“I have a princess face, but not a princess body,” an emerging professional actor shrugged morosely, as she described to me her new dietary regimen of spinach and kale. This moment remains with me as one of many anecdotes where performers have succumbed to diet culture, convinced that contorting their bodies would increase their odds of success. As an educator, I have witnessed this even with students participating in theater on the recreational level; unsurprising, considering the Mental Health Foundation report on body image found that in the United Kingdom 35% of youth aged 13–19 “often” or “always” worry about their weight (2019). Psychologists Gattario and Frisěn observe that “the adolescent years are critical for many in shaping the body image that they will subsequently carry with them into adulthood” (2019). People of all ages and genders can be susceptible to eating disorders, but youth are particularly vulnerable, described by Fat Studies scholars Solovay and Rothblum as “the most innocent victims in the [so-called] war on fat” declared by the United States government in 1997 (WHO 2009).

The dominant literature examining intersections of youth, eating disorders, and extra-curricular activities considers physical education (Kennedy, Winter, and Corbin 2019; Kirk and Colquhoun 1989; Sykes and McPhail 2008) and dance education (Oliver 2008; Barr and Oliver 2016). Though less research exists pertaining to theater education, some research does suggest a link between involvement in theater and the pressure to achieve an ideal body image (Dwojnych and Kuczkowska-Golińska 2018). Anecdotally, my involvement in educational theater as an aspiring actress is woven throughout my narrative as a survivor of a 20-year battle with disordered eating, exercise bulimia, and body dysmorphia. Young actors receive messages pressuring them to suppress their body size and shape in multiple ways: through typecasting; the physical demands of a specific role; double-casting actors in one role, leading to physical comparisons and sometimes the need to share costumes; or height and weight specifications in contracts for professional young actors. In my own story, I was overlooked for the romantic lead time and time again, and was instead cast as maternal figures or in supporting comedic roles. In college, the opportunity to finally play the leading lady only reinforced in my mind the need to shrink my body; surely, I thought, I was the only available actor for this role. Surely, the director would prefer me to be thinner.

Male-presenting bodies are increasingly scrutinized and thus also at risk of disordered food and exercise behaviors. However, food studies scholar and fat activist LeBesco observes
the ways in which larger bodies are depicted on stage and screen are not equitable based on
gender; they write: “Popular images of fat men include the wealthy, politically powerful ‘fat
cat,’ the sweetly avuncular Santa Claus type, and the funny guy, à la John Belushi, Chris
Farley, and Louise Anderson” (2004). Conversely, fat female-presenting performers are often
cast as the unwanted single girl, the rowdy “slut”, or the brutish matron. Even on the rare
occasions where a female protagonist is written as fat (such as Tracy Turnblad in the film and
stage adaptation Hairspray), she often plays opposite a thin, conventionally attractive male,
suggesting that this dichotomy is every fat girl’s fantasy. Furthermore, these fat protagonists
are often cast with “small fat” performers (those whose bodies are still catered to with some
amount of thin privilege, such as being able to shop in most clothing stores); worse, these
roles may also be cast with thin actors wearing padding, a discriminatory practice that points
to the fatphobia of casting directors and the inequity of training and performance experience
available to larger-bodied actors.

In this essay and lesson plan, I approach eating disorders and body image with young
actors as an issue of social justice and diversity. As anti-diet dietician and journalist Har-
rison observes, historically, “demonizing fatness is an anomaly,” and in Western culture is
rooted in early modern colonialism (2019). Just as nineteenth-century white, male scientists
categorized bodies by worth based on skin pigmentation, so, too, did they consider fatness a
“marker of ‘savagery’” (Harrison 2019). Fat activists Harding and Kirby assert, “…it’s absurd
to look at very thin [bodies] as the norm, and everyone else as an outlier. But we do,” and in
this statement echoes the narrow representation on stage of so many demographic identity
markers since the inception of theater, including, but not limited to, race, gender, sexual
orientation, ability, and socioeconomic status (2009).

