The Roads are Bumpy Ones: A Study of Body Image Through Abstract Performance

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THE ROADS ARE BUMPY ONES:
A STUDY OF BODY IMAGE THROUGH ABSTRACT PERFORMANCE

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

THE ROAD IS A BUMPY ONE:
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Major Director: Dr. Aaron Anderson
Director of Undergraduate Studies, Department of Theatre

An overwhelming number of contemporary adolescents struggle with difficult issues. Many of these problems are socially related whereas others can be directly related to the degradation of the family unit. Among the most damaging of issues is distorted body image, which infect youth, often causing them to communicate aggressively, and even landing them in compromising situations. I have sought to challenge my students to redefine themselves through expressive movement and the creation of abstract rhythmic sounds. In teaching these techniques, I have given my former students the means to
combat negative thoughts and actions, as well as an excellent tool for self-discovery. In leading a number of workshops targeted to specific populations, I have taught an innovative technique of movement expression that replaces the spoken word, thereby allowing an individual to unlock the previously undiscovered power of his/her body.
CHAPTER 1 Discovering the Road

There is an epidemic swallowing this country. Americans are obsessed with food and the obsession has turned deadly. Research shows that the majority of our nation is either overweight or underweight. In a recent study led by the World Health Organization, an estimated one billion adults and almost 18 million children under the age of five are obese. More specifically, 64% of the United States adult population suffers from obesity and the percentages are increasing. As of 2009, obesity is the second largest killer, attacking around 434,000 deaths yearly (Strasburger 390). According to the American Psychological Association, many who struggle with overeating attempt to find comfort in food. There is also a large percentage of the population who struggles at the opposite spectrum. Those who suffer from anorexia and/or bulimia strive to find control by not ingesting food, in addition to trying to conquer an unobtainable goal of physical perfection. The numbers that will be explored throughout this thesis are shocking. More importantly, the number of underweight females is growing at a steady pace. Over the past eight years, I have introduced performance movement expression to help in the journey to find confidence, establish individual strength, and uncover the ability to be heard. An eating disorder is a lifetime battle that will never be conquered. Though I do not pretend to have the answers to this problem, I do offer alternate ways of overcoming these obstacles. In
this thesis I will focus on how damaged females can re-ignite their confidence and re-
discover their voice through abstract movement and performative expression. As I journey
through the highlights of my teaching experiences, I will illustrate what personal methods
have worked for my students, and my application of what well known dramatists and
movement therapists have already uncovered.

Since I was a little girl I was always highly aware of my body. Perhaps it was the
multitude of dance classes I was enrolled in, or the constant diets my mother would go on
every few weeks. It might have been the plethora of flashy magazines lining the aisles by
the checkout in the grocery store, or the television shows that planted the idea of being
skinny in my head. This desire for perfection has affected me and affects many young girls
today. I can remember going to dance class after class that was filled girls whose parents’
wanted them to find their graceful side. According to the definition of graceful is
“characterized by elegance or beauty in the form of manner, form or movement.” As a
young child who was put in front of mirrored walls, all I could see was how I did
everything wrong. My stomach stuck out, my backside swayed too much, and my head
was cocked too far to one side or the other. As a young child I failed to achieve the very
detailed posture of the ideal dancer’s body: tucked and held. The backside had to be in a
straight line, with shoulders back and head held high, resulting in a line without any
curves. Having those two words, “tucked” and “held,” ingrained in my mind affected my
definition of perfection. In class, as I landed on the floor from my leaps and runs, I was
told not to sound like a herd of elephants. For my teacher to compare me to an elephant
was harmful to my not-fully-developed self image. Nonetheless, I heard this comparison
more times than I can remember. From childhood, noise was something I was taught not
to make. Too much noise and a lady will be deemed too loud and abrasive.

My mother realized that “Grace” would never be my middle name, and I
recognized that I was surrounded by unobtainable standards of beauty. Beauty, or rather,
our society’s version of beauty, is an unattainable picture of perfection. From my past, I
have been surrounded by young girls who use “beautiful” and “perfection”
interchangeably. Not only is this extremely limiting for girls, but it also becomes the most
impossible goal. Why are the numbers of body image disorders rising consistently in this
country? Is it all those dance classes that are to blame? Is it the movie stars or the
magazine covers? Is it the overwhelming amount of commercials for diet pills and diet
shakes? It becomes all of the above.

As I went through my adolescence years, I restricted my eating habits. I suffered
from a severely low caloric diet that I put myself on for the majority of high school. For
more than two years, my diet primarily consisted of water, half of a bagel, and an apple.
As I reached an appalling low weight, I was introduced to rhythm movement. There were
no words, and no specific emotions assigned to the movement, simply loud and powerful
stomps that were delivered in a dance studio that became my strongest expression. I had
uncovered a new dance medium that I felt alive performing. A few years following my
initial expression, I began to think that my process of unveiling my disorder and taking
control of my dysfunction through movement expression might help other young females
who are dealing with similar obstacles. Working at Performance Plus in New Hampshire,
a small dance studio in Virginia, and my time at United Methodist Family Services, these
three specific environments have all been a wonderfully strong breeding ground for my work. Though not every place I have been a part of dealt directly with girls and eating disorders, they all do revolve around the idea of perfection and the repercussions of the consistent feeling of failure.

I had also started to deal with finding social balance. Since I could not find the physical balance in my life due to this never-ending struggle to obtain the impossible perfect body, I decided to force the perfect body on myself by starvation. Socially, I was fighting to discover the balance as well. I wanted to be strong, but not unapproachable. I desired to be smart, but not awkwardly intelligent. I wanted to embrace my competitive streak, but was careful not to step on anyone’s toes. Stephen Hinshaw, PhD. and author of The Triple Bind speaks directly about the triple standards that surround the young girls of today. Hinshaw defines the standards as:

*Girls Must...*

1. Be good at all the traditional girl stuff.
2. Be good at most of the traditional guy stuff.
3. Conform to a narrow, unrealistic set of standards that allows for no alternative.

To understand why girls will never reconcile all of these demands listed above, below is a closer look at the detriment sitting behind the rules:

1. *Be good at all the traditional girl stuff.* “Girl stuff” refers to being empathetic, cooperative, looking good, and establishing relationships with other adolescents. These demands will lead to suppression of a girl’s personal abilities since her focus is constantly on others.
2. **Be good at most of the traditional guy stuff.** Not only do most girls have the desire to be a wife and a mother, but they also seek to embody the stereotypical qualities of a successful male. They want to balance sweetness with assertion. Finding such a balance is impossible.

3. **Conform to a narrow, unrealistic set of standards that allows for no alternative.** There is only one way to be the best woman, but there is no instruction manual that does not undermine previously set standards of womanhood. The facts are challenging to comprehend and the numbers keep attacking our youth. According to Hinshaw, at least 25% of today’s teenage girls are in immediate danger from self-mutilation, eating disorders, violence, depression, or suicide. In just one year the suicide rate among teenage girls rose 76% and an estimated 10% struggle with eating disorders, a distorted body image or hatred of their own bodies, while more than half of all teenage girls worry about their weight or participate in some sort of dieting fad (x, xi). Where do teenage girls get ideas about their bodies and selves, and how can this exhausting battle end?

   In Hinshaw’s introduction, he states that most teenage girls are not at a psychological risk for a disorder; however, he does point out that the girls most vulnerable to the triple standards are placed at the highest risk for major clinical conditions. Hinshaw speaks about a phrase he calls “hidden suffering.” Hidden suffering begins with the absence of a self image and incorporates a girl’s absent family or community and so she is left to figure out whom she should become. She may turn to the world’s most popular babysitter – the television. Through this thesis, I will also illustrate how media can be extremely detrimental to both young boys and girls in our society.
Joan Williams, the author of *Unbending Gender* and chair of the Center of WorkLife Law at the University of California Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco, has said, “Women have to choose between being liked but not being respected, or respected but not liked” (Hinshaw 16). Men become successful by being assertive, and strong. If a woman adheres to these qualities, she will be labeled as “bitchy” and on a “power trip.” Control is exactly what young girls find the balance between both masculine and feminine qualities in order to succeed.

How does a girl find control? If she cannot control society’s expectations of her, nor can she easily reconcile the triple standard, then it makes sense that she would seek ultimate control over her body. A healthy diet and exercise are key elements to attaining the “perfect body.” But what happens when that “perfect body” is completely unobtainable? Young girls are not told often enough that this picture of perfection is unrealistic. The media presents advertisements, diet fads, and glamorous lifestyles to girls at such a young age that they become susceptible to drawing unreasonable comparisons between themselves and what they see as acceptable, respectable, and successful.

