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"Not the Leading Role of Life": Fatphobia in Educational Theatre & Its Impact on Larger-Bodied Adolescent Girls

LUCY KANIA

EMERSON COLLEGE

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to shed light on larger-bodied adolescent girls' experiences of fatphobia in educational theatre. It investigates the forms that fatphobia can take in educational theatre (in schools, camps, and youth theaters), and the impact of these experiences on larger-bodied girls' body image and self-esteem. The issue is considered in relationship to the role of anti-fat bias in society broadly, the representation of larger-bodied women in theatre, and presence of bias in casting. Methods of data collection consist of a review of existing research and writing, and interviews with seven voluntary participants, all larger-bodied individuals assigned female at birth who participated in educational theatre as adolescents. The study identifies areas of concern, including typecasting and costuming, and areas of impact, including internalized negative messaging and low self-esteem, and suggests a path forward for theatre educators to combat fatphobia in

their own programs. It asks: If fatphobia is present in theatre education, and has a negative impact on the health and wellness of larger-bodied adolescent girls, how can theatre educators do better?

When I was thirteen, my pediatrician diagnosed me as "morbidly obese." This diagnosis was based on no information about my health, lifestyle, or even body size, other than my Body Mass Index (the ratio of height and weight), and was my first point of contact with a force that would shape my life: fatphobia. Ever since I started puberty, I had cultivated an uneasy relationship with my prematurely curvy figure, but I was a healthy, active child, and the diagnosis rattled me. After all, there must be something very wrong with my body for it to have earned such a label. As I entered adolescence, I began seeing more and more proof of my body's failure. Since early childhood, theatre had been my favorite activity and my happiest place—yet even my experiences there seemed to confirm this new fear. I spent my teenage years playing mothers, maids, and matrons, but I never seemed to be considered for the romantic lead. The message felt clear: no amount of talent or hard work or paying my dues could make up for the fact that I did not look like someone you could fall in love with.

Today, over ten years later, I identify as a fat woman. It has taken me years of self-reflection and research to reclaim that word, but I think it describes me and that is okay. Even so, it is hard for me to comprehend how warped my body image became as a teenager, and although I have worked hard to reclaim the word "fat," I still struggle with my sense of self-worth on a daily basis. The messages I internalized about myself during my time in educational theatre, aided of course by the medical fatphobia I experienced, haunt me in very real ways, ways I am still trying to untangle and unlearn. In the years since, I have taught theatre at high schools and summer camps, and observed these same patterns unfold, unacknowledged and unchallenged, again and again.

In this study, I sought to identify the role of fatphobia in educational theatre and its emotional and psychological impact on larger-bodied girls. I undertook this research in large part because I have had these conversations with other fat and plus size women in casual settings, but could find no formal research addressing fatphobia in educational theatre spaces. I aimed to create a piece of research that could address

this hole in the field, to bring awareness to the experiences of fat or larger-bodied girls in educational theatre, and to identify ways in which theatre educators can combat fatphobia in their own programs.

A Note on Language

Throughout my research, I use the intentionally broad term of "educational theatre" to refer to any theatre experience that takes place in schools, youth theaters, summer camps, or other educational programs, in order to get the most comprehensive picture of how this bias manifests in similar ways across different settings. I use the word "fatphobia" to describe the bias toward fat and/or larger bodies, because it is the term I hear most within fat spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW: FATPHOBIA AND ITS IMPACT ON ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Although no preexisting academic research can be found on fatphobia in educational theatre, an understanding of its impact in society at large, and of the way casting replicates societal patterns and biases, supports the conclusion that fatphobia exists in educational theatre and can harm larger-bodied adolescent girls.

Although the majority of American women now fall into "overweight" or "obese" medical categories, and ample evidence suggests that such categorizations are based on faulty science and bear little relation to actual health outcomes, hatred and disgust for fat women remains a pillar of American society (Donovan, 2019; Gordon, 2021; Bacon, 2010). A foundational 2008 study identified weight discrimination as the third most prevalent cause of perceived discrimination among women, after gender and age but before race, sexual orientation, religion, or ability (Puhl et al., 2008). In spite of the "body positivity" movement of the past ten to fifteen years, research shows that anti-fat bias is as prevalent today as it was then (Gordon, 2021). A study out of Harvard University's Project Implicit, collecting data on a variety of implicit and explicit biases from 2007-2016, found that while other biases, including racism and homophobia, declined across those years, fatphobia is the only bias that has in fact gotten *worse* (Charlesworth et al., 2019). Recent research also shows that the growing ubiquity of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram—another factor that has increased

substantially in the last decade—has led to greater body image issues among adolescents, especially girls (Fardouly, et al., 2016).

