

We're here! We're sphere! Get used to it!

Anti-Fatness at the Theatre Academy

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Me while everyone else dieting so they don't look like me.



Meme by Rosey Blair, @roseybeeme

ABSTRACT

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<p>This is a thesis inspired by autotheory and stand-point theory, in which I present experiences lived by myself and four other fat students at the Uniarts Helsinki Theatre academy. Drawing on literature from the field of fat studies as a part of gender studies, it explores how anti-fat attitudes have shown themselves in the interactions we have had with individuals and structures at the academy and how we as individuals who have been shaped by anti-fat bias and abuse outside of the Theatre academy cope within it. Additionally, the thesis compares statements from the Uniarts Helsinki vision statement and Safer spaces guidelines and argues that for fat people at the academy these guidelines and goals are not upheld nor reached. Fat students at the academy face bias and abuse, they limit themselves personally and artistically and are actively limited artistically by teachers and peers, they receive movement training of lesser quality than their thin peers and they are not supported in becoming self-confident fat artists when they leave the academy.</p> <p>The method used is interviews in the form of small talk between author and interviewee. The interviewees and their quotes have been anonymized, and the quotes have been scrambled so as to form a mass of experiences rather than shaping rosters of individual experiences for each interviewee.</p> <p>The interview materials have been categorized through close reading, following the themes arisen in the interviews. The categories are as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Getting in – experiences from entrance exams2. Opting out – experiences of self-censorship and exclusion3. Fitting in – experiences from the costume department4. Staying fat – temporality of identity and the pressure to shrink5. Getting out – how has the school prepared us for the field?6. Stigma, slurs and surviving <p>This thesis came about due to my own hurt as a fat person studying at the Theatre academy, and my own experiences of not being heard or supported when expressing this hurt. I chose to place myself as an active part of the thesis for several reasons: to include my own experiences in order to have more voices in the mix; to assert myself in my fat identity; to place myself and fat narrative as part of the stand-point theory canon; to practice the principle I inherited from my mentor Suzanne Osten to always as a director be ready to answer any question I put to an actor or colleague.</p>	
KEYWORDS Fat, Anti-fatness, Autotheory, Fat identity, Pro-thin bias, Implicit bias, Weight stigma, Situated knowledge, Theatre academy, Theatre education, Safer spaces, Uniarts Helsinki, Normativity	

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1. INTRODUCTION

I am fat. I have been fat my entire life. I came to the Theatre academy in 2019, thinking I was going to fight for fat justice and representation of fat people in the theatre, but found myself growing more and more quiet as the years went by. Stating and maintaining a fat identity proved significantly more difficult than I had, perhaps naively, expected, and I stopped pushing it. It wasn't until my fourth year, the first year of my master studies in directing, that the will to engage with this topic was lit again during a course on decolonial directing led by professor Rodolpho García Vázquez. What happened was probably not particularly dramatic to anyone else; Rodolpho simply stated that oppression of fat people is a political problem, but for me it was extremely significant. I wasn't prepared to have such a visceral reaction to this statement that I knew already to be true, having lived these experiences my entire life and perused academic and popular fat studies for years, but in the instant he said it I realized I had been gaslit and silenced for the entirety of my studies at the Theatre academy. I don't know if it actually is a thing that can happen, but it felt like my spine relaxed. I had been seen, and it was clear to me I could not leave the academy without looking into the experiences of fat students at the institution.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have interviewed fat students present in the school during my own studies. Apart from me, that's four persons – obviously a sample too small to claim generalizability, but one that hopefully allows us to form a deeper understanding of the experience through individual testimony. First, I'll share more on my own experiences with anti-fatness at and before studying at the Theatre academy. Then, I will explain some central terms, present my literature and my methods. In the central part of the thesis I will present the statements of my interviewees and discuss them as they pertain to my own experiences and my literature. In the end, I look at how these experiences match with the safer space guidelines that Uniarts Helsinki presents as a tool for academic events, and, lastly, suggest concrete measures to be taken by the institution, its employees and students and by individuals in the theatre field.

I choose to place myself as an active part in this text for several reasons. First, inspired by my colleague Gréta Kristín Ómarsdóttir, I wish to follow the principles of stand-

point theory and autotheory as she describes them in her thesis (Ómarsdóttir, 2023, p. 9–10). I, too, find this way of thinking to be a must for theatre directors in all stages of our work. Stand-point theory, developed by philosophers such as Black feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins, states that all we know is situated in our experiences. This makes it so that any claim to objectivity or universality is unthinkable, and the utterances that are and have been held as such are mainly those of the privileged. We are all affected by our own bias, so becoming aware of it and stating our perspective is the way of producing relevant thought, according to stand-point theory (Ómarsdóttir, 2023, p. 9–10). Secondly, in harmony with stand-point theory, I am committed in my work as a director to honour a principle instilled in me by my mentor, director and professor Suzanne Osten: anything you ask of the actor you must be prepared to try yourself, answer yourself, take responsibility for yourself. So, as I ask other fat students to state their experiences, so will I. Thirdly, there is so few of us. Fat students at the Theatre Academy are a very small group, and if I wish to include as many experiences as I responsibly can I need to provide mine, too.

1.1. My Story

I've been fat my whole life, I say. But what is a fat child, really? Why should it know of such a thing? My fatness and my otherness and how these things made me less than were evident to me from the start. I can't remember ever not identifying with this. I remember looking at the outline of my fingers drawn on a piece of paper in kindergarten and thinking that they were too fat. It was before my family moved from my second home, so I must have been around three years old. When I first came into relevant treatment for eating disorders at the age of 24, I realized I had never had a non-disordered approach to food or to my self-image. I remember being six and adoring the water, arguing with an adult and a child in my immediate family who said it was too cold to swim. "It's not too cold, it's wonderful," I said. "Maybe for you," my slim adult relative said, laughing at me with the other child, "you've got all that fat to warm you." In her essay in the book *Koolla on väliä!* (Size matters!, my translation), Anna-Stina Nykänen describes a situation in which her older brother at three years of age is petting her chubby baby legs and praising them for being so thin – making their mother laugh at how wrong he is. "Even three-year-old boys know, what you should say, when you think someone is beautiful." (Kyrölä & Harjunen (eds.), p. 201, my translation)

When I say I've been fat my whole life, I might as well say that I have been trying to be thin my whole life. As a child, I lay in bed before going to sleep fantasizing about waking up changed, about coming back to school after summer and shocking everyone with my new body, planning food intake and exercise regimes that all ultimately failed. I had one fantasy which I found particularly pleasurable, about cutting the fat off my body with a big knife. I remember going to the drawers in the kitchen of my childhood home – might I have been seven or eight? – and placing the cold wide blade of a cooking knife against my belly. One swift swooping cut, and I would be free. My childhood and teenage diaries are full of plans, how this summer holiday I will diet and exercise or how next week will be different – I will be different.

I've always loved acting, and I was quite good at it until I became a teenager. Then, the weight of self-awareness finally overtook the joy of play. Where before I had lost myself in situation, now I felt ashamed to be exposing the audience to my body. When taking the stage singing at my local music school, I wanted so desperately to apologize: "sorry that you have to look at me, I'm so sorry I haven't fulfilled my duty of getting thin, sorry I am singing a love song when clearly I am too fat to be loved." Yes, these are the thoughts of a mentally ill teenage girl without treatment. But can you blame her? The only representations I had seen of fat people were detrimental ones. I was a passionate fan of Harry Potter, gladly accepting that only evil bullies had bodies like mine. Friends and Will & Grace and other tv-shows were on in the afternoons, showing fatness only as disgusting mistakes to be surpassed. I watched Shallow Hal, the Jack Black movie where he is hypnotized to see women's inner beauty and unknowingly dates a very fat woman who, to him, looks like Gwyneth Paltrow, and I longed and dreamed for someone to be hypnotized into liking me despite my body. The only Disney character I ever really identified with was Quasimodo, and not even he gets the girl in the end.

I am including all this because I want to make it clear what an enormous leap of faith it was for me to apply to the acting program at the Theatre Academy, as I did in the spring of 2013. After moving away from home at 18 in 2010, I had had time and space to develop really very serious eating disorders while living on my own, but I had also met

wonderful, uplifting friends and lovers, and I was again high on the thought of acting. I came to Helsinki for the tests, and it was such a joy. I had moments when that familiar shame came over me, but I was quick to recover, and the happiness of improvisation and expression was stronger. I had been warned about the physical tests being grueling and when I passed to that stage in the tests, I had prepared for the worst. We did quite extreme tests of endurance and I was in no way good at them, but I did them all and I didn't pass out or puke like I had heard could happen. After this stage, however, I was out of the running. I called for feedback after the tests were over, and the teacher on the other end of the line cleared their throat a little uncomfortably. "Well," they said, "you did a great job in the acting part, really you have a fantastic ability to enact and improvise and sing. The thing is the physical part. We are worried you couldn't keep up. My advice to you is to try pilates, and you can apply again." The next year, 2014, I worked as assistant director for the first time and one of my colleagues told me about when she applied to the same program in the 80's. She had been fat when she applied, and when she called for her feedback the professor said, "Surely you yourself must understand you can't be an actor with that body!" This made me feel lucky, that my feedback had, at least, not been quite that crass.

In 2019 I applied and was accepted to the education program in directing at the Theatre Academy. In the entrance exams I did a scene about ugliness, and I wrote an essay about fatness and body dysmorphia. I got in, even though one teacher in the interview stage asked me, "Do you have any other topics, other than body?" and shame overtook me once more. "Sorry that I have made you look at and think about my body," I wanted to say, "but you did specifically ask for personal stories." I was so happy to be accepted, I knew I was in the right place and that it was the right time for me to get in. I entered, wanting to fight for us fat people. Within the first month of school, if I remember correctly, I went to see a showing of several demo plays by other students. In one, a very fat person appeared far away on the stage, and my heart fluttered. I thought, how wonderful if there is such an actor at the school! I wondered who they were and if I might get the privilege of working with them. As they got closer, walking with difficulty and breathing in an exaggeratedly laboured fashion, I realized it was in fact a thin actor in a very large fat suit. My heart sank. When the actor spoke, he did so in huffs and puffs. I was truly shocked, and so very sad. However, this was in my fighting

days, so I promptly registered to raise the subject at our faculty meeting coming up. The first directors' meeting I ever went to, I brought the subject of fat suits and how it should, surely, be common knowledge that their use is highly damaging. I had, by then, also visited the costume department where very few clothes could fit my body, but a whole rack of pink overstuffed fat suits was on display. At the meeting, I was shocked to meet complete ignorance on the topic. One student didn't understand the English term I used, fat suit, and asked what it was in Finnish. "Läskipuku," the answer came immediately. If I wasn't already so close to tears, I would have laughed. This room of adults were surprised that something they call läskipuku could be offensive. Puku means suit, and läski is a Finnish word derived from the Swedish fläsk, meaning lard. Lard, as in pigs' fat. Even without realizing the glaringly insulting derivation of the word, läski is a widely used slur directed at fat people. How is it possible to consider a thing called läskipuku and not realize it is an instrument of ridicule? I don't think I handled the discussion very well, I was shook by meeting such opaque ignorance and disinterest, and was too emotionally invested. No-one appeared to share my upset, and no-one suggested changes be made. It was decided I would send the group an article on the problematic use of fat suits and I was told to write a complaint to the costume department regarding the fat suits in there. What this said to me, was that I was alone in this. My classmates supported me and checked in on me because they are my friends, but it seemed clear to me that no one in charge was going to act. I closed myself like a shell. I never wrote that letter of complaint.

We talk about the director's body, and how the actors listen to our body language just as much as our words. The first year at the Theatre academy seemed to me to be a lot about policing our bodies. First, the intensive physical training with focus on running and outspoken pressure to perform and improve our bodies through sport. Second, getting used to eating in a school canteen again – the source of many a trauma for fat children and for anyone with eating disorders. Third, the costume department. What is an abundant dream and playground for the thin, is a slap in the face for me. The costume department at the Theatre academy is a very well-filled room packed with clothes both pedestrian and fantastical – but small in size. In a far corner, there is one rack labelled XL. From that rack, approximately half the clothes are big enough for me. I feel like I've disappointed the very room by my inability to fulfil my duty to be small

enough. So what happened to this director's body? I clammed up, didn't let the words out, and hunched over. My posture after five years really is atrocious. I erased the school gym, changing rooms and saunas from my inner map of the building, denying myself access to the places where I knew I would feel exposed in my otherness.

In the first-year miniature play, I was lucky enough to work with a fat actor, and I tried to assert myself by demanding an addition to my project's budget so that we could buy clothes for this actor to wear since I knew there was next to nothing in the wardrobe. This was met by an amused incredulity, and we were told that if we really needed to buy something we could ask for money after the fact. I did not do a very good job directing the play for a number of reasons, and one of them was my feeling terrible in my own skin, in my own body, existing in the room with my wonderful actors. I wanted to hide, and I can see now that this is mirrored in the way I directed. Just like the actors, I must be free in my body. I cannot hide while asking actors to put their own bodies out there.

