BMI (Beautiful Misanthropic Illusion): A Small Show About A Big Girl

By Amanda Katz

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First Reader- Rachel Dickstein
Second Reader- Peter Sprague

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Artistic Aims

Growing up, I never thought I would choose to make my passion my career. I was surrounded by doctors, teachers, and business owners who all believed that my dedication to dance and fascination with theatre were simply after school hobbies. They promoted the idea that only people with "the two L's" (looks and luck) could be successful in the arts despite hard work, and persistence. Before I figured out that looks and luck are not the requirements to become an artist, I continued to attend my year-round dance classes and theatre camp every summer with some detachment. I had to tell myself I was only doing this for fun because there would be no way I looked good enough or had enough luck to make it as an artist. This was true until I connected with a character in a show who faced similar adversities.

When I was eleven years old, my parents saved enough money to take me to see *Hairspray* on Broadway. As I have grown older, I realize how problematic this musical is due to its racial portrayal (specifically the "white hero" aspect.) But I fell in love with it because of the main character. I went to see the production not knowing what it was about. When the curtains opened and a heavy-set woman took center stage, my heart began to race. As the show progressed, the audience learns that the big leading lady, Tracey Turnblad, is a dancer, whose dream of being on a television show is frowned upon by almost everybody. Tracey proves herself and eventually becomes a star. Seeing a character who not only looked like me but who is talented, confident, and hopeful was the first time I ever felt accepted. She solidified that the theatre community had room for someone like me. Though I was young, I was still aware that I would be surrounded by people who did not believe in me or what I was doing. Still, I had more hope of being an artist. The exact moment I felt this was during the song "I Can Hear The Bells." The song acknowledges how others believe Tracey cannot have something because of her

plus size body but she knows that she is worth more than that and can have what she wants, despite society's view. Seeing this story played out on stage encouraged me to pursue my love for performing.

The arts have become a part of my identity: specifically acting and dancing. Before going to school and diving into theory, history, and practice, I saw myself as someone who was molded by constructs, I had been surrounded by. I thought what others wanted me to think. Then I came to SUNY Purchase and became secure in my thoughts, feelings, and beliefs when it came to creating. Of course, there are still moments of insecurity and blocks, but overall I have found confidence in vulnerability. This has made me a better performer and overall artist. However, my insecurities occasionally stop me from doing my best work mostly because of outside criticism about my body. This is why for my senior project I chose to focus on body image issues as the subject of an original performance. Two of the first biggest critics I have had and still have about my career choice being compromised by my looks are my parents. Making this piece for them and for other parents who instill fatphobia in their children became a central focus in my artistic goals.

For my senior project I along with my playwright, Dylan Vivolo, and director, Kai Dondero devised a one act piece involving body image, family dynamic, and grief. The piece examines the way parents communicate with their children about diversely sized bodies. Insecurities parents have often influence the way their children perceive themselves in the present and the future. For example, internalized fatphobia is often passed down. Internalized fatphobia is the fear or dislike of being or becoming fat. Since our society is thin obsessed, this is a common trait that has become normalized in the mainstream. It is more likely to be taught how to be thin rather than how to love oneself. This is explored in the piece not only through the

dialogue, but through movement as well. Movement more often than not can express feelings more than words. Even a few simple gestures emote thoughts that words may not be able to grasp.

The body takes center stage in both content and in form. Body language is a form of communication. Therefore, movement and dance can be used as devices for storytelling. It is important for me as a performer and a body positive promoter to tell a story about the body through the body. I believe doing this will create a deeper impact on the audience. The movement will be metaphoric. The movement will represent relationships between characters, as well as the mental state of the main character during the climax. I aimed for the emotions and feelings to be felt and understood. This idea is something I am planning on continuing to carry out in my work when I graduate college. I want my art to be relatable without being too obvious. To be relatable means even if an audience member has not been through what the storyline portrays, the emotions of the situation create empathy. Considering the show is centered around body image, ideally, I would like the audience to take with them the desire to be less judgmental on others and on themselves. As humans we immediately judge people without knowing their stories. Especially when it comes to body size because we are conditioned to look at that first. Everyone can relate to this in some way.

