Big, Bigger, Biggest:

The Social Implications and Portrayal of Overweight Women in Contemporary Theater

“We are educated by the entertainment media, even if unintended by the source and unnoticed by the audience” (Singhal 8). At the turn of the new millennium, Americans are pursuing the fit and healthy body with an enthusiasm and focus that some might find startling. At the turn of the new millennium, Americans are pursuing the fit and healthy body with an enthusiasm and focus that some might find startling.1 Faced with a deteriorating environment, an uncertain economy, and daily news of intractable and terrifying political events, Americans have seemed to turn inward toward a preoccupation with themselves; a passion which, for large numbers of them, has meant doing something about their bodies. Fighting fat and getting in shape have become a national obsession with a torrent of print, film, media and omnipresent everyday conversation devoted to advice, products and testimonials about weight loss and exercise. No one, at least officially, has a kind word to say for corpulence. Fat has even become a political crusade in which politicians weigh in on the benefits of svelte life, and citizens routinely hector each other about their general health and levels of fitness. If politicians are engaging in the debate, one can only assume that the artistic community has been adding to the barrage too.

1 This is not to say the same as saying that preoccupations with health and fitness are anything new in American culture. See Carson 1957; Whorton 1982.
Generally, men have also had to deal with the weight struggle thrust upon the culture, yet society has inexplicably placed a more quantifiable pressure on women to be thin and to emulate the aesthetic concept of “healthy as thin,” specifically in entertainment and performance. While the pressure to be thin and the glamorization of emaciated actresses has long been recognized in the mediums of film and television, few take notice of the journey the overweight woman has experienced on stage in contemporary American theater. Through three examples of live theater, evidence that overweight women have gone from exploring their bodies as emotional and political vehicles to being objectified in a sort of benevolent racism—a “size-ism” instead—is apparent. The material explored to prove this notion ranges over the past fifteen years in contrasting genre, style, and venue and all feature plump women at the crux of the plot: *The Most Massive Woman Wins*, an abstract comedy in one act, produced as a part of the young Playwrights Festival in New York City in 1994; *Fat Pig*, a full-length drama, produced Off-Broadway in 2004 at the Manhattan Class Company (MCC) Theatre; and finally, *Hairspray*, a two-act Broadway musical, which began its run of over 2,600 performances in 2002 at the Neil Simon Theatre. Taking into account the size of the productions, appeal to the masses and messages about overweight women within these shows, conclusions can be drawn that America can accept, and even love, corpulent females . . . as long as they are never asked to see them as anything but just plain fat girls.

Referring to the American attitude towards the body, no matter how dubious the claims of health, obesity, or fitness are, how economically biased or insensitive they are to questions of race, class, access to resources, gender and genetics, the message is increasingly the same: thin bodies are healthy bodies (Edgley 232). “The standards of fitness are largely settled. Medicine

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2 The longevity and popularity of such television programming as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *King of Queens*, *According to Jim*, *Still Standing*, *The Honeymooners*, and *The Flintstones*, which all feature overweight men married to slender women, begins to demonstrate this point.
and nutritional sciences have given institutional imprimatur to a foreordained conclusion, and those who do not measure up are not only courting a self-induced disaster, but are socially irresponsible as well” (232). As waistlines have increased, fitness expectations expanded along with them. Ignoring contradictory evidence\(^3\) pouring in from all sides about what constitutes fitness in the first place, what the standards for a healthy body are, and how they might best be achieved, narratives of the public culture on health continued to crank out the conventional mantra of diet and exercise, differing only on the details (Edgley and Brissett 1991, 1999). While it is evident that America is facing an obesity crisis, particularly among children, the sometimes-vicious attack that the overweight endure from society begins to prove that “size-ism” does exist.