I have been incredibly fortunate work with the younger population who subconsciously crave to step out of the trap and into a new expression of self. These experiences, in addition to my past skewed self-perception, have provided the framework for my profound connection with the teenage population. In establishing trust, becoming comfortable with silence, and learning alternative ways of conversing, a small percentage of teens can overcome extraordinary pressures. Throughout this thesis, I will share my
experiences that changed my outlook on application of performance, and sparked my desire for a stronger change.
CHAPTER 2 Paving the First Street

My concentrated attention to body image has always been present; however, when I began working with high school students, I soon realized that any teenager can fall prey to the dangers of distorted body image. The rich, the poor, the two-parent household or the one-parent struggling to keep everything together – under many roofs are children at an incredible risk. I will examine at my first experience that transformed the way that I thought about the body forever. I will explore hair-raising numbers that are found in medical studies, and on the bookshelves of psychologists. Though a cure is impossible, a step in the right direction is exactly what I gave my first group of girls.

My very first experience with expressionistic movement started in New Hampton, New Hampshire at a private overnight summer camp for high school students. Expressionistic movement is a term that I have created within the past eight years as I attempted to label the journey that have been on. I was hired to co-create the contemporary theatre track with Megan Murphy, an artist with a background in dance, theatre and film. We began our first class with our students sitting in a circle, and shared an interesting fact about themselves. From these snippets of information, Megan created an abstract story of the winnings and losses of childhood. Many of these students were speaking of their restructure of familiar relationships. The majority of students were vocal
about their transition from childhood innocence and naivety to hormonal urges and sexual passion. Most memorable was the girls who did not see themselves as being “adult beautiful.” They were caught in between the two worlds of small and soft, or child-like beauty, and strong and committed, or adult-beautiful. Though this verbalization was satisfying to some students, I was approached by a handful of girls about starting a more in-depth workshop. The girls knew I had a dance background, and few of them danced at the time, they wanted to incorporate more movement into their daily lives to combat their feelings of inadequacy.

Over the course of three weeks, in discussing the various challenges of adolescence the one word that kept resurfacing was “beautiful.” No one in this group saw herself as beautiful. I was not surprised to find that within a group of high school girls that most of them were dissatisfied with their physical appearance; however, I was shocked to discover that this unhappiness was directly related to their perception of success. For many years during the girls’ developmental stages, they were enrolled in dance classes, all striving to be that beautiful and graceful ballerina. None of them succeeded in their strict definition of grace, beauty or perfection. In relation, “dancer” had become a memory of failing. I eliminated the word “dancer” from my space and replaced it with the word “mover.” I decided that no one would be compared to a dancer again because the image of perfection was too outrageous. By saying “yes” to everything and applying a positive attitude towards everything in our space, the girls and I had built a brand new world together. This world most importantly revolved around acceptance. We said “yes” to everything. Our
lowered focus and our slumped posture were soon outweighed by the positive single word of “yes” that hung in the air like a soft perfume.

Through my work with the students, I discovered another challenge that I recognized from my own past experiences. They had trouble committing to physical movement and verbal expression. Every question I asked was answered in a whisper and lowered focus. Overall expression was constrained. I realized that I had to convince them that their beauty lay in their commitment to their physical movement and to their voices. According to the triple bind, a woman’s commitment is often viewed as too much passion or emotional instability. I needed to take the focus off of their bodies and redirect it to the sounds their bodies could produce.

I played with their sense of exposure. I asked the girls to close their eyes as I led them through physical warm-ups. The most important sensation I wanted them to feel was freedom from judgment. Since no one was watching anyone else, bodies started to move without hesitation. The girls succeeded in committed physical expression because of the anonymity that was created due to the lack of staring eyes. If the girls were being watched they felt judged. If I eased them into exposure, and played with darkness, would they begin to explore their confidence? As I incorporated different levels of light, from bright white light to candlelight, their sense of ease increased. Moving into less light allowed for the students to commit more fully. Finally, darkness was the last phase in reduction of exposure. The level of commitment from the body was useless unless sound was added. The only form of sound they had was the sound their bodies and tap shoes could make.
The girls discover their sounds that were strong and powerful, two qualities that they began to believe in for themselves.

Following the first successful exercise, I was interested to see how the next phase of our expression would play out. When the group sat in a circle discussing their specific difficulties and experiences, I noticed that the same phrases kept recurring and decided to write them down: “I am too loud.” “I want to walk on clouds and never be heard.” “I know that no one will like me if I speak up.” “I am afraid of what is going to come out of my mouth.” I wanted them to physically feel the weight of their words in their bodies. Believing that the gravity of their words could be felt in their bodies, I repeated the phrases over and over again with light instrumental music playing in the background. As they moved around, I filled the space with their words. I gave them no further direction other than to continue their movement. The first music I played was calm and soothing; however, their movements were awkward and uncommitted. I started to wonder about the reactions if the next choice in music was completely polar opposite of the first selection of music. I continued to verbalize their negative phrases with this other selection of music that was more rhythmically driven. I was baffled to see the students had an easier time committing to their movements with the rhythmic music in the background. When we reflected on their movements during each musical selection, the girls said they were more comfortable in their bodies with the stronger music because they were distracted by the sounds. When the light and calmer music was playing directly against their phrases, it created a sense of uncertainty, making their movements weaker. The rhythmic music gave
the girls something to move against, whereas the lighter music became something to impersonate, just like they had done during their entire young lives.

At the next meeting, I wanted to move into a more detailed exercise. I took the music away and asked them each to verbalize a single phrase related to their body image as they moved through the space. I wanted to give them back their control by giving them back their words. This time, their bodies reacted without energy and their focus was at the floor. They felt uncomfortable and exposed with just the sound of their own voices and bodies in the space; they did not want to make any noise. My goal was for them to feel a sense of empowerment and release through their movements, and in turn to find authority in their own sounds. So, I returned to the idea of exposure. They would become confident once they released their fear of judgment. Since they were uncomfortable being seen, I decided to hold the performance in complete darkness. The most successful moves I choreographed were stomps, slaps, and charges across the floor because the noises their bodies made grounded them in space. It became evident that the strongest tool of this workshop was the appropriate use of anonymity.

Upon reflection on their experiences, the students spoke about the release they felt from performing in darkness. For the first time, each girl understood how strength and power did not have to be associated with anything negative. Because they were so powerful and committed with their bodies, the audience could follow their dance and find connection to the piece.

It was fascinating to hear phrases such as, “I felt free.” “I found my power.” “I can do anything I want.” These girls, who previously were bound by societal limits, and the
impossible balance of the triple bind, discovered the freedom by moving in a completely opposite manner. Though Hinshaw’s definition of the triple bind does not give any particular answers to finding this balance, because of the exploration of opposite movements within the safety of darkness, the girls found a step towards a solution.

My goal of freedom for the girls was successful; however, I was still concerned with this idea that these young students felt so conflicted about being so strong. I decided to re-focus on what I had accomplished in just a short time through the application of movement and sound. By using this abstract sound and movement, the girls did use the freedom they found to embrace the power of being a committed woman. At the end of the three weeks the girls and I had choreographed their own expressionistic piece of dance that could be heard. They performed in front of their friends, their parents, and their secret crushes. If a person can actually glow from accomplishment, my girls lit the room up by the end of their performance. Their performance was a success in terms of their commitment level, success in terms of their honesty on that stage, and success in terms of being more comfortable with exposing their strength as young women. Words such as “conquered” and “empowered” laced the conversations and covered my body like a warm blanket.

Little did my students know they had embraced a style of dance called “hittin’.” Hittin’ was coined by famous dancer Savion Glover. Glover studied with the great dance legend Gregory Hines. Together they discovered that expression can be explored through a more dynamic style of dance involving more rhythm, more beats, and essentially, more power. In Glover’s dance troupe, Not Your Ordinary Tappers, which he founded in the
1990’s, the dancers conversed and argued with their feet. I was introduced to this style of dance when I was in high school. Not being brave enough to communicate with my words about my sickness, I found myself embracing this new style of movement. I would put my tap shoes on and use the sounds of my feet to express my frustration, my embarrassment, and my shortcomings. I felt safe behind sounds that were more abstract. I began researching Savion Glover and Gregory Hines. I started uncovering these intense “dance-off’s” where there would be just the two of them with their tap shoes, and communicate with rhythms. For once, I wasn’t being looked at for my body posture, or watched to see if my belly was sucked in, and my bottom was tucked. Instead, I found myself watching these two strong men who had their arms flailing all over the place, embracing their sound. The more I became intrigued with this new style of movement, the more I started closing my eyes when I danced. It did not matter what I looked like anymore; what mattered was the commitment of the sound I was making. In Savion Glover’s book, *My Life in Tap* Savion! Glover says, “Drummers play drums, dancers play the floor” (10). I knew how to play a floor. All the irritation I felt went directly into the floor with all the power I had. When considering the image of a dancer, he contests the idea that bodies need to look beautiful during a performance. According to him, the visual body does not even come into play. Dance truly revolves around sound, and how a dancer moves from one sound to the next.