Writing this thesis has been a long and arduous project. I have only been able to do so in short bursts of time. It is incredibly affirming, finally talking to my fat peers about our situation and reading the theory supporting our experiences. It is also incredibly painful, tiring, devastating, to finally face all this hurt and consider how it has shaped me and my colleagues as persons and as artists. I want to believe things can change for the better, I have to believe the academy wants to do better. After all, one of the goals put up by the Uniarts Helsinki in their vision statement reads: "Our community is characterised by its wellbeing, international appeal and lack of discrimination." (Uniarts Helsinki, 2020). I choose to believe they are by this referring to all kinds of discrimination, to the wellbeing of all kinds of bodies, also our fat ones. I choose to believe we will be heard, trusted and understood. I choose to hold hope for changes to be made.

Let's get into it.

2. WHAT I TALK ABOUT WHEN I TALK ABOUT FATNESS

In this chapter, I will present the materials on which this thesis is based: my literature and the interviews I have conducted with fat students at the academy.

2.1. Central Terms

2.1.1. Fat

Throughout this text, I strive to use “fat” as the neutral descriptor it is or should be, rejecting its validity as an insult in the way it has been used against me and my peers throughout our lives. I wish to join Aubrey Gordon (2020) and “reclaim the term as an objective adjective to describe our bodies, like tall or short” (p. 8).

Fat hasn't become a bad word because fatness is somehow inherently undesirable or bad – it has fallen out of public favor because of what we attach to it. We take fat to mean unlovable, unwanted, unattractive, unintelligent, unhealthy. But fatness itself is simply one aspect of our bodies – and a very small part of who each of us is. It deserves to be described as a simple and unimportant fact.

Aubrey Gordon, *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat*, p. 8.

While the celebration of thinness affects everyone, there is reason to differentiate between different levels of fatness in accordance with the extent at which it complicates our lives. While anyone at any size in our society might sometimes “feel fat,” only some of us experience discrimination and harassment on the basis of our size, and the ones who do experience it to different extents depending on their level of fatness. Aubrey Gordon (2020, p. 9) refers to a popularly used framework based on clothing size, which I will reiterate here with added women's EU clothing sizes:

Small fat: US size 18 (EU size 50) and lower. Find clothes that fit at mainstream brands and can shop in many stores.

Mid fat: US size 20 to 24 (EU size 52 to 56). Shop at some mainstream brands, but mostly dedicated plus brands and online.

Superfat: US sizes 26 to 32 (EU size 58 to 64). Wear the highest sizes at plus brands.

Can often only shop online.

Infinifat: US sizes 34 (EU size 66) and higher. Very difficult to find anything that fits, even online. Often require custom sizing.

This is a framework built on US sizes and clothes availability in US stores, and as such it presents some problems when trying to apply it here in Finland. I have worn size 48-50 most of my time at the Theatre academy, placing me in the small fat-category.

However, in Helsinki I cannot “Find clothes that fit at mainstream brands” or “shop in many stores.” Very few brick-and-mortar stores in the Nordics provide my size, either not carrying it at all or carrying it only online. The reality for me is much more like the mid fat-category, as I can “Shop at some mainstream brands, but mostly dedicated plus brands and online.” This suggests the need for an updated Nordic framework to categorize fat experiences, where small fat would perhaps be size 46 and lower, and mid fat be size 48–56. As Hannele Harjunen (2007) states in the essay *Lihavuus välitilana* (Fatness as a liminal state, my translation), determining who is fat follows different criteria in different contexts (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2007, p. 205). However, due to the popularity of this list and its widely used categories, I will refer to it as is for the purposes of this thesis.

During our time at the Theatre academy, my interviewees and I have been small fat and mid fat as our weight has fluctuated. I am not aware of there being any student in attendance at the academy during this time (2016–2025), who has been larger than mid fat.

So, what about those smaller than small fat? Mid-size, in Kyrölä and Harjunen (2007) in-betweenie or the Finnish *välikokoinen*, is a group that often experience the exclusion of being neither thin enough nor fat enough to find their group (p. 313). In the context of the Theatre Academy, where we find much more mid-size than fat students, the experiences of these students could be interesting to hear in further research.

Why do we need these categories? Since the thinness norm affects everybody regardless of size, shouldn't everyone's experiences matter in the matter? Since my small- to mid

fat interviewees are the largest students in the school, should I not include also mid-size students in my study? I believe the extreme lack of fat people in the arts means we within the field have a faulty view of the discrimination very fat people face. As a small- to mid fat person, I am still the largest person in almost all rooms I come across in my work. This is not, however, the case in society as a whole. It is not the case in theatre audiences. Very fat people exist even though they are completely erased from our professional circles, and therefore we must consider them in their absence and do what we can to invite them into our work. We also need to be faced with our own, internalized anti-fat bias. Gordon (2020) details how thin and especially mid-size people turn to fat people for reassurance, as “we reflect their bodies back to them, their imperfect thinness made beautiful by its proximity to the abject failure of our fatness” (p. 68). I am guilty of this myself as a small-fat person, and have been throughout my life, seeing people fatter than me and thinking as Gordon (2020) points out “at least I’m not that fat.” (p. 68)

2.1.2. Anti-fatness

Being fat is quite common, but it is outside of the norm. In her “Casting dictionary” Noora Dadu explains norms and normativity as a society’s common understanding of what is normal or acceptable, and, accordingly, the normative body as the body a society deems acceptable and which therefore is not subject to body-based structural oppression (Dadu, 2024, p. 82). Part of the normative body in Finland is the thinness norm, as exemplified by the fact relayed by Dadu that women bigger than clothing size medium are very seldom hired for television and film productions (ibid., p. 126–127). The thinness norm is dangerous for both thin and fat people, men and women, often playing a part in disordered eating patterns or dangerous relationships with exercise. As Dadu points out, acting students are particularly vulnerable to the danger of the thinness norm (ibid.). The part of the thinness norm that this thesis mainly deals with, is its expression in the oppression of fat people, anti-fatness.

Anti-fatness and anti-fat bias are umbrella terms that describe the attitudes, behaviors, and social systems that specifically marginalize, exclude, under-serve, and oppress fat bodies. They refer both to individual bigotry as well as institutional

policies designed to marginalize fat people. Anti-fatness and anti-fat bias are also sometimes referred to as fatphobia, fatmisia, sizeism, weight stigma, or fattism.

Aubrey Gordon, *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat*, p. 10.

Anti-fatness is so common that it might be difficult for a lot of people to identify. It could be staring you in the face and you wouldn't think about it. One obvious anti-fat circumstance should immediately spring to mind for us theatre workers. But does it? We talk a lot about diversifying our audiences and making our spaces accessible. But when was the last time you considered the size of the seats? In the stage where I am directing as I write this, I am reminded every time I sit down, and the arm rests dig into my sides: I was not considered in the set-up of this place.

Project Implicit, an online implicit association test run by researchers from universities such as Harvard, has been up and in use since 2011. Anyone can participate from their own device, and many have – the project reports 26 million tests have been taken (Project Implicit. 2025). In the test, you are shown a number of images and words in rapid succession in order to measure your unconscious – implicit – bias around skin colour, disability, sexuality, weight and other characteristics. A study was released in 2019 analyzing the data from four million test takers over nine years, reportedly showing that in many cases bias decreased over the years, for instance implicit bias based on race decreasing by 17 percent. (Gordon, 2020, p. 23). However, anti-fat bias breaks this trend, increasing by 40% during those same years. In the data from 2016, 81% showed pro-thin, anti-fat bias (ibid, p. 24). While people become more aware of and critical towards racism, our hatred toward fat people is growing.

Anti-fat attitudes have more dire consequences than theatre seats bruising my hips, of course. Studies at the university of Exeter have shown clear correlation between a woman's weight and her salary – the thinner she is, the more money she makes – while a Yale study found that very fat women were more likely than thin women to be found guilty in a court of law (Gordon, 2020, p. 26). Several studies have shown doctors and medical staff carry notable anti-fat bias, with more than 50% of respondents in one study describing fat patients as “awkward, unattractive, ugly and non-compliant” (Gordon, 2020, p. 146). I myself and many fat people with me avoid seeking medical

care, knowing that we might be insulted, humiliated or simply turned away without examination but told to “just lose weight.”

In the theatre, anti-fat attitudes are maybe best observed on stage. In Finland, a very homogenous group of people has access to the boards. The typical actor is white, cis, able-bodied and thin. The few fat actors active are often made to insult themselves on stage, playing their fatness for jokes. In school, we read a lot of plays out loud to each other, and even though I should have expected it I was surprised at the amount of anti-fat slurs and insults that are present in dramatic literature of today. While I am happy that our (almost exclusively white) teachers are aware of and bring racist imagery in plays up for discussion, very quickly I grew weary at being the only one to bring the anti-fat imagery to the table.

2.2. Presentation of Literature

In my research for this text, I was unable to find books or research articles specifically on fatness in the theatre. Instead, I turned to my other alma mater University of Helsinki and the literature on gender studies, which has long been the home of fat studies. Of all the literature by prolific Kathleen LeBesco, I lean heavily on her 2004 book *Revolting bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* in my approaching the interview part of this work. Searching for Finnish context, I use *Koolla on väliä! Lihavuus, ruumisnormit ja sukupuoli* (*Size matters! Fatness, bodily norms and gender*, my translation), edited by Katariina Kyrölä and Hannele Harjunen (2007). While writing my thesis in 2024, actor, activist and playwright Noora Dadu published her seminal *Roolitus* (*Casting*, my translation), finally providing literature on bias in the performing arts in Finland. For background facts and mic drops, no one is snappier and more reliable than Aubrey Gordon, which is why her popular book *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (2020) is so actively referenced here.

2.3. My Interviews

2.3.1. Method

In planning my interviews, there are several limits to consider. The most glaringly obvious being that there are very few fat students at the Theatre academy. Any form of quantitative research is impossible, and I would be ill-advised to claim to be able to

generalize any findings. Anonymity would also be impossible, as I know the interviewees personally. At last, in the introduction to Kathleen LeBesco's book *Revolting bodies?*, I found my method. LeBesco (2004) writes about fat identity and of "approaching political struggle and social transformation from a vantage point of cultural studies and interpersonal communication" (p. 2). The book is aimed at enabling fat subjects to function with agency, amongst other things through small talk. Small talk! Reading this, I realized I had never been engaged in small talk about our experiences as fat students with any of my fat peers at school. Our bodies are an inconvenience everyone else tries to ignore, and so we do the same and only open up about our situation in moments when our cups overflow. We might find each other crying in the locker room, and everything bubbles up in an emotionally wrought conversation. The next day, over coffee, we prefer to smile and pretend nothing happened, so conditioned are we to wish for normalcy, to just be like everyone else, to forget. We have been deprived of the chance to small talk about our situation, so I decided the method of my interviews should be just that. Of course, as a method, it is not a particularly scientific one. I invited my interviewees to a one-on-one interview, and even though I told them the form of it would be small talk, the framing of the conversation is obviously not a naturally casual one. I still tried, bringing snacks and non-alcoholic drinks, starting the conversation with greeting the interviewee as the personal friend they are before opening up with an explanation of LeBesco's ideas of small talk and then turning the topic to that of being fat in the Theatre academy. I strove to follow the thoughts and initiative of the interviewee, only asking my own original questions if the conversation came to a stop. These questions were often derived from my own experiences as a fat student in the Theatre academy, which I of course see puts me in the forefront. I would however like to state how the interpersonal communication LeBesco describes does require a conversation to take place – interviewer and interviewee connecting over shared backgrounds or experiences. I also wanted to deploy the principle I as a theatre director decidedly follow in working with actors – any question I ask of them I must be prepared to answer too, and any action I ask them to perform I must be willing to perform too – meaning in this instance, that whenever the interviewee asked me something, I answered truthfully. A different approach could have been to actively remove myself from the conversation. This might have produced a more spontaneous, "pure" monologue from the interviewee. One might argue that any

situation where one interviews the other, taking notes, cannot be deemed “small talk.” I could perhaps have considered recording actual small talk without informing the person beforehand of my research, but I cannot see how I would justify this ethically. As it was, I found the interviews to be very empowering for myself, and the interviewees expressed similar sentiment. We chose to speak with our own voices, on the record, about our own experiences. I would like to argue that this strengthened both mine and the interviewees’ agency as fat people telling our own stories.