Those whose bodies do not measure up to the new symbolism of fitness and health have neither remained silent nor accepted the conventional mainstream narrative. Alternative discourses, honed and practiced in organized opposition of the “official” health standards, emerged from those who see themselves as victims of the conventional tale. As Martin has shown in his study of three organizations, Weight Watchers, Overeaters Anonymous (OA) and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), there are widely differing strategies to those who see themselves as stigmatized by conventional stories of fitness sins and enforced redemption (2002). In fact all three groups asserted their beliefs in 2001, when the controversial film, *Shallow Hall*, was released (AP E-2). The film portrayed the sylph-like Gwyneth Paltrow in a fat suit, adding 200 lbs. to her slender frame. In promoting the film, Paltrow spoke sympathetically on television of the “obese discrimination” against fat people in American. She described wearing the extra padding in a Manhattan hotel lobby and finding no

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\(^3\) Atrens (2005) reports that while obesity among American seems to be increasingly; both caloric and fat intake has actually been declining. An examination of cross-cultural data only adds to the diet and exercise contradictions.
one was willing to help her when she asked questions (E-2). Yet even as she expressed horror about the treatment of fat people, no one asked her the fundamental question raised by the movie: Why is inner beauty a size 6? It was that issue that prompted advocates for the acceptance of the overweight to attack the movie and its star. They charged that the movie, which on its surface aspires to eradicate issues of size consciousness by emphasizing “inner beauty,” actually fortified the American prejudice against obesity. “It is as if Hollywood has developed this obsession with fat because it is the epitome of everything that is feared and repulsive to Hollywood,” said Allen Steadham, president of NAAFA. “And at the same time, it’s the trendiest new thing to put in your movie. So they’re kind of stuck with us” (E-2).

The Most Massive Woman Wins (which for the remainder of the paper will be referred to as MMWW) also looks at the shifting definitions of what it is to be fat and was created from a similar standpoint of the advocacy groups. In it, playwright Madeleine George has four women share their stories of growing up overweight and unloved, chant nursery rhymes, and generally assert their solidarity with each other. Debuting in 1994 for a short run within a playwriting festival at the Public Theater, it did not reach a large audience and did not receive an official review from any New York City paper (due to its Festival status). The production—with its honest stories of women and food, incorporated childhood adages, present-day challenges, and subversive humor—is arresting to many of its readers.4 It takes place in the lobby of a liposuction clinic. All four women have come to the conclusion of cosmetic surgery based on personal events, ranging from bulimia to self-immolation, from a need for sex to a subjugating husband.

The stylized manner of the piece speaks of the feminist context that George intended.

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4 George has intimated that its printing in Nina Shengold’s Plays for Actresses and Monologues for Young Actresses is the primary reason “anybody knows it exists. My work is read far more than it is performed” (George 293).
She created women who were real, strong, scarred, unafraid of pain, independent and products of the society they lived in. They were not portrayed eating, gossiping, wearing, ill-fitting clothing or making fat jokes about themselves. The use of nursery rhymes and childhood games reinforced the manipulation and game playing that society and media is subjecting so many women to all the time. The first moments of the show demonstrate this (272):

RENNIE: I’m about to have my body surgically removed.

CEL: (CEL’s chants run under others’ comments.) Cinderella dressed in yella…

RENNIE: They’re taking stuff out—big chunks, sloppy hunks.

CEL: Went to the ball to meet a fella…

SABINE: I’m here for the ass and inner thigh combo.

CEL: On the way her girdle busted…

CARLY: He said my butt and my gut are the parts he would pay for.

CEL: How many people were disgusted?

RENNIE: One—

SABINE: Two—

CEL: Three—

CARLY: Four—

ALL: Five!

