

CHICAGO



Lisa Sunde makes her point during a recent show of "Mortified," which features everyday people reading diary entries, poems and letters that they wrote in their youth.

[PHOTO BY BRIAN WALSH]

Info, please ...

Want to revisit the days of claw bangs, P.P.P.'s and first French kisses? Mortified is breaking into Chicago and into the literary world.

>> Show info: 8 and 10 p.m. Oct. 18 at the Green Mill, 4802 N. Broadway. The next show will be Dec. 6, also at the Green Mill. For tickets, check out getmortified.com or greenmilljazz.com, or call the Green Mill at **773-878-5552**.

>> Book info: "Mortified: Real Words. Real People. Real Pathetic." is a compilation of some of the best material from "Mortified" shows. It is scheduled to hit bookstores Nov. 28.

Absolutely mortified

Chicagoans relive adolescent angst through on-stage performances

By **Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz**
REDEYE

When she was 16 years old, Sunita Pillay wrote a poem called "Life."

It began: "Life can be wonderful."

It climaxed: "Life can be a bitch!"

It ended: "Life is all of these things, every [bleeping] one of them."

There were many other descriptions of what life can be, all unprintable here. But you get the picture.

Now 34 and living in Wicker Park, Pillay will be reciting that poem and other excerpts from her diary Oct. 18 at the Chicago debut of "Mortified," a show that gets regular people on stage to celebrate the agony of adolescence.

Pillay is among seven locals who will read actual diary entries, letters and other writings from their preteen and teenage years, showcasing a period of life when we are at our most tortured and our prose is, perhaps, at its most dramatic.

"Am I the only one in the *world* who understands Pink Floyd?" Pillay read from her diary at a recent rehearsal for the show, channeling the angst of her younger self. And later: "Words cannot describe my love affair with marijuana."

"Mortified"—which was born in L.A. in 2002 and has since sprouted shows in San Francisco, New York and Boston—has consistently drawn sold-out crowds, with audiences hungry for the "ultra, ultra truth" that spills from the teenage pen, creator Dave Nadelberg said.

"I think there is a craving in culture right now for things that are just sincere and honest," said Nadelberg, an L.A.-based actor and writer. "It's sort-of voyeurism, but not in this dirty, reality-TV kind of way."

Nadelberg found inspiration for the show in the closet of his childhood home in West Bloomington, Mich., where he stumbled upon a letter he wrote to a girl when he was 16 explaining why she should go out with him. He cited, among other things, his love for "sunsets across the water, beach volleyball, 'Calvin and Hobbes,' the outdoors, classic lines and beautiful eyes." He even drew a little "Clip 'n' Save" coupon containing his name and phone number.

With his friends taking "ruthless delight" in his newly found letter, Nadelberg set out to find other former teenage scribes willing to take their real words to the stage. The concept took off, he said, with people of

all stripes finding solidarity in the passion, pathos and ridiculousness of their youth.

"No matter who you are—popular or a nerd, black, white, gay or straight—we were all that same suffering idiot," Nadelberg said. "Even the hot cheerleader, beneath that mean-girl exterior, was just as insecure as the pimply fat kid."

Nadelberg said he has high hopes for success in Chicago, as it's a theater town and a comedy town, "and we're somewhere in between."

"Chicago is the perfect synthesis of what we are," said Nadelberg, who will perform his letter at the Chicago show.

About 50 people submitted entries in Chicago, said Annette Ferrara, one of the local producers. After selecting the seven best pieces, the producers worked with the performers to help them boil down the material and deliver the lines most effectively. No words are changed or added.

Reading from her diary at a rehearsal last week at Ferrara's Logan Square home, Bridgid Titley's rendition of her 9-year-old self—perpetually livid for being sent to her room—was sidesplitting.

"Mom said I ate all the cookie dough when I didn't!" read Titley, 25, an administrative assistant and actress who lives in Ukrainian Village. "Mom is a dork, a moron and a geek, and I hate her so much!"

Another favorite was Bill Rohde, 40, a

customer service office manager from Valparaiso who read from the journal he kept during his freshman year at a Lutheran college in Indiana, when he was desperately fighting the temptation of sex.

It was a losing battle, with the 18-year-old Rohde lamenting dates who, in one example, "started playing around in the groin-y area." He concluded, eventually, that "hypocrisy does not result in cascading happiness."

Most of the performers say they feel enough distance from their unfortunate writings to view them as pure entertainment, with a touch of catharsis.

"I thought it would be interesting to look at it in a funny way instead of the serious way in which I wrote it," said Pillay, an adjunct instructor at Indiana University Northwest.

But Brandi Kleinert Larsen—who will be reading from a time capsule she kept in middle school containing letters she wrote to her future self (example: "Goodbye from the soon-to-be past!")—said she's mortified.

"I was really cool about it when I didn't think I was going to be cast, but now I'm so embarrassed," said Larsen, 27, an editor of a publishing company who lives in Roscoe Village. "I want to go back to my 11-year-old self and shake her."

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