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## **The Theater Plays the Body. Replication of the Canon of Beauty among Young Actresses in the Theater**

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**Abstract** The article presents the results of our independent qualitative research conducted in Polish theater circles. In-depth interviews have been conducted with fourth-year female students of acting faculties from four state theater schools and with lecturers working at these faculties. The aim of the study was to answer the question whether the theater has currently become a place where bodily images are being standardized and beauty canons reproduced. The research material gathered allows for the formulation of the following conclusions: 1) studying at a theater school significantly impacts the perception of one's own body, 2) there is a widespread belief among the students concerning the importance of the body (and the beauty thereof) in the profession of an actor, which results in subjecting the body to some regimes, often destructive ones, 3) the pressure to have a perfect body is so strongly internalized in the theater circles that it becomes imperceptible to those who yield under this pressure.

**Keywords** Body; Canon Beauty; Eating Disorders; Theater; Sociology of the Body

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**T**he sociology of the body is a research perspective present in nearly all the dimensions and realms of social life. However, despite the fact that reflections concerning the theater have often included the issue of the body (e.g., in the context of nudity), the theater has yet to develop research methods and techniques that would be adequate to recognize processes which are currently taking place on stage. Although this is not the main task of the theater, in the light of contemporary theater discussions (largely centered on the presence of women on the stage), it is an important part of the reflection on contemporary theater (Godlewska-Byliniak, Kułakowska, and Łukasz n.d.). Part of the mentioned processes are conditional upon mass culture as broadly understood. At the same time, the theater is a perfect place—while studying the body in it—to satisfy the claim of Honorata Jakubowska (2012) and truly reach the body and corporeality.

The role and meaning of the body in the theater is constantly changing and the category of the body itself can be used as a tool for distinguishing particular territories in the history of theater. However, as Krystyna Duniec (2012:10) points out, “regardless of the type of theater, the body will constitute architectonics of sense, since it is always intertwined in the meaning.”

From the anthropological, as well as psychological and sociological perspective, the meaning ascribed to the theatrical body—a body which signifies and is signified—changes together with our embodied experience:

The theater used to have the purpose of the post-symbolic sublimation of the soul and setting it free from the

limitations of random carnality. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century—just as Adolphe Appia wanted it to be—the human body does not feign reality—since it is reality itself. In contemporary performance, in which the aesthetical, moral, notional, flowing limits between presentation and representation, between the artist and the work of art have been moved, the body is no longer merely a tool for evoking events, but a source thereof. [Duniec 2012:16]

It is a strange paradox, since the body, which loses its figurative sense, dependent upon the human spirit, gains an essential sense on stage. In the world of rickety identities, it becomes a symbol of authenticity. However, it is necessary to remember that this authenticity is clearly marked by “the spirit of the times” and intertwined with the aesthetical discourse: “The present body is a palimpsest, enmeshed in a multi-form process of figuration and transfiguration, where new layers of meanings are added by history, medicine, politics, literature, and gender” (Duniec 2012:19).

Within this meaning it is not only the body that plays in the theater but it is also the theater that plays the body.

### **The Theater as a Place of Meeting with the Body**

The starting point for our reflections is the conviction that each aspect of human life has a carnal dimension and each experience is a carnal one. However, at the same time, this inevitable presence of the body is characterized by its absence in everyday experience—although it is embodied by nature, we erase the body from our consciousness (Jakubowska 2012).

The theater is one of the places where the body can be observed, not being subject to aestheticization with the use of graphic software, where the imperfections of the body can be instantly reduced. In the theater, we get to know the bodies of other people and compare our own. During the play the spectator begins to perceive his or her body as a significant element of existing in social reality. He or she assesses the actors' condition, confronts their bodies with images known from the media, or compares him- or herself to them.

We ask the question of how actors experience their own bodies, how they struggle with their limitations, how they experience shame, exposing their bodies in public. In the course of the research questions of treating one's body as an obstacle (in taking up professional challenges), or experiencing the body during an illness, also emerged.

Also, as far as the commercial potential of the body is concerned, selling the body in pop culture and mass culture relates mainly to women's bodies. Despite the postmodern discourse concerning transgression, the business and the market point directly to the female body.