The women routinely relive various moments throughout their lives that informed the extreme negative self-image that would lead to pursuing plastic surgery. Unlike works concerning obesity or body image to follow, MMWW explores why these women are fat and why they do not want to be fat any longer on a deeper level than aesthetics. George openly states her purpose for conceiving the show within the text, elucidating her own misgivings, fears, and
messages about body image, when Sabine defends her thesis to an interrupting thesis committee (277):

Although inquiry into such subjects is somewhat scarce in journals today, I predict that as the information age hits its stride, and as feminist thought becomes more seamlessly integrated into mainstream American consciousness, we will see a proliferation of influential and powerful work concerning the subjugation of women’s bodies through media images [...] No, it’s more complicated than that . . . \textit{(stumbling over words)} Once again, I’d like to remind you that studies show how physical appearance, that is conformity to societally established standards of beauty, has a much greater impact on women’s lives than on men’s; this includes social status, marital status, income, and work-related achievements—

RENNIE: It seems to me you’re getting a little emotional about this. I can understand why—this hits a little close to home for you. For that reason I would have advised you to choose a topic you could remain somewhat objective about.

In addressing the topic of societal standards of beauty in an intelligent manner, George forces her audience to look at these characters outside the standard options for overweight actors. She creates fully human characters that are using their bodies as political and emotional vehicles to explore the societal limitations and constrictions put upon them, purely for being a plus size. Carly tells the story of discovering her teenage daughter’s pregnancy: “I thought only fat girls didn’t know what they were doing. My kid’s a beauty, gorgeous, skinny, tall, why the hell didn’t she stand up for herself?!” (284). Sabine wants her surgery because she is sick of being “everyone’s warm and fuzzy sounding board. I want to be a full-blown sexual threat right now” (285). Rennie is the lone thin character, though she suffers from bulimia and is only 17
years old. Shedding light into what drove her to this extreme, she says, “And when I finally want nothing, nothing at all, when I finally want so little I can barely get up in the morning, my head feels like a ten ton brick on my shoulders, my knees buckle walking from class to class, when I want so little the gentlest sounds scrape my ears and my skin is sore and my hair falls out, finally my mother pulls me out from behind the chaise lounge and says, This is my wonderful, beautiful daughter Rennie!” (288) Cel tells the haunting story of giving herself scars throughout her entire life until finally she lit herself on fire after her husband tells her that “fat girls go crazy more than thin girls do. It’s scientifically proven” (280). Furthermore, despite these dramatic monologues, the women are depicted as victors at the conclusion of the play when, before their surgery, they drop their hospital gowns and stand in their underwear, facing the audience. The stage directions read, “The last few lines are light and full of relief” (292):

   CARLY: Once upon a time there was a beautiful woman who hardly ever wanted or asked for anything until one day when she suddenly got—very extremely hungry.

   CEL: So she said to her husband, honey, climb over that wall and get me some of them radishes I see growing down there in that garden.

   SABINE: But this was no ordinary garden.

   CARLY: This was no ordinary woman.

   RENNIE: This was no ordinary hunger. (End of play)

Yet with all of these interesting insights, genuine forays into the psychology of being fat, and the potential for positivity it leaves its characters, the show is rarely produced outside of academia having only two professional productions.  

5 One could contend that society is not comfortable

5 Granted, one-act plays are more difficult to produce professionally as they do not provide a “full night” of entertainment and require coupling with other one-act plays to do so. Many producers hesitate when faced with the acquisition of multiple sets of rights. (Hustoles 1)
viewing overweight women in this way . . . or rather is not accustomed to having to contend that overweight women could be this way.

Neil LaBute’s *Fat Pig* approaches images of overweight women in an entirely different manner. In the 2004 debut production, when theatergoers walked into the West Village theater, the main character, Helen, was already on stage alone and eating pizza, salad, and garlic bread. It was a piece of uncomfortable stage business added during rehearsals by the play’s director, Jo Bonney (Kissel 48). The idea was to get audience members, like the other characters in the play, to struggle with their feelings about obesity. “I wanted that moment when we see an overweight person eating like that, where we all have a voice in our own heads saying, ‘Stop eating,’” Bonney said. “And I wanted us to ultimately question that voice in our own heads. Helen is comfortable with her body. It’s us who is not.” *Fat Pig* tells the story of a love affair between a plus-sized girl (Helen) and an average-sized guy (Tom). They fall in love, but when Tom can neither justify his choice to his judgmental friends, Carter and Jeannie, nor relieve himself of the paranoia that everyone around him is judging them, he breaks up with her based on her size alone. “All this love inside and it’s not nearly enough to get around the shit that people heave at you” (83). Immediately *Fat Pig* differs from *MMWW* because it is geared towards the voyeur’s reaction to fat and the judgment of those people, as opposed to it being the story of those people.