2.3.2. The Interviewees

As stated above, sourcing the interviewees for this thesis posed several ethical and practical questions. The Uniarts Helsinki Theatre academy is a comparably small school, and the admission of fat people to the school is very limited. Anonymity was impossible. There were only a couple of small fat students I didn’t personally know, and they were in their first years of studies. I considered inviting them for interviews, but worried that I, a master’s student of directing, approaching them might result in pressure to please me. I was also wary of approaching people who had not publicly or in private conversation with me expressed any form of fat identity, in case my identifying them from afar would in any way be upsetting. Also, I was interested in how the education in its entirety affected fat students, and so I chose to approach four students either recently graduated or in their last years of study, who had previously expressed fat identity either publicly or in private conversation with myself.

In the following text, I will refer to these interviewees interchangeably in order to avoid identifiability. Only when an interviewee has themselves referred to their gender as a factor in intersection with their fatness will I, in turn, refer to it. Three of the interviewees have studied acting in either the Finnish language education program or the Swedish language education program. One has studied a design program in the departments of scenography, light and sound. Each one entered the school when they were 22 years of age or older and have been fat before and during their education. All my interviewees are white and have grown up in Finland.

2.3.3. Silence and the Courage to Finally Speak

It's difficult to know where to start. I always have the thought that I haven't had it so bad. I feel like it's so many treacherous little experiences, micro aggressions, that are difficult to name. That makes it hard to trust your own experience. Am I just interpreting this as anti-fatness, or was there really something there?

Interviewee, April 2023

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my interviewees. Many times, they expressed how our conversation was the first time they had spoken about their experiences. This is one of my most significant findings and it fills me with grief and anger – no teacher or peer has asked any of us how we are coping as fat students at the academy. This fact might mean that some utterances are quite raw, intensely personal and vulnerable, wherefore I would like to ask all readers and especially thin readers to treat this vulnerability with the respect it deserves. You might feel the urge to explain our experiences away, or to simply not believe our statements. I implore you to still listen. Through our conversations and my writing of this thesis, I have also noticed that both the interviewees and I myself have been victims of gaslighting and frequently enact it on ourselves. “It’s not that bad,” we repeat, and “Of course, others have it much worse.” All of the interviewees repeatedly state that they are grateful they haven’t been subjected to worse treatment than they have, happy that they haven’t been actively bullied at the Theatre academy. As I started writing out the experiences of my interviewees and myself, I found myself thinking, “Oh, do I even have a case here? Have we really been through anything worth mentioning,” only brought back to reality by the reaction of my mentor Rodolpho García Vázquez, confirming that these are shocking, sobering, devastating witness accounts. I believe this distrust in ourselves comes from our internalized anti-fat bias, and from no one else ever standing up for us. The idea that fat people are to blame for our own bodies and therefore our own oppression is such a strong one, and one we’ve been conditioned to believe our whole lives. I want to take this opportunity to radically stand on the side of myself and my fat peers, saying yes, it is that bad, and no, oppressions shall not be played off of each other to comfort the oppressors. These are our experiences. They are real, and they matter.

3. BEING FAT AT THE THEATRE ACADEMY

After interviewing four fat students and transcribing and translating their answers, I approached the material again as a whole to see if I could identify common themes in the personal experiences. Of course, already during the interviews I could recognize images and themes that resonated with my own experiences or with those of earlier interviewees. Soon, I had found five themes that everyone touched upon, which I then named as follows:

1. Getting in – experiences from entrance exams
2. Opting out – experiences of self-censorship and exclusion
3. Fitting in – experiences from the costume department
4. Staying fat – temporality of identity and the pressure to shrink
5. Getting out – how has the school prepared us for the field?

After arranging the answers under these headlines, a handful of quotes remained.

Reading them, they all pointed towards the need of a sixth category:

6. Stigma, slurs and surviving

In this chapter, I will first present the interview quotes for each category and then discuss the themes in relation to the literature and to my own experiences.

3.1. Getting In – Experiences from Entrance Exams

“I applied to the school for seven years, and I was always rejected after the first morning. In that first phase the jury is only seeing you for a very short time. What’s to say prejudice doesn’t play in? Each time I was rejected I had the thought: is it because of my body? However, I do recognize that the entrance exams is a violent situation for everyone.”

“I applied twice, three years apart. The first time I was on reserve, but no spot opened up, and the second time I got in. In the last phase of the tests there is an interview and my second one has affected my whole education. I got there and the professor told me: ‘You have not been accepted to the program, because we have not seen a big enough

improvement in your physique since last time you applied.’ The professor was new but he was flanked by other teachers who had been in both my tests. They had even invited the movement teacher especially to my interview, she was not in the other applicants’ interviews. The interview was in English and not in my native language in order to accommodate the movement teacher. I understood that they had hoped I would have lost more weight. I broke down in tears and it felt like I was split in two, where one cried helplessly and the other kept arguing for my right. I left the interview thinking I was out. It was quite the start to my relationship with my future classmates when I met them outside where they were waiting to go in to their own interview, and they had to comfort me hysterically crying. Then I got in anyway.

When I got into the school, I hadn’t even checked the lists. I was sure I hadn’t gotten in, since the teachers had said so. Then I got a message from a friend congratulating me. I was so confused. My reaction became something like ‘Aha, I got in anyway.’ That overjoyed feeling didn’t come. I didn’t post about it on social media or anything. Then when school started, I didn’t get any explanation. We had our first student-teacher meetings, and I didn’t dare bring it up. In the end, I sent an email to the professor asking about it and got an apology in the answering email, but not without the caveat ‘well, you did get in, so...’

After all this, it’s been difficult to trust the professor and teachers. It overshadowed all my years of studying. I have limited and tried to make myself smaller with all the teachers present at those exams.

The last time I came to the school when I graduated was to visit the costume department to give back some things I’d borrowed, and I cried there with them. So, my time at the Theatre academy started and ended in relation to my weight.”

“When I applied, we were rigorously tested to see if we would withstand the school – running and doing acrobatics. What kind of a measurement of an actor is that?”

“I know the entrance exams in my program have changed since I applied, in part because my class and I were very vocal in demanding they change. But still when I applied, the physical tests were unnecessarily cruel. It was common for people to faint or throw up during the endurance tests. Why was that needed? Also, I applied twice and both times I was subject to simulated rape. The first time, I was 19 years old and

entered a blind improvisation where a professional actor waited for me and acted out a scene where he was my father who raped me. When I entered the school, I very plainly said: this cannot continue. I'm happy to hear [from newer students] that these things have indeed changed.”

“The education is physically demanding, but fat people can also do demanding things. Like, in my interview they said they were worried about my knees. Five years later – I haven't had any problems with my knees, but several of my slim classmates have.”

“I wish the entrance exams would look more at ‘what can this person express with their body,’ rather than ‘what can this person's body withstand.’”

Discussion

Why are there so few non-white actors on stage and screen in Finland? Well, there aren't so many graduating. Why are there so few graduating? Well, because there are so few accepted to the school. Why are there so few accepted to the school? Well, because so few apply. Why do so few non-white people apply? Well, because there are so few on stage and screen! And so on, and so on, until we do something about it. Why are there so few fat actors on stage? Well, as Noora Dadu points out, naming and challenging norms is uncomfortable, difficult work, and a quite human response to this is to shut out anything or anyone breaking with the norm, so you won't have to face that there is a problem at all (2024, p. 83).

To have an experience of the Theatre academy, you first need to be accepted. Achieving this is notoriously difficult, especially to the Finnish language acting program where around 1200 people apply and 12 are accepted each year. In the first stage of the exams jury members and applicants meet only for a very brief moment of time, and in a big group. What's to say that bias doesn't play a part in who is even allowed to take part in more than the first test? We remember that the study of the Project Implicit-tests stated that anti-fat, pro-thin bias appears to be increasing, with 81% of test takers showing it (Gordon, 2020, p. 24). Aubrey Gordon (2020) references other surveys, too, which show how negative attitudes towards fat jobseekers are rampant among managers – fat

people being perceived as incompetent, lazy and unfit for leadership positions (p. 25–26). It is easy to see how these kinds of attitudes would affect applicants to directing and design programs as well as the acting program.

Of course, it is never fun to be rejected when applying to your dream school, even if you were given a fair chance and weren't discriminated against. The problem is that you often have no way of knowing what informed the decision against you. If you are eliminated at the first stage of tests, you do not receive any feedback for obvious reasons – the jury doesn't have the time to give relevant feedback to so many applicants. If you get further, you can call the jury for feedback. When I applied to the acting program in 2013, I knew was turned away because of my body. So did my friend in the 80's. But one of my interviewees applied for years, always being rejected immediately after the very first morning. It is a testament to their phenomenal conviction and strength as an actor that they continued applying until they were accepted, despite the added stress of not knowing the reasons and the message from society as a whole that their fatness made them less than.

Judging by my own feedback and the bizarre situation of being rejected-then-accepted that one of my interviewees experienced, it appears that the physicality of the schooling is used as a motivation for keeping fat applicants out of the school. So, can't you argue that this is simply out of just concern for the applicants' wellbeing? Surely, it would be irresponsible to accept someone to an education that they cannot withstand. However, as my interviewee states, fat people can be strong and capable and thin people are not immune to physical strain or injury. You cannot tell someone's health status just from looking at them, but still we, as Harjunen (2007) points out, assume thinness equals health and fatness equals sickness (p. 210). Turning away fat people under the guise of worry for our knees or capability bares resemblance to the phenomenon Aubrey Gordon (2020) refers to as concern trolling – a kind of well-intentioned bullying (p. 76–77) where people try to limit fat people's lives giving as justification that they are “just concerned for your health.” This kind of insipid concern is, of course, mostly anti-fatness in disguise as it disproportionately targets fat people, and because it has been proved over and over that weight stigma and the stress it results in is far more dangerous than being heavy – and that weight stigma increases risk of dying regardless

of BMI (Gordon, 2020, p. 149). Bullying fat people doesn't make them thin, and it certainly doesn't make them healthy.

I would like to argue that it is also an expression of healthism, something Gordon (2020) describes as the idea that health is a virtue and a moral, normative imperative (p. 10), a reality echoed by Harjunen (2007, p. 206–207). You must be healthy! You are only worthy of respect if you are or strive to be healthy. And what does healthy mean? Well, usually we just mean thin. My thin schoolmates very seldom describe themselves or other thin people as “thin,” instead calling them “fit,” “in good condition” and such. I've never heard of someone being turned away from the applications to the acting program for being a smoker – and of course they shouldn't be. I would like to challenge the whole idea – while fatness by no means should be taken as an indicator of illness, why shouldn't we have sick actors? Actors suffering from visible, debilitating illness? Why should only rosy, apparently healthy people be the tellers of human stories? Why is it anyone's duty to perform health?

3.2. Opting Out – Experiences of Self-censorship and Exclusion

“I don't apply to a lot of things. I keep thinking “they don't want a fatty anyway.””

“I have internalized the hatred. I reject myself all the time.”

“I feel like I've become paranoid. If I get offered something, I think: am I now wanted for roles of some kind of quota? I'll get a text that tells a story of anti-fatness, and I can't help thinking: why am I getting these texts?”

“People keep giving backhanded compliments. I know I should just own it. Like when they say “No, you're not fat, you're beautiful!” As if they can't see me. It's unsettling that everyone knows I'm fat but try to pretend there's nothing to it. It's like there's a pressure on me: don't talk about that.”

“Eating in school is difficult. Overall, I've had problems with eating in public. And the girls in the acting class eat quite little. It does make me think about whether others

check what I'm eating. People treat you like you know nothing about eating [when you're fat], even though you're an absolute expert. I think a lot of people in school are close to orthorexia. My own eating goes in cycles as well, sometimes very restrictive. But this is something you just don't talk about. How could we talk about this, as a community?"

"I feel the majority don't want you to call yourself fat. It's like they see it as a threat, if I was to accept myself."

"Sometimes I feel that there are parts of my body that I never want to show. The whole thing of being large 'in the right way' is very real. Not only how big I am, but what is that big body like. So then in a dance performance where everybody is expected to wear the same thing I panic – how will others react to me in this line-up."

"I have been taught that certain things, certain traits of my body are unacceptable. I am sometimes struck by thoughts of just going for plastic surgery. But how far can I go, how far am I supposed to go in order to be able to step onto the stage, in order to be seen?"

"On stage so far, I feel I have either been over-sexualized or allowed no sexuality at all. Through the school years, I haven't been naked at all. I feel that nudity as an expression is shut off from me. When classmates have taken their clothes off, I have felt that if I were to join there, topless, it would be equal to social suicide. How on earth could I dare? I've gotten beaten down my entire life. How could I dare hang out naked like other actors do backstage? Like when my friends were taking naked selfies all together, I felt I just couldn't join. The others are so close to the norm. I didn't want to ruin the pictures. I didn't want them to think I ruined the pictures."

