

Artist takes on a pill-popping nation

Tiffany Martini, The Examiner

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Performer, playwright Berry examines ‘the great antidepression’ in solo show

Drug dealing in the United States has reached a new high.

Abusers are everywhere. Anyone who thought the war on drugs was won a long time ago has never been more wrong.

Let’s be clear, though. The dealing we’re talking about doesn’t happen in dodgy back alleyways, or under a veil of secrecy. These deals take place in hospitals, pharmacies, and online.

We’re talking about the onslaught of pharmaceutical goods peddled on television, on the radio, and even in programs handed out at the theater, and the millions of willing customers gobbling up the industry’s promise for a better life, a regular digestive tract, mellower children, and the eradication of heartburn forever.

Performer, playwright, and director Jennifer Berry takes on the pharmaceutical trend in her one-woman show “Big Pharma,” which makes its Bay Area premiere at The Marsh on Nov. 4.

“We are in the great antidepression,” Berry says, describing the “spiritual” state of affairs, so to speak, characterizing the United States.

Unlike our grandparents, Berry says, who turned to each other for solace and support when the times got, not just tough, but downright unbearable, these days, we’re more apt to pop a pill, rather than find a shoulder to lean on.

Much of Berry’s work as a playwright is of a political bent. She’s taken on topics such as women’s portrayal in the media and beautification.

In “Big Pharma” women are once again the primary group she studies, but this time how women are targeted by pharmaceutical companies.

Prompting Berry’s interest was an alarming trend among her 30-something pals. Too many had suddenly began taking antidepressants.

That’s when she became more attuned to how many pharmaceutical ads infiltrated her magazines, radio stations, and television screen.

Even more alarming however, was the fact that these advertisements sold not only prescriptions, but diagnoses as well.

Berry recalls an advertisement she saw in which a woman, frustrated because she has difficulty getting her shopping cart out of its corral, is recommended as the perfect candidate for an antidepressant.

“I started laughing. I thought ‘This is hysterical,’” Berry says.

She is emphatic, however, that her show should no way be interpreted as downplaying the seriousness of mental illnesses or stigmatizing those who suffer from them. Rather, Berry believes this age of self-medication is one more consumer trend plaguing America — but this time with consequences that have yet to be seen.

She also says the real solutions to the problems these advertisements so carefully and often eloquently outline can only be addressed outside of the pillbox.

“We need to decide — do we want to keep drugging our children or devise educational systems that meets kids’ individual needs?” Berry said.

“Big Pharma”

Opens Nov. 4 at The Marsh and runs through Dec. 10. The Marsh is located at 1062 Valencia St. For more information call (415) 826-5750 or visit www.themarsh.org.

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