During its three month run Off-Broadway, Ashlie Atkinson, who portrayed Helen, encountered a lot of attention, both from formerly overweight audience members who would approach her on the street with photographs showing how they looked before surgeries and from the media (Hoffman 43). Audiences responded to the strength of her character, who maintains she is comfortable with how she is throughout the play’s duration. “It was interesting to see her stance as being one of power, and his [Tom’s] being the wavering one,” says Erin Graham, an
audience member who witnessed the show during previews. “I like that the person with the flaw [being fat] was very self-assured” (Horn E.46). In an interview with Frank Scheck of the New York Post, Atkinson spoke candidly about her experience being an overweight actor on display in this unconventional show and what her experience had been being an overweight actor in general:

If anything, I didn’t think I was big enough [to play Helen]. Many of the actresses I auditioned against were heavier. But what I’ve found is, after a certain size, there’s very little gradation. To some people, it doesn’t matter if you’re 200 lbs. or 275. Once they write you off in a certain category, you’re there. I watched once as an agent filed my headshots into two clearly marked folders: “fat girl, 20 to 40” and “unsightly and unattractive.” That really hurt. […] They [the costumers of Fat Pig] even cut the slimming panel out of the swimsuit I wear in the end. People come up to me to tell me how brave I am. They never say that to Keri [Russell, who played Jeannie], and she’s wearing a bikini! But this show is new and exciting! To have the bigger girl not be the best friend dispensing love advice, to have her falling in love and being real, and getting her heart broken, is something that I’d never anticipated getting to do (52).

Atkinson’s interview speaks to the objectification of fat people within the entertainment industry, just as it illuminates the focus of Fat Pig being the external views of obesity from the perspective of the thin, instead of from the knowledge and comprehension of the fat.

With the opening of Fat Pig, journalists reported hopeful ideas such as “Discussions about body size are on the upswing, as pop culture—apparently trying to keep pace with news reports about obesity among Americans—is generating entertainment that deals with being fat” (Hoffman 43) and “From Broadway to books, reality TV to the movies, the lives of the
overweight are being mined for laughs and drama—giving a voice to those who don’t typically get heard, and testing the theory that society is becoming more tolerant of bigger bodies” (Kissel 48). However if one were to take a closer look at the language, not only within the script, but also from those journalists discussing the show, it becomes very clear that Fat Pig does not promote “tolerance” of fatness or give a voice to the unheard, but provides opportunity for pop culture offerings that are anything but flattering. Negative size-ist comments used throughout the first half of the script are as follows: “Looking pretty big over there” (5), “big people are jolly” (10), “A thousand ships needed to carry me back” (11), “you’re the one for me, fatty” (11), “looks a bit sloppy…in her ass” (21), “flabby” (21), “her arms have gotten chunkier” (21), “chicks don’t get out much and they bloat up” (22), “I used to be a touch heavy” (31), “Your weight and everything” (31), “big…boned” (32), “Big-bonededness” (32), “Not that she couldn’t eat for five” (35), “Even some beast from work” (35), “Fat chick” (43), “I had to maneuver around the girth issue” (44), “You told me she was HUGE” (44), “You said she was a pig” (44), “I’ve got this fucking sumo wrestler in a house coat trailing me” (48), “she just shoveled shit into her mouth all the time” (48), “Don’t look at the package, take a look in the fucking mirror, you cow” (49), and “Do-not-jam-so-much-food-in-your-fucking-gullet” (49). A handful of New York City and other national newspapers that reviewed opening night of the production emblazoned such headlines as: “She’s a Sow, He’s Sheepish” (Kissel 48); “Big Helpings of Denial and Oinks All Around” (McKinley 43); “A Full Diet of Sacred Cows; ‘Fat Pig’ fits perfectly into LaBute’s body of work” (Horn 46); “The Bravest Actress in New York—Would you Star in Something Called ‘Fat Pig’?” (Hoffman 43); and “‘Fat’ Worth the Weight—LaBute’s Plus-Size Love Story” (Scheck 52). Each of the aforementioned pun-filled reviews raved about LaBute’s attempt at showing an alternative female body in the leady role with
differing opinions of the overall effectiveness of his intention. One review differed entirely. John Heilpin of *The New York Observer*, not only fails to make a weight pun in the title of his article, but also goes on to find *Fat Pig* sophomoric and insensitive. In “‘Fat Pig’ Raises a Familiar Question: Are LaBute’s Men Interesting? She Looked Like A Pretty Average Girl Enjoying Lunch to Me,” Heilpin maintains that the journey of Helen could have been “summed up in a letter to *Cosmo* [magazine] with the reply being: Dear Tom, Your fellow workers are victims of societal pressures to conform to conventional standards of beauty propagated by any image-obsessed culture. True love is what counts. Remember that Beauty is Within and it ain’t over till the fat lady sings” (17). By judging critical response, it becomes clear that the overwhelming theme throughout is objectifying the overweight person. The use of harsh language within and surrounding *Fat Pig* do not clearly provide an empathetic window from which to witness the study of corpulence.