Glover put it best when speaking about his style. He said “Whatever you do, dancing or whatever, you got to hit. Don’t sleep on it. Just hit. Because for me, dancing is like life. The lessons of one are the lessons of the other” (Glover and Weber 77). By
introducing an alternate form of movement, I allowed the girls from the performing arts camp to significantly change how they saw themselves. By the end of the New Hampshire performance, I had shown my students that they could express their fears and become dancers by using a variation on the hittin’ method.

Though I had a great breakthrough with a group of females, I continued to search for more information on how to combat teens’ negative self-perception. Psychologists and specialists have been trying to conquer this body image distortion for much longer than I have even been alive. According to the Students Against Destructive Decisions, or SADD, as of 2005 1 out of 100 women between the ages of 10 and 20 years of age are anorexic. These numbers have been stable in the past decade; however, the rate of successful treatment has not increased. The treatment for eating disorders is primarily based in the cognitive therapy process. As defined on www.medicinenet.com, the cognitive therapy process is based on the idea that the way a person thinks about specific things affects his/her emotions. In turn, it becomes critical for the patient to understand the cycle in order for it to be broken.

But what happens after the brain comprehends the information? Knowing where the cycle begins and recognizing all the factors that play into the disease are just steps to overcoming a lifelong struggle with perfection. Perfection is simply the underlying goal that forces these young patients into an unhealthy lifestyle. What I was curious to understand was how an individual can benefit from the information uncovered from the cognitive therapy process.
Sitting in therapy for hours on end and talking about frustrations and social pressures can only go so far before the mind begins to overflow. If I could establish a safe environment and obtain an unwavering commitment from the youth, and in turn, put the answers back into their own hands, success would be an outcome of the cognitive therapy work. Fran J. Levy, one of the founding mothers of Creative Arts Therapy (CAT), succeeded in giving patients answers by using a new form of therapy. CAT was founded in 1979 and uses the creative arts such as dance, drama, music, art, and poetry modalities during interventions to rebuild the self. Levy has compiled one of the most encompassing books about Dance Movement Therapy. She defines dance therapy as “…the use of dance movement as psychotherapeutic or healing tool, is rooted in the idea that the body and the mind are inseparable. Its basic premise is that body movement reflects inner emotional states and that change in movement behavior can lead to changes in the psyche, thus promoting health and growth” (1). The overall goal of this newer type of therapy is to experience the unity of the body, mind, and spirit. Though I have background in movement and theatre performance, I was amazed at some incredible parallels that well-known theatre minds have abstractly written on this topic.

One of the most notable theatrical writers, Antonin Artaud, spoke about the amount of masterpieces that were surrounding our world, and the influence that they were having. When Artaud wrote this article in *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, compiled by Bernard F. Dukore, it was the 1930’s. In his essay, “No More Masterpieces,” Artaud said “…I think the theatre and we ourselves have had enough of psychology” (762). Through my work with the youthful population, the last place they want to be is in a therapists’ office. Most
every young person I worked with recognizes that he/she needs some kind of help. Going through every day challenges can be exhausting, but labels of a psychological dysfunction frighten many. Playwrights and directors are surrounded with performances that revolve around the subject of psychological problems. My students were vocal about not wanting to sit around and talk. They looked for a new ways of figuring out their issues. Artaud continued to say that theatre had reached its lowest point and had lost all energy. We are consumed with “…torments, seductions, and lusts before which we are nothing but Peeping Toms gratifying our cravings…” (763). Up to this point in my own life, performance was strictly for the audience. Perhaps it was time for “performers” to be re-defined. As I remembered this quote as I worked with the girls, I wanted to assure them that their performance would be for themselves, and not for those “Peeping Toms.” Later in his essay he notes, “…but there are too many signs that everything that used to sustain our lives no longer does so, that we are all mad, desperate, and sick. And I call for us to react” (763). If we took our reactions and integrated them into our bodies, would that be a reaction that Artaud may have supported? Instead of theatre being a place to be seen, could it be using the public spectacle as a way of responding to turn theatre into a more receptive art form? I also brought this thought into our expressionistic movement by keeping the as a reaction to their world and challenges. Antonin Artaud continued to say that “Art should not be detached and creating nothing and producing nothing is the downfall of all art” (763). I wanted theatre to be revolutionized and to help people through disastrous experiences. I was fortunate enough to have worked with performers who craved a change and not simply moving to look pretty. On that same thought, he also
spoke about light and the power it carries. “Light which is not created merely to add color or to brighten, and which brings its power, influence, suggestions with it” calls on the idea of imagery holding the ability to change moods, posture, and overall body positions (765). A simple shift in the placement of the head, or using imagery to redirect the center of a body changed the entire move. As my students became aware of their positioning of their light, that allowed them to shift and transform their own shape. In Artaud’s concluding paragraph, he noted that “a theatre which, abandoning psychology, recounts the extraordinary, stages natural conflicts, natural and subtle forces, and present itself first of all as an exceptional power of redirection” will bring our society to a new level of revitalization (766). What the focus was in this environment, revolved around natural conflicts, such as body image, and the redirection was our goal.

Revitalization is something many young girls need. Taking Artaud’s viewpoints and marrying them with more modern conversations started my exploration into Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia*. This book focuses on the Western culture of perfection in teenagers who are inundated with messages from the mass media about what beauty is and how these messages eventually result in the death of the self. Pipher says, “Research shows that virtually all women are ashamed of their bodies. It used to be adult women, teenage girls, who were ashamed, but now you see the shame down to very young girl – 10, 11 years old. Society’s standard of beauty is an image that is literally just short of starvation for most women” (rptd. in Strasburger 375). Mary Pipher’s book received such publicity that a response book was created just a few years following. Sara Shandler, a former student at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, was specifically
moved by Pipher’s book. She examines her adolescent experiences from a different perspective after having read *Reviving Ophelia.* She realized that she and all of her contemporaries had been raised in a “…culture that cradles double standards, impossible ideals of beauty, and asks us to listen. A friend summed up her struggle in one phrase, ‘I’m afraid of the sound of my own voice.’ As I finished Pipher’s introduction, I felt her describing me – an adolescent girl caught….” (Shandler xii).

The rampant fear of obesity often frightens youth into starvation. When looking at television shows, research shows that 94% of characters are below the average weight for teenagers (Levine and Smolak 1996). If characters are broken down into body types, obesity is confined to middle or old age, and being overweight is more likely to be found in the comic character. The pretty girl who gets the guy is almost always below the average body weight. The media presents commercials focused on food, combined with other images that focus on female beauty. This pairing sends an extremely mixed message to youth. According to a study led B. Silverstein and Perlick, “…as thin model and actresses appeared more frequently in the media, eating disorders also increased. The diet industry tripled its revenues from $10 billion a year to $36 billion a year” (Strasburger 400). However, this goes much beyond television. Studies have also found that girls who pick up fashion magazines are more likely to compare themselves to the models found in those pages. In a study conducted by Nichter and Nichter in 1991, adolescent girls described the “ideal girl” as being “5’7”, 100 pounds, size 5, with long blonde hair and blue eyes – clearly a body shape that is both rare and close to impossible to achieve” (Strasburger 401). In music videos, “…one study of 837 ninth-grade girls found the
number of hours spent watching videos was related to their assessment of the importance of appearance and their weight concern” (403). The influence that media has over so many females is overwhelming. The destruction became so apparent and widespread that books and essays began to show up on the local bookshelves.

Elizabeth Fales, a young woman who recognized the struggle of her friends, wrote an essay entitled “Food is Not My Enemy.” It was submitted to the *Ophelia Speaks* book and published. Fales posed such difficult questions such as, “How did every girl I grew up with learn to measure their merit by the size of their skirt? Why does the Gap make a size zero? The ultimate question: Who designed Barbie? I am furious with the world today” (Shandler 15). She writes about eating disorders as though she were waging a war. She says that her friends have “lost their membership cards to womanhood – their hips, breasts, periods, every biological feature that makes woman distinctly different from children” (15). Because I used to be a girl who thought that having no breasts and no hips was beautiful, I read this essay nodding in agreement.