"I'm not active in making self-tapes. I can't do that. I can go to castings, sure, but making my own video just makes me see it with other people's eyes and I feel it's a contaminated gaze. It feels like a risk to send self-tapes, I want to protect my inner child from that, what if they say something mean about me?"

“The gym isn’t off limits to me. I’ve worked hard to claim that space. I tell myself I have the right to be here. It’s been a big project to feel like that. It is weird that the gym has windows up to the aula though... As if it’s a place for showing off. I just can’t stand the thought that people will look at me and think ‘oh, good for her.’”

“If I do go to the gym, I feel I have to do something all the time, I cannot have pauses or rest there. This means I always do too much and hurt myself. It’s just like I have to do more than the others. And every time I have to psych myself up to be able to claim the space.”

“I made it a project for myself to explore nudity at the school. As a form of revolt and to strengthen myself. A form of self-actualization. You must empower yourself some way. If no one else gives it to you, you must fix it yourself.”

“The first time I was nude on stage was in the first class we had. Some classmates were upset and said they would have wanted an advance warning that there would be nudity. I don’t think they saw it as an aesthetic question, it was more that they thought nudity was something private. For me it was definitely about daring to show my fat, naked body as something different.”

“Today I am friends with my body. I’ve found a lot of beautiful material in my body. It moves, stuff shakes and jiggles, it has given me a lot of material. In dance performances I’ve been part of I haven’t felt othered. If someone has chosen me for their performance, I feel secure they want all of me.”

“I have avoided the gym. It’s like the changing rooms. I have to make a decision to be brave in those spaces. It’s become better during the years; I’ve been better at making them my spaces. Making them places where I have the right to exist. That I don’t have to hide myself, that I have the same right as anyone else to be there, to change, to feel free like everyone else. This is not a given if you are fat. As fat people, we are shamed into not liking our bodies.”

“A stressor in the academy is also in the diet choices. There’s strong pressure to be vegan. With what right do people start to construct new oppressive norms around food? Once, I was sat at a table with classmates, and I was the only one who had gone for the chicken option while the others were eating vegan food. Then, one classmate said to everyone in a casual tone, “We should start bullying everyone who isn’t vegan.” No one protested. This gave me such flashbacks from bullying in school. I felt that they all thought I’m a bad person for eating meat. I thought, “aha, just as I thought, I am not wanted here, I don’t fit in, there’s something wrong with me.” People should be very careful when talking about food. I know of people who have chosen not to eat anything at all in school when they didn’t want the vegan option, because it is constructed as shameful to eat meat. At the same time, I feel like thin people get off easier for these things. Like, I’ve heard it said about those who lift weights or do a lot of gym or sports that of course they need to eat meat to be able to withstand their training. It’s just a circumstance, that thin people can do anything they like. I see thin people making huge piles of food on their plates, and I can’t help but wonder what people would think if I came to the table with the same kind of portion.”

“My femininity is and has always been very important to me, and I feel that my identity conflicted with the roles I got to play. Being an asexual fat actor was easy. But it wasn’t okay for me to be interested in eroticism. I didn’t want to only play the classical funny fat character, or the desexualized character. I’ve come to realize that sex and eroticism are crucial to my practice, and I felt that at school I didn’t have the room to make those choices. I wonder if this was tied mostly to my view of myself. There wasn’t room for me in the normative spaces, and at the beginning I had a longing for those spaces. Why can’t I play Juliet or Ophelia? Playing characters that are emotionally desirable was an area shut off from me. I was allowed to play either hypersexualized whores or completely desexualized characters. This made me make the decision to resist, to say NO, I will be desirable.”

“There’s only one role for us to play – the funny fatty.”

“I don’t take the stairs, because I get out of breath.”

“I like dancing, and I would have liked to take some dance class in school. But I haven’t, I’ve been afraid. I just feel so strongly that, even though there is such focus on contemporary dance here, that I just couldn’t take part. I couldn’t go there and claim to be able to dance.”

Discussion

This chapter reveals two different dimensions in which fat students at the Theatre academy confront perceived external limitations or impose limits of their own. One dimension can be seen as dealing with the body in a private capacity – exercising, eating, showing your body in changing rooms or showers – and the other deals with the body in performance – on stage, auditioning and such.

At the Theatre academy, there is a well-equipped gym to which students have free access. While applying to school, I used to dream of how my body would change when I finally got in – the physicality of the education, the easy access to this gym, all of it would magically make me sporty and healthy and thin. During my six years at the school, I have voluntarily gone to this gym exactly once.

Whether you claim the spaces as yours or avoid them, it’s clear that it is not neutral ground. Every-day situations such as exercising or eating are activities that require preparation and consideration when you are fat at the Theatre academy. As it should be, the student body is politically conscious and unlike Finnish society at large, vegetarian cuisine is the norm. While I whole-heartedly agree with the need for societal change to the meat-eating norm, both for me and for my interviewees this strong normativity in the lunchroom has brought with it reawakened eating disorders and memories of childhood bullying. Seeing my new classmates disappointedly surveying my plate in the restaurant, hearing people talk about how disgusting meat eating is, immediately makes heart ice over. Only a few people have questioned me to my face, and when they do I scramble, lump in my throat, to explain how my eating disorders mean that any limit I impose on my diet triggers and worsens my condition, that yes, yes, I have tried to be vegetarian but it sent me down a very dangerous path, I wish I could of course, I totally agree, but I can’t. Hearing that a close friend of mine told one of my interviewees that

he wanted to start bullying everyone who isn't vegan, I am not surprised in the slightest, instead I feel like it's something I already knew or should have understood – of course he thinks this, of course I should be bullied, of course he thinks I am disgusting. Eating in public as a fat person is phenomenally stressful and causes me to strongly dissociate from myself. I have to really fight to access and assert my own desires, so hyper aware am I of others' perception of me. If I choose something "unhealthy," something greasy or heavy, I will feel the eyes of strangers and friends and their loud thoughts "of course she's fat if she eats like that." If I choose something "healthy," a salad or such, I see either encouraging condescension: "well done, good for you" or disbelief: "darling, you're not fooling anyone, you didn't get that size eating salads." Damned-if-I-do, and so on. Now, attempt to go through this kind of anxiety, stress and dissociation during your 30-minute lunch break, and then go back to the rehearsal room and try to be a vulnerable and truthful artist, often with the same people who have induced in you this stress.

The dimension of self-censorship in performance is a damning one for a performing arts academy. That students about to leave school and going into the professional field are reluctant to audition cannot be seen as anything other than a failure. We will return to this in chapter five of this section, "getting out."

All my interviewees mention sexuality and desirability in some way as a stressor as a fat person at the academy. Their statements are very much echoed in the literature, with Gordon (2020) pointing out the way fat sexuality is portrayed as something both laughable and threatening in contemporary film (p. 130–131) and Harjunen (2007) as well as LeBesco (2004) directly supporting my interviewee's experience of being either hypersexualized or completely desexualized as a fat woman (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2007, p. 210–211; LeBesco, 2004, p. 87).

Limits can be put upon us by others, by writers and directors making discriminatory choices, or costume designers dressing fat bodies differently to thin ones, or enacted by ourselves. "I didn't want to ruin the pictures," one of my interviewees states as the reason for staying out of topless selfies with their classmates, "I didn't want them to think I ruined the pictures." When I was applying to the acting program in 2013, I was

thoroughly enjoying a guided group improvisation where we were acting as different animals, until the teacher told us all to be horny hippos at a brothel. Immediately, my will to play and interact was replaced by fear that someone would be repulsed by me. I knew with absolute certainty that I couldn't approach anyone with sexual interest – that kind of expression, however playful or absurd, was unacceptable in a body like mine. While others started dry humping each other, I retreated to a corner and hoped the jury would like that I made a different choice, being a pervy Peeping Tom of a hippo, and that they wouldn't notice I was no longer playing but simply surviving. We censor ourselves pre-emptively, before anyone else has the chance to say we should step aside. And why wouldn't we? I was 16 years old when I first saw a fat girl kissing someone in a romantic context, when we rented the 2007 version of the musical *Hairspray*. After finishing the movie with my parents, I immediately took the DVD to my room and watched it a second time. I wrote in my diary that it was so incredible to see Nikki Blonsky kissing Zac Efron, but that I hoped I wouldn't look like that if I ever got to kiss a boy, because it looked so wrong and so weird. As fat people, we almost never get to see ourselves portrayed on stage or on screen as loveable or beautiful. As Dadu (2024) mentions, how mustn't that affect us, never seeing someone our size on stage at all, or never seeing them as the object of love and respect (p. 127)? It is truly inspirational and wonderful that one of my interviewees has been able to claim their body as beautiful and interesting; "Today I am friends with my body. I've found a lot of beautiful material in my body. It moves, stuff shakes and jiggles, it has given me a lot of material." I sincerely wish this would be the experience for anyone after spending five years at an arts academy – to see your own body as a friend capable of offering beautiful material for stage performance. Not as an enemy.

3.3. Fitting In – Experiences from the Costume Department

"When school started and we first visited the costume department, all felt hopeless."

"The costume department told me to go buy things for myself. That made me feel the pressure of fixing this myself. Maybe, if I had asked them to order things specially for me, maybe they would have? But the feeling I got was that I couldn't ask. Because what if they would have said 'No, why should we?'"

“They’ve told me to go buy things myself. I think they don’t know how to dress larger people. And I didn’t dare take that conversation.”

“Once they fixed some boots for me. For a production in school the designer wanted to put me in boots. Boots are the worst. But they altered the ready-made boots so they fit over my calves, that was wonderful. However, first I had to try on the original pair in front of everyone, even though I could see immediately they wouldn’t work. Why must I be put in that situation over and over again, where I have to be humiliated in front of others? They helped me in the end and made the boots work for me, but first I had to be humiliated.”

“They tell me to go buy things for myself, but the act of visiting clothes shops is triggering in itself.”

“Now that more brands make clothes in bigger sizes finally, it’s mainly the unethical fast fashion brands online. So the only way to get clothes that fit is to go against your values. It becomes a double punishment. Because when you’ve never been able to be pretty – you want it so badly.”

“My mother is a good seamstress, we alter the clothes for me. And for any kind of demo performances, I provide the clothes myself with my mother’s help. Why would I go to the costume department when I already know there is nothing there for me?”

“When we’re in productions with costume designers in school it’s hard to trust that they will know how to dress me. I never want to think about someone that they are incapable. But every time I find myself wondering: do they understand anything at all?”

In classes it’s easier, there everyone is just in work-out clothes all the time, so we’re equal. In classes I can do anything. Then, as soon as the costumes get involved, I panic.”

“In our first year I felt shut out when everyone else got to try out and play with clothes and costumes. I get what I get, and others get what they choose. I have to accept what

happens to be available, while everyone else gets to choose. In those moments I know I should say something, speak up, but I just can't do it because it would be pulling everyone's attention to my wound. Instead, I stay quiet."

"I was in a class on *commedia dell'arte*, where the teacher had gathered clothes for us to use for the roles. There are specific clothes used for the different archetypal roles in the genre, all in white. One of the archetypes is the young lovers, and I could see immediately that all clothes on that rack were very small. So, I didn't volunteer for those roles. Even if one would have wanted to volunteer, it literally wouldn't have been possible [to dress for that role]. So that gives a strong feeling that I shouldn't volunteer. I feel othered, shut out. Furthermore, it confirms that to be a Young Lover, you should be small. It can't be me. Maybe this means I'm supposed to bring it up, to take that discussion then and there. I always have to have that conversation.

I get the feeling: I never fit in anywhere. I never FIT IN anywhere. There's no room for me.

In the end in this class I found a white cape that covered my entire body from my neck to my feet. The teacher looked at me and said 'Good!' He might as well have said 'Good that you cover yourself up.'

All these times when they roll in a rack of clothes. Am I supposed to disrupt the class, demand more clothes? Am I supposed to take up time from everyone else, or miss class by going to the costume department to try to find something for myself?"

"My first meeting with the costume department was probably a tour of the school right when we started. I remember thinking that this must be hell on earth. Just like going shopping as a teenager. It has always been a pain to go there. For some people it's a buffet where everything works."

"Personally, I have gotten lots of good help from the employees of the costume department. They've helped me try to find alternative solutions for demo performances. I've worn only underwear and an oversized jacket, for instance, or a mascot costume. Something that fit. Even though I've gotten help, first you have to search for yourself. And I was among the first. There was literally nothing in my size. The costume people

ordered a pair of black pants in my size so there would be something I could be sure to wear.”

“You do feel put on the spot. You have to accept being the clown.”

“The classic costumes for us: rain jacket, cape, kimono.”

“The situation has made me more creative regarding costume. Make something out of nothing, make a costume. Of course, it always took me the longest to find things in the closet. I’ve been forced to be creative. Maybe put a skirt on your head instead of around your waist!”