*Fat Pig* clearly does not portray the overweight woman with the nuances that complete a true human being. Beginning the show with the spectacle of watching a fat woman eat, using excessive, derogatory, size-ist language throughout the duration of the action from all characters (including Helen), and concluding the story with the same eating fat woman crying on the beach in a bathing suit after getting dumped, does not make any progress in showing any sensitivity toward the obese in contemporary American theater. Couple this with its raging popularity in regional theatre and university theatre programs and it is clear that *Fat Pig* serves best as a perpetuation of the ideological stereotypes associated with fat people in America. Helen never gets to exist as anything but the girl everyone is calling fat.

The third and final demonstration of the notion that American contemporary theater has neglected to allow overweight women to appear as real women, independent of their physical
status, is the hugely successful Broadway musical, *Hairspray*. *Hairspray* is by far the most commercially successful, wide reaching, and socially embraced piece of theater of the three discussed. It opened in 2002 and closed 4 January 2009, having also inspired a movie of the musical in 2007. Audiences have embraced the story of Tracy Turnblad, a chubby teenager, who falls in love with heartthrob, Link Larkin, and simultaneously leads a civil rights campaign in Baltimore, ever since its first inception in John Waters’ film of the same name in 1988. Dealing within the same convention of *Fat Pig* where the leading lady is overweight, they have been compared: “*Hairspray is Fat Pig* with a happy end. In the Broadway musical, the fat girl becomes the prom queen, of course, and she gets the boy because when all is said and done and eaten, Beauty is Within” (Heilpin 17). In many cases, the spectacle of the overweight actor is displayed through comedic devices such as the slapstick routine, which highlights his/her physical oddity and fosters breaks in the narrative (Douglas 8). Fat actors are also ideal for other facets of traditional comedy, such as “the notions of incongruity—the pairing of vastly different (visual) elements—which frequently finds large, heavy comics coupled with small, skinny performers” (19). The notions of incongruity are used with all feature couples in *Hairspray*: the plump Tracy loves the lean Link, the hefty Edna is devoted to the slight Wilbur, and the white Penny falls for the black Seaweed.

