



# Body-Shaming

## The Epidemic Plaguing Collegiate Theatre Programs

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ESSAY BY

**RACHEL BYKOWSKI**

I have a whisper for you.  
You're probably thinking, "Don't you mean, secret?"  
Sadly, this is not a secret.  
People know it happens.  
People have witnessed it happening.  
People have experienced it happening to themselves.  
Instead of shouting, they simply whisper.  
Whispering is safer.

As a woman, I've learned to speak in whispers. In my experience, people tend to get agitated, nervous, or uncomfortable when I speak in a louder tone. But when something is whispered, people don't believe it immediately. After all, if it was true, why wouldn't you shout it from the rooftops? Whispers are for hiding and protecting. Women have been whispering for generations about the violence committed against our bodies and minds to warn each other without endangering ourselves again.

I currently live with many whispered truths, but there is one that can no longer be written off as rumor. I'm ready to speak up about body-shaming in the theatre industry, particularly with regards to students in undergraduate and graduate programs.

Sadly, I must admit, I've known body-shaming students was an epidemic in many collegiate theatre programs. When I was an undergrad, I would hear whispers from friends in various acting programs about dangerous crash diets that involved eating less than a thousand calories a day. Or implementing unhealthy food restrictions and extreme exercise routines without consulting a

doctor or fitness expert. All these eating disorders and hazardous activities were self-imposed, so my peers would be cast, recruited, or invited back to the theatre program for the remaining years.

## **I'm ready to speak up about body-shaming in the theatre industry, particularly with regards to students in undergraduate and graduate programs.**

Other whispers I heard as an undergraduate were cloaked as “inside jokes.” My peers and I laughed at how there appeared to be a specific actor body type associated with each theatre program. We would giggle and say, “Oh, you know they're from [institution's name] because their actors look like runway models.” Or, “They are totally from [another institution's name], they are athletic and cut.” “Tall and lanky,” “Dancer's body,” “Petite”—this list could go on for a while. Little did I know, I was learning how to speak in code. Code for what these universities deemed as “leading actor” potential.

As whispers carried these jokes and rumors to our ears, they were easily drowned out by the commanding voices of professors, mentors, advisers, and recruiters who proclaimed, “This is just how the industry works.” “If you want to make it, you've got to play the game.” “These are the rules; we all had to go through this.”

The whispers echoed in my mind for years. I honestly don't know if it is because I've gotten older, I've graduated, hindsight is 20/20, or I've been an instructor for multiple undergraduate classes, but all these whispers culminated to a scream one morning. I attended a theatre conference where I had the privilege of meeting a group of talented undergraduate acting majors. They reminded me of, well, me when I was their age: eager, energetic, determined, willing to do whatever it takes to “make it,” and searching for someone to guide them.

I was speaking to a young actor who just finished their first year. I asked about the workload, challenges, the ups and downs of undergraduate life, and I have never been able to forget what they revealed to me: a recruiter from a college told them, “Don't try so hard, you're not the body type we want anyway.”

This admission immediately transported me back to all those jokes, rumors, gossip, exercise routines, obsessive calorie counting, and the furtive heaving heard from bathroom stalls. All the perilous tactics committed in the hopes of fitting into whatever “type” of actor the program accepts.

**"That's just how the industry works."**

"Type." A word that continues to haunt the majority of my actor friends. According to advice I've heard given to undergrads, knowing your type can help make or break your career.

I remember a game some professors played with their students. They gathered them into a room, had them stand in front of their classmates so the entire class could get a good look at their hair, face, smile (or lack thereof)—their body put on display. The experiment culminated with the professor dictating the student's "type." I was never in the room, but I do remember watching a group of young women gather in the hallway. They were not what the program would deem as "petite" or "runway model." I watched them hold back tears at the news their type was the "best friend," "sidekick," or "character actor."

Never the ingénue.

Never the lead.

Their fates were sealed before their twenty-first birthdays.

And, of course, battling the natural shape of your body becomes increasingly more difficult when you factor in race, gender, and ability/disability. Some collegiate theatre programs force students to declare war against their own skin color, gender identity, and what functions their bodies and minds can or cannot perform. Each of these battles deserve their own article.



**"These are the rules; we all had to go through this."**

In this sadomasochistic student/professor relationship, the student believes every word that comes out of the professor's mouth, and why shouldn't they? These professors are employed by a prestigious institution. These professors have a resume an amateur can only dream of obtaining. These professors have been there, done that. These professors know the path and if the student just listens to them, they will "make it."