This show is relatable due to the fact we are taking the topic of weight and putting it outside its typical setting. Often, a story about a larger person will consist of the character trying to lose weight or change their appearance. They go to doctors, try diets, or get makeovers. But with *BMI* the journey is not about changing on the outside. The journey is recognizing mental change and trying to accept oneself. This I believe is one aspect of the piece the audience will

carry with them. The content reaches a wide variety of people. However, I am hoping the show reaches two specific audiences: parents and children.

Societal beauty standards surround us every day, affecting every woman's perception of her body and potentially feeding negative thoughts. This is why it is important to develop self-worth and self-love. If not, the negative thoughts may lead women (or people) to engaging in unhealthy behavior surrounding their appearance. Home is where everything begins. Parents have one of the largest impacts on who their children become. Essentially, parents are a guiding force for their children's development of beliefs, morals, and thought processes. This piece is for people whose body perceptions have been affected by their parents. Whether the affect was positive or negative, *BMI* will recognize how parents shape how we see ourselves and comfort those who already recognize this. When discussing the idea of the project with peers, I heard many stories about the way parents have twisted their children's body perception. In their stories, I heard how passionate they were to listening about how to rethink and rebuild rethink the way we look at diversely-sized bodies.

This piece is designed for parents of diversely sized children. As touched on previously, parents can project insecurities about themselves onto their children. The way parents speak of themselves and other factors into how children treat themselves and others. A goal for *BMI* is to open parents' eyes about how they speak to and about their children. An example of this could be every time they see family or friends and comment on how good they look and follow that up with "have you lost weight?" They have instilled the correlation between looking good and losing weight. This may seem small but it has impact in the long run and creates the feeling of needing to lose weight in order to look good. We want parents in the audience to think about how they approach body image. Society makes it difficult to be happy and accepting with

appearance. The outside world critiques constantly. Home should be a safe space to feel loved and worthy. When a parent is making negative comments on weight or the way their child looks, they cause damage. Persistent criticism about appearance takes a toll on mental health so when parents contribute to that criticism there is a greater effect. Even when comments are said without malicious intent, the impact hits hard. When parents see *BMI*, I want them to think about the way they have spoken to their children and figure out how they will speak to them in the future. Words hold weight but when they come from loved ones, they weigh even more. I want parents to recognize that it is more important to have self -worth, self- love, and self-acceptance, rather than have a small waist.

Though body image is the heart of this show, there is another topic that is being explored. The topic of grief was not originally something that was being considered when we were coming up with ideas for the project. However, we were affected by grief during the writing process and therefore it became part of the plot. Grief is one of the most difficult things in life people go through. The cycle of emotions is a rollercoaster ride one can never truly prepare for. How a person reacts in an extremely emotional or stressful situation shows who they are. Grief was a driving force for the plot in *BMI* because it brought out each character's response to loss. The response highlights how they feel in relation towards each other. My hope for this aspect of the show is for the audience to remember that when grieving loss, one is still responsible for their words and actions, and to not take out emotions on others.

Finally, I wanted to create a show that made space for diversely sized bodies outside of a typical setting. I wanted to create a show that explores how parents affect their children. I wanted people whose parents have affected their self-perception to understand they are not alone and that the journey to self-acceptance is about rethinking and rebuilding what was taught from a

young age. I wanted parents to step back and think how their perceptions affect their children and consider their mental health over societal standards that they feel strongly about. *BMI* is the first of what I hope will be a lifetime of creating impactful performance.

Research Essay: The Revolution of Self-Love for Plus Sized Dancers

Image is everything. Now more than ever, we exist in a society obsessed with appearance. The media projects its ideals of beauty on women which are internalized into what our peers then expect of us. This especially affects American women. In the United States, women are groomed to believe that their appearance is what is most valuable. From a young age, women are judged constantly based on how they look. However, some women choose to ignore beauty "ideals" and instead value self-love on their own terms. We find these revolutionary attitudes towards image in art-making as well and specifically, in dance productions.

Dance is a double-edged sword: it promotes both negative and positive body image. The dance world is similarly splintered between artists with prescribed ideas of "proper" body type for dance, and those choreographers who choose to celebrate their own, more flexible standards of body type. There has been a revolution of dance companies in the United States and across the world that are devoted to addressing diversity of body types as a theme within their work. The impact of this revolution has been positive and encourages the idea that dance is truly for anybody.