If “diet culture [stems] from White supremacy” (Cox 2020), it makes sense, then, that “by
and large, Western culture is diet culture” (Harrison 2019; emphasis added). To understand
how to best educate young people raised within this culture, I am reminded of Zaretta Ham-
mond’s research on culturally responsive pedagogy, which details feeling safe and being part
of a caring social community as necessary for cognitive functioning (2015). As Cox states,
“weight stigma takes its toll on recipients by eroding trust and compounding stress and anxi-
ety” (2020), causing the amygdala, the “fight or flight” part of the brain, to perceive constant
threats; as Hammond asserts, “We cannot downplay students’ needs to feel safe and valued in
the classroom” (2015), and I advocate for the inclusion of body size within this conversation.

I posit that youth of all sizes are negatively impacted when the field of theater is not size
inclusive – whether having their bodies scrutinized as young performers in the audition
process, or watching from the audience as stories center white, thin, cisgender, straight,
non-disabled bodies. For young performers, physical demands of actors, narrow casting
practices, and weight-biased dramatic literature are all common in professional theater, and
too easily trickle down to the educational level. Educators are well situated for creating rad-
ical change; they need not prepare young students for the professional theater of today, but
rather can guide them in critically examining and challenging common theater practices.
In what ways can theater educators address this issue in the classroom? How can theater
educators create a theater program that is inclusive of all bodies – across the size spectrum
and other demographics such as race, gender, and ability? How can doing so inspire young
people to radically reimagine whose bodies can tell what stories, to create a more dynamic
and just theater of tomorrow?

Cox argues, “Liberation flourishes where safety and trust reside” (2020). I did not know
it at the time, but liberation is what I desperately longed for as a young theater artist who
felt as though my body did not belong on stage. If theater educators are committed to social
justice and diversity, it is imperative that they operate with a commitment to body liberation related to size, as well as other issues impacting marginalized bodies such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. Through a Fat Liberation lens, I imagine a classroom where no young person will feel the need to diet as their bodies grow and mature. I picture a space where all bodies are engaged in the writing and telling of stories on stage, where no singular body is considered the default. Solovay and Rothblum ask, “Why [do] we continue to expect people to [diet]? Who is oppressed by that pattern? To whom, and to which industries and organizations, do the resulting privileges flow?” (2009). Through acknowledging that theater is a traditionally non-neutral art form that privileges thin bodies, and through aiming to disrupt that norm, we can work toward a more equitable future for theater artists of all sizes and bodies.

Young actors are infiltrated with messages championing the thin ideal; thus, I argue that this issue must be addressed explicitly in the classroom. I offer the following lesson plan as the beginning of a conversation, intended for high school or university students to reflect on their own body image and experiences as a performer. From this lesson, a theater educator can then continue to encourage young actors to identify fatphobia in dramatic literature and in casting practices, and to create theater that counteracts the traditional model. One lesson cannot dismantle fatphobia, but it may lead to significant change when used in concert with best practices for size-inclusive theater education, such as redirecting fat shaming or negative self-talk; making body-diverse show selections and casting choices; responsibly staging physical moments such as fight choreography and intimacy; providing ample time for physical rest and recovery during the rehearsal and production process; and analyzing scripts through a diversity lens.

This lesson is adapted from a workshop presented to undergraduate and graduate performing arts students at the University of Central Florida in a health and wellness course for performing artists. The content in this lesson is influenced by the works of Boal (Rainbow of Desire, 1995), Bogart and Landau (2004), and Alrutz and Hoare (2020). The workshop was originally developed with UCF Counseling and Psychological Services providers Jade Garneau-Fournier, coordinator of the Eating Disorders Management Team, and performing arts liaison Christine Dassow, who have graciously agreed to allow the lesson to be modified for this publication. Working with a counselor or therapist is always the best practice when presenting content related to mental health, and anyone wishing to facilitate this lesson plan is encouraged to do the same.

TITLE: Bodies at play: body image and the young actor
Length: 1 hour
Recommended age group: high school or university
Objectives:
1. To use theatre to examine body image as a young actor.
2. To explore the intersections of negative body image/eating disorders and societal oppressions.
3. To explore how we can use our positions as theatre artists to imagine a world free of body shaming and eating disorders.