“The last thing I did in this school was return some things to the costume department, and I thanked them for all they’ve done for me. I don’t think I would have made it through if it wasn’t for their kindness. They have seen me and seen how difficult it’s all been. I really want to say that none of this is their fault, it was just the situation at hand that I was the first fat actor here. It’s all about inclusion and exclusion. There hasn’t been any actors and dancers who have needed larger clothes before.”

“Stepping into the closet the first feeling is frustration. Where should I start searching, and not because of the ample possibilities that others have, but because I know it will be like finding a needle in a haystack. Even though I do want to stress the [positive, creative] possibilities too! You can play with the clothes; there’s the possibility for theatre. Put the skirt on your head.”

“Having to settle, make compromise. All the clothes that just are not. Are. Not. It weighs on you. I don’t have the same opportunities as others. That brings sorrow. It feels like being back in that same old sandbox even though you’re supposed to be at a university.”

“There should be resources to use the possibilities of costumes, for all bodies. Like using lace up techniques instead of zippers, and so on.”

“The wardrobe is a hole of anxiety. I brought up the problems every time I went there. They only said the same thing, ‘there has only been thin students here before.’ But I wonder, with the thousands of extremely small dresses in the wardrobe, who are these students?”

“At the beginning, there was only men’s shirts and clown pants that fit me. So that tells me: you do not fit into the roles of the desirable woman. The asexual was forced upon me. No-one dresses Juliet in men’s shirts and clown pants.”

“I think my position as designer is different from that of the performers. My fatness doesn’t affect my studies as visibly as for the performers. I don’t have to go to the wardrobe all that often. But when I go, it’s awful. Maybe you think: ‘I’d like those pretty red pants.’ But they only exist in small sizes.”

“I didn’t feel directly discriminated against, bullied or mistreated by my teachers, fellow students or the individuals working in the wardrobe. But I also didn’t feel supported. I wish there would have been more outrage from others when the structure was discriminating against me. Maybe outrage from the teachers, when the wardrobe didn’t have any clothes to fit their students. I wish the teachers would have supported me in this. I was so angry – that was easier than being sad – but I didn’t have the tools to make bigger change happen on my own. The teachers didn’t have the tools either.”

Discussion

I vividly remember my first visit to the costume department at the Theatre academy. Thin classmates started running around me, squealing with joy at the beautiful princess dresses and fantastical fairy costumes, while I walked with trepidation and a chilling feeling in my chest. Would anything fit me? The 3–4-metre-long racks are stuffed to the brim with costumes, each with a sign at the end: “soldiers’ uniforms,” “fantasia,” “suits,” and so on. Then, in the far corner behind the shoes, a double rack of about two metres reads “XL.” From this rack, only about half of the clothes are EU size 50 or larger. When one of my interviewees started school, this rack did not exist. After my first visit, I cried in the bathroom. The oppression of the costume department is almost

difficult to talk about, because it is so obvious it feels close to banal. This appears to be a very strong example of situated knowledge – only fat people can know how it feels to enter the wardrobe in our bodies. When I do bring it up to thinner schoolmates, it seems almost impossible for them to resist changing the topic to their own feelings. “It’s really hard for everyone,” they say. And yes, there is an abundance of dresses with waists so small it’s hard to see whom they’re for, begging the question that one of my interviewees asks: “Who are these students [who have needed these tiny clothes]?”

However, I wish to argue that there is a clear difference in the experience of searching in vain for something that suits your character perfectly, and the experience of searching in vain for anything that will fit your body in the first place. In our first year at the academy, actors, directors and dramaturges acted together in a play. It was a period piece, and we were sent to find outfits for our characters. I found one skirt of proper length, and one shirt I could button at least to my waist, the skirt hiding the fact that it didn’t close over my hips. The outfit was gloomy and dark, but it was the only one I could find. All the other women were dressed in poofy silk gowns or blouses. When the teacher/director told me I should go look for something else for a party scene, I almost cried when telling him that there wasn’t anything to be found. He told me to look anyway, look at the kimonos and things. I went, and I found a beautiful pink silk dressing gown that I paired with a belt to make a dress. This worked, it’s shine was more in keeping with the atmosphere of the scene, but it was very much a dressing gown. I don’t know what the audience thought about this, but I definitely couldn’t forget that I was different, that I was wearing a garment completely wrong for the scene, that I was wrapped in a dressing gown because no dress would go over my hips or shoulders. Like one of my interviewees, I wish there would have been reactions from my teachers. Did they go to the wardrobe and complain? Did they stand up for me, for us? I never heard that they would have.

Forcing the fat student to humiliate themselves in the costume department appears to be inevitable. When I was going to direct my first play at school, like I stated earlier I had the privilege to work with a fat actor, and at the budget meeting I asked for extra funds to be able to buy clothes for them. This was not granted, instead we were told to look for clothes in the wardrobe and if we really needed something we could buy it, then ask for more money. We both knew we wouldn’t find enough pieces. We could have taken

hours of our rehearsal time or of our free time to search the city for clothes to buy, going through the all-too-familiar humiliation of going from shop to shop without finding a single garment that fits. In the end, this actor ended up wearing their own underwear and one of my sweaters. My interviewees above testify to this same dynamic: a pair of boots are remade to fit their ankles but not until they've tried on the too-small ones in front of everyone; they get help figuring out alternative outfits, but not until they've spent hours searching on their own; they get reimbursed for buying new clothes, but not until they've used their own free time to go around flea markets and stores searching for sizes most shops don't carry. I've chronicled my own experience being dressed for a performance in the appendix titled *Fat surrealism* – the twists and turns, mental and physical energy required of me as a fat person to receive even one full outfit for a performance is staggering, and at the centre is humiliation. Why is there not resources to accommodate the students accepted to the school? Why are students who break the norm supposed to do unpaid work in order to fulfil normal study requirements?

We must return also to the presence of fat suits at the Theatre academy. To get to the back corner where our XL rack is located, you need to pass the rack of fat suits. Bulging, pink, overstuffed breasts and stomachs spill out into the corridor. One of the suits is uncannily similar to my body. To my knowledge, only two or three women with bodies like mine have been accepted to the acting program at least in the last 10 years. Meanwhile, it has been possible for thinner actors to wear me. How have they cast me? Have they laughed at me? Felt sorry for me? And, perhaps most mysteriously of all, what have they dressed me in?

What am I, who in primary school was so certain of my body's faults I fantasized about cutting off my stomach with a kitchen knife, to make of the presence at my university of a loose, fat stomach made specially for thin actors to strap to their flat abs? How am I supposed to interpret this? And, how am I supposed to interpret the fact that I and the other fat students at the school have brought this up to our professors, but nothing has changed?

Fat suits are harmful because they replicate the utterly hostile and hateful idea that Harjunen (2007) among others have described: the idea that inside of a fat person there lives a thin person trying to get out, a person who possesses the traits the fat person lacks – intelligence, efficiency and self-control (p. 214). As Gordon (2020) astutely points out, fat suit narratives are always constructed by thin people (p. 129). They show that we can handle a fat person's story only if it is told by a thin person – a real person – who can zip themselves out of the abject fatness at the end of the day. In the beginning of my writing this thesis, Brendan Fraser won the Academy Award for best male actor in a leading role for his work in the movie *The Whale*. I couldn't believe my ears. One of my interviewees testify to having “whale” shouted at them as an insult in the street. This is our story. Yet, a mid-size man playing a very fat man, dressed in really very bad fat suit wins an Oscar for his performance. In a film directed by a thin man, written by a thin man, based on a play written by a thin man who himself admits to making the character fat to add distance between the audience and the character. The director said of the film that it is “an exercise in empathy,” thus revealing his own reluctance to empathize with fat people. The way these thin men view the fat main character is appalling, and the way they portray him on screen is unspeakable. The contempt is shockingly clear. And this contempt won Brendan Fraser an Oscar. Am I to understand that this same contempt is keeping the fat suits on display at the Theatre academy?

3.4. Staying Fat – Temporality of Identity and the Pressure to Shrink

“These thoughts set everything off. I'm not enough. My life is a never-ending list of attempts to change. I keep thinking when I lose weight I'll get those roles, when I lose weight, I can do this and that. And I have experienced it – when I have lost weight, I am not rejected in the same way. When I'm smaller, I am allowed in. I really struggle with this. I want to be the kind of person who doesn't think about these things. But how, when I'm reminded of it all the time?”

“Normal weight – no, what are you supposed to say? Fuck, I also say that, I have no other language. It really makes a difference how we talk! Normal weight, normal body, those things mean I'm abnormal. You don't belong. You are abnormal or someone's

fetish. I find I can't trust people. If they give compliments or tell me nice things I question it."

"It's the small things all the time. Being given lines to say which state "I look enormous" in a negative way. Other students trying to tell me things about living healthy, without knowing anything about it or about my habits. It's so funny when thin people try to teach me how to become thin."

"I can never shake the feeling that I'm still supposed to grow into a butterfly. But I'm always that caterpillar. This is the body I have!"

"All these thoughts that hurt me so much. No-one supports you in getting rid of the thoughts. Everyone supports you in going on a diet."

"People just don't understand. People have no idea. People think it's possible to control your weight, to change it."

"I have had the thought that if I'm not allowed to just be and be myself, maybe it would be better not to be at all, not to live. It is so incredibly sad when you do get thinner and see how differently people treat you. It's not that I hate this body, I hate the way I'm treated."

[On the class movement and voice, a five-week exercise class that starts off the first year for actors, directors and dramaturgs] "I did everything so fiercely. And all the time I still thought I should have done more, better. I thought about the other students that they were valuing me according to how well I did. 'Does that person want to couple up with me in this exercise?' 'Am I enough?'"

"In movement class, I feel like a certain quality is wanted and if for some reason you can't do it like that, you are wrong. Teachers don't respect our limits. I find we are shamed for articulating needs or if we can't keep up. This means all actors are over trained."

“It's hard to talk about myself as fat. I find clothes work like an armour, like I try to hide and forget how fat I am.”

Discussion

Let's start by making one thing clear: diets don't work. When I searched for literature for this thesis, I happened upon a book that stated as much on its back cover – I don't remember which book because I put it away as if I'd been burned when I saw it had been printed in 1992. The pain of realizing literally my entire life (I was born in 1991) had been led by lies made it impossible for me to handle this book. How can it have been known for so long that diets don't work, and still my whole life has been lived in relation to the moral imperative to diet? How can it be that the school nurse poked at my belly when I was nine years old and told me I needed to “get rid of this.” How can it have been known diets don't work at least since 1992, when school nurses put me on diets in 2004 and again in 2007, when the psychologist I sought for eating disorder treatment in 2013 made me keep a food diary and chastised me when I overate? Why are we still treating fatness as a changeable condition linked only to individual willpower or virtue when the facts are that pretty much everyone who diets and loses weight, puts it back on? Gordon (2020) refers to studies showing that around 95–98% of dieters either don't lose any weight or can't keep it off if they do (p. 61). Not only that, the act of dieting itself and putting weight on and off can be dangerous to health (ibid, p. 62).

Hannele Harjunen's (2007) article on fatness as a temporary or liminal state opens the discussion on the bodily subject and how the normative pressure to change our fat bodies affects us. Being on a diet, slimming down, is seen as the natural state of a fat person (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2007, p. 207). Also Gordon (2020 p.134) and LeBesco (2004, p. 27) discuss the perception of fatness as a liminal, temporary state. Liminality is a term used in both social anthropology and in our theatre studies for example when examining ritual practice. It is used to describe the in-between state experienced for instance in a transformative ritual, such as the process of becoming an adult member of the church in a Christian confirmation rite. A short, clearly defined liminal state such as a vacation or a bachelorette party with a clear beginning and end can be an intensely

freeing experience, a moment where societal norms do not apply and through which you are prepared for what is to come (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2007, p. 208–209). However, the liminal can also in some cases be seen as a permanent state. Harjunen cites the research of Little et al., wherein persons with chronic illnesses are seen to experience a division in the self where both illness and identity live side-by-side in their body, producing the experience of living in a permanent liminal (Harjunen, 2007, p. 208-209). In LeBesco's *Revolt Bodies* (2004) I seek understanding of how this liminal state might constitute one reason why my fat peers and I have not joined forces at the academy. As we are not seen by others nor ourselves as fixed or full individuals, we cannot seek each other out, and don't tend to form communal resistance (p. 27). Why would we form a group around our fatness, when we are all on our way to being not-fat?