Historically, certain styles of dance promoted a standard that has ruled cultural norms for decades. The prime example of this is ballet culture. Though ballet has existed for centuries, the "ideal ballet body" was popularized by choreographer George Balanchine. As one of the founders in 1948 of New York City Ballet, George Balanchine defined what became the accepted ideal look of a ballerina. Balanchine set the standard that his dancers must have long limbs, a long neck, a small ribcage and hips, as well as being exceptionally thin. In 2003 a book titled *Balanchine: Celebrating a Life in Dance* was published and was filled with performance

shots of his dancers from fifty of his works. In *Frozen landscapes: a Foucauldian genealogy of the ideal ballet dancer's body,* Heather Margaret Ritenburg comments on Balanchine's dancers and observes that the dancers' bodies are 'on display:' "...they are very thin with small breasts and narrow hips; their legs are long and lean; their arms are long and slender...with a flat stomach and abdomen...long, slender neck." She continues that the costuming seems to emphasize their stature "... the arms, upper chest, neck and face are bare and fully visible...legs are encased in thin tights which reveal detailing in the skeleton and musculature…"(Ritenburg, 75). One of his dancers, Gelsey Kirkland wrote *Dancing On My Grave,* an autobiography about her life as a dancer including the effect Balanchine had on young women's bodies. In her book, she describes that he would halt class and do body inspections. She states, "With his knuckles, he thumped me on the sternum and down my rib cage clucking his tongue and remarking 'Must see the bones'... he said repeatedly, 'Eat nothing'…" (Kirkland, 56). Kirkland confirms, "Mr. B's ideal proportions called for an almost skeletal frame, accentuating the collarbones and length of neck…" (Kirkland, 56). Balanchine's profound influence in the dance world made this the desired look to the point that it is now known to be the "Balanchine body." Not only was this emphasized through his dance company, but through images as well.

Balanchine's highlighting the build of his dancers influenced how other choreographers looked at their own companies. His methods were so influential that body size could hurt a female dancer's chance of employment at any dance company. For example, Gelsey Kirkland says that her physical type and technical proficiency decreed a specific place for her in the Balanchine repertory and that her figure sealed her fate (Kirkland, 82). She writes, "Mr. B's methods and taste have been adopted by virtually every Ballet Company and school in America …'Thin is-in'..." (Kirkland, 56). With an ideal such as the "Balanchine body," dancers are not

only affected physically but mentally as well. In *Ballet Body Belief: Perceptions of an Ideal Ballet Body From Young Ballet Dancers*, Angela Pickard discusses how, just as ballet shapes a dancer's body, it shapes the mind as well. What a dancer learns goes further than the physical. Pickard states, "The belief in the body becomes...a core part of a ballet dancer's habitus." (Pickard, 3). She explains that habitus is learnt through explicit teaching in which the student's attitudes and actions towards a subject is shaped and behavior becomes ingrained. The physical habitus of ballet is the practice itself (i.e. flexibility, strength, technique, etc.) while the mental habitus is what Pickard calls the "logic of the practice" (Pickard, 3.) This includes perception of the body. Body shape and size in relation to ballet are realized by the student after practice. In ballet culture, thin equals beautiful. In Pickard's article, she quotes a comment made by a teacher from a ballet school:

> Ballet is one of the very highest art forms, you cannot attain the levels that are needed basically if you're fat (laughs). It's just impossible and also to retain balletic posture and balletic movements, you know, you can't get a grand jeté if you can't get your legs apart. If you're tight in the groins and your bones aren't set right, it just isn't going to work and yes, it not may be politically correct but don't choose to do that profession. There are plenty of professions where you can be politically correct. This is a high standard world. (Pickard, 9)

This teacher did not take physique into consideration. He believes that people who are fat are not meant for ballet but provides an explanation with an assumption of a fat person rather than any sort of factual evidence. Based on opinions such as his, the perfect ballet body is the "Balanchine body" or at the very least something close to it. This mind set has no support other than an opinion of a subjective aesthetic. Between the goal to reach perfection performance wise and the

pressure to have a specific body shape, training in ballet culture can cause female dancers to develop unhealthy behaviors like eating disorders.