### **The Female Body on Stage<sup>1</sup>**

The growing phenomenon of gender transgression, as a result of the postmodern dispersion of identity, can also be seen in the theater. Therefore, the theater ought to be treated as a kind of a laboratory in which

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<sup>1</sup>The original (Polish) version of this title contains a word play, with "stage" meaning both the theater stage and a boxing ring, where the female body lies, defeated.

we observe images of femininity and masculinity. What is clearly visible in it is the further specification of models and canons of beauty present in the mass culture, both in the case of men and women. The regimes that people subject their bodies to in order to achieve a perfect image are both aestheticization on the level of stomatological and surgical interventions, aestheticizations performed with the help of stylists and image specialists, as well as the particular care of one's weight and "quality" of the body. This study concerns female bodies. According to the authors, despite certain similarities between the sexes in adjusting the body to the contemporary canons of beauty, the regimes that women subject their bodies to are different from the ones undertaken by men.

The need to distinguish the body depending on sex still seems to be valid, since the sex still remains the basic category regarding the use of the body (Mauss 1973). The findings concerning the general health of women and men, as well as the factors which determine it, also impact this differentiation (Giddens 2007:171-172).

Furthermore, the female body appears to be particularly subjected to constant control. Although the regulation of women's physical sphere by social standards (moral, religious, legal) is changing, it still remains extraordinarily strong (Garncarek 2010) and nowadays is outright destructive (Jakubowska-Mroskowiak 2002).

### **The Body as an Object of Control**

Observing theater school learners over the last few years gives rise to the thought that the theatrical

body, at least when it approaches the stage, falling under internal and external pressure, appears to be quite uniform. It can be clearly seen here that the body is a cultural and social concept, as well as an object of social control, which involves various aspects (Jakubowska 2009).

The actor's profession, requiring taking particular care of the body as a tool of the trade (Jakubowska 2012), has always subjected the "scenic body" to reflection and focus, yet it allowed for a diversity of body forms. However, never has the body in the theater been so standardized as it is in recent years. Mimesis—one of the functions of the theater—seems to be limited nowadays to the reproduction of beauty canons.

At vocal faculties where voice is the basic criterion determining whether or not a person will be admitted to the school, the theatrical body appears to be more varied. However, the pressure to improve it and put it within the frames of contemporary ideas of a beautiful (slim) theatrical body is not decreasing. It might be said that today even ears have eyes.<sup>2</sup>

The presented study has enabled us to examine an interesting piece of the social world—theater schools—which corresponds to processes taking place among the younger generation, susceptible to criticism and control due to immaturity and external factors (expectations of their peers and teachers). As Jan Szczepański (1970) points out, control is one of the basic elements of socialization; thanks to con-

trol, it is possible to regulate the behavior of individuals and whole social groups.

Bulimia and anorexia nervosa which are, according to the authors, extreme consequences of the pursuit of the perfect body, are common in various circles, and the theater community is only one of them. However, it is this particular environment where problems related to eating disorders can be recognized much more easily, owing to the compulsion to shape and take care of one's body, which is typical of this community. We emphasize it in the very beginning, since the scale of the problem among female students at acting faculties (although representatives of acting circles are associated with eating disorders) has really surprised us.

## Research Questions, Place of Research, Difficulties

The aim of the study was to understand, partially at least, the extent of the internalization of external pressure to have a body which meets the norms and canons of beauty. We assumed that the appearance of very similar bodies on stage is the result of various factors—the awareness present in the culture of beauty canons, the expectations of the selection committee in entry exams, and the personal preferences of the persons making recruitment decisions.

Through the study we wanted to answer the following question: Do young people bow so much to the pressure of mass culture and conform to the ideal of beauty reproduced in the mass media or is it the preferences of the lecturers that decide whose body will become the next model?

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<sup>2</sup> Covent Garden paid for stomach-shrinking surgery and liposuction for Deborah Voigt, when she reached a weight which made the stage performances of the soprano in her costumes not so much impossible, as offending the taste of the audience admiring the singer's voice.

The study was conducted at the 34<sup>th</sup> Theater Schools Festival, which took place in Łódź, May 10-15, 2016. Conducting the research during the festival enabled us to reach a wide group of respondents.