Staying fat is a real challenge. The cultural pressure to be thin is so ubiquitous most people probably don't question it. I saw an Instagram post a couple of years ago and am still reeling at the thought it offered: "What if you wouldn't worry about your child becoming fat?" It's a staggering idea. To accept fatness as a neutral, acceptable, permanent state that doesn't need changing. Right now, after a brief rise in popularity of so-called body positivity and an increased presence of images of happy fat people on social media, feeds are once again flooded with weight-loss content and before-and-after-videos. At the Theatre academy at Uniarts Helsinki, there is a focus in many degree programs on you finding your own particular identity as an artist. In directing, we are encouraged to find our own personal styles and aesthetics, asked to look at the work through ourselves and who we are. I appreciate this approach to art and to arts education, wanting to see as many varying, different and weird expressions as possible, but I wonder: how can we find our own art if we aren't allowed to find ourselves? If we are stuck being a worst-case-scenario or a "before," how can we discover and state consistent identity? Like my interviewee says, "No-one supports you in getting rid of the [negative] thoughts. Everyone supports you in going on a diet." How can we become strong artists with our own unique expression, if we are constantly waiting to change? We are all living what Harjunen calls a "Then, when"-life, (Kyrölä & Harjunen 2007, p. 206) dreaming about what we will be able to do when we change. In the earlier chapter about the entrance exams, we saw a terribly insulting example of teachers imposing change on one of my interviewees – setting it as a requirement to be accepted

to the school. But, as Dadu (2024) points out, feeling at home in your body and accepting it is important for your acting while your weight really has nothing to do with the quality of your acting (p. 127–128). How can we fulfill the goal of societal impact as described in the vision statement of our school: “Graduates from Uniarts Helsinki change the world as artists, researchers and experts. Our students discover their own potential as artists and influencers, and don’t shy away from their responsibility,” (Uniarts Helsinki, 2020) if we are convinced our potential is prisoner of a potential, thinner self?

There is reason to worry this pressure to change is worsening along with the rise in popularity of drugs such as Ozempic which were developed for treating diabetes but are proving effective in inducing weight loss. During my writing of this thesis the use and common knowledge of these drugs has exploded, bringing with it a host of different reactions. One worry I have is that pressure to shrink might become even more strong when “you can just take the medicine.” As Harjunen wrote already 2007, medicalisation of fatness and the influence of medical discussion on fatness are part of the reason we see fatness as a temporary state (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2007, p. 210) – illness is temporary, and everyone expects the ill to be working toward health. Replace ill with fat and health with thin, voila. If I had applied to the acting program today, might I have been told to try Ozempic, rather than Pilates, and then apply again? Another side of it has been thin people spewing bile over fat people turning to these drugs, calling their use cheating or shortcuts or selfish as the drugs initially intended for diabetics are sold to promote weight-loss. As my fat colleague put it, this reaction shows that when thin people insisted we slim down, they never wanted us to be happy or healthy – they wanted us to suffer, to pay for the crime of being fat with the suffering of restrictive diets and exercise regimes.

3.5. Getting Out – How has the School Prepared us for the Field?

“Recently I was in a project [In an MA-level class working with a professional director.] where a scene consisted of improvised and scripted slurs and verbal attacks, where anti-fat insults were shouted at me. I think the idea was to show something that’s

wrong, but the director never told us anything about it. It was never explained. What was the point of that, what was the point of putting me through that?”

“I know the stress of this makes you sick. The stress in never getting accepted is what is unhealthy.”

“I don’t apply to a lot of things. I keep thinking “they don’t want a fatty anyway.””

“I do have physical strengths as well, my dark voice and sturdy body makes people listen to me, perhaps because it’s read as masculine.

“There’s the idea that fat people are funny. I’m funny. But am I really, or are they laughing at me or just because of the idea that I should be funny?

It’s difficult to be made a representative. Yes, I want to help others, but I am only myself. Everyone is different.”

“No teacher has ever breached the subject with me.”

“Every day these tiny pin pricks that all add up to the fundamental thoughts of not being accepted.”

“It doesn’t matter how good I am or how good I get, there will always be some things I will never be allowed to do as an actor.”

“In movement class it becomes clear the teachers don’t consider fat bodies. Some movements are just impossible to do in the same exact way in a larger body, but when I ask for variations, I feel like I’m just wasting other people’s time. No teacher is ever prepared to give variations.”

“All bodies break or suffer, but if something happens to me I immediately think it’s related to my weight. I have done everything that my slim classmates have done, but I still have the thought that if I was thinner, I would have done them better.”

“In acrobatics there’s way too little focus on technique. They don’t dare say that doing acrobatics in pairs is about technique. Instead, I end up taking responsibility for the situation when we work in pairs. I have to explain to my partner how we can do things together even though I am heavier than them, because I’m afraid that people don’t dare bring it up. My fellow students haven’t been taught how to work with a pair of another size, because the teachers don’t talk about it. People are afraid to mention differences in weight. The teachers just say, “make pairs where you are both roughly the same size.” What?! With WHO?! This puts stress on me. I always have to find my own solutions and all the responsibility is on me. The teachers don’t have the competence, and they don’t dare say anything about it. I’m sure they would say it’s because they haven’t had fat students, or disabled students. And that the reason for that is that fat or disabled students don’t apply. So then you have to think, why don’t they?”

“The teachers have not helped me.”

“In school I have been spliced, split up, not wanted as an entire person. Hearing things like “You have a beautiful voice, but...””

“It’s weird to think about really. Because I do have those thoughts, like how much does my weight affect whether I get roles or not?”

“I want to be confident, but the truth is I am not confident about my weight. But when I step onto the stage – I am Lizzo then.”

“My very existence is political. It colours everything. Being someone who has to be considered, instead of just being.”

“In the academy this [being different] is mainly visible in the bachelor, I feel, since everything is done in a group during that time. A group that is supposed to all go the same way, that makes it very obvious if you’re different.”

“When I entered the school, I had made the decision not to be ashamed here. That was something I could find strength in. During the years I have started liking my body. But I have been very alone in that.”

“My teachers have thought it [being naked or exposed on stage] is about transgression in some other sense, but for me it has been completely about my body. About defiance.

“We have not talked about my fatness or my difference in the group.”

“I’ve been lucky to have some teachers who have seen me. One time, I had missed several movement classes. Usually, you could make up for it by taking some other course or exercise class, but once our planner suggested I go to a dance festival that was going on at the time and write about what I saw. I was so moved, because I felt seen. Someone realized that it is possible to do things in many different ways. There is no reason whatsoever to exclude people! You can always do things another way.”

“In my education there was a heavy focus on acrobatics, and that kind of movement didn’t work for my body. When we had classes in somatic movement instead, I flourished. But the acrobatics was just humiliating, another proof that I didn’t fit in. The teacher didn’t treat me badly or different from the others, I wasn’t bullied. But they didn’t have the tools to teach acrobatics to someone in a body like mine, like alternative movements or techniques which would have made the acrobatics accessible to me.

During my time at the Theatre Academy my body changed a lot.

It’s very strange being in an education so focused on making you be present in your body, and at the same time becoming so disassociated from your body. My fat body became a reminder that I didn’t have access to being sexual or feminine, and this made me disassociate. Being present in that was too painful.”

“We have not spoken enough about the hierarchies of the theatre field, and what you need to be able to hold your own in artistic processes. As a designer, I always have to sell my ideas to the others and especially the director. In that situation, if I am ashamed

of who I am, how can I do that? These are problems with long-term effects. If you are left out in school, who will call you to work on a show later? Directors have such power over what the groups look like, and if they just invite their friends, what chance do you have?”

“The education started with eight weeks of running and doing Cooper tests under incredible stress. I don’t feel we got any context to this method, other than that ‘this is what we’ve always done.’ I understand the idea of the actor being a physical instrument in the art of theatre, but why was this form of physical education the one chosen? My physical condition was not improved in the long run by this, instead increasing my stress levels.”

“I’m sure if I would have been accepted under the previous professor, I would have been crushed. The education has changed a lot during and after my time at the school. We have been taught to make our own opportunities and art pieces. I am grateful to the fact that I wasn’t subjected to that much violent structures against my body, since the education was shifted toward a more post-dramatic viewpoint. My first independent work in school was about dating as a fat person. It was important to me to portray that experience, ‘I am fat, and I want to fuck.’ This was well received; I didn’t get any discriminatory comments from teachers or friends. But the rest of it was difficult.”

“I’m not active in making self-tapes. I can’t do that. I can go to castings, sure, but making my own video just makes me see it with other people’s eyes and I feel it’s a contaminated gaze. It feels like a risk to send self-tapes, I want to protect my inner child from that, what if they say something mean about me?”

“The field outside of school felt impossible to access. It’s just clear, that if you are thin, white, hetero, cis, not disabled, you have more opportunities. If I would have tried to become the kind of actor who is a tool for the art, I would have died. There are no roles for me. The things I would have wanted to play, I never would have been elected for. So, I buried the idea of being employed at institutions. This is both because of artistic values, and because I know there is no place for me there.”

“No one else ever brought up the difficulties I had in school. If it was to be discussed, it had to come from me.”

“I think we need to look at the whole idea of what an actor should learn in school. I feel the way it has been is this view of the acting student as a lump of clay that the school needs to shape into a form that fits the market.”

“The setting of the school brings with it a lot of things. I felt like an outsider when I started here, like everyone else knew each other already. They are all thin, fast and urban and I am something different. This reminded me instantly of primary school bullying.”

“There’s only one role for us to play – the funny fatty.”

“The importance of social networking at the school makes life very difficult. And in that, being fat doesn’t help. It’s hard to try to be socially attractive when our society clearly says we as fat people are not. So then all other social weakness, like being from the countryside, being slower or more shy, is amplified by being fat. Another factor dragging you down. It makes me feel bad that so many people don’t even give me the chance to sit down and have a conversation. I feel they just see what I look like, not who I am. I end up in the shadows. I’m boring, stupid, wrong, and on top of it all I’m a fatty. Is that an interesting person? No. That is very difficult to bear. It annoys me, how much it matters, the way we look and the way we are seen.”

“No one else would ever refer to our experiences, no one would say ‘well, you as a fatty...’ That’s where the shame comes in. If someone would offer me a pair of shoes in a size too small for me, I would have no problem stating that [they won’t fit] and I don’t think anyone would have any difficulty understanding it. But if it’s any other piece of clothing, it’s suddenly shameful.”

“I wonder how my view of myself and my self-esteem factors into my work as a designer. I find it difficult to hold my own in conflicts or disagreements in artistic processes. I let the others decide what is good or not of the things I make. I think my

lack of self-esteem is a product of many things. When it comes to the technical side of things, I am self-confident. But for instance as a performer, I look at others doing similar things to mine, and they are all completely different from me. Thin Kallio indie boys. I stick out.”

“The teachers have not spoken to us about self-esteem.”

Discussion

Obviously, the Theatre academy is not responsible for the contempt of fat people that the rest of society holds, just as little as it is at fault for the racism faced by BIPOC students through their lives. However, for Uniarts to achieve their goals specified in the vision statement available at the website, preparing the students for work in society outside the academy must surely be a priority. I quote from said vision statement, under the headline Societal impact/Students and learning: “Graduates from Uniarts Helsinki change the world as artists, researchers and experts. Our students discover their own potential as artists and influencers, and don’t shy away from their responsibility.” (Uniarts Helsinki, 2020). Is the academy capable of achieving this, if the teachers do not for whichever reason actively support marginalized students?

The acting students I have interviewed all describe receiving lower quality movement training due to teachers not having the competence to adjust instructions for larger bodies. It is interesting that none of them use these words, rather stating how grateful they are for not being actively bullied in these classes. But, reading the interviews, how else can we describe it other than as incompetence on the part of the teachers? The teachers are not prepared to modify instructions or explain how the larger students can perform the movements, and they refuse to directly teach thin students how to interact with fat students when they don’t explain balance and techniques for working together with differences in size. The teachers fail to make the students enjoy acrobatics or make them braver, rather adding to reluctance and shame. For me, beginning our studies with the five-week movement class made me much less brave, much more afraid, and made my relationship with the thin actors much more difficult. I felt exactly what one of the interviewees describes, being afraid to volunteer or make pairs, fearing to disappoint a

classmate as if I was a child again. The feeling only grew after one pairs' exercise where we were to lift each other back-to-back, pairing up with whomever was closest. I turned to my partner, worried they were annoyed to have been paired with me, and was met with calm certainty while he told me "It's just technique, we need to find balance" before hoisting me into the air with ease. We laughed together, switching positions, and I felt amazing. After our success, I looked around the open-air space we were in for the only other fat student present, to see how this was going for them and their partner. My heart sank when I saw them having difficulties, the teacher walking over. After only a second the teacher stepped in to try and promptly dropped the fatter student onto the ground. The teacher didn't give any explanation to the student, or the class at large, and instead fled the situation by starting another exercise. The student was covered in dirt the rest of the day. What I saw was how not even the teacher, supposedly an expert, could be trusted with a body like mine; how she wasn't capable or willing to work it out; how she was willing to leave the thin students with the image of their fat schoolmate on the ground. By not educating themselves – by the academy not educating them? – these movement teachers rob fat students of so much joy, so many possibilities, and of so much education that their thin peers have access to.

