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# Making Light of Drug Abuse, to Make a Point

By GERRI HIRSHEY  
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AVON



George Ruhe for The New York Times

**ONE-MAN SHOW** John Morello

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EVERY spring they crop up, dark and worrisome as nightshade amid the tea roses of prom corsages: High school safety assemblies. Most often they are earnest and sobering “scared straight” campaigns against drug and alcohol use and drunken driving. But this year, Avon High School parents and school administrators tried out a new weapon in the war against bad choices: laughter. Gloriously irreverent laughter.

As students filed into the auditorium, speculation was hopeful: “I hear this dude is the bomb.” Dude is a Boston-based actor and comedian, John Morello. Mr. Morello wrote and performs an hourlong show called “I Am Dirt,” which his Web site describes as “a one-man show about substance abuse and choices.”

Since he began performing it in late 2001, “Dirt” has become so popular that Mr. Morello is on the road for more than 100 days a year, coast to coast and in Canada, in city, suburban and rural schools, churches and synagogues. He is summoned to Midwestern towns where crystal meth is a scourge, to Southern cities losing children to OxyContin and teenage binge

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drinking.

“It almost seems as if you feel you’re immortal,” Jim Pappa, an assistant principal at Avon, told his juniors and seniors as he introduced the program. “I always get worried at this time of year.”

Taking the stage with a bit of patter from his days as a stand-up comedian, Mr. Morello assured his wary audience: “I don’t preach, teach or lecture. It’s a show.”

In jeans, T-shirt and hoodie, he looks far younger than his 39 years, morphing easily into several characters. Among them: an unintentionally hilarious teenage poetry contest winner; Melissa, a loner Goth girl (and date rape drug victim) tormented by mean girls; and the perplexed but loving grandpa of a troubled high school philosopher called Pi, nicknamed for his student number, 3.14. Their stories unspool and interlace around an overall theme: choices, consequences and the balm of compassion.

The kids roared throughout. Here is Pi, ruefully describing his pal Jason, who was quite bright until he started smoking weed daily: “The wheels are turning, but the gerbil is dead.” Pi, on the drug habits of his own family: “My mom’s on [Prozac](#), my brother’s on [Ritalin](#) and my father takes [Viagra](#).” His explanation for why he takes the feel-good drug Ecstasy: most of the time, he wants to be dirt. As in maybe not alive anymore. Pi’s father is another kind of addict; his drug of choice is success, at the expense of family life.

The message is neatly, tastily wrapped in layers of fast food, mall and music references. There were stomps and howls of gleeful recognition when Pi asks a girl how she could bully Melissa while wearing a “Save Darfur” T-shirt. When Pi lands in rehab, the scene is as mordantly funny as any Nurse Ratched hissy fit from “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.”

Mr. Morello comes by his *vérité* honestly. In his onstage postscript, he explained that the day after his 12th birthday, his oldest brother, Henry, then 20, died in a drunken driving accident. His other brother, Glenn, “the one who slept in the top bunk and broke my Hungry Hungry Hippos game” became a heroin addict and after many rehabs and two years of sobriety, bought a bag of heroin. “He overdosed and died alone on Jan. 30, 2003.”

In closing, Mr. Morello invoked good sense and hope—with a rim shot. He reminded students that according to state law, what happens in a guidance counselor’s office stays there, “just like in Vegas.” So talk to somebody.

Afterward, sitting in a borrowed guidance office, Mr. Morello said he developed his show from “shoeboxes and backpacks full of monologues and stand-up I’d written over the years.” He was stunned to walk away with 35 bookings when he showcased the material

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before a conference of educators in New Jersey in 2002. “I didn’t intend to be getting up for 7:30 a.m. gigs,” he said. “And I’ve never seen myself as a motivational speaker.”

Nor had he envisioned himself as the ever-hopeful caretaker of his addicted brother, driving him home to Boston from Detroit “as he detoxed in the cab of the U-Haul.” He learned that addicts, teenagers or adult, are cunning liars. “But I always stayed a sucker for my brother, and I’m glad I did. Yeah, he stole my stereo. But I never stopped believing he could change and trying to help him get there. I’d do it all over again.”

He did change the show after his brother’s overdose. “Pi used to die. He doesn’t now. So many school performances are sad for sadness’ sake.”

Now the father of a year-old girl, Mr. Morello said he understands the anxious love that keeps him so well booked. But not all adults have been thrilled with his take-no-prisoners approach. In Cherry Hill, N.J., parents insisted on so much censorship that the woman who hired him apologized, paid him in full, and suggested he skip the last few shows.

“I won’t dumb it down,” he said. “These kids are way too smart to disrespect that way.”

Mr. Morello headed for a cafeteria lunch, pulling the wheeie suitcase with his sound equipment and props. Students stopped him every few feet with thanks, handshakes and a chorus of “awesomes.” In the spirit of his show, Mr. Morello offers up his favorite review, delivered by a bespectacled middle schooler: “This was way better than last year’s melanoma assembly.”

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