Despite the dance world having choreographers like Balanchine who encourage a prescribed idea of "proper" body type, there are more contemporary choreographers and companies devoted to celebrating different body types of women. However, the emergence of this trend is a fairly new phenomena. Though dancers without the "proper" body type have always been around, recognition of larger dancers (i.e. having major roles in dances, content being centered around body image, etc.) has only become evident for about the past decade. Directors of companies have branched out beyond stereotypes to create pieces that are inclusive. One example of this is *Nothing To Lose* which premiered at Carriageworks, a multi-arts center in Sydney as a part of Sydney Festival 2015 in Sydney, Australia. This piece was created by Kate Champion with the assistance of Kelli Jean Drinkwater to, as said in their mission statement, "...challenge aesthetic norms and reclaim a performative space for people with large bodies" (*Nothing to Lose*, Kelli DrinkWater). The dance delved into true life stories of the performers themselves; five women and two men. The choreography consisted of constant use of the flesh on the performers' bodies. They often lifted, squeezed, and rubbed their stomachs as well shaking isolated parts of their bodies; such as thighs and arms. These movements were an exploration and emphasis on the size of the performers. In addition to watching this manipulation of big bodies, the audience is invited to touch them. The Body Politic, a magazine for dancers, described the experience as a live art exhibition that celebrated the "…sculptural splendor of the fat dancing body." (*The Body Politic*, Fjord Review). The audience was encouraged to lift the stomachs of the dancers as well as trace their fingertips along the fat of their bodies. This piece required a lot of trust and vulnerability from the performers. But they and the creators knew that

something like this is essential to bring not only to the dance world but to the public as well. During a TED Talk speech in 2016, Kelli Jean Drinkwater, who is a multi-disciplinary artist and activist, explained how art has been important and essential to claim space in areas that are often prohibited to bigger bodies. She discusses how claiming space is not only a compelling artistic statement but also a radical way to community build. She continues to say how *Nothing to Lose* was something that has never been done in the mainstream dance scene.

Creating a piece with dancers that do not have a "typical dancer's body" caused controversy. When Champion announced auditions that called for "fat dancers" there were mixed responses. Initial reactions were messages and phone calls saying that she is exploiting large bodied people. In an interview with Independent magazine Champion admits, "We did say fat…You can't make a simple work about body size because it's an incredibly complex conversation…" (*Nothing to Lose: Fat dancers, not a freak show*, Wiley). Drinkwater is a fat activist and sees the word "fat" as just a describing word and not an insult. She told the magazine, "I personally use the word "fat" because I've reclaimed…It's just a description…like tall or brunette. We're not shying away from this subject. We wanted actual fat people in this work, not necessarily just curvy." (*Nothing to Lose: Fat dancers, not a freak show*, Wiley) "People were skeptical. 'What do you mean fat dancers? Like size ten kind of fat...are they even going to have the stamina to do a full-length production?'…" (*Enough With The Fear Of Fat*, TEDxSydney).

In fact, because it was such a rarity to mount a production with large bodied dancers about body politics, dancers who identified as "fat" were eager to audition. After the premiere, these initial critiques were drowned out because *Nothing to Lose* was a hit. The show was a sold-out success. This success is evident due to the rave reviews in major newspapers and dance

magazines, tour through several cities. It evolved from stage to screen when *Nothing to Lose* was filmed and made into a documentary in 2018. The collaboration of Kate Champion and Kelli Jean Drinkwater have contributed to the revolution of recognizing and celebrating diverse bodies in a space that typically shuns them.

Similar to the collaboration behind *Nothing to Lose*, there are specific companies that are dedicated to celebrating the diversity of bodies and creating shows based upon the lives of larger dancers. Big Moves Dance Co. founded in 2000 in the San Francisco Bay Area, pride themselves on being one of the few service organizations in the world that gets various people of sizes into the dance studio and onto stage (*About Big Moves*, Big Moves Dance). They invite young dancers and older adults of all sizes and skill levels into a safe space to dance. Big Moves Dance Co. holds classes in various styles of dance such as ballet, jazz, lyrical, hip-hop and have hosted specialty classes in burlesque and aerial dance, all for bodies of every size (*About Big Moves*, Big Moves Dance). Marina Wolf Ahmad, founder of the studio, began Big Moves Dance Co. with the belief that every body type should have access to a welcoming atmosphere where they can learn technique, perform, and be encouraged with body positivity (*About Big Moves*, Big Moves Dance). Ahmad herself is a big woman with a passion for dance. The central part of her vision for the studio, and for the future of dance in general, has been to, "…create work centering fat people within our organization; our programs include training, choreography, and full-length dance productions by and for fat people" (*About Big Moves*, Big Moves Dance).