Since we worked on an area that has not been explored before, as far as theater in Poland is concerned, we chose to verify the thesis with the method of in-depth unstructured interviews, not merely in order not to falsify the thesis but also to discover new problems.

We were aware that we were touching upon problems existing in the environment being researched on many levels, which the social actors themselves often remain unaware of. In addition, the problem of eating disorders selected already at the initial stage of research required that we demonstrate particular sensitivity, but also conversation skills, knowledge concerning the problem, and awareness of conditions in which people who are ill live and describe the world.

## **Methodology—Sampling and Methods of Analysis**

Since qualitative field researchers strive to grasp experiences and interactions in their natural context, we decided to deal in the research environment (theater) of one of the authors, placed in the context of research interest of the other author (unification of the body according to a beauty canon).

We have conducted 17 in-depth interviews: 13 with female students of the 4<sup>th</sup> course of faculties of acting at four state theater schools and 4 interviews with teachers working at these faculties. Part of the in-

terviews were semi-structured life word interviews, while another part used elements of factual, conceptual, narrative, and confrontational interviews.

The interview as a space for constructing knowledge was carefully structured so that reliable knowledge about the world and the awareness of the respondents could be obtained. However, where both the respondent's knowledge, as well as their willingness to share their own experience went beyond the scenario of the interview, other types of interviews proved to be valuable. Elements of a factual interview, in which the significance of the respondent's history to the identity of the group is more important than their personal relation to the events mentioned (Kvale 2011:124), were present in talks with teachers and the female respondents who admitted to eating disorders.

Elements of a conceptual interview, the purpose of which is to clarify concepts and ways of understanding the phenomena described (Kvale 2011:125), appeared in almost all interviews. Elements of a narrative interview made it possible to obtain a lot of information about the respondents themselves and the structure of their connections in a given institution. Narration is one of the most natural cognitive and linguistic forms through which individuals try to sort out and express meaning. If the respondent is used to the stereotypical style of the interview and uses "ready-made formulas," the researcher's request to tell their own story will leave room for "the author's element" in which the respondent, often unconsciously, "will come out of the role" and, ordering the quoted events while telling the story, will cast a new light on them (Kvale 2011:127).

Elements of a confrontational interview as a form of an active interview in which the researcher stimulates the process of narrative creation, suggesting views that the respondent may accept (Kvale 2011:131), made it possible to verify the obtained data.

Sampling was purposeful. The research was conducted in two stages: for the first 6 interviews we chose the respondents using the snowball method. This stage allowed us to examine the area; next respondents were chosen mainly on the basis of the specificity of the stage roles they presented.

Long-term presence in the environment, in-depth analysis thereof, and awareness of internal conditionings made it possible not only to reach key respondents but also to preserve symmetry in interaction of interviews.

Triangulation in the research covered the following methods: ethnographic participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, interviews with elements of factual, conceptual, narrative, and confrontational interview, interviews with experts, and visual method.

Prior to commencing the research we saw pictures of young actresses published on websites of students' theaters,<sup>3</sup> treating them as a kind of related data (Gibbs 2011:53). These were photos from previously announced sessions, taken by a professional photographer; presenting both portraits and whole figures of the actresses. We also presented this material to persons uninterested in theater and the

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.teatrstudyjny.lodz.pl/aktorzy-teatru-studyjnego-w-lodzi-20152016/>. Retrieved April 17, 2018.

issue we approached, asking them to assess the likeness between the actresses. We were surprised that many of those persons noticed similarities not only with regard to figures, but also the type of looks preferred by a given school. It can be easily explained, especially in the case of institutions in which the final decision concerning the admitting of candidates to the first year of studies is made by the year's tutor single-handedly. However, we are aware that "generally speaking, the nature of visual methods is more to explore than to verify" (Banks 2009:32).

The particular character of interviews also depended on the time they were conducted. When new research problems appeared, the interviews were supplemented by further questions, and the issues which appeared in them were taken up by people well-aware of the situation—connected with the artistic education system and theater. Such a practice is consistent with the assumption that definitions and hypotheses in qualitative research are developed and improved in the course of the research (Flick 2011:14).

