages of their mental health recovery process. Victims like Lawrence—a storyteller who struggled with alcoholism as a result of his diagnosis of depression and bipolar disorder, which eventually led to homelessness and suicide attempts—and KOKUMO (Yoruba for this woman will not die)—an African-American transgender woman who experienced racial violence from her own community and is now a huge advocate in the transgender community—share their stories, performed by actors, during 10-12 minute monologues, followed by an interactive talk-back with the actors, mental health professionals, and crisis volunteers.

O’Shaughnessy selected theater as her medium to connect with victims and a larger audience because she finds that it resonates with people. “We find that theater has a way of touching your heart and hitting you on all levels so that you end up feeling like you understand what’s going on and you can do something about it,” she says. “When you hear somebody else speaking it through the medium of the arts, it has a way of sparking feelings and ideas that I don’t think a panel or a book, while good sources of information, could ever do.”

Acknowledging that people learn in several different ways, O’Shaughnessy and her creative team have partnered with two visual artists, Fernando Ramirez of Project Onward, and independent artist Deva Suckerman, whose art will be showcased and sold in the lobby.

Her vision for Will You Stand Up? is to spark activism in the hearts and minds of its audience to help refute common stigmas associated with people dealing with mental illness, stigmas that patients of mental illness are violent, unreliable, incoherent, or just making excuses for why they can’t overcome their illness. “Part of our goal with the show, and I mean this in a conscious way, is for people to be uncomfortable, because we feel that, unless you’re uncomfortable, chances are you aren’t going to do a whole lot to be an advocate for change.”

Will You Stand Up? is a four-night production at the Hoover-Leppen Theater (3656 N. Halsted) on November 12, 13, 19 & 20, at 7:30pm. Tickets are $20 at the door, $15 in advance, and $10 for groups, seniors and students. For people interested in attending but who struggle with paying for entry, particularly individuals with mental illnesses, substance abuse issues or individuals dealing with homelessness, they are invited to contact O’Shaughnessy at (773) 856-3455 or see her at the door to best be accommodated.

Mental health stigmas have permeated our society through the creative expression of some of the most popular investigative shows to date. Shows like Law & Order, CSI, and Criminal Minds, while entertaining, affect the way our society interacts with people dealing with mental illness, exposing only the most severe cases of depression, schizophrenia, and the like. And while viewers can appreciate a good suspense episode, are they able to separate fantasy from reality?

Brigid O’Shaughnessy, a mental health educator and founder and executive artistic director of Erasing the Distance, aims to reveal mental health disparities through the