Materials: Music (instrumental rhythmic tracks, and one instrumental meditation track); Device to play music; Eight posters or large squares of butcher paper; Tape; Markers; Pencils; Index cards; Drum (optional); Handouts

Set up:
• Write each of the following prompts on one of the posters:
  1. “Body”
“Love”
“Beauty”
“Strength”
“As an actor, my body is …”
“As an actor, my body is NOT …”
“As an actor, I want my body to…”
• Using adhesive or tape, mount the posters around the room. Place several markers at each poster.
• Form a large circle of chairs for lesson participants. Place an index card and a pencil underneath each seat.
• On the last poster (or on a whiteboard) write the following steps for the devising sequence:
  1 “Original three-words (story)”
  2 “First frozen image and soundscape”
  3 “8-count heartbeat to transform”
  4 “Second three-words (response)”
  5 “Second frozen image and soundscape”
• Play instrumental rhythmic music as people enter the space.

Check in: poster dialogue (10 minutes total, including 5 minutes before start time)
1 As participants enter the space, encourage them to respond to the posters with a word, sentence, or image.
2 If participants have already completed all of the posters, they may go around once more to read what other people have written, and to circle, underline, or comment in response to the statements that resonate with them.
3 Encourage participants to finish their final thought and find a seat in the circle by the end of the music.

Introduction and community agreement (5 minutes)
1 If necessary, the facilitator(s) will introduce themselves using name, pronouns, and organization.
2 State the lesson objectives; emphasize that today’s work is about process, and not product; and ask participants to, as a community, commit to respecting self and other.
3 Share that resources about eating disorders will be provided at end of lesson and introduce the on-site therapist, if available.

Warm-up: wellness stretch (2 minutes)
1 Ask participants to find their tallest posture, standing or sitting up as able.
2 Working within and honoring their individual abilities, guide participants in stretching high in the air, reaching down to their toes, and slowly rolling back up.
3 Guide participants in stretching arms out to the side, then wrapping arms across the chest and around to the back, as though enveloping self in a big hug.
4 Guide participants in placing one hand over their hearts and finding stillness, feeling their heartbeats.
5 Provide participants a moment to check in with their own bodies’ needs and to stretch or move as they desire.
Bodies at play

Icebreaker: embodied names (10 minutes)
1 Ask participants to think about the natural rhythm of their names, considering stressed or unstressed syllables. Using that rhythm, ask them to make a movement that matches. The sillier and freer the better!
2 One at a time, going around the circle, each participant will say their name with the accompanying rhythmic movement. The rest of the circle will then echo their name and movement within their abilities, before going to the next person.

Bridge work: embodied connections (3 minutes)
1 Use the above icebreaker to observe how movement, rhythm, and text came together. Say, “We will now use these components to reflect on our experiences with body image as theatre artists. With each of the following prompts, take a moment to think about the prompt, and when I say ‘go,’ please respond to the prompt with a movement and a word, sound, or breath to accompany that movement.”
2 Offer the prompt: “What do you feel about how bodies are represented in media and entertainment?” After a moment to think, say “go” to allow participants to simultaneously create a movement and word, sound, or breath in response.
3 Offer the prompt: “Think about a time you felt evaluated based on your body. How did that make you feel?” and repeat the process.