Though my time with my New Hampshire girls was limited, I have kept up with them over the years. Confidence becomes a daily habit, just like taking vitamins or drinking water. Having the confidence to speak up in class, or walk across a campus with head held high, will for some be more challenging than taking an advanced math exam. As I continued through my years, I have encountered remarkable people who reignited my confidence by establishing their own.
CHAPTER 3 The Biggest Bump of Your Life

Negative body image does not always stem from the media; people are often influenced by relationships. For example, the dynamic between a mother and daughter is something so sacred and fragile that if unhealthy, can destroy a daughter’s sense of worth. In this chapter I will discuss one of my most powerful experiences with a single girl. After being physically abused, she found that the power movement could help her own her life again. After developing a series of physical movements that abstractly reflected her struggles, her breakthrough was like none other I had witnessed. Movement not only expresses mood, but it can also be a path to regaining an independent life that is free from abuse.

One gorgeous fall afternoon I was working in Norfolk, Virginia teaching a dance class. This was not any particularly emotional class like in New Hampshire. It was a very small class, with perhaps five people with varying degrees of tap experience. I ran the class very loosely, dabbling in both Broadway and modern styles. There was one student, about fifteen years old, who almost always came to class in a sour mood. At first I simply blamed it on her being a teenager. Like every teenage girl, I had also gone through “growing pains” and tumultuous times with my parents. A few classes I noticed bruises appearing on her arms. She was not a clumsy girl, yet I did not want to jump to
conclusions. I kept my eye on her while we were dancing and it seemed as though the more bruises appeared on her body, the less of a dancer she became. Her confidence was directly linked to something outside of class. At one point she was so shaken that she just sat with her back against the mirrors, holding back her tears.

I approached her before class one day to see how she was both emotionally and physically. Surprisingly, she was rather open about her experience, and seemed like she wanted help. It turned out that her mother had been beating her pretty regularly the past few weeks. Her grades had been dropping and her extra-curricular activities were a financial burden to her mother. Out of pure frustration and the inability to find the appropriate words to communicate with her daughter, she began to hit her.

I was neither a therapist, nor a social worker, but remembered the breakthroughs I had had with the New Hampshire students. Recognizing my limits as a dance teacher, I started brainstorming about how I could maximize her experience in the studio. First, I focused on the idea of creating a safe space. It was difficult to convince a student, surrounded by fear and anger at home, that whatever happened in this space was safe. I did understand my student’s need for protection, including the need for emotional security. I wanted her to be in charge of her own story, and hoped that through our work together, she would feel empowered. I also wanted her to come to terms with the aspects of her life that were out of her control.

Looking at this young girl who had completely lost her sense of self, it was apparent that her confidence had been shattered. My goal was to put her back together emotionally so she could trust herself, and other, through physical exploration. I began
with a simple writing exercise. I approached her one evening and asked her if she would be comfortable scribing her conflict. She decided to take the project home with her and write it while literally in the middle of her personal catastrophe. She returned the following week with amazingly detailed writing. I did not ask to read it, nor did I ask her to share it with the other students. Instead, I asked her to dance it. She blinked a few times in confusion, but never actually questioned the request. She went into the corner of the studio and started to move. I admired her willingness to be open to the process. She took the very basic instruction of “dance it” and went with it.

I was excited about her desire to embrace this project, and I also knew that I wanted her to discover her emotional depth. She was so drained by her mother’s abuse she needed to release her anger. I felt that the exercises of Jerzy Grotowski, a renowned Polish director since the 1960’s, would enhance her work in class. Grotowski introduced a brilliant new way for actors to begin the process of building a character. From my teaching experience, I knew that the connection to the self was more rooted and emotions resonated more strongly. Through Grotowski’s writings, he believed that constructing a strong inner self was one of the most important aspects of development.

The first book I used, Acrobat of the Heart by Stephen Wangh, encompasses Grotowski’s ideas by placing his work in the studio. Wangh, a former student of Grotowski’s in 1967, compiled this user-friendly manuscript that outlines how to use Grotowski’s process in a rebuilding environment. What I found when using these exercises was that they were extremely effective for the students because of the immediacy of the results. It applies strongly to everyday people, as well as actors, who struggle to
discover who they are and where their inner strength lies. In the first few pages of *Acrobat of the Heart*, Wangh exposes the epidemic of noise. He says that our society is so busy making noise that no one ever hears anything or anyone. His answer is to acknowledge the silence and not to fear it. I have frequently worked with students who were so nervous and unsure of themselves that they filled the silence with chatter. My goal was to introduce the value of silence into the work from the very beginning. Once a student can feel comfortable in stillness, precision soon follows, and the result is more deliberate.

The initial aspect of creation in Grotowski’s world, and addressed in Wangh’s book, is the ability to get the student to a place of complete confidence. There is no room for self-consciousness in the work space. If there is ever a challenge for a teenager especially, this is biggest challenge of them all. Teaching a woman confidence is obviously not a simple task. That is where Grotowski’s phrase *via negativa* came into play. *Via negativa* is the process of elimination of everything. Essentially, *via negativa* allows everything that feels imprisoned to be free. There are countless exercises that can lead a person to this outcome, but one of my favorites is a recognition exercise. In Grotowski’s *Towards a Poor Theatre*, he says:

> First of all, such work is only free if it is in confidence, and confidence depends on its confidences not being disclosed. Secondly, the work is essentially non-verbal. To verbalize is to complicate and even to destroy exercises that are clear and simple when indicated by a gesture and when executed by the mind and body as one (11).

I was dealing with a very sensitive and broken girl, one who had been mistreated by her mother for a very long time. I was unsure I could convince her that she had entered a safe place, but I discovered one of the most beautiful aspects of her demeanor was her
ease with silence. However, silence of the voice did not equate silence of the space. I informed her that her dance would not be set to music. She would have nothing to hide behind or carry her along. She would be emotionally naked in the space with just her body and breath moving her forward.

Grotowski said that everything starts and finishes in the breath. And so, we started with the breath. With each inhalation, I told her that she was taking back her power that she had lost. She used her breath as a tool to reignite her thoughts, her dreams, and her opinions. I led her to put the palm of her hand right below her belly button, and told her when she took in a breath that “baby belly” should expand. Women need to find the comfort in making their diaphragms, or baby bellies, expand and contract.

Simply shifting her breath changed her posture dramatically. She started standing straighter, her shoulders were strong, and her chin was up. It was remarkable that such a slight change in the placement of her breath accentuated her excellent posture. With a stance of strength, her mind started to play a trick of strength on her. Though she might not have initially understood why she felt different, her mind followed what her body expressed – power.

Grotowski speaks of exploring the power of oneself, but he also focuses on uncovering the sincerity of the self:

An actor reaches the essence of his vocation whenever he commits an act of sincerity, when he unveils himself, opens and gives himself is an extreme, solemn gesture, and does not hold back…when this act of extreme sincerity is modeled in a living organism, in impulses, in a way of breathing, a rhythm of thought and the circulation of blood, when it is ordered and brought to consciousness…it enables us to respond totally, that is, begin to exist. For each day we only react with half our potential (124, 125).
Though Grotowski speaks of actors here, his words are universally applicable. The first step is recognition of bad habits, and the second step is their removal.

After my student’s breath was repositioned, we went back to her choreography. Though her steps were pretty, I reminded her that the project was not about making her situation look good, because her story was not. Her story was full of anger and frustration, and I wanted to understand that through her movements. I needed her to trust that she could tell the story and also trust that I, her audience, would not abandon her. In Walter Kerr’s essay, “Is Grotowski Right, Did the Word Come Last?,” he states that the performer must control the self while trusting the spectator. There had to be trust established between my student and her spectator – me. She needed to find her detachment from the project while still embracing her situation. The result would be peace with her emotional reactions. By finding that balance, the audience and the performer could exist in the world of theatre. Though creating “theatre” was never my goal in this particular situation, the sense of performance underlined everything we did. Whether in a classroom, on a playing field, or in a business meeting, the performer must recognize the proscenium and embrace both the performance and specified audience.

As we began to work through the horrific world that she was living in every day, she said that she felt lonely and afraid. These are two incredibly real emotions that actors often verbalize when they are performing a monologue or singing a song alone. I, once again, turned to Jerzy Grotowski. During Grotowski’s “Theatre of Sources” phase, he focused on “the investigation about what the human being can do with his own solitude”
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(259). Solitude should be embraced and then transformed into force. He said that the individual’s goal is to find the silence of movement, even when running. This returns to the placement of the breath. Once the breath is grounded and the posture is strong, the silence can exist without fear of judgment. Most importantly, “This silence gives the chance for important words…” (260).