So much of the mainstream entertainment (which this production can be classified as), and the representations within it, rely upon the audiences’ familiarity with, if not belief in, societal stereotypes. How groups are thought of and how they think of themselves is intrinsically linked with the images of that group created and circulated by the institutions of cultural productions. As Dyer writes: “How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation” (88).
*Hairspray* incorporates the public’s acceptance of size representation and discrimination to an ever further extreme than *Fat Pig*. While the severity and bluntness of languages does not occur in the musical, the frequency of size mention is startling. For instance, if either overweight character, Tracy or Edna, is onstage, the longest exchange between characters in which no fat joke is made is twelve lines. Specifically in her relationship with Link, there are no moments in which they exchange thoughts and feelings for each other that are not also qualified with a comment on her weight. When Link finally says he loves her, he finishes the line with “no matter what you weigh” (95). When Link calls her beautiful for the first time when she is in jail, she retorts back with, “It must be the low-watt institutional lighting” (93). When Tracy first sees him, she sings, “Everybody says that he won’t like what he’ll see, but I know that he’ll look inside of me” (14). Furthermore, in the exploration between Edna and Wilbur’s interactions, there are only three exchanges that avoid size-ist comments. While there are beautiful sentiments from Edna like, “You just can’t stop my happiness ‘cuz I like the way I am,” it’s immediately followed by an underhanded fat joke, “And you just can’t stop my knife and fork when I see a Christmas ham” (113), thus aborting any progress in portraying an overweight woman as more than just a fat girl.

Another point to consider is that just as *Fat Pig*, trying to tell the story of an overweight woman, is written by a man; *Hairspray* was created entirely by a team of men. From the original concept by John Waters, to the book writers (Thomas Meehan and Mark O’Donnell), to the composer (Marc Shaimann), lyricist (Scott Whittman), choreographer (Jerry Mitchell) and the director (Jack O’Brien), there was not even one woman on the production team. One must wonder if the perception that *Hairspray* gives of overweight women was even fully understood, as there was a complete absence of the subject being perceived at its core. When dissected out of
the campy style in which it is directed, choreographed, and performed, *Hairspray* commits many crimes against the plight of the fat woman, as it embraces “fat” being the sole identifying personality trait for these women. They are otherwise good, kind-hearted, ambitious women; yet, as no mention of these qualities ever gets to stand alone without mention of girth looming somewhere near it, Tracy Turnblad will always be known as a fat girl first and a political activist second. Apparently as the continued success of *Hairspray* endures, America loves her that way.

In America today, even with the successes and breakthroughs for overweight people, there is duplicitous, derisive material in circulation, deceiving people with pseudo-pro-fat sentiments. *Fat Pig* and *Hairspray* are two such pieces of theater that follow the trend. Reality television shows are now in the trend as well; “The Biggest Loser” pits morbidly obese adults in a competition to lose the most body weight percentage in order to win a large money reward. The show aims to “inspire unhealthy adults to take control of their lives” (Burger 17), yet in challenges, producers select tasks like building towers of tempting food using only their mouths—that do nothing more than portray these desperate people as a fat person minstrel show. America has watched as celebrities have won and lost the fat war and have lived through their own personal battles of the bulge as well. The remarkable thing about this journey is that it has lead to a destination of intolerance, disillusionment, and discrimination. Chris Crandall, a professor of psychology at the University of Kansas, points out that if we really are becoming more tolerant, there’d be fewer unflattering photos in tabloids and more plus-size actresses (Campbell 12). But if change were indeed afoot, he says, the intensifying tug of war between tolerance and prejudice would be a sign of it. “The fight between the two sides may be evidence that something is brewing,” says Crandall, who tracks attitudes toward the overweight. “It could get worse for fat people, but there’s a lot more room for it to get better” (12). Yet with
performance art like *MMWW* out there and being absorbed, if not commercially, then at least artistically by others in the theater community, there is a glint of hope. Perhaps one day an overweight woman can stand on stage, not as a humorous, slapstick cubby girl; not as an adverse political statement against society’s expectations; not even as a fat girl, looking for love; but perhaps one day an overweight woman can stand onstage and just be a woman, full of idiosyncrasies, nuance and spinelessness. Maybe one day American will love her for that too.

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