These were forms of group interviews conducted in non-formal situations. In view of the particular character of the respondents, the interviews may also be categorized as expert interviews.

## Data Analysis

When analyzing data we used the method of bricolage, an eclectic form of producing meaning (through the multitude of methods and theoretical approaches adopted *ad hoc*): "Bricolage refers to

mixed technical discourses, that is, to a situation in which the interpreter moves freely between various analytical techniques" (Kvale 2011:186). Hence, in the course of the conducted analysis, there were various techniques interoperating:

1. Those techniques making it possible to notice the elements which are compatible with one another:
  - registering models and schemes,
  - noticing likelihood,
  - grouping.
2. Those techniques making it possible to combine various constituents of the data:
  - building metaphors.

In view of the small amount of the material, we were able to analyze it thoroughly. We made comparisons and differentiated by dividing the variables.

We are aware that considering such a small scale of the research, making generalizations from the interviews can be misleading. Thus, we emphasize that the conclusions which we draw on the basis of this research should not be generalized, but signal only the problems discovered.

Gathering factors, noticing relationships between variables, and searching for intermediary variables (Miles and Huberman 2000:252-253) allowed us to express the subject as a whole and seek a relationship between the observed state and the reasons which led to it.

Thanks to the bricolage technique we were able to determine the correlation between the recog-

nized problem of the respondents' eating disorder and the willingness to talk about it, as well as the length of utterances. The persons identified as suffering from bulimia and/or anorexia and admitting to their illness clearly indicated both the internal (psyche) and external (system of education in artistic schools) factors which contributed to the development of the illness. The persons who did not admit to suffering from those illnesses (although they had been indicated by their teachers and peers as the ones who struggle with this problem), were unwilling to talk about the rate of occurrence of such disorders among their friends. Such a correlation clearly points to one of the basic recommendations—being aware of the problem and familiarizing oneself with it results in greater openness in talking about it and undertaking steps to deal with it.

### Being an Actor

While researching the scenic body, we are aware that the actor "experiences his own body similarly to a dancer, as a tool, an interactive partner, or a material which has to be conciliated according to the needs of a social group" (Byczkowska 2009:102 as cited in Jakubowska 2012:14). The actor is exposed to critical social reception and continuously judged to a far greater extent than other professions. Youth is another element which increases the need for being accepted, sensitivity to external stimuli, and often the inability to set one's own boundaries, too. However, people willing to pursue this career are not in short supply; acting faculties are among the most popular choices in the country, with 50 applicants for each place.

At the same time, when touching upon the body, which is interesting to us as the subject of research itself, it reveals itself to us as an indicator referring to other dimensions of social life. We have singled out the following research questions and problems:

1. Perception of one's own body prior to the commencement of education at the school and currently.
2. Importance of the body in an actor's career.
3. Emphasizing the role of the body in the theater school education process.
4. Working on the body (at school and outside of it) and bodily regimes.
5. Acceptance as self-reflection and in feedback.
6. Can lack of perfection be an asset?
7. Is there conscious pressure to standardize looks in theater circles?
8. Who do I compare myself to? Colleagues and pop culture models as the mirror and reference point.
9. Presence of eating disorders.

The above questions and research problems constituted the basis for the interviewer to construct an interview scenario. They directed the collection of empirical material and then its analysis.

The rich literature on the role and perception of the body in the modern world has provided us with some tracks. We were also convinced that the issues we touch on in this particular profession and at this stage of the respondents' career will in many places be related to general corporeality analyses, although intensified by the specificity of the acting profession. The transition from general to specific objectives has made it possible to see how, by operating in the theater environment and confronting the social expectations of the actor's role, the attitude of a young actress to her own body changes and the feeling of pressure on the adaptation of her own image to environmental and social needs and expectations increases.

Both at the state of the interview stage and material analysis, we tried to preserve this pattern as an element illustrating the process of emergence of eating disorders in the theater environment. The above pattern of questions and issues allows us to see that the source of the problem of eating disorders is located outside of the educational system, although the educational system noticeably deepens it.

### **The Impact of School Education on the Perception of the Body**

One can easily notice that the perception of one's own body prior to the commencement of education at the school, and after several years of studying, changes dramatically in the course of socialization in theater schools.