As I found my student returning to her breath and trusting in her solitude, her movements became more defined, exposing the pain in her life. She was able to embrace her journey when she found the ability to trust in the process, in the audience, and most notably, in her own body. She discovered the control and the power that she lacked at home when she was fighting with her mother. She had used the art of performance to access another level of perception. Grotowski spoke about this process in almost every essay or lecture that he had given over the years. Having the ability to step outside the routine and examine one’s own life without bias opens up an entirely fresh outlook.

I picked up the paper that held her story on one side and her specified dance moves on the other, and asked her why she had chosen these steps. Her reply was that she liked to do them. Though I understood her response, and smiled gently, I wanted her to dig deeper. Her dance should have been built out of impulses from the body, not the mind. I needed to introduce her to the world of impulse and then allow her to release them on the dance floor. However, an impulse cannot necessarily be taught. It is similar to teaching someone how to tell a joke – some understand the timing innately, and others will fall flat no matter what. Grotowski believes that in order to be aware of impulse, it is first necessary to bring a person to a place of utter exhaustion. So I exhausted my student. We ran, we stretched, we
jumped, and we threw our entire bodies in the process of elimination and exhaustion. We had to start with an empty canvas and move forward. Her blockages became unblocked and she started the psycho-physical process.

The application of impulse through the mind will not release into the body, and in turn, absolute accomplishment is not possible. This concept is related to psychiatric theory and practice. Jennifer Kumiega, author of *The Theatre of Grotowski*, states that “Grotowski’s theories relate to some schools of contemporary psychiatric practice in the central thesis that cerebral functioning has been over-emphasized in the past as a medium for comprehending the human condition” (121). Many psychiatrists agree that memories are stored in the tissue of the body and the brain simply gets in the way. However, if anyone knew how hard it is to turn off the mind, my student did.

At the conclusion of the process, she not only had a remarkable dance, but she had balanced all the lessons, words, and hardships into one breathtaking exhibition of self. She succeeded in finding Wangh’s concept of ultimate awareness: “Always seek for the real truth and not the popular conception of truth. Use your own real, specific and intimate experiences. This means that you must often give the impression of tactlessness. Aim always for authenticity” (Wangh 237). Though we did not put this on a stage or invite an audience to view her, she obtained her goal. Through movement, silence and clarity, my broken dancer achieved her own stillness.
CHAPTER 4 Not Every Road is Paved

Though teenage life is littered with challenges, transitions, and awkward experiences, the majority of young people have a place to call home. I worked with Richmond area high school students in foster care that have dealt with more than the normal growing pains. They struggle with the ultimate heartbreak - abandonment. Not only do they have an increased risk of negative body image, but they also face being left in the foster care system for years and years, with no one to trust or lean on except themselves. Through this chapter I explore the at-risk female population and how abstract movement, incorporated with specific dance therapy techniques, provided them the tools to believe in the strength of oneself.

In the spring of 2010, I sat down with a creative arts therapist and spoke with her about the idea of saving lives through the arts. Dr. Annie Coffey has her Ph.D. in Poetry Therapy and has a private practice in Richmond. We spoke about drama, dance, music, art, and poetry therapies, and by the end of our conversation I had decided that I wanted to receive my Ph.D. in all of them. Realizing that this was quite an unrealistic task, I walked out knowing the specific population I was ready to work with next. I contacted the United Methodist Family Services, or UMFS, and began communication with their resident art director, Ruth Farrell.
UMFS’s goal, as listed on their website www.umfs.org, states “the goal of UMFS has always been ambitious – to provide a network of human services to enable children and families to realize their hopes for the future.” UMFS is a housing service that gives foster children a place to call home while they are in transition. During their time at UMFS they have class, and extra-curricular activities. I would have blindly led this population had I not picked up specific books that dealt with movement therapy. I decided that my workshops would be based primarily on movement therapy.

I did not expect to meet a group of a dozen girls between the ages of twelve and seventeen who did not even want to say their names. I had never met such a resistant group before, and there I was, at the workshop’s introduction, and already failing miserably. I felt humiliated and slightly angry. I had to remove my feelings from the process and realize that this was a population to which I could not easily relate. Or so I thought. Though my mom and dad never physically abandoned me, as a teenager I often thought I was alone. I always felt as though I was in a different world than my family, always striving for the perfect body, the perfect grades, and the perfect relationships, I realized that I had been where these girls were. In addition to being abandoned, some of these girls struggled with body image issues, eating disorders, and drug and alcohol abuse. I faced twelve girls who were dealing with everything in the book. I returned to Grotowski and dance movement therapy books and started again. Grotowski explained that one of the greatest challenges in any type of performance is the fear of exposure. Every person needs the courage to reveal herself. Our first step as a group would be to establish trust.
Trusting a leader is of the utmost importance when attempting to establish a world of discovery. Interestingly enough, the dance and movement books that I read did not include a chapter on trust. No one seemed to be writing about trust in the very hardest of situations. I attempted gain their trust using trial and error. Knowing that I only had a few hours with the group, I started off simply. The girls met me in the gym on their campus and I entered the space with a music system, an Ipod, and a lot of energy. I took my shoes and socks off and asked them to do the same. I was bombarded with moans and groans and an orchestration of “No’s.” They said the floor was dirty and they were not about to get themselves dirty, too. I stuck to my guns and told them they had to take their shoes off, stop worrying, and trust me. That was the first big mistake. Asking them to take off their shoes was like asking someone to take off his/her shirt. I was requesting that they expose a part of themselves, regardless of how personal or impersonal feet might have been. I put on some music and asked them to move around the space. No one moved off of the bleachers. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could have done to make anyone participate, so I danced alone in the space.

As I looked at the girls, one by one they took their shoes and socks off, complaining their way down to the floor, where they stood frozen. It looked as if they were going to meet me, just not half way. “Just dance,” I yelled, competing with the music, as I expressed my enthusiasm for what I was doing. That was the second big mistake I made because the word “dance” scares so many people away. Fran J. Levy, author of Dance Movement Therapy: A Healing Art, says in the introduction that “… others fear that they will have to perform dance steps or display an attitude for body
movement, as opposed to simply expressing their thoughts and feelings” (iv). I had already made two big mistakes and I had not even been with them for ten minutes.

As these girls stood and talked to each other, I was left in the middle of the gym dancing alone. I did not understand. I had energy, I had spunk, and I had a lesson plan. Those three qualities were not enough. At the end of this first workshop, these girls had put me through a test of strength and I needed to break down my own barriers to meet them where they were.

Once again, being as engulfed in academics as I was, I went back to my books. My goals were the same as those that the dance movement books outlined. The overall goal of each therapist that I researched was:

Individual to feel a sense of strength, competence and mastery of their environment if they are to become an integral part of society and master inherent childhood feelings of inferiority. Individuals who could learn to use their bodies in assertive, confident and competent ways, expressing feelings of independence and autonomy, would be able to more easily express such self-reliant behaviors and attitudes in other aspects of their lives (Adler 6).

Though Alfred Adler, a modern movement therapist had all the words, Trudi Schoop, a pioneer in the movement therapy world, had the most impact. Trudi Schoop, recognized as “the female Charlie Chaplin” in the 1930’s, took her laughter and knowledge of the body to schizophrenic patients all around the world throughout the mid-to-late 20th century. Her greatest gift was her ability to laugh at herself. According to the New York Times, she developed what she called “body-ego technique,” which specifically helped her patients laugh at themselves in a less judgmental fashion. In turn, she built an atmosphere of trust which allowed her patients to explore themselves. By building this body awareness, which
is basis of movement therapy, the patients begin to experience control. Schoop’s most amazing quality was her humor that was intertwined with everything.

I knew that I needed to bring laughter to this group. Though I recognized that Schoop’s patients were mentally handicapped and mine were not, I did see the similarities in body image problems. I began to implement Schoop’s exercises of imitation, exaggeration and humor. We started big and continued to exaggerate. First we walked around the space with shoes on and found our own gait. I asked them to exaggerate their movements to the point of absurdity, at which point I brought them back to an everyday walk. I was amazed at how a simple walking exercise immediately introduced laughter into the space. The walking was no longer about them, but instead they became their exaggerated selves, from which they seemed to be removed. I began throwing different emotions into the space and having them embody what they heard. Initially I was met with questions, but once I said that there was no wrong way to walk around the space, every person just moved. Their only instructions were to fully commit to their movement. Much to my pleasure, commitment and laughter were quickly filling the space. I gained their trust simply by being able to laugh at myself, and my personal exaggerations.