On top of social media, weight-based bias from peers and teachers leads to increased risk of depression and suicidal ideation, social isolation, and eating disorder in adolescent girls (Puhl et al., 2001). Importantly, multiple studies have found that these negative effects are associated more with the experience of weight discrimination—or even the fear that one *might* experience weight discrimination—than they are with actual weight (Eaton et al., 2005; Puhl, 2011). Some studies even indicate that the negative physical health affects often associated with "excess" weight, from high blood pressure to hypertension to insulin resistance, can actually be attributed to the stress of living in a body that is continually stigmatized (Schafer et al., 2011; Hunger et. al., 2015). This suggests that the way educators treat larger-bodied adolescent girls, most of whom already deal with external and internalized fatphobia, has a very real and substantive impact on their mental and physical health.

While there has been less formal research done on bias in casting, theatre scholars and practitioners agree that casting choices reflect the biases of the director or casting agent. Coming from a cognitive science perspective, scholar Amy Cook writes that the mental categories we create to "cast" the people around us on a daily basis rely on our past knowledge and experiences, meaning they reflect our biases and the biases of the society in which we live (Cook, 2018). Looking at the issue from a social justice perspective, theatre practitioner Brian Eugenio Herrera observes that the act of casting for the theatre, inherently an act of both inclusion and exclusion, too often leads to the replication of familiar patterns and biases (Herrera, 2015).

When the overwhelming bias against fat women in our society is replicated rather than challenged through casting, we see fat girls and women only in certain types of roles—patterns that, in turn, reinforce negative stereotypes and their harmful impact on larger-bodied girls. The theatre relegates larger women to roles deemed "undesirable" by the male gaze, and the few roles written specifically for fat women often reflect problematic stereotypes (Jester, 2009). Although little has been written about this phenomenon in educational theatre specifically, one voluntary survey by *OnStage Blog* found that larger-bodied girls who participated in youth theater had been repeatedly cast in matronly or sexualized roles, some even told by educators that they looked too old

to play roles their own age or older, or that they would not be believable as a romantic lead (Gaffney, 2021). Matrons, sidekicks, and whores have one thing in common: no one has to fall in love with them. They do not have to appeal to the male gaze—except for the whore, who must be sexual but not necessarily beautiful, and never innocent. More often than not, these are the roles that are available to larger-bodied girls, regardless of age, talent, or personality (Gaffney, 2021; Jester, 2009). This is not to say these roles are all terrible, but when these are the only roles attainable for larger-bodied girls, they paint a clear picture of the way theatre educators view those girls and, in turn, how those girls may start to view themselves.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In an effort to learn more about how these dynamics play out in the real world of educational theater, I conducted seven semi-structured Zoom interviews. As a form of qualitative data collection, interviews allow the researcher to learn about feelings, beliefs, and experiences that would be impossible to observe—in this case, the patterns of treatment experienced by participants across years and different settings, and the impact these experiences had on their development (Patton, 2002). All participants identified themselves as larger-bodied, and participated in educational theatre as adolescents—six are women, while one is a non-binary individual who presented as a girl throughout their education. Although they are all in their twenties or thirties, and all but one are white, they represent educational theatre experiences from across the United States: both the East and West Coasts, the Midwest, and the South. They also represent a range of larger body sizes and shapes, and identify as fat, plus size, curvy, and stocky, among other terms. From these interviews, I was able to identify areas of concern where fatphobia is most present in educational theatre, a sense of its impact on larger-bodied girls, and an idea of how educators can begin do better.

I acknowledge that the age of these individuals means they are all at least a few years removed from their education, but as the research demonstrates, anti-fat bias has not gone away in the intervening years. I also recognize that this a small and relatively homogenous sample, but I hope that the honesty and insight of these seven individuals can inspire others to share their own diverse experiences and continue the conversation. Participants' names have been changed to preserve

anonymity, except by request. Some responses have been minorly edited for length and clarity.