Perception of one's own body ought to be divided into two stages—before and after the school. All

respondents emphasize that they were completely different when they joined the school.

It's hard for me to remember who I was those four years ago. I have an impression that each year of this school was a different me, that it all happened so quickly, this school results in such a development of self-awareness, self-knowledge, that I was a different person each year. [S8]

They understand the maturity which they reach at school in many ways—on the one hand, it is greater self-awareness—awareness of one's emotionality, as well as the capabilities and limitations of one's body. On the other hand, maturity is understood as acceptance of one's body (at least declared).

Before I went to school I paid attention if my body was pretty...There's no such thing as a pretty or ugly body; the body can be interesting or not, each fat roll can be used to your advantage. The more I accept this, the better I can use it in acting. [S1]

Growing to be aware of oneself, one's own body and its capabilities was emphasized by nearly all of the respondents.

The second stage of one's own body perception is the body they are aware of, the body which is an effective tool, the object of reflection, focus, and care, but perceived more like an option than a necessity. It is then when the awareness of one's boundaries, the ability to protect oneself and say "no" appears.

In the freshman year the tutor suggested that we all got undressed...there was a mirror and everybody

approached it and took their clothes off, we were in our underwear, like at a swimming pool and he would approach us, standing in front of this mirror and ask us what we didn't like about ourselves, what our strengths and weaknesses were, as far as body was concerned. And so we looked at ourselves this way, that we had bandy legs, prominent ears and he said then that you have bandy legs and do you realize that your head is like a pepper, and this and that, and you should lose weight, that you should exercise...to become aware of it. This shouldn't have happened in the freshman year, if at all. If it had happened later, I wouldn't have participated in it. [S8]

According to the respondents, the boundary between exposing and showing one's body at school or on stage is very thin and easy to be breached, particularly in the hierarchical system of education. A fact which creates an additional difficulty is that the students are often taught by their future employers, so setting one's own boundaries (at least initially) is difficult or even impossible.

Lack of acceptance on the part of the lecturers, and excessive expectations regarding the students' bodies, are attributed by the actresses not to the teachers' lack of good will, but to external conditions and the laws of the market.

### **Whenever I Want to**

Respondents claimed that they were able to change their bodies at will and work on them, which requires iron discipline and self-control. They admire it in their colleagues, but admit that they do not have such a need themselves.

Sure, I'm jealous, I look at them and think what beautiful bodies they have, I envy them because I know it requires work and discipline, and I respect this and admire my beautiful colleagues, but I'm not like that, I could do it, too, but what for? [S10]

An exception is the case when they work on a role, which justifies complying with practically any regimes. In their opinion, the body can be freely transformed and disciplined. They see it as a process in the making.

When I stand next to my colleagues who have flat bellies, firm butts with no cellulite, because they don't eat this and that, they exercise a lot, I could do the same, but I take care of my body because I'm gonna have it for the rest of my life, but some regimes are only for the role, but maybe just because I'm young and ready for a challenge. [S11]

It is worth mentioning that the challenges related to dramatic loss of weight are rather connected with accepting cinema roles. However, the awareness of the fact that the profession of an actor involves such a challenge makes going on an extremely strict diet behavior which is acceptable (and even admired) in this environment and never ostracized.

I wish I could sing better, I don't know how to improvise when singing—skills, not looks? I can always change the looks, but it requires a great deal of discipline from me...I was never able to reach such a point, well, perhaps once I looked like a model, but I'm not able to reach such a point to be size 34—that's the desired one? Yes, 34 and 170 cm it's like...for a movie, because on the stage it's always

like I shouldn't be plump, I should have bigger eyes. [S9]

Striving to have a perfect body is clearly inspired by the model suggested by mass culture.

## Importance of the Body in an Actor's Career

The respondents emphasize that looks should go together with talent and personality, but they have no doubt that in many cases it is the appearance itself that swings the balance. They hear it even from their professors.