After I reflected upon the success with Schoop’s exercise, I examined other amazing pioneers from the dance/movement therapy world, three of which were Frederick S. Perls, Paul Schilder and Franziska Boas. These three therapists all implemented variations of methods that used visualization, imagery and silence. Perls believed that patients who struggle with confidence need to first understand where their centers lie. As I walked into the second workshop, I was excited to use his visual method of lighting a
candle and placing it in the bottom of the stomach; however, my efforts were met with confusion and smirking. I continued on with my visualization exercise, certain that the girls would come around to it. My biggest struggle was finding the silence within the group. These girls had been left alone so many times that they had gotten used to filling the space with noise. It did not matter what the noise was, it was simply noise produced to avoid silence. Though I loved the idea behind finding the center within the quiet, this particular population was not about to jump on that bandwagon.

Paul Schilder’s method, similar to Perls, combined percussion with visualization to encourage movement expression without visual exposure. The percussive element worked incredibly well with the girls of larger stature, but the smaller ones were afraid to make noise. I was instantly brought back to my New Hampshire days where these students were overly aware of their body mass, and constantly attempting to control their own sound. With the mixed responses to the addition of rhythm, I separated those who wished to continue exploring sound from those who were resistant to the sound exercise. I instructed the latter group to explore smaller sounds, and then slowly build to the exaggeration. These girls easily grasped the ideas of starting slow and soft with room for gradual growth.

Franziska Boas, another leader in percussion-based movement, stressed the fluidity that percussive sound has on the release of inhibitions. Not only did Boas offer a new direction of expression, but she was also a strong advocate for women’s rights and racial equality. However, when I introduced Boas’ methodology, I noticed that these girls wanted something to hide behind. I offered them the ability to individually build a sound-based phrase out of hits and slaps on the floor. The group then created a phrase together in order
to find a sense of unity as they expressed their power through abstract sound. Though the phrase was a little scattered, the sense of ensemble was overwhelming.

My overall goal in this setting was for the girls to uncover their “inner dance.” Oftentimes the “inner dance” refers to uncovering a person’s unconsciousness through body movement. These girls had never been asked, “Where do you want to live? What do you want to wake up to?” Their lives had shifted constantly, and stability was the last thing in their world. However, by giving the girls different ways to communicate, they did find their power, and ultimately, their control. As I began planning my final workshop with UMFS, I noted those who were confident, those who were still reserved, and wondered if they would be open to the addition of their voices. On the drive home, I reflected back on my role as leader. I was not their therapist, I was not their friend, and I was not their sister. I had to restructure my goals for the next workshops in order to ensure that success was conscious, but as important, that closure was available.

I requested a different room for our next session because the grime of the gym did not provide a place for emotional safety. We were given the “auditorium,” which was simply a carpeted room with a slightly raised stage area. The best part about moving to this room was seeing how fast their shoes came off. Instantly, the carpeted floor felt more like a home. Looking around the room, I noticed that the girls’ sense of hesitation had lessened. They were smiling, eager to move and ready to talk. For this session, I brought specific music that I hoped would foster a sense of community and feelings of release. Whitney Houston – pre-breakdown – Nina Simone, and Lauryn Hill made up one of my playlists. All three women were fiercely independent artists who had made a name for
themselves through musical expression. I hoped that the girls would pick up on the sense of freedom and strength as they listened to their music. Much to my surprise, not only did the girls have a fantastic time dancing around the space with their arms in the air, but they commanded attention that was rooted in positivity. To the naked eye, these were just girls dancing. But to me, these were my girls committing to something wonderfully fulfilling. For those two hours, they were not simply foster kids. They were not forgotten or abandoned. They were teenagers who embraced their own community and release.

Eventually, the shiest girl, who had not previously participated, released her arms, threw her head back, and displayed complete openness. Suddenly these girls had been transported to freedom. Though they never completely forgot where they were, they did embrace one another in the very best way they knew how – they opened their circle up and started their very own “dance-off.” One by one, each girl was cheered into the center of the circle with her head up, chest out, and creating her own moves. As beautiful as the dancing may or may not have been, their commitment was perfect. This exercise allowed the girls to step away from how they looked, and instead focus on their community that they had built through dancing. Having a dozen girls who had defeated their inner voices of negativity and self-doubt created the strongest sense of confidence and power.

After our final dance, the girls rushed for water and then sat as close together as I had ever seen them. It did not matter who was next to whom. All barriers had been destroyed through the use of music and movement. There were a dozen sweaty girls, varying in body weight and skin color, all sitting right next to one another. They had just experienced perhaps their first physical breakthrough; the best part was that they did not
even know it had happened. I decided to give them an assignment. I had printed out the
lyrics of female songwriters and I asked them to each pick a phrase from a song and
physicalize it for our final workshop. I gave them no other instructions than that. As I
packed up my stereo and made some notes, the girls rushed over with questions for their
assignment. They wanted rules. They wanted strong directions. They wanted to succeed.
I told them that there was no wrong way to create. The only quality that I wanted to see in
this was commitment. They had all committed previously, so I knew they could do it
again. I wanted them to believe in themselves, to feel beautiful in their movement, and to
commit. Those were the only “rules.”

Two days later I entered the space with complete confidence that within these
workshops, these girls were ready to explode into the space. The majority of the students
had really felt a connection to Nina Simone’s “Feeling Good.” The lyrics, the honesty, and
the composition of this one song transformed so many broken and abandoned girls into
passionate, strong women. Their bodies were filled with energy, their faces shone, and
their minds seemed clear of all the hardships they were surrounded by. Their phrases were
not artistically constructed, nor were their moves rooted in grace or perfection. But they
had fulfilled the three requirements I created for them. They believed in themselves, their
commitment never faltered, and that resulted in their ownership of the space. Their ability
to find release in music and movement gave me chills. They had found success within
their own bodies. With their new sense of physical success, they were empowered.
CHAPTER 5 Boys and Their Roads

Generally, the male population is not the first demographic that enters into the mind when describing body image issues. However, males are highly susceptible to an unusual extreme of “perfection.” Perfection to males generally qualifies as being muscular, lean, mentally and physically strong, and balancing aggression and competitive behavior. When those characteristics are combined, the result evokes the image of a full-service gym inside of a CEO’s corner office with panoramic views of the city skyline. Men are taught at a very young age to restrict emotions when making decisions. These emotions do not simply go away; instead, they build up over time until they often are expressed through physical aggression. This aggression can be unleashed on any person, and more than likely, the fight will be nothing more than a scrapple. However, if a thrown fist does not gratify, then a stronger fight may ensue. The bigger the fight, the more extreme the punishment may be, such as a prison or jail sentence. I knew little about the group of boys I was to work with, except their abilities to handle hostility. I thought about alternate methods of communication. After watching a primarily male-cast Off-Broadway show, Stomp, which uses drum beats and other rhythmic sounds to represent dialogue, I began to wonder how I could incorporate rhythms and sounds that may be able to replace the passionate punch or killer kick.
After completing my workshops with the United Methodist Family Services, I was asked to return to teach separate classes of boys and girls. I had no experience working with boys. Though body image issues do exist in the male gender, the primary issue that UMFS saw was uncontrollable anger and aggression.

Western media contains excessive violence. The American Psychological Association, or the APA, estimates that teenagers view more than 200,000 murders, rapes, and aggravated assaults within one year of watching television alone (rptd. in Strasburger 147). Interestingly enough, films and television shows that TV Guide listed as being violent attracted higher household ratings. The American culture seems to be obsessed with guns, fighting, and overall graphic violence. However, does media violence necessarily lead to aggression?

One of the most impressive studies was led by Leonard Eron and Rowell Huesmann. They conducted a test in which they showed a sample of children violent television programs at ages 8, 19 and 30. The results showed that the relationship between viewing the violence in the third grade and aggressive behavior ten years later was significant. They checked back in with the boys when they had reached manhood, age 30. The data revealed a link between television exposure to violence at age 8 and self-reported aggression at age 30. Their group of boys was much more likely to commit violent crimes because of their exposure to violent television at such a young age. In another test conducted by Huesmann and his colleagues in 2003, the researchers interviewed more than 500 elementary school children who watched violent television programs, and interviewed
them fifteen years later. They once again found the more exposure to television violence at such a youthful age calculated a significant rise in aggressive behavior in adulthood.

The boys that I would work with had the same abandonment issues that the females had. In addition, they were also “babysat” by the television throughout their developmental stages. They had experienced an overwhelming amount of media violence and it seemed to be prevalent into their everyday world. I knew that putting on music and having them move around the space was not the key to their success. I needed to discover a new way to success with this group. Once again, it was important to recognize that these students were in a particularly emotional state due to their being carted from house to house. They were also conscious of protecting themselves. The ability to find protection within an unstable family life is a never-ending battle for this population.

