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‘Bob’ shares family’s life with mental illness

By CHANNING GRAY, Journal Arts Writer

When New York writer-actress Anne Pasquale was growing up in Greenville, she remembers life revolving around her mentally ill brother, Bob. Bob, now 58 and living in a home for the emotionally disturbed, would throw violent fits if things did not go his way.

As a result, Pasquale said her family couldn’t invite people over to the house, couldn’t go out to dinner and couldn’t watch TV when they wanted.

“When a person has mental illness, the whole family has special needs,” said Pasquale, who is bringing her one-woman show, “BOB: Blessed Be the Dysfunction That Binds” to Cranston’s Artists’ Exchange this weekend. The 80-minute show opens Thursday and runs through Sunday.



Photo by Peter Welch

Pasquale said her brother was diagnosed with an emotional illness at the age of three, when he showed signs of autism and schizophrenia. Whether he was born that way, or it was a result of a fall as an infant is not known.

As a youngster, he attended Meeting Street School and the Fogarty Center, where he learned to read at a first or second grade level. When he was 18, Bob was sent to the state Institute for Mental Health for about a decade.

“Everything revolves around the person with the illness,” said Pasquale, who left Rhode Island in the 1980s to attend New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts.

This weekend’s show marks the first time Pasquale has performed in her native state as a professional. Her last performances here were college productions at URI in the early 1980s.

She wrote “Bob” a little over a year ago, then workshopped it for six months. She considers the engagement here an out-of-town tryout, as she gets ready for a possible off-Broadway run a year from now.

In the show, Pasquale plays 20 characters, including herself, her parents and her Italian grandparents, doctors, Bob and people Bob met at the IMH.

“I wanted to see how far I could go as a one-woman show,” said Pasquale, who is a co-founder of New York’s Accidental Repertory Theatre. “I don’t know where it will go from here. I’m on a journey. We’ll see where it takes me.”

In New York, Pasquale does a lot of school shows about the place of women in history. She has done performances on the westward expansion, immigration and the first female soldier.

She has also appeared in Lincoln Center’s “A View from the Bridge,” and “Paradise Lost” at the Actors Studio, where she is a member.

At first, Pasquale wasn’t sure whether she should tackle such a personal subject as her brother’s illness. But she has since gotten a lot of positive feedback. She performed “Bob” in March at Columbia University’s Teachers college, and is now preparing a study guide for the school based on the show.

Pasquale said she talked to her mother about writing the piece, and was told if it helps someone, do it.

“It’s not self-pitying,” said Pasquale. “It has a lot of humor. After all, it’s an Italian family. Loud and crazy.”