Yes, sometimes it is so [that appearance is more important than skills—footnote authors]. Even before theater school, when I studied at a preparatory school, I heard it from a professor, an experienced actor who prepared us for theater school: "An actress doesn't have to be smart, she has to be pretty." [S1]

Talented, with such a pointed chin, and though all the ladies were for, the tutor didn't admit her...because it's the tutor that finally makes the decision; actress reduced to a good-looking thing? I'm sorry to say so, but in fact, that's the way it is. [P2]

Beginning from theater schools, the theater environment is a basin of sexism. Actresses are not judged through the prism of their skills, acting, or vocal talent, but their body. It turns out that talent and knowledge do not decide on an acting career, but above all a "pretty face." The respondents speak directly, though in a more vulgar way:

Always at auditions for movies and commercials, unless somebody is outstanding, but after school we all represent a certain level, but it's the muzzle that counts. [S9]

Enormous competition in the profession and the tough rules of the market leave young people with no illusions:

We are a product—it's the pretty stuff that sells. [P9]

There is something like that, it's not the most talented ones that make it, it's the prettiest ones, those dolls, and people in the theater start to admire them. [P2]

Female students are, therefore, aware of being objectified. After leaving theater school, and sometimes even while still studying, they become a "commodity" to meet the expectations of "buyers," first directors, and then the audience.

### **Emphasizing the Role of the Body in the Theater School Education Process**

The actresses' belief about the importance of looks also results from the fact that the role of the body is emphasized in the education process, both during the exams, and in the course of education.

The body is greatly emphasized in theater education, which is expressed in regulations. The body has to be healthy in order to rise to the challenges it is put through:

Schools have to teach the trade, the body is a tool of the trade, thorough workshops on the basics of danc-

ing, movement improvisation, acrobatics, there are also additional workshops for them to meet person-ages from various fields, 50%/50%; a whole lot of moving, there's no theater outside the body. [P1]

In the freshman year, there's a lot of it, three hours of dancing, the body doesn't have time to rest, then the second year is better, and in the third and fourth there's nothing at all. [S9]

It is easy to notice that in the course of socialization at artistic schools, young actresses internalize standards and values desired in a given group. Particularly explicit are the "vigilance systems" (Szczepański 1970) which, together with formal (bylaw) and informal actions (assessment of individuals by members of the groups he or she belongs to), make it possible to exercise social control over the bodies of young actresses, of which they are often unaware.

The extent of control depends, for example, on the social and cultural situation of a given community and the extent to which standards and values are internalized by particular individuals, as well as on their social position, and the resulting ways of fulfilling social roles (woman/actress/student/lecturer) (Weinberg 2007).

### **Working on the Body (at School and Outside of It) and Bodily Regimes**

The body should therefore meet the social standard and expectations. Even if working on the body is often destructive:

One student lost 20 kg for the role, we told him that he can't go through such a drastic change because today

you play here, tomorrow there, and it's not healthy, it's not the USA where you have a coach, a dietician, a year or two...under our Polish circumstances it's impossible, it slowly changes, but for those who have the freedom to choose the roles, they want and have financial security... [P1]

Out of the greatest cruelty I only drank juice for a month and I still rode a bike, it was a need for some kind of control. [S9]

Of course, these may be seen as extreme cases, marking already the beginning of eating disorders, yet many young people are able to do a lot in order to get a role or maintain it. However, gaining the acceptance of the theater environment (which translates into engagements and career development) is worth the great effort.

### Acceptance as Self-Reflection and in Feedback

How important the role of the body is in self-acceptance can be exemplified by the following quote: "Our life is dependent on the proper functioning of our body. Even our sense of identity is based on the expectation that the body will make it easier, not harder for us to interact with others" (Giddens 2007:181).

Acceptance appears to be one of the basic conditions to pursue this profession, with the respondents claiming that it is to be searched for in oneself first.

The more I try to be myself instead of striving to please somebody else, the more acceptance I get. Be-

cause I don't expect this acceptance, when you accept yourself, you don't need the acceptance of others so much. [S3]

The respondents also emphasize that the significant other is an important element of self-acceptance. It can be a loved one, but it is the professors and tutors that turn out to be the most important ones.

There are really wise people in Wrocław, I followed the right path, I met...who didn't allow any of the girls to come to her classes in make-up, she made us uglier, I fought on the stage, I cried...she made us get used to being natural. I knew I didn't have to pretend to be anybody else. [S10]

For me it's always important to hear a good word from the year tutor, because he's the one that leads us. [S4]

The professor-expert accepting the students as the "significant other" is the highest form of acknowledgement.