FINDINGS

The largest area of concern that emerged from this study was casting—more specifically, typecasting. Although typecasting is a relatively common practice in theatre, and in entertainment broadly, we must recall from Amy Cook and Brian Eugenio Herrera's writing on casting that the "types" of roles that we sort people into stem as much from our own biases as they do any personal qualities of the actor. For the individuals that I interviewed, typecasting was a consistent and limiting pattern. The most common example, experienced to some extent by all seven, was being typecast as mothers, grandmothers, and other matronly roles. Krista, a fat, white woman from suburban Massachusetts, said:

> Most of the time I was cast as the old woman… There was [sic] a lot of roles that I wanted to play… that I wasn't even considered for, because of the way that I—my 'type' *[using air quotes]*… Like, I'm a sixteen-year-old with literally my life ahead of me, and you're saying that's a role I'll never play, because I don't look like an ingénue… that was a huge message that I came out with. It was very limiting.

Miranda, who is white and non-binary and grew up in Georgia, mentioned the fat-coded category of comic relief, or sidekick, as one into which they were typecast based on their body size: "The comic relief roles, I was not comfortable with, because I didn't felt [sic] like I had comedy acting skills… And I feel like those were roles I more got because again, I was… bigger or whatever."

Becca referred to her "racialized body" as a larger, mixed-race Latina girl in a predominantly white New Jersey school as a major factor in her typecasting. She shared her experience of being "set apart" from her white peers in her life outside of theatre, and how the combination of her body size and racial identity informed how she was cast. Like many of the others, she reported playing mainly matronly and comedic roles, but added:

> I was cast as any role that had traditionally been a person of color.

> Often they were Black roles. And it would sort of be like, well, you have the body type… of a sassy Black woman. And so that was a role that I definitely got a lot. I *never* got any sort of love interest role, no ingénue roles.

Anti-Black racism and fatphobia have a deeply intertwined history in the United States (Strings, 2019). Fatness, as a negative quality connoting excess and lack of control, has long been associated with Black women, and fatphobia used as a tool of white supremacy to villainize and dehumanize them (Strings, 2019). As Becca articulates, her identity, not only as a person of color but also as a fat person, increased her proximity to, and ability to stand in for, Blackness, in the eyes of her white educators.

Renae, a fat, white woman from Ohio, spoke to the way her experiences of being typecast in the fat-coded categories of matron and whore compounded upon the negative messages from society and the media about fatness, age, and sexuality:

> When you're young, and you're being told that you're 'mature'… because we're inundated with all of this messaging that young and youthful is attractive… That really felt bad as a kid. And then when I would get cast as hypersexualized roles, I feel like I—I was proud… I was like, 'Oh, I'm desirable, that's a good thing.' And it took until graduating college to look back on that and be like, 'that kind of fucked me up a little'… Feeling fetishized is not the same as feeling desired.

As Renae articulates, the experience of being typecast into "hypersexualized" roles can be just as damaging as any other. When larger women and girls are repeatedly cast as whores but never as ingénues, it reinforces the idea that there is something perverse about their sexuality—an idea supported by a society that considers any attraction to fat bodies fetishistic (Gordon, 2021).

When asked which body types they felt had the most value in educational theatre, the words most often repeated by participants were "skinny," "thin," and "pretty," with multiple people referencing the idea of the "dancer body," i.e. a body that appears thin, athletic, and graceful. Participants felt educators valued girls whose body types adhered to conventional white European standards of "beauty," especially when it

came to the leading ingénue roles. These educators sent the message that larger-bodied girls do not have the innocence or beauty to embody an ingénue, and that they do not deserve to take center stage.

A secondary area of concern that arose in these interviews was costuming. Although I had no questions that specifically addressed costumes, this issue came up in the majority of my interviews. Carolyn (a fat, white woman from Southern California) called the process of being costumed “very anxiety inducing,” sharing the disappointment she felt in never being given a costume that fit her correctly, let alone looked good on her. Becca recalled a costume designer as “a terror in my life,” who commented frequently on the difficulty of costuming her, and made her cry on multiple occasions. Krista and Miranda also spoke at length about experiences with costuming, all of which communicated negative ideas about larger bodies: that they pose an inconvenience, that they should be covered up or hidden, and that they do not deserve well-fitting, flattering costumes. The fact that all four of them brought up costuming unprompted speaks to the strength of these memories and the harmful messages that they sent.