Many students in these theatre programs are from out-of-town, out-of-state, some out-of-country. They left behind their mothers, fathers, friends, family, and a community who truly know their "type." The students are now isolated in an unfamiliar place, with unfamiliar faces, left with these professors who claim to hold the map to their success.

I don't know why I waited so long to talk about this. I think often about that undergrad I met at the conference and sometimes I see my face instead of theirs. I think back to when I was their age and all the things I wanted to shout, but I only whispered.

What would I have said to that recruiter or professor back then?

Now, all I want to say to them is, I'm sorry.

I'm sorry you were taught, "This is just how the industry works."

I'm sorry someone you trusted told you, "If you want to make it, you got to play the game."

I'm sorry they made you feel trapped by these so-called "rules" and forced you to go through a

painful journey.

But you are not that student anymore.

You are not that amateur with no employment and a blank resume.

You don't make the rules, but you uphold them.

You can change them.

The next time that eighteen-year-old or twenty-something student is auditioning for your program, I hope you see yourself and not create another whisper.

## Topics

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Acting & Performance

Advice

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

United States

## Comments 8

The article is just the start of the conversation—we want to know what you think about this subject, too! HowlRound is a space for knowledge-sharing, and we welcome spirited, thoughtful, and on-topic dialogue. Find our full [comments policy here](#)

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**AZIZA CALLAHAN** 2 years ago



Hi Rachel, thank you so much for writing this piece. I experienced so much of this "secret" between myself and my fellow actors. The world is becoming more body positive every day and it's up to all of us to continue fighting for the right to be seen. Thank you for adding your voice to the roar.

<https://azizadarling.weebly...>

**MARILOUISE MICHEL** 2 years ago

I agree that this is an important discussion but does it start with the college or does it start with the industry? If I think/know a person's body type (particularly a chosen body type) is going to affect their success, am I remiss as a professor if I don't teach that reality? This has always been a painful and difficult choice, but I don't want to graduate someone and have them say later, "Why didn't you tell me?"

**MATEOBARD** 2 years ago

Thank you.

**RACHEL BYKOWSKI** 2 years ago

Thank you so much for reading. I hope this piece continues to raise awareness and lets people know they are not alone.

**MARCIA POLAS** 2 years ago

Great piece. And an important discussion. I'll add to it that the training within those programs relative to body specific and/or program specific usage of physical training for the actor's instrument are also sending misinformation about how their body works, what is required to maintain it, and how and when to listen to it. The number of actors who have contacted me, from 19-year-old freshmen to a 60 year-olds from famous training programs who have worked for years, who are being told (and taught) to use their bodies in ways that are causing chronic pain issues and vocal distress and damage, would

stagger you. In an industry where self-awareness and listening to instincts is so important, actors are constantly given verbal and non-verbal messages to “just ignore it” or “we don’t talk about that because we won’t get hired” or “don’t tell anyone because you can be replaced” and “we know more than you do about your body” from smart educators, directors, choreographers, and each other. None of whom actually study bodies and LISTEN as their primary focus. They know “how it’s been done” or what they were taught. Enough. The body type, the crushing of possibilities you describe is the story I hear from “kids” from every program. And from every actor via their representation or search for representation. Then we have the bandaids we put on broken actors in even the most successful Broadway shows and best funded films. A PT once a week, a chiropractor on the road — and not even one who is part of the company but one in each city? These are not solutions and they are not preventative. It infuriates me!

You are starting an important conversation. Unfortunately, this is just one of the ways we are breaking actors physically and emotionally. And one of the whispers that need to be spoken loudly — with real solutions articulated with vocal resonance!!

**RACHEL BYKOWSKI** 2 years ago



I appreciate you reading the piece and for your thoughtful, passionate response. It is amazing how many stories I am hearing about people who were victims of this body-shaming and how it still effects them today. Many of them have stories where not being the "right type" effected them emotionally as well as professionally because they were rejected from programs solely based on their physical appearance and not on their talent. It is almost scary to think that in corporate America, denying someone employment based on appearance is a fireable offense and a lawsuit waiting to happen. However, in theatre, where we are SUPPOSED to be more free and open, this kind of behavior still has lasting effects on people's careers (not to mention their self-esteem.)

**KITTY DREXEL** 2 years ago

Thank you. This must have been painful to write and I greatly appreciate your candor.

**RACHEL BYKOWSKI** 2 years ago

Thank you so much for reading. Surprisingly, writing this turned into self-care as I realized I'm not alone and others have felt this way too.

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