You need to be reconciled with yourself, you need to read a lot and you need to have a boyfriend. [S8]

This school is quite a psychology school, I got a lot from the professors, but I also had my private life with somebody outside this environment; support of a loved one really helps to overcome this jealousy. [S11]

Eating disorders remain inseparably related to feelings of low self-worth, the need to be accepted, fear, depression, and the inability to cope with one's emotions. They are an answer of still immature individuals to the postmodern requirement

to treat the body as a project, material that can be shaped at will, often under the pressure of culture or peers. The capability to shape the body is particularly important in the profession of the actor, who is required to be able to transform his body in a most spectacular way (putting on and losing weight for the role, appearing older, uglier).

### **Can Lack of Perfection Be an Asset?**

Some of the respondents claimed that there is a place for every kind of body, also the one outside of the canon, in the theater. The actresses they mentioned (Hajewska-Krzysztofik, Celińska) have their admiration, but the girls are aware that imperfections are allowed once you already are a personage and an acknowledged theatrical talent.

A “flaw” may turn into an advantage...the stage likes it when something doesn't add up, something isn't right, there is no such thing in the actor's body that would be a clear flaw, everything can be turned into an asset. [S2]

The imperfect body was also described in a positive way, as the one that can play a therapeutic role.

It's necessary in the theater, people need to see somebody who is like them, who limps, who is dirty, who fails, who's posseting. People need that, women especially. People want to see life, not styled faces, hair, figures, it's just pretty, but it's boring. [S2]

The tendency to perceive bodies which do not belong to the canon in a positive way can also be seen as part of some theater fad which professors talk about:

There is a fad for some kind of pathology, on the one hand, there is a whole trend like that in the theater, while, on the other hand, there are the pretty ones, there's nothing in-between, either a doll or a monster. [P2]

### **Is There Conscious Pressure to Standardize Looks in Theater Circles?**

The pressure to have a perfect body and look beautiful is so strongly internalized that it is difficult to say clearly what determines the thinking and actions of students to the greatest extent; the perfect model of a female body present in mass culture, watching their colleagues who get closer to it or the suggestions of the professors who believe in it due to the “laws of the market.”

The actresses themselves do not notice great similarities between one another; such a suggestion rather surprised them. They do not realize the pressure they fall under.

I don't see it anymore, but come to think of it, then it is so, we are actually all one type, none of us are more than 36 and 170. [S8]

From my point of view, this is absurd that we can be similar to one another, because we are so totally different, a collection of totally different characters, each one wants to be the alpha female, but I recently changed my hairstyle and people now recognize me; yeah, that third year are clones. [S7]

In Łódź, it's like somebody comes up to me and I thought I had already talked with that person and

it's a completely new person, it's amazing that they find people of the same type. [S10]

It is hard for the actresses to admit that they give in to pressure; they do not admit it, trying to justify the similarities between their figures. They explain that a slim and athletic body is related rather to trying to be in good shape, which is crucial in the profession of an actor, than to taking care of the appearance. The actresses mentioned the need for a healthy diet, keeping the body in good shape, and being aware that they would be competing with one another to get a job.

Usually by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> year they're all beautiful, thin, like processed...it happens as a side effect, but not because we have a lot of physical education classes, it's like from the second year on they are on the runway and in the third year the competition begins. [S7]

It's obvious that there is some pressure, that we have to look good, we have to feel good in our bodies, and that's why everybody's athletic, exercises, and watches what they eat. It's not about being pretty. [S5]

Comments about body and weight are part of everyday life in this environment. The pressure starts from the dresser, because there are no size 38 costumes in theater warehouses. Professors' suggestions that a slim, slender, and flexible body is the key to success are the order of the day:

We had classes with NL who does the auditioning for all the Polish movies and she said that there are five girls in our course who have to lose 5 kg immediately

if they want to be taken into consideration at all, and she said it directly—honestly and bluntly. [S9]

I had an audition for a short film and I was told that I don't meet the conditions [concerning weight], somebody once told me that there will always be time to put on weight. [S4]

### **Whom Do I Compare Myself to? Colleagues and Pop Culture Models as the Mirror and Reference Point**

The example of colleagues who get hired as a reward for their intense work on the body motivates them to take similar efforts:

I don't know if I envy other bodies, I know what body I would like to have and I strive to achieve it, I can see that she's beautiful and I ask myself if I am, too. [S3]

We can impose an enormous regime on ourselves, I've seen that because many of my colleagues have problems with eating...it's like when one girl is athletic and has a job, then many people try to follow suit and some of them go to extremes. [S13]

One of the professors also notices this trend: "what difference does it make if we choose various types, if they format themselves on their own" (P4).