The studio also has featured dancers that make up a performance company named emFATic DANCE. They were formed a year after the studio opened in 2001 and were originally a hip-hop troupe that went by the name Phat Fly Girls. In 2007, they renamed themselves emFATic DANCE and transitioned from hip-hop to traditional and lyrical jazz-based company

under the artistic co-direction of Jessica Judd and Matilda St. John (*About emFATic DANCE*, Big Moves Dance). Since the beginning their shows have been "fat themed." Ranging from original concepts to already existing stories, their performances embrace the larger body. They are most widely known for their fat-positive musical theatre rewrites such as "All That Flab" and "Jazz Hams". They present a vision of, "…a world transformed…" where "…performances can and do come from artists who resist narrow dance-world norms….and narrow dancewear options" (*About Big Moves*, Big Moves Dance).

Though Big Moves performs mainstream showcases, they do not give permission for media outlets to review their work. I had the opportunity to interview co-director Matilda St. John and ask why they usually turn down requests for interviews, reviews or features by the media. She stated they have had bad experience with people misinterpreting what their studio represents. They have been approached by different news stations and asked to do special segments for networks like PBS. On more than one occasion their studio, performances, and fundraising events have been filmed and then edited to promote losing weight and body shame. St. John says, "…a news station was covering one of our fundraiser performances and filmed the line outside of our event. They used the footage and showed it as a line for auditions for the tv show 'The Biggest Loser'…" She described another incident where the studio allowed a major network, who reached out to them, to come film one of their classes. They were told it was to give their studio publicity. However, St. John explained "…it ended up just being a tie in to Billy Cyrus losing weight on 'Dancing With The Stars'…it was about how dancing is great for weight loss…which is true but that's not what our studio is trying to do" (*Interview with St. John*, Katz). She continued by describing that they also made the dancers look like they were having a difficult time, "…we had been dancing for two hours…we were dripping with sweat and

tired…they made it look like we danced for two minutes and were out of it….these kinds of things really turn you off to mainstream media" *(Interview with St. John,* Katz).

Despite these incidents, Big Moves continues to follow the path of positivity. They have taken negative comments and turned them into art. In my interview with her, St. John shared with me that they created a piece of hateful fat shaming comments they have received over voicemails, and recordings from public events and put them over music. They then created a piece dancing to it. She describes, "…that was for us. We have nothing to prove to anybody about our bodies. We are simply creating a space" (*Interview with St John,* Katz). Though Big Moves does not aim for fame, they have certainly achieved much success including producing six seasons of professional modern dance concert, co-producing burlesque productions, and being featured in photo essays and documentaries (*About Big Moves,* Big Moves Dance).

Big Moves Dance Co. is a contributor to the body positivity revolution in the dance community. In addition to Nothing to Lose and Big Moves Dance Co., there is an all-female company in New York City, Pretty BIG Movement, that is dominating the dance world and destroying stereotypes. They began when the founder and CEO Akira Armstrong had realized that there was not a platform for curvy and plus-sized women, such as herself, in the mainstream dance. Armstrong had dedicated years showing that dancing is about dedication, passion, and talent. Her credits include performing with the Jubilation Dance Company, the Bernice Johnson Dance Company, The Ladies of Hip Hop at Cosmo theater in Vienna, Austria, performing on stage at the world-famous Apollo theater, and has even been in two of Beyoncé's music videos (*CEO/FOUNDER,* Pretty Big Movement). Regardless of the resume she had built she still experienced the bias of being a bigger woman in the dance world. During the time she spent in Los Angeles filming for a music video, she went to an agency in the hopes of getting

representation to book more jobs but was consistently turned down due to her size (‘*Pretty Big Movement’ Takes On Dance Company Stereotypes,* NPR).