Body: embodied story (20 minutes)
1 (3 minutes) Ask participants to return to their chairs. Ask them to write, using the index cards and pencils underneath their chairs, up to three words in response to the prompt: “Describe a moment when your identity as an artist impacted how you saw or related to your body.” Specify that they will be invited to share these words and stories in small groups. Each participant can brainstorm several on their index card and then select one for the next step.
2 (3 minutes) Divide participants into groups of 4 to 6. Going around their small group, participants will have the opportunity to share the three words they wrote, without revealing details or providing commentary on the story itself. As a group, participants will choose one group member’s words to work with (hereafter referred to as the Storyteller).
3 (2 minutes) Within their groups, the Storyteller will have the opportunity to share the story behind their three words, with group members asking open, non-judgmental questions to acquire additional details if needed.
4 (1 minute) Groups will now create a devised theatrical composition inspired by the story shared. The group should determine who will fill each of the following roles: Speaker (1 participant); Soundscape (1 or 2 participants), and Movement (2 or 3 participants). The Storyteller does not need to be the Speaker; they can fill any role.
5 (1 minute) The Movement participants will offer a tableau, or a frozen image, in response to the original three words shared by the Storyteller. The Storyteller can, as needed, offer feedback or adjustments to the tableau until they feel it best represents the essence of their story.
6 (1 minute) The Soundscape participant(s) will then offer a non-verbal response in response to the three words and tableau. This may be created with their mouths and breath (such as sighs, gasps, or tongue clicks), with their bodies (such as stomping feet or rubbing hands), and/or with objects the group has on hand (such as crinkling notebook paper). Any combination of sounds can be used, but actual words should be avoided. Again, the Storyteller should have the opportunity to respond and offer suggestions to help capture the essence of their story.
Together, the group will then discuss the story, creating a three-word response to this story that offers an ideal. This phrase, spoken in performance by the Speaker (along with the original three words), may serve to counteract anything negative about body image and diet culture within this story, to create a call to action, or to reinforce any body-positive messages within the story.

The Movement participants will repeat step five, creating a new tableau to match the three-word response.

The Soundscape participants will repeat step six, creating sound to match the three-word response and tableau.

Participants will then practice the transformation from the first tableau (which represents the reality of the story) to the second. This transition should embody what it might feel like to work toward this second image: the ideal. For example, the movement might feel slow and sustained, like moving through mud, or quick and forceful, like shattering glass. This movement should be achieved within eight “heartbeats” (BUM-BUM played on an 8-count) which the facilitator can provide on a drum or by clapping.

Now, with all of these elements created, groups should practice them in the following order (listed on a poster or whiteboard for easier reference):

1. Original three-words (story)
2. First frozen image and soundscape
3. 8-count heartbeat to transform
4. Second three-words (response)
5. Second frozen image and soundscape

After allowing groups time to practice, ask them to complete one final run-through, with the facilitator calling out the sequence and providing the 8-count heartbeat with a drum or claps.

Sharing and response (10 minutes)

Groups will share their compositions in the order listed. When it is not their group’s turn, participants in the audience may help to create the 8-count heartbeat using their hands over their hearts or patting their thighs.

In between groups, encourage participants to take a collective breath.

Embodied reflection (5 minutes)

Ask participants to find their tallest posture, standing or sitting as able.

Play instrumental meditative music throughout the following guided reflection:

“Find yourself in a relaxed position, with your arms gently by your side or resting on your thighs. Feel the energy between your feet and the ground. Allow your eyes to close or to soften their focus to a spot in front of you. Breathe deeply through your nose, allowing your belly to gently rise and fall. Now, as you sit in this calm state, considering what we have explored today, ask yourself: What is one achievable thing you can do today to counteract societal pressures about your body? What can you do today to feel more in control, or more positive, about yourself and your body? Imagine what that sounds like, and what it looks like. Imagine yourself doing that.” Encourage participants to come into a power pose (this may be interpreted in whatever body position makes the participants feel powerful), saying, “Picture yourself doing this thing. How would it feel?”

Encourage participants to take one final deep breath, in and out through their nose, as they say in their mind the following affirmation: “My body tells my story.”
18 Provide participants with handouts to connect them with on-campus counseling services, websites, or organizations for additional support.

Notes

1 I reflect further on my journey as a young actor and a survivor of an eating disorder in my essay: “And So She Plays Her Part: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Body Image, Consent, and the Young Actor” (2020).

2 I use the term fat in the spirit of Fat Studies, as a reclaiming and destigmatization of the word, and instead of “obese,” as “obesity” is a narrowly defined social construct determined by the oversimplified calculation of an individual’s body mass index.

3 Dassow is also a certified HealthRHYTHMS Drumming Facilitator, and therapeutic drumming was an essential component in the original lesson plan. While the influence of therapeutic drumming is evident in this version, the content has been modified to be accessible to those working without a certified facilitator.

References