"No teacher has ever breached the subject with me," one interviewee states. Neither have mine. Why are the actors not trained in self-esteem, resilience, and to see their own strengths in the face of discrimination, before they are sent out into a field where bias is rampant? Why are directors and designers not taught to challenge our own bias, our own racism, our own anti-fatness? In the directing department, there is no class or workshop on casting or choosing actors for your project. We are encouraged to follow our intuition, but in a discriminatory world what's to say that bias isn't compromising our intuition? And if we don't question and analyze our choices at school, where there is next to no demands of commercial success, then when? As Dadu (2024) recounts, women larger than size M (EU size 36–38) are very seldom hired for tv or film in Finland (p.127) – decisions made in part by directors who have graduated from the Theatre academy.

As my interviewee studying at a design program brings up, bias also affects social interaction which plays a huge role in the network-based nature of our field. You need

to build relationships to get work, and building these is more difficult when people ridicule you, bully you, overlook you, or when they don't take the time to get to know you because they perceive you in a negative light. Aubrey Gordon (2020) references studies in which even specialized health professionals describe fat people as "lazy, stupid and worthless." (p. 147). With anti-fat jokes and harmful fat suit narratives being as ubiquitous as they are in Finland today, making friends and professional connections as a fat person is a minefield where both other's treatment of you and your own ability to trust others hang in the balance.

3.6. Stigma, Slurs and Surviving

"We are all brain washed. When you hear about getting beach ready every year. When someone at some point has yelled "Whale" after you in the street. You never forget that."

"If I wasn't fat, I could have love."

"When you feel alone with a trauma or discrimination, you just don't dare object. Someone else should stand up for us. But it's always only you, yourself."

"There is anti-fat talk everywhere. You can never know what anyone thinks about you. Every day you hear something."

"Anti-fat jokes and using fat or fatty as insults or punchlines, it really hurts. It affects friendships and relationships to other people. I get the feeling that people who say these things wish me hurt, or that they hate me. After a joke or comment like that I can never trust that person again."

"I have had the thought that if I'm not allowed to just be and be myself, maybe it would be better not to be at all, not to live. It is so incredibly sad when you do get thinner and see how differently people treat you. It's not that I hate this body, I hate the way I'm treated."

“I do think it’s linked to femininity or to being a woman as well. The actors here are all victims of some kind of body dysmorphia, or victims of the beauty norms. But then when my thin friends talk badly about themselves or their bodies in the locker rooms or are checking themselves in the mirror criticizing themselves, all I can think is that if even she doesn’t like herself, what chance do I have. When they say that they are fat or disgusting, then what am I. It annoys me that I haven’t spoken up in those situations.”

“Now that more brands make clothes in bigger sizes finally, it’s mainly the unethical fast fashion brands online. So the only way to get clothes that fit is to go against your values. It becomes a double punishment. Because when you’ve never been able to be pretty – you want it so badly.”

“I haven’t spoken about this like this before. When I was younger, I was afraid of talking about it at all.”

“When I started school, I wasn’t part of the body positive movement that was flourishing at that time. I have been bullied since childhood due to being fat. There are so many traumas there.”

“When talking with friends and others about relationships the othering is very present. Others don’t realize how different our experiences are. I have been taught in every single movie I’ve ever seen that fat people cannot be loved.”

“You become suspicious; you can never know what someone else thinks. In this school, there’s the air of ‘here everyone is accepted,’ but that is only true if you present a certain way.”

“I have internalized the hatred of fat people, because I’ve been met with it my entire life.”

“I haven’t felt bullied at the Theatre academy, but there is an implicit understanding that things are the way they are and don’t need changing.”

“I am always searching for those moments or places where I can be wholly myself. People keep telling me ‘You occupy a lot of space.’ I know they mean spiritually, but it has its double meaning. I am large and LARGE. So, I keep making myself smaller, physically and as a person. All my life I’ve been told I’m fat and different. I have internalized that shame.”

“Now that more brands make clothes in bigger sizes finally, it’s mainly the unethical fast fashion brands online. So, the only way to get clothes that fit is to go against your values. It becomes a double punishment. Because when you’ve never been able to be pretty – you want it so badly.”

“As a student I end up in economic difficulties because of my body. My weight has always fluctuated, my whole life it’s been like this. And so, every now and then my clothes don’t fit, and I would need to buy new ones. But in the flea markets there is very little clothes that fit my gender identity, and even less in my size. This both results in economic stress as I have to buy more expensive clothes, and in ethical stress for buying new production instead of second hand. Especially at a school like ours, where there is strong pressure to act environmentally and ethically consciously. And then the shame, if the shirts that fit me are in the wash and I have to go to school in a shirt too small, one that shows my stomach if I would lift my arms. And the shame in not being able to go to an ordinary shop. Sometimes I can wear the biggest size in an ordinary clothes shop, but otherwise I have to go to a special shop for bigger sizes and the shame of that label is put upon me. It says I’m not an ordinary person.”

“Movement has been a process I’ve had to go through. When can I feel beautiful on stage, not sexual or personal beauty but the beauty of being whole. The norm is made up for thin people. And we’re surrounded by thin people all the time. But that’s just how it is. It’s about who is chosen to go here. And how we are treated.”

Discussion

I want to start out by repeating the words of one of the interviewees: “It’s not that I hate this body, I hate the way I’m treated.” Neither the quotes above nor this thesis as a

whole should be understood as an example of fat people being sad in their bodies because of their bodies. We are hurt by the anti-fatness we face. Our fatness is not a tragedy in itself. The discrimination and abuse we face is.

My best friend is fat, and she was my first fat friend. I was shocked when she once described a thought pattern I immediately recognized: when she crosses a street, she would think “Let’s see if they run me over, for the crime of being fat in front of them. They might as well, I couldn’t blame them.” I, myself, had had the recurring thought when waiting to cross the street “I’m sure they are thinking about running me over, laughing about it with their passenger, I bet they want to squash me.” And “I wonder if they’ll let me pass or if I need to wait because I’m fat, not a person.” Equally shocked and validated, I read Aubrey Gordon’s (2020) recount of her childhood fantasies: “At night, I dreamed of laying my belly on a cold, metal table (...) and slicing it off with a fish knife in one smooth stroke, bloodied but finally free” (p. 34.) She and I have dreamed about the same self-mutilation, cutting ourselves free of our stomachs. The sensations, plans, ideas, so similar even across the globe and across cultures. This is what anti-fatness is doing to our children.

My interviewees and I have experienced life-long abuse, bullying and internalized rejection. And it turns out this, not our weight, might be the most dangerous to our health. Studies have shown that experiencing weight stigma increases risks of an early death regardless of your BMI (Gordon, 2020, p. 149.) Yet, how many times haven’t we heard people close to us say that bullying might be good for us – a motivator to lose weight. Aubrey Gordon (2020) references a study made where very fat women were asked to write down all instances where they felt judged or insulted about their weight – on average three times a day (p. 94). Anti-fat abuse is all around us and it leaves deep scars. Like my interviewee says, if someone’s shouted whale at you in the street – you never forget it. I remember all the insults I’ve ever received. They relentlessly, still, shape the view I have of myself. In fifth grade Finnish class we were to learn vocabulary by repeating pairs of words that fit together. I’ve forgotten all other pairs, but one is forever on a loop in my head: “lihava ja laiska.” That means fat and lazy. Words that go together. Lihava ja laiska, lihava ja laiska, lihava ja laiska, that’s me, like my schoolteacher taught me when I was 11. Weight-based bullying is special in that way, that every authority around you actively supports the bullies’ statements. “You’re

too fat” says the bully, and your parents agree. “You should change, you are not good enough the way you are.” The school nurse agrees, as does your extended family, strangers on the street, your friends, the news, social media, your story books, Finnish class, chairs, clothes shops, and the jury at the Theatre academy. Stigma around fat people is so strong even other fat people seldom take your side, preferring to stay out of it to save themselves. It is a very vulnerable situation for a child to find themselves in, and these fat children grow up to be fat adults who have learnt to expect rejection and humiliation from every direction.

For me, a key to surviving has been finding clownery. Having long loved it as an expression and tool in my directing, something fundamentally changed for me when I tried it for real myself in a class with the master Per Sörberg at the Theatre academy. With my red nose, in the extremely pure contact with the audience, I experienced my body as an asset for the first time in my life. As a clown, I am not afraid to be seen, not afraid to be funny, not afraid to be fat. I am myself and I am in charge of my body, with no desire to hide. The experience is so intense and so freeing. I wish for all fat folks and all other marginalized people in the arts this pleasure – finding expression in which you can be complete, whatever that means for you.

Everyone I’ve talked to survives this exposure to anti-fat abuse in different ways. Crucially, all five of us have survived, and that is cause for celebration.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1. An Unsafe Space

Fat students at the Theatre academy are hurting. According to the interviews I have made, I would argue that the school is not a safe space for fat people. Let's go through the Safer Space Guidelines as they are presented on the Uniarts website. All quotes in the following are gathered from the article Safer space guidelines at academic events at uniarts.fi (Uniarts Helsinki, 2022).

Uniarts Helsinki is committed to promoting equity, equality, and anti-racism. (...) Harassment, misogyny, sexism, racism, ableism, homo- and transphobia, body shaming, ageism, or other forms of discrimination are not acceptable (...)

At Uniarts Helsinki, my interviewees and I have experienced body shaming, and we have experienced sexism, misogyny and ableism in intersection with body shaming.

Respect everyone's physical and emotional boundaries, privacy, and pronouns. Do not make assumptions of anyone's gender, (...) or any other personal matters.

At Uniarts Helsinki, my interviewees and I have had our physical and emotional boundaries disrespected in reference to our fatness. We have met assumptions of our health and abilities in reference to our fatness.

It is important that we all remember and critically reflect upon our own privileges and take this into account when participating in the discussions. (...) We also encourage everyone to be aware of the space we are used to taking in social situations, especially in terms of giving space to other voices than our own.

At Uniarts Helsinki, my interviewees and I have not felt heard, have not had any space to state our experiences and have in some instances been actively silenced when attempting to make our experiences heard.

Recognise the boundaries of your knowledge, especially in areas that are not your expertise or which you do not have experience of, particularly in case of sensitive topics.

At Uniarts Helsinki, my interviewees and I have frequently been met with others claiming to know our experiences and our bodies, for instance in the case of unsolicited dieting advice.

(...) If you are given critical feedback for problematic behaviour or harmful comments, we kindly ask you to take a moment to reflect upon the feedback and what you could learn from it.

At Uniarts Helsinki, my interviewees and I have not seen learning taking place as a result of the feedback we've given when we've been hurt by the anti-fatness of individuals or structures.

All participants of the Uniarts Helsinki entrance examinations must commit to following the safer space guidelines, as well.

At Uniarts Helsinki entrance exams, my interviewees and I have been met with harassment, body shaming, and we have experienced sexism, misogyny and ableism in intersection with body shaming, thus these entrance examinations have not met these Safer Space Guidelines.

If the Theatre academy at Uniarts Helsinki wishes to live up to the Safer Space Guidelines they themselves have chosen to present and promote, there is a lot of work to be done in relation to anti-fatness at the institution.

4.2. Criticism and Call for Further Research

This thesis is limited in its material both created and sourced – only four interviewees, a majority of literature produced in the United States as opposed to locally in Finland – and the topic would certainly deserve a more comprehensive study. Perhaps by including fat respondents from the field outside the theatre academy, or from schools in

other countries, the group could be expanded and diversified. Another option would be to include mid-size respondents studying at the theatre academy, or question students regardless of size about their thoughts on fatness and the thinness ideal.

I can see a need for further research into the intersections of sexism and anti-fatness at the academy. This topic wasn't the main focus of this thesis, and I didn't pose direct questions pertaining to it to my interviewees, but judging from the literature and the allusions made in some interview quotes, looking closer at gender and fatness would be called for.

This thesis does not touch upon the intersections of racism and anti-fatness, and it is a clear disadvantage that all respondents including the author are white.

As discussed in the chapter on materials and the interviews, the small size of the school and the group interviewed poses substantial questions to the ethics of this thesis.

Anonymity between writer and interviewee is not in place, and the identity of interviewees might be assumed by many readers in close proximity to the writer.

Reproduction of the interviews or interview conditions is impossible.

The lack of statements from teachers or other representatives of the school can be seen as a problem with this thesis. In further research, or further discussion at the institution, hearing from these people would be highly interesting. Also, the staff of the costume department should be heard in further research into this topic.