While auditioning for ‘Full-Figured Fashion Week,’ Armstrong found herself surrounded by plus sized women who shared the same confidence and passion for dance that she had (*About Us*, Pretty Big Movement). She seized the opportunity and created the first all full-figured dance company Pretty BIG Movement LLC in 2008. Pretty BIG Movement currently consists of nine plus-sized women, including Armstrong, with diverse backgrounds in performance and the shared factor of size discrimination. The company specializes in various genres of dance such as Hip-Hop, Jazz, African, and Modern (*About Us*, Pretty Big Movement). By 2015, the company had made huge milestones. They broke barriers by being the only plus-sized dance troupe to dance in Ladies Of Hip Hop, Carnival (choreographers Ball), Ms. Full Figured USA pageant & Press Release, the 3rd Female Hip Hop Honor Award Show for Salt N Pepa, be the face for Lane Bryant’s “I’m No Angel” campaign, walk in NY fashion week’s “Plus is Equal,” competed on NBC America’s Got Talent Season 10, and have been interviewed multiple times on daytime television shows as well as major news networks and national magazines (*About us*, Pretty Big Movement).

Aside from their evident success as dancers, they are passionate body positivity activists. They offer dance workshops and classes across the nation. These workshops and classes are open to all shapes, sizes, and levels, but members of the plus-sized community are highly encouraged to participate. The goal is to create a non-judgemental environment where individuals can feel comfortable and free in a supportive environment (About Us, Pretty Big Movement). I became very interested in a workshop marketed for bodies like mine and decided to take one. On June 15th, 2019 I attended a Pretty BIG Movement workshop. From start to finish the workshop was

the most body positive dance experience I have ever had. For the first time, I was surrounded by well over a dozen plus sized dancers. Throughout the stretches/warmup, going across the floor, and the combination we learned, Akira Armstrong regularly reminded us to be confident in what we were doing and to "use what we got". One woman in the workshop that was not fully doing the choreography because she did not like the way her body jiggled. Armstrong stopped her and said "…that jiggle adds spice to my routine. We love jiggle in here…" This made the class cheer and throw away any insecurity we were holding onto. The environment was friendly and fun. After two hours of intense dancing Armstrong had us stand in a circle while putting one hand on our heart and the other hand on the person to our left. We were told to give ourselves and the person next to us something. For example, one person could say "I give myself permission to be happy" and then look at the person next to them and say "I give you courage" so on and so forth. She then told us to repeat the phrase with which she ends every class, workshops, and rehearsal. It starts with "I am pretty big, and I am powerful because…" the ending of the sentence changes and is repeated three times. The other participants and I had never felt more comfortable and confident in our skin during and after that workshop. Armstrong and the members of Pretty BIG Movement have a goal to empower and encourage those that have been body shamed and have faced bias because of their bodies to reach their full potential. They convey these messages in each workshop, appearance, and panel event, through dance, proving that size has no barrier. (*CEO/FOUNDER*, Pretty Big Movement).

Ultimately, from a young age, women are judged constantly based on how they look. This is especially true in the world of dance. Being in a world where the Balanchine body is preferred and desired, plus size dancers can often feel the dance industry to be unwelcoming and harmful. However, creators like Kate Champion, Kelli Jean Drinkwater, Marina Wolf, and Akira

Armstrong choose to ignore beauty “ideals” and instead create dance, and work environments in which to create those dances that value self-love on their own terms. They contribute to the revolutionary attitude of having a positive self-image over beauty standards in dance production.

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Technical Essay: After the Show

Creating an original piece of theatre is not what I expected it to be. I never truly understood before now how much work put into building a show from scratch. I have always been in shows where everything was predetermined. There was a script, choreography made prior to rehearsal, or production decisions that were made that did not involve my input. My senior project was the first time I dove deep into the creative process of a creating an original show. I was a part of the creation from all angles. *BMI (Beautiful, Misanthropic, Illusion)* was one of the hardest and most rewarding experiences I have experienced.