I began to search through any films that I might have had that could help me figure out a way to channel this aggression for these teenage boys. I picked up a DVD of the Off-Broadway show, Stomp. In doing so, I sought a way to take my mind away from how overwhelming this situation was. As luck would have it, I had just uncovered my magical answer.

Stomp opened in 1991 in the United Kingdom. This non-traditional dance and rhythm-based show uses the body and found objects to create physical theatrical performance. The idea behind the show began in the mid 1980’s with creators Steve McNicholas and Luke Cresswell. They began performing street festivals in Edinburgh, and in 1986 the two created an eight-minute percussive segment for Bette Midler’s HBO Special. Following this success with Midler’s special, over five years Cresswell and
McNicholas financed, staged and directed what is now known as the percussive performance, *Stomp*. Within ninety minutes, this eight-person cast experiments with rhythms made from ordinary props. From dustpans, rusty metal signs, ladders, folding chairs, boxes of kitchen matches, paper bags, garbage cans, oil drums and even a quartet of kitchen sinks, burly men take the stage.

As I sat in my apartment, surrounded by stability, I realized that I had found another form of expressive performance. Though I had played with the idea of sound when I was in New Hampshire, this particular form of expression was absolutely perfect for the group of boys I would work with. Not only could their aggression be taken out on inanimate objects, but they could also enjoy the physical exhaustion of moving around the space. I started to look around at the objects around me and created rhythms with them. Tables, books, water bottle, pencils – anything that made a percussive sound would work.

Unsurprisingly, I was met with uncertainty at the beginning of my workshops. I knew I would battle more than just their aggression because I was a female in an all-male population, still young enough to still be physically admired. I had to immediately be aware of my posture, stance, walk, and vocal tone. I had to mold into this non-feminine leader just so the boys would take me seriously and focus on what I was saying, not how I was saying it. As I raised my awareness of being as physically neutral as possible, I introduced the idea behind percussive expression and showed them a clip of the show. Instantly, smiles were forming and heads started to unknowingly move to the rhythms.

However, I also wanted to briefly discuss moments of anger with them. I wanted to hear, in their own words, what sort of images came to mind when remembering those times
when they resorted to violence or aggression instead of talking something out. The majority of them openly talked about where they were getting their “moves.” Besides scenarios on television, they saw aggression in video gaming. The only positive aspect of video games was that the whole group recognized which games the others were talking about, and could repeat the moves. The problem was, these guys were not living in a video game. They were trying to survive in real life with violent actions, and with those actions came equal violent reactions.

When I started researching the background of video gaming and the amount of time that boys commit to them, I was not too shocked. What did grab my attention was how many first and second grade boys were attracted to the fantasy violent category of video games. The Federal Trade Commission, or the FTC, took a survey in 2006 that showed 49% of the boys were attracted to fantasy violent games as their first pick. In the same survey, when looking at fifth and sixth graders, the violent fantasy games were no longer holding their attention. Instead, they moved over to human violence, and the popularity increased as the boys matured.

I still was unsure why violent video games were so popular. Though many researchers have posed multiple reasons behind this appeal, some of the most accepted ideas are the entertainment context modifies the anxiety into a state of arousal or pure excitement. Others claim that boys are simply seeking out new experiences, and again, pure psychological pleasure. Whatever the reasons, there was more than enough evidence to prove that these violent video games contributed to unacceptable behavior. In 2007, the research team Anderson and Dill surveyed 227 young children through college-aged youth
with their goal of observing the links between the typical time playing video games and the increase in aggression. It was predictable that their relationships with friends and partners were more explosive due to the violent video games. However, when looking more closely at the population between the ages of six and seven years of age, it was noted that their empathy level decreased, their aggression increased, and the children exhibited anti-social behaviors.

It seemed as though the more research I found, the more nervous I became when working with this group. Though it was obvious that I had found a wealth of information in *Stomp*, I still had to deliver the workshop. After gathering into the best circle the guys could muster, their stories began to unravel. The most interesting part about the sharing was how proud they were of the destruction they had been responsible for. There was no remorse for the pain that they had caused. For them, it was a game of survival and each boy was for himself. As I recognized their separation from pain, I became anxious to put these instruments in their hands. Fortunately, the boys had respect for the power of the sounds they were about to make. Many related the power of percussive legends and found some common ground on admired musicians.

As I brought the rhythmic found-instruments into the space, they were excited to hear the intense sounds that they created, yet uncertain as to how this pertained to them specifically. I told them that over the next two workshops they were going to be creating their own pieces of rhythmic expression, both individually and then as an ensemble.

I instructed them to write notes. They scribbled down notes about their favorite fights. They got excited and talkative when they were noting great defeats and intense
raging moments. I repeated that they were to write them down, not to brag to one another. Following the “script writing,” I asked them to each pick up an object that they felt would make the best sound to illustrate their battle. After carefully choosing their objects, they ran into the space and started slamming out noise. I reminded them that the assignment was not simply to make noise, but to create particular phrases for each moment of the fight. These instructions made them break down their moves and link them with emotion. I succeeded in making them think, not react.

When they walked into the second part of the workshop, chatter overflowed. They all focused, were eager and a little nervous when they had their rhythmic tools in their hands. They took a few minutes to review their personal battles and then shared them. Their phrases were strong and their choices were clear. Using these specific phrases to illustrate conflict allowed the boys to take a little more time to make choices. Without even speaking about posture or focus, they had it. They were grounded in their bodies and committed.

At the conclusion of the rhythmic exhibitions, I informed them of their next assignment. I wanted them to create a discussion or argument with the entire group. There had to be give-and-take, listening and responding, and there had to be commitment and strength. Without missing a beat they gathered together, picked a scenario and began working. The sense of ensemble and family came quickly. Though the battles were planned, and the rhythms were chosen, the performance was filled with spontaneity and healthy passion.
My final twist was incorporating silence. Just as previously noted, silence can be one of the hardest elements to work with. I was met with some strong opinions on how silly silence was and questions about how it would work with this fight. I told them that with silence comes reaction, and that I wanted to see the reaction just before the action. Though I was unsure if that was understood, the guys bravely included moments of complete silence, and at the conclusion of their performance, it was the silent moments that became the most powerful.

I have kept in touch with UMFS since these workshops were completed, and I have been told that the students often ask when I am coming back. I am thrilled to hear that the students of both genders walked away from our work together with lifelong skills that have made them more balanced, more secure, and unafraid of the passion they all hold within themselves.
CHAPTER 6 Keep on Going

Though everything goes against these young girls of today, the triple bind, the impossible goals of perfection, and the overwhelming lack of balance of self, the introduction of movement and abstract sound is a strong survival tool for many of these young students. Though boys are also fighting their own battles of using alternate methods to express their anger or frustration, the pressure to conquer impossible goals certainly rest on the females’. I continue to compile strong skills that I have seen work on a variety of populations. Some have been abandoned by their families, their own society, and others self-abandoned.

I have been lucky enough to work with some of the most incredible students who have everything going against them. However, after our work together, they have achieved the best reward – inner strength and passion. I am hopeful that my students will no longer allow media, television, or society to assign them boundaries. They now have the knowledge that they can create their own goals, and their own ways of communication that is strong and healthy.

Fighting with fists is no longer the only option for the boys at UMFS. Instead, they have started picking up percussive instruments found in ordinary situations, and began to express themselves using abstract sound.
The girls at UMFS have started to reject the disgust about their bodies, and instead, they push the “play” button on their stereos. They now understand the power of movement. They can look up to strong female vocalists who inspire them to look forward to a new day, and put that inspiration in their bodies.

As far as the earlier students that I have worked with, they also have more options than just to sit in a therapist’s office and talk. When their voices give out, or they run out of words to use, I am optimistic that they will remember that their bodies hold the memories of their pasts, and the ability to remind them of their futures. Whatever can be verbalized, can also be physicalized. In many ways, the body does hold the power over the mind. My hope for every person who has ever struggled with finding the words to fit a situation, or found themselves drowning by negative thoughts, is that they open their minds to abstract therapeutic movement because it can be a tool for survival.
CHAPTER 7 Specific Exercises and Explanations

Below are a selected number of exercises that have proved to be incredibly successful in the majority of my workshops throughout the past few years. The populations that I have been lucky enough to work with have benefited from the Grotowski based warm-ups and exercises by encouraging release, stillness, exposure, imagination, discovery of the center and strong focus. These exercises are all pulled directly from Acrobat of the Heart by Stephen Wangh.

“From Breath to Vowel to Pitch” ~ Focuses on the body and voice connection that begins with the breath being supported prior to adding any vocals. Lying down is a wonderful way to release all tension.