For adolescent girls, whose body image and sense of self is still in flux, internalizing these negative ideas about larger bodies can have a major impact on their self-esteem (Voelker et al., 2015). When I asked my participants to describe their relationships to their bodies as adolescents, many of them laughed out loud. This laughter was followed by assessments ranging from “tortured,” (Becca) to “intensely uncomfortable” (Miranda) to “negative as can be” (Amy). Carolyn reported “hating” her body, Krista being “ashamed” of hers, and even Maggie, a midsize white woman from Minnesota who remained largely positive throughout our interview, remembered “feeling bad about being bigger.” Four women referenced developing unhealthy relationships with food in their adolescence, from extreme dieting to anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder. Renae put it into strikingly simple words: “I wanted my body to be a different body.”

Many of my participants reflected on the relationship between their negative body image and their experiences in educational theatre, and how these experiences impacted their overall self-worth. As Carolyn said: “It probably reinforced the feelings of, like, I'm not the pretty girl. I'm not the leading role of life girl.”

Amy, a plus size, white woman from Massachusetts, spoke about the way being typecast in “undesirable” roles affected her personal life,

especially when it came to romance and dating, and the way she envisioned her future:

> I felt all along, theatre or no theatre, that I was not worthy of… the things that I wanted, my dreams… I wanted theatre, but I also wanted love very, very badly, right? The family, and the husband, and that whole thing. And to be told from educators, who I respected… that I'm also not worthy of love, that I can't be that leading character, because no one's gonna want me that way, really did damage.

Becca noted that her repeated typecasting discouraged her from wanting to try new things or push herself as a performer. Reflecting on how comments made about her body by directors and costumers made her self-conscious, she said:

> It becomes perpetuating, because then I didn't want to go for any roles that would involve sexuality or intimacy, that you would have to… be more vulnerable in that way onstage.

Carolyn, Krista, Becca, and Renae all recounted feeling that they had to work exponentially harder than their thin peers to prove their worth, both in educational theatre and in other areas of their lives, and, in Renae's words: "That that was fair, that that made sense, that I had to try harder. Because there was something wrong with me that I had to overcome."

Across the spectrum of body size represented by these individuals, the impact of fatphobia on their body image and self-esteem was clear. The negative messages that they internalized from their experiences with typecasting, costuming, and more, told them that they weren't worthy of the parts that they wanted—both on and offstage.

WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO

When I asked my participants how they would like to see theatre educators approach casting larger-bodied girls, the resounding answer was that body size should not play a role in casting for educational theatre. Each of them spoke about the way biases towards larger bodies and fat-coded typecasting limit the learning opportunities that should be

at the core of any educational theatre experience. As Becca put it:

> The whole point of theatre is to be someone else, and to be imaginative, and to put yourself in different perspectives. And if you keep being put in the perspectives that are just true to you, or to how other people perceive you, you're going to be really stuck.

Miranda acknowledged that a bias toward larger bodies may not be conscious for many people, but suggested that educators confront and challenge their unconscious biases during the casting process:

> Examining that bias of 'Why do I automatically put these people in these categories in my head?' And then, and then maybe being like, 'Well, what if I just did the opposite of that?' Right? 'What if I just put people, or considered people, for roles I might not have considered them for?' And sometimes it's not a good fit, but sometimes maybe it might be.

Many participants spoke about the pedagogic nature of educational theatre in particular, and the responsibility theatre educators have to the learning experiences of their students. Amy shared:

> I think people need to start casting, especially in educational environments, based on talent, and merit, and also what people need to learn... It's about molding actors… and helping them get the opportunities that they need to succeed.

The participants themselves serve as proof of the effectiveness of such an approach, as evidenced by their experiences when cast based on qualities other than their body size. Amy remembered being cast as a romantic lead for the first time as a senior in college:

> We had a senior showcase where… it was between me and someone else for the lead. And I ended up getting the lead, it was a romantic lead, it was very exciting. I finally got to act that thing, and it was great. And I did a really great job, and it was really empowering.