The start of the project was deciding what the project was going to be about. My project partner and fellow senior, Michaela Savoie, and myself knew three things before discussing this: we wanted to work together, we wanted a minimal set with few set pieces, and we wanted our piece in the Purchase Performance Lab as opposed to a stand-alone production. We knew we wanted to tell a short story that was relatable to others and personal to us. Before finding a writer and starting work on a script, Michaela and I began discussing things that we were passionate about that affected us. The main topics were mental illness and body image. We were set on how body image effects our mental health. However, in further discussion, we realized we did not want our story to play into clichés like we'd seen other stories about body image do. The "fat girl wanting to change" story was all too familiar. Michaela and I wanted instead to create a story about accepting and celebrating bodies. We wanted the piece to promote self-love instead of affirming how people should conform to society's expectation to look a certain way.

Even with this focus chosen, we still felt like something was missing. We continued to discuss how society makes larger people believe we are not worthy or attractive. We credited the

usual media outlets, beauty standards, etc., but we dug deeper and asked ourselves where the self-doubt really started and continued to grow. We realized that our parents had impacted the way we saw and treated ourselves. We decided that we would create a show about how our parents affected our body image. Our next step was finding a writer, a step that ended up being easy. My roommate and best friend, Dylan Vivolo, is a playwriting and screenwriting major and writes beautiful work. I have spent countless hours seeing them construct plays, poems, and songs and have always loved what they have created. They also understand how to put my ideas on paper because they understand me. Therefore, I was confident that we would work well together for the project. Dylan and I agreed that they were the official writer for the project, but we would work closely together in collaboration for the story.

Next Michaela and I searched for a director. We thought this was going to be nearly impossible due to the fact we had a number of requirements: we specifically wanted a director who is female, one who understands body image issues, and one who could have an understanding of how parents contribute to body image issues. Luckily, my advisor connected us to Kai DonDero. She checked all the boxes and was highly interested in the project. Now we had a director.

Despite having all our team members to start the process, we still had questions of where to go with our story. There were so many directions we could take because we all had too much to say and contribute to this topic. In the beginning of the summer, we finally made a small breakthrough for the storyline. We settled on the story of a girl coming home from college and being criticized about her weight. However, we then had a major interruption to the process that made me have to step back from the project for several weeks. On May 28th, 2019, my cousin passed away. His death was the first time I had experienced someone I knew and loved passing

away. I could not do anything, let alone work on the project for a while. Michaela, Dylan, and Kai respected this, and we put the project on pause for a bit. However, we were running out of time and still did not have a fully fleshed out draft of a script. I knew time was limited but I was not motivated and could not think about anything besides my grief. Dylan, who had also experienced a very close relative passing just two years prior, suggested we use the grief in the project. The story would be a girl coming home from college because of the death of her cousin and instead of just having to deal with the weight of grief, she deals family members commenting on her weight. Thus *BMI* (*Beautiful*, Misanthropic, Illusion) was born. Dylan began to write and completed the script with only two months until we started rehearsing.

Once we had a script, it was time for auditions. This was nerve-wracking because the script had been finished very last minute and we were holding auditions last minute as well. We were pleasantly surprised to see that a good number of people came and auditioned. I was certain we would get a cast, but I was unsure if we would get people with whom I would feel comfortable being vulnerable. Because of this, I asked Kai and Dylan if during the auditions they could ask those auditioning a couple questions regarding body image, relationships with parents, and if their parents had impacted their body image. Of course, we made these questions optional to answer but I hoped people would respond as I wanted to know if I could relate to potential castmates. Everyone was open to answering the questions. They had different experiences, but each person had experienced their parents impacting their body image. Most talked about how they developed eating disorders because of it. I was saddened but touched with their honesty.

We ended up with a SUNY Purchase star studded cast including Megan Siepak, Ash Viskar, Jeremy Nuñez, Trevor Vaughn, and Siobhan Kiernan. I could not have worked with a better cast. Their honesty, risk taking, and professionalism throughout the process was

compelling. The content of the show was never easy to rehearse. Frankly, it was quite emotionally and mentally draining. Grief is heavy and uncomfortable. But we consistently took time to check in with how each other were feeling and ask if breaks were needed. The care we all expressed towards one another during the process created a bond between us personally and with our characters. We all became comfortable with each other which allowed exploration and experimentation within the piece. For example, the incorporation of movement and dance was not something with which everyone in the piece was familiar. There was hesitation at first. Our choreographer, Cedric James, teaches and has worked with performers with a variety of experience with movement. He made the room feel safe, warm, and fun. He simultaneously broke everyone out of their comfort zones with by making them feel comfortable. With his choreography, everyone got more tough with the relationships between the characters. The trust we developed personally helped create our character development. The most rewarding part about this project for me was working with the incredible cast. I am so grateful to have worked with each one of them.