1. For five minutes, perform any aerobic exercise that leaves you breathing hard.
2. Lie down on your back, giving up your physical tension to gravity.
3. Take the time you need to make sure your legs are relaxed, that your neck is free, and that your jaw is released. Notice how your breath naturally fills your lower abdomen as you breathe. As the exercise proceeds and your breath becomes shallower, continue to allow your lower body to receive the breath in this way.
4. While making sure that your stomach, chest, and neck stay relaxed, wake up your face by moving the facial muscles around, stretching your tongue and lips, and allowing yourself to smile.

5. Open your eyes and allow your breath to exit from your mouth, fountaining up toward the ceiling. Practice adding muscular choice without interfering with the breath itself by lifting the lower lip toward the upper teeth so that the outgoing of breath produces a \textit{fff} sound. Then return to allowing the breath to exit from an open mouth.

6. As lightly as you produced the \textit{fff}, now allow sound to occur on the out-of-breath, beginning with a gentle \textit{hhuh}, what Linklater calls a “sigh of relief.” Let the sound just “ride” on top of the breath that initiates it, as a surfer rides on top of the powerful wave beneath. You do not have to \textit{make} the sound, but simply \textit{allow} it to happen.

7. Now let the vowel change. On the same relaxed breath, allow an \textit{oo} to ride (like the \textit{oo} in \textit{hoop}). Then try an \textit{oh} (like the \textit{o} in \textit{cone}). An \textit{ay} (like the \textit{a} in \textit{wave}), and then \textit{eee}. Just let the different vowels happen without trying to change anything else.

8. Notice how the \textit{eee} sounds higher in pitch than the \textit{oh}, even though you are speaking the same note.

9. Now, as you slide from \textit{oo} to \textit{oh} to \textit{ah} to \textit{ay} to \textit{ee}, allow the pitch to slide up as the vowels suggest. Meanwhile picture the sound sliding up your body from your pelvis to your head. Let the vowel, the pitch, and the resonation all slide together from pelvis to head (from \textit{oo} to \textit{eee}) and from the head back down again (from \textit{eee} to \textit{oo}).

10. Relax and return to just breathing.

(p. 153)
“The Container” and “The Kiss” ~ Focuses on a single image and making a commitment to working with that image, no matter how uncomfortable or comfortable it feels. It is incredibly important that these two exercises be done as close to complete silence, with the understanding that reactions to the images may be met with light laughter or intense exasperation.

“The Container”

1. To begin, find a safe place on the floor and curl your body into a huddled position. You can be kneeling or lying on your side in any position that allows you to feel though your body is confined.

2. The premise is that your body is contained by something, something literal. Your work is to “discover” the image by using your body, by pressing outward against the container, trying to find an exit. It is important that you work with all the part of your body, with the back of your neck and your pelvis and legs as well as your arms. You are pushing, clawing, biting, scraping, wriggling your way out through the container, discovering as you do just what it is that holds you. There is no right or wrong solution to this problem; what is important is that you engage fully in the struggle, that you let yourself keep trying things, and that you trust whatever you discover. Use your eyes to help you to “see” what is there and to help you be specific.

3. When you have “escaped,” or exited, from whatever was holding your body so tightly at first, you have more space, and the exercise continues. You are again in some sort of container; that is, there is some other piece of imagery that you must actively
engage. Again you use your full body to work your way out, allowing yourself to accept and to work with all the details of texture, material, or life that you discover.

4. And so on. Each time you exit from one piece of imagery, you find yourself in another, and another each time the image “contains” you so that you must actively engage it in order to progress.

5. The most important thing is to keep using all the parts of your body and to trust what you find.

6. Work for fifteen or twenty minutes. And when you have finished, stop, close your eyes, and give yourself some private time to digest what you have encountered.

“The Kiss”

1. To begin the kiss exercise, again find a safe place on the floor, but this time begin the exercise either in a high kneel or standing – that is, in some position that leaves you open, rather than curled up. While you work you may find yourself moving into other positions, but be careful if you lie down on the floor that you do not collapse or give in completely to gravity.

2. The premise of this exercise is that a kiss is touching your body, and the kiss moves over your skin. You can use your isolations to help you be specific about where the kiss is and how it is touching you, but unlike the Container work in which you were engaging the image, here you are opening yourself to it, allowing it to come to you. Your choices are choices of permission rather than of effort. But again, the most important
things you need to do are trust what you find, allow what happens to happen, and stay open to receiving the image.

3. Sometimes during this exercise you may feel like closing your eyes. If you do, try to open them again. See if you can allow yourself to actually see your imagery, to be specific about who or what is kissing you.

4. At the end of fifteen or twenty minutes, stop, hunker, and allow yourself to remember your experience.

(p. 104-105)

“Standing Up Without Adding Tension” ~ Focuses on placing each vertebrae one by one and not overloading the body with too much weight at once. Since we are most often caught up in the rush of life, it becomes incredibly important to take care of yourself as much as you can. From the time you get up in the morning, if you rise as specifically as listed in the exercise below, your body and mind will be thankful.

1. Begin by returning to your relaxed *hhuuh* sound, the “sigh of relief” on each out-breath.

2. During the following steps, move only on the in-breath, relaxing in each new position on the out-breath, and exhaling a sigh.

3. On one in-breath, roll onto your side, pulling your legs up into a fetal position. Then sigh, checking that your sound is as relaxed and open as it was when you were lying on your back.
4. On another breath, use your arms to push yourself onto your knees. Your head is still down, your forehead on the floor. And again, sigh.

5. Next push yourself back onto your feet, and sigh.

6. Then, on several breaths, slowly straighten your legs, and then unroll the vertebrae of your back one by one, beginning with the pelvis and working your way up to the head. As you do, be careful that your stomach stays relaxed, that your shoulders hang freely, and that your jaw does not tighten.

7. Every time you breathe out, stop, relax, and check the vibration with a light sigh. If you seem to have added any tension, halt the straightening process for a moment while you let the tension go.

8. If you notice that at some particular step along the way your voice has become more restricted, return to the previous position, check the sound again, and then progress up again, changing your position in smaller increments, noticing the sources of unnecessary tension.

9. The last thing to do is to let your head float up, making sure your eyes are open, and your jaw is relaxed.

10. Now that you are standing, again let the relaxed sigh happen on your out-breath. Check through your body that you are not holding anything that does not need to be held.

11. Make eye contact with others, smile and check that you are not “zoning out.”

(p. 154-155)
“The Weapons Work” ~ This exercise was particularly successful with the teenage boys that I worked with. Allowing their entire body to feel the weight of a “weapon” that is completely created by the body and imagination with full commitment gave them a sense of power that was safe. The sense of honesty and using the “give-and-take” method also established a bond within the group. Again, the word “actor” is used in this exercise, but the goals and outcomes are universal.

1. One actor sends a sound and movement to another, as if the sound and body gesture were an imagery weapon directed through space. The receiver then aims another sound/gesture/weapon at another actor. One gesture might be like a giant sword, swung from the waist, the next like a series of bullets from the eyes, the next might be imaginary clods of mud kicked with the feet. Each gesture-weapon activates a particular resonator and pitch, and each is aimed to “hit” the partner in a particular place. What you are working on is a variation and range of weapons (not weapon after weapon held in the hands) and on a particular effect (my twelve-foot fingernails and my nasal whine are scraping the skin off your left leg).

2. At the same time, the person who is receiving the blow allows her body to take in the energy of the hit fully and with precision. (The edge of your tongue-whip slices me across the stomach, knocking me down.)

3. Once you are able to keep giving and receiving with changing rhythms and images, the next step is to begin using the text, one phrase at a time. Each phrase is like a weapon. Each phrase is clearly meant to get through to your partner, and to do so in a very particular way.
4. Be careful not to strain your voice.
Bibliography


VITA

Alexis Goldstein was born on June 19, 1982 in Norfolk, VA. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Performance from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2003 and then worked for Theatre IV/Barksdale Theatre as their Production Management Associate directly following her undergraduate work. After departing from Richmond, she spent time in Philadelphia, PA, where she worked at the Annenberg Center of Performing Arts at the University of Pennsylvania as the Group Sales Coordinator in addition to working at the Center for Autism as one of their movement therapy students before returning back to Richmond, VA.

During her graduate school years, she worked with Tuckahoe Elementary School as their lead theatre professor and has taught extensive performance and speech based classes at Virginia Commonwealth University. She is currently signed to maintain working with both Tuckahoe Elementary and United Methodist Family Services continuing her abstract movement work, and also establishing programs with Art 180, which gives young people the chance to express themselves through creative artistic expression.