Unfortunately, Amy later overheard two theatre professors discussing how her casting made the whole production hard to believe,

even referring to her with a derogatory epithet for a fat woman that I will not repeat here. The pain and shame of that overhearing cast a pall on her recollection of an otherwise affirming experience, and the fact that multiple professors felt comfortable speaking this way serves as further proof of the insidious nature of fatphobia in educational theatre spaces.

In a more wholly positive light, Krista recounted being cast as popular girl Rizzo in *Grease* (a role Becca also recalled playing with fondness) when she expected to play her fat sidekick Jan:

> There is a character within that same show that they could have easily just put me there because of my type, right?... One time, I felt like I actually may have gotten a role based on my talent, and based on my work ethic, and based on my ability to work well with others, [rather] than on what I looked like on stage… It definitely gave me a lot more confidence.

These experiences, as well an account from Miranda about being cast based on their powerful personality, or from Carolyn about playing Tracy in *Hairspray* (a rare empowered fat leading character), were moments when these young performers were *seen*—for their range, their personality, their talent, their star quality—for anything other than the size of their body and its failure to conform to conventional standards of beauty.

CONCLUSION

So what can theatre educators do? From camp counselors, to classroom teachers, to college professors, it starts with acknowledging our implicit biases toward larger bodies (even if we may be living in one), and challenging them. We must prioritize talent and opportunities for growth over body type when casting students. We must ensure that larger-bodied actors are provided with well-fitting costumes, and that they are not made to feel that costuming them is difficult or burdensome compared with their smaller peers. We must also remember that some larger students may experience trauma from living in a stigmatized body, and seek to create a safe and affirming space for them. Larger-bodied women still face many difficulties in the entertainment industry, but theatre educators should seek to create opportunities for marginalized performers, rather than replicating the patterns of discrimination we see

in the professional world.

I want to once again acknowledge that all of the people interviewed for this study are able-bodied adults, and the majority are cisgender and white. Further research into how fatness intersects with other marginalized identities, including more women of color, as well as transgender and disabled participants, could provide a much more comprehensive and inclusive picture of how fatphobia affects larger-bodied girls and gender minorities. A truly comprehensive study of the role of fatphobia in educational theatre would of course also include larger-bodied cisgender boys, who are not exempt from the damaging effects of this bias. Additionally, I chose to interview adult subjects due to both ease of access and the distance they have from painful adolescent experiences. Including teenagers in the conversation, in a way that does not cause further harm or marginalization, would create the most accurate picture of the state of fatphobia in theatre education today.

Negative messages about fatness and larger bodies are everywhere. Many of my interviewees pointed out that theatre alone did not convince them that their body was wrong, that they had to overcompensate for their appearance, or that they were unworthy of romantic love—but nearly all of them spoke to the way their experiences in educational theatre reinforced these messages. Fatphobic messages become more concrete and personal when reinforced through educational theatre, because, as participant Amy put it, “[her] personal body was also [her] actor body.” It is one thing to see a fat person made fun of on TV, or see someone your size portrayed as the unattractive “before” in a weight loss ad. It is another to be told that your own body—the one you live in every day and must inhabit for the rest of your life—is not a body someone could fall in love with onstage. That the way you look at eighteen, or fifteen, or twelve, is more believable as an old woman, a sight gag, or an adult sex-worker than a girl your own age. Many theatre educators may not realize that the visual shortcuts they rely on to communicate age, comedy, or sexuality are built on bias and capable of causing damage, but they are, and they do. We will never truly create safe creative communities, or produce well-rounded, confident, empathetic actors, until we stop engaging in practices that reflect our implicit biases and replicate social inequities in the classroom and onstage. Larger-bodied girls see fatphobic messages everywhere they go, but we, as theatre educators, can choose not to reinforce those

ideas. Theatre educators alone can never change the way every person thinks about fatness, but if we confront our biases, reexamine our practices, and work to create safe spaces for larger-bodied girls (and all marginalized performers), we can start to change the way people in our programs see larger bodies—and the way larger-bodied girls see themselves.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lucy Kania received her MFA in Theatre Education from Emerson College this May. She has an MA in Theatre Education from Emerson College and a BA in Drama from Tufts University, where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She has worked as a teacher, director, and costume designer for schools, camps, and youth theatres in Massachusetts. Her research centers on bringing attention to bias in educational theatre and how we can build better, more affirming educational practices.