Before I knew it, the show was about to go up. We had all the pieces of our project put together. Everyone was off-book and knew their blocking early, the set pieces were complete a week or two before tech, our sound and lighting cues were done in a day, and costumes were brought from home. Of course, there is always something to reinterpret from a script, or find with a character, but from a design point of view, *BMI* was ready. After the run, the feedback I received were mostly tears. Most people cried and gave tight hugs while saying “thank you for doing that.” Many strangers came up to me and admitted how their parents did the same thing as mine had in the piece. They opened up about their parents making comments about what they should eat and that if they just changed or lost some weight, they would be beautiful. The

characters of my mom and dad were very much based on my actual parents. This was something I was nervous about because I did not want to hurt my parent's feelings. But, at the end of the day, what happened to me was real, and it is true.

When my parents came to the show, I was anxious about their response. At first, I was excited when I saw them afterword. They were both sobbing saying how proud they were of me and how beautiful a job everyone did. But then my mother made sure to announce to my castmates how she never treated me like that and that the things the mother character spoke were things she had never said. Yet in private, she told my dad that he was exactly like the father in *BMI*. I was really hoping that this show would be a mirror for parents; especially my own. I was hoping that the show would make my parents see the impact of their actions towards me.

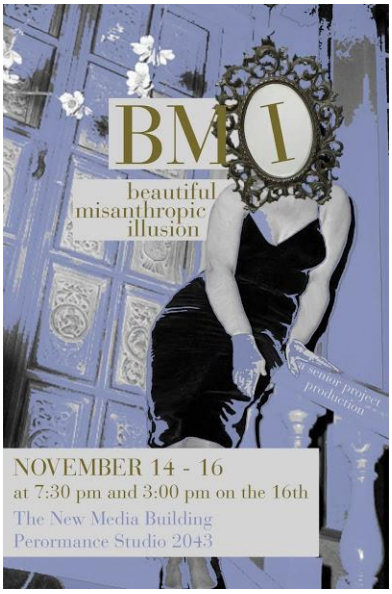
Though the process in general was smooth, I had several difficulties throughout the journey. The show was not exactly what I pictured initially. The theme of grief outweighed the original intent to focus on body image. But because time was limited, I did not speak up about it. Another difficulty was learning that I cannot always work with my friends just because they are my friends. Separating business and friendship is essential and easier said than done. I bumped heads with the stage manager and the writer on the project a lot because they either had artistic differences or claimed that they had taken on more work responsibility on the project than I had. The stage manager believed that I was doing little to nothing for the project besides being in it. She believed this because everyone was coming to me for everything. No one was going to her for anything. I became overwhelmed and started telling people they need to go to her for certain questions. The issues I had with the writer were more personal because we are close friends. The writer and the director did not get along and the writer expected me to choose their side every time when a lot of the time they were wrong. In hindsight, the issues that we had were trivial.

Still they created enough tension for me to know that I cannot work with those people in the future.

My main difficulty in working on this project was dealing with my mental health. This show took a great toll on me when I already was not in a great place. I do take ownership of the fact that I neglected to take care of myself throughout this process and have since learned tools in case I am in a piece that deals with such weighty personal material like this again.

In conclusion, my senior project *BMI (Beautiful, Misanthropic, Illusion)* was one of the hardest and most rewarding experiences I have encountered. I learned what it means to put every ounce of blood, sweat, and tears, into a piece. The show did not turn out entirely the way I planned: it was not the show focusing on body image that I had originally envisioned, we had issues with collaboration, and my parents reacted differently than I had hoped. Still, I am proud that I was a part of putting up this original work of theatre. I am walking away from this journey with lessons learned and a greater passion for making art.

BMI *2019*


BMI
beautiful
misanthropic
illusion
senior project
production
NOVEMBER 14 - 16
at 7:30 pm and 3:00 pm on the 16th
The New Media Building
Perormance Studio 2043