4.3. What Needs to be Done

I am courteous enough to assume the Theatre academy actually mean it when they say that they "(...) value diversity and consider it a resource." (Uniarts Helsinki, 2020). I am courteous enough to believe it when my colleagues and schoolmates say they want justice for all. I am courageous enough to believe they include me in their idea of "all." It should be clear, at the end of this thesis, that things need to change in order to make the Theatre academy and, indeed, the entire theatre field in Finland, a space where fat folks are welcome. As discussed, anti-fatness and thinness ideals also hurts thin and mid-size people, causing immeasurable pain in the form of eating disorders and such.

Everyone would stand to gain from fat liberation in the theatre. If we are interested in diversity, where also fat artists can flourish and be free instead of being rejected by themselves and others, we need to act.

Here's what I think we need to do.

Accept more fat applicants to the school. Accept applicants larger than mid-fat to the school.

Make all jury members take the Harvard implicit association test for weight-based bias and invite them to analyse their results together. Make sure all jury members have an understanding of how their implicit bias might affect their decision-making. Make sure jury members understand that weight-based discrimination is a problem.

Educate all teachers on weight stigma and weight-based discrimination.

Educate all movement teachers on how to approach teaching bodies different from their own, different from the norm.

Directors, writers, designers and choreographers especially need to be taught to question their own bias, for instance through what Dadu (2024) calls the decolonization of your own gaze (p. 358ff).

All actors need to be taught in the bodies they have, not the body they might someday have.

Take away the fat suits. Burn them. Or recognise them as harmful material and put them in a special cupboard the same way we keep firearms in a locked cabinet in the props department.

Thin people in theatre need to care about fat people's stories. We need you to hire us. We need you to write good roles for fat actors, cast fat actors in good roles. We need you to confront your own worry about getting fat, we need quite a few things from you actually, in fact I'll make a list

- Challenge your contempt for fat people, especially very fat people
- Stop seeing our bodies as your own worst nightmare
- Stop talking badly about our bodies
- Stop talking badly about your own body
- Stop sharing dieting advice
- Stop dieting
- Stop judging our plate, stop judging your own
- Stop offering us seats that won't hold our bodies
- Stop offering us clothes that won't fit our bodies
- Stop taking more pictures of your thin friends than of your fat friends
- Stop excluding us from your social media, from performance photos, from promotional material
- Stop excluding us from your scripts and ensembles
- Stop putting thin actors in fat suits
- Stop dressing fat actors in only rain jackets, capes, kimonos
- Stop making fat actors insult themselves in your works
- Stop making thin actors insult their fat colleagues and audiences
- Stop talking about yourself when someone fat tries to share their experience
- Get some fat friends. Show them off. Don't exploit them. Listen to their experiences. Stand up for them.

To my fellow fatties. I love you. Your hurt is valid, as is your joy. We are worthy of love. But we also have some stuff to do. We need to meet; to engage in small talk; we need to see each other and dare to name our bodies appropriately, the way we ourselves choose to. We need to, like Noora Dadu (2024) suggests, decolonize wellness by building trust and finding spaces for communication and sharing (p. 374ff). We need to support each other and stand up for each other and hire each other. We can't wait for thin people to deign to see our lives and our stories as worthy, we need to provide that for ourselves. We need to see our own stories as worthy. We need to stand up for those fatter than us. We need to stop trying to make ourselves disappear. We need to stay fat.

To echo the popular fat activist chant: we're here! We're sphere! Get used to it!

4.4. Thank You

Thank you, my fellow fat students, for engaging in small talk with me about your big lives. Your honesty, generosity and vulnerability is everything. Thank you.

Thank you, Rodolpho García Vázquez, for your support across the globe, and for being the only teacher and speaker at the Theatre academy to validate my experiences as a fat student. Without you, I would have stayed silent.

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6. APPENDIX

6.1. Fat Surrealism

Inspired by my colleague Ikenna Anyabuike, who introduced me to the concept of Afro-surrealism, I offer here an interlude: an attempt at fat surrealism.

I am in theatre school. I am about to act in a play about beauty standards and bodily norms. I weigh 109 kg and wear clothes size 50-52. When I am invited to the working group as an actor, I ask the director what the plan is for the costumes – is there a costume designer and will the clothes be custom made or sourced from the wardrobe? I specify I want to know because there isn't much clothing for me in the wardrobe at school. The director assures me the costume designer is prepared to work with us to make us feel good and get stuff that fits.

The first meeting with the whole working group. We are asked to share what things in the material are especially interesting to us. I open up about the scary nature of being fat on stage and wanting to be brave here, using my body to tell the story of the thinness ideal that is in the material. I meet the costume designer and tell them in person that there are almost no clothes I can wear in the costume department. I urge them to prepare for this. They say that they are prepared and committed to finding clothes for all of us.

The rehearsal period starts. I hear the director and costume designer mention in passing their idea to dress us in pink silk pyjamas. I tell the costume designer that I overheard this and just want to give them a heads up that there are no silk pyjamas I can wear in the wardrobe, and that brick-and-mortar shops in our city don't carry my size so maybe they need to be made or ordered online. They tell me the budget is tight, but that it will all work out. I consider maybe I am overly cautious because of my fear of being left out – maybe the shops do make these kinds of pyjamas in my size nowadays. I start to google plus size silk pyjamas in my free time, during bathroom breaks and on the tram to rehearsals. No brick-and-mortar shop carries my size, and none of the affordable online stores have any full pink silk pyjamas in my size at the moment.

All us actors are asked whether we are ok to go have our measurements taken by the wardrobe workers, assured that we don't have to do it if we don't want to but that it will help the designer look for pieces for us in the wardrobe. I repeat that I already know there are next to no clothes for me in the wardrobe. The designer says they would like to try to find stuff anyway, because they could take the time to search also in places I maybe hadn't dug through. I agree and a respectful worker takes my measurements in the wardrobe. It is done in privacy without mirrors in sight, and I am grateful they don't say the measurements out loud but just write them down. Still, the feeling of a measurement tape around my waist, my hips, my arms, will probably always remind me of being a teenager and stealing my grandmothers measuring tape to keep hidden in a drawer – the school nurse had told me I should lose weight, and the newspaper had told me that a woman's waist measurement should never exceed 88 cm and that if it did she was at risk of death. I try to not think about these things as I am measured in the Theatre academy 20 years later. I try to focus on that giving these measurements would protect me from having humiliating situations later on – the designer could check if clothes would fit me without me needing to try them on. The one thing that's more anxiety inducing than measuring tapes? Trying to wrestle on a piece of clothing too small. We rehearse the piece, amongst other things a passage about the birth of the thinness ideal, a great text about how this is one of the last really unifying experiences in late capitalism – that everyone would like to be a little bit thinner.

We are taking a photo for the poster. It is set to be a picture of shins in silk pyjamas. We are to go to a photographer's studio after rehearsals and are asked who has the time to go. I say I can but ask if there is any point for me to go since there are no pyjama pants for me? The designer says they have rounded up some pants from the wardrobe, but that they are all so very small that they will fit no-one. "They will be small for everyone. We will all just pull them up to our knees and take the picture, it will be fine." I join the group. In the basement studio the pants are put on a table and people start to hold them up, try them on. As expected, I cannot pull any up beyond my knees. However, everyone else can put some on. We stand on the photo background paper, mashed together into a tiny group to get everyone into the same picture. It is December in a basement in Helsinki. I am bent over in only my underwear, holding the pants up around my knees. It takes long for the photographer to find the height at which to take

the picture so that it doesn't include the bunched-up fabric at my knees. I am struggling to make the pants legs fall naturally, as if I was actually wearing them. Finally, the picture is taken. My joints hurt both from the unnatural pose in the cold and from all-too-familiar humiliation.

The costume designer is excited when telling us they have picked out clothes for each of us to try in the wardrobe. Some things might fit, others might need small alterations. In my chest, hope blossoms as I allow the thought that I might have been wrong – maybe there is in fact pieces for me. After all, the designer had my measurements. Another actor and I go at the same time to look. There are no silk pyjama pants on my rack, but a couple of other silky pants for me to try. None of them fit. I can pull them on, but they are uncomfortably tight or sit oddly on me. I stand in front of the mirror and try my best to see them as wearable. They push my stomach and accentuate the roll of it. I am told that maybe they could be altered, but the wardrobe personnel don't seem convinced. I try a pyjama shirt. I cannot button it all the way down, my hips and belly are too wide. I try to see possibilities – could it be altered, opened in the sides, to allow it to fall straight in the front? Could it stay unbuttoned at the bottom? It is suggested I try it with a t-shirt under, perhaps it could be open completely? There are a couple of black jersey t-shirts on my rack. Neither of them fit me. I feel again like the child for whom the children's section in the shops only carry clothes too small, I feel like I felt buying adult size jeans and having my grandmother shortening them when I was only 11. I feel the same burning behind my eyes as I push down tears. The costume designer is clearly also emotional. I feel the need to console them – they have tried, probably searched really hard. No one has said anything mean to me. I should be grateful. The others find some pyjamas and similar things to rehearse with. I have no pieces to rehearse in.

Another day the costume designer tells me they have found a silk fabric in the wardrobe and the wardrobe personnel can make me a pair of pants. I am so relieved. They ask me if I have some silk pyjama pants that fit me that I could bring in so they could make the pattern from them. It takes me only a moment to recover from my initial irritation to tell them no – I don't have silk pyjama pants because such pyjamas are not made in my size. I had a pair when I was 9. I have wanted them, but I have not been able to get

them. They do not exist, like I said at the beginning of the process. The designer remembers a pair of jersey pants I wore to the wardrobe fitting, and I agree to bring those in for the wardrobe to mimic for a pattern. Later, I will feel bad for being annoyed, because I really am very annoyed that neither the costume department or the costume designer seem to have considered doing this research themselves or buying a pattern from somewhere. However, I berate myself for being upset in front of the clearly over-worked designer.

For one scene in the performance, we need silk robes. I get the one I know works, it's a robe too long for me with too long arms, but it closes. I know of it, because in my first year at the Theatre academy we did a play where all students of acting, directing and dramaturgy acted together, and we were supposed to wear turn-of-the-century party clothes. As there was no such dress for me, I wore this dressing gown, and we all pretended it was the same. Then, it was a source of shame for me as all the other girls had actual gowns and dresses. Now, I'm glad I knew of this gem and didn't have to go through another gruelling search. For the last scene we are told to go to the wardrobe and find something amazing to wear as queens – anything we want. The task feels like a mockery, but after some tears in the aisles I find an unbelievably yellow and unbelievably wide crinoline fantasy skirt on the floor in the back. I can't fasten it in the waist in the way intended, but it also has a ribbon waistband that means it can be tied around me anyway, and the way I am moving in this particular scene means the gaping hole at the back will not be too obvious.

A polyester satin pyjama shirt is purchased online for me, the same one bought with matching pants for the only male actor in the group. I am told this is a gamble, since it's not possible to try them on as they don't carry the size in the brick-and-mortar shop. They've ordered the biggest size, and we can only hope.

The costume department make the silk pants for me in the pattern of my jersey pants. They fit, they are comfortable and fall rather beautifully over my belly and thighs. I'm so very happy. I feel accommodated, I feel seen.

The pyjama shirt arrives, and I try it on, immediately extatic that it fits over my chest. The lowest button cannot be buttoned over my hips, but the pants are high waisted so this will not be a problem. The costume designer is visibly relieved, says “yes!” when I emerge dressed in the shirt. I am also happy. I will fit in. We have a few days left before the premiere.

I arrive for a run through – we are expecting a small audience – to find my shirt has been given a colour wash to match the pants that the wardrobe people have made for me. Nice, it will look more like a cohesive pair of pyjamas. I warm up and get ready as usual, waiting to dress in order to not get anything dirty. Finally, I get dressed and immediately feel that the shirt is different. There is a particular feeling holding a garment that is too small, a warning in non-stretch fabrics giving information long before anything even strains across my shoulders. I wonder, have I mistakenly put on my colleague’s shirt? No, I check, it has my name. It turns out the shirt has shrunk in the colour washing, and the synthetic fabric is rife with static, clinging to my skin. I had not known the garment was to be coloured with machine washing. I try to pull the fabric out, stretch it back, while trying to find the costume designer. They tell me they’re sorry but there was always the possibility of it shrinking in the wash. I have a painful lump in my throat, my eyes are burning, the run through is less than 30 minutes away. The designer now also has tears in their eyes, and I feel clearly that I need to reassure them it will be ok, and I need to pull myself together, so I don’t fully cry this close to the performance. I pull and pull at the sleeves, trying to make them fall as airily around my arms as my colleagues’ sleeves do. I leave two buttons unbuttoned, glad that the pants are sufficiently high waisted to allow this. We tell the story of absurd focus on beauty in our culture. Most of the texts about thinness don’t make it into the final performance. The costume designer gets an anti-static spray for the coming performances. We never speak of any of this again.