### **Presence of Eating Disorders**

Eating disorders as a problem of the contemporary world are also present in acting circles, where they meet with particularly favorable conditions. Both

the respondents and the teaching staff are aware of the presence of the problem.

I became ill when I was 16 and this environment only aggravated it. [S9]

I heard that they have a huge problem with it in other schools, the extent of this obsession about body and looks is enormous. [S13]

It seems that it is no longer a problem of individual cases that the professors talk about in the context of sick leave. The students point out that the scale of this phenomenon is much bigger:

In our course, I know more than 5 people that I know have this problem, people rather hide it because it's embarrassing, that's what this illness really is about, those people give off a sort of an air that everything's great, I'm perfect. [S10]

I guess that there are 60% with eating disorders, bulimics, anorexics, and people don't talk about it, they say: "You look great." [S12]

One of the tendencies observed was hiding the problem. Girls who are ill can perfectly recognize the symptoms and determine the scale of the disorder. However, even the ones named by the professors as having the problem were often not ready to talk about it. We do not assume that the situation looks the same in all schools. Beyond any doubt, the awareness of the problem can be observed in Cracow and Wrocław. The schools undertake certain actions, for example, organize classes with a psychologist.

They have classes with a psychologist in freshman year and he can refer them further to somebody else...it's a group of people working there, the emotions which are created there are so enormous, you need to learn how to keep the emotions stable, then it's easier for us, too, to work with them, there is also coaching for teachers, how to talk about difficult things with the students, because you can easily hurt somebody. [P1]

The students appreciate this form of assistance. However, they do not state clearly whether it is sufficient. On the one hand, they do not expect anybody to take over the responsibility for their life and health, while on the other hand, they are often incapable of fighting the illness on their own.

The school does not take the responsibility in the form of medical inspections, we do it on our own. How do you do it? You lose weight, you don't eat, you sweat in the gym, they have no responsibility, nobody asks you: "Did you go to a dietician, maybe we can give you a refund. You lost weight? That's cool!" And if that's cool, then the girls keep losing weight because it can be even more cool. [S12]

## Summary

Our research demonstrates that schools are the place where socialization to a specifically understood femininity occurs. This socialization takes place on various levels, and its sources are both external and internal. The external level consists of the visual surroundings (including the message presented by the media), teachers, and their educational methods. The internal level, in turn, is the students' ideas of

their own bodies. All this makes young actresses strive to standardize their bodies.

The research problem mentioned in our study, that is, the pressure to standardize the bodies of students learning the art of acting (manifesting itself in eating disorders), although it concerns individuals and their emotional dysfunctions, is undoubtedly a sociological problem. For it is the “sociological imagination,” as defined by C. Wright Mills, that makes it possible to notice public problems in private concerns. Our respondents form a peculiar social group—on the one hand, they are young people, susceptible to cultural pressure to keep the body in a certain condition, while on the other hand, as representatives of the world of TV or the cinema—it is they that will soon be given the social legitimation to influence mass imagination. Therefore, the extent to which these individuals consent to submitting the body to regimes is of crucial importance. In the light of our research, it turns out that such a process does take place, which manifests itself in expressing approval of slim actresses (“the camera adds weight”) or playing down the problem of mental

disorders in the actors’ community (such disorders are described as either minor cases or a natural, ordinary phenomenon in this community).

We realize that generalization of the results could be possible if the sampling were bigger (including students of all courses) or even full (which is feasible). We know that by conducting this study we have only outlined a certain problem, but we cannot generalize the conclusions, since the circumstances of students learning the art of acting, as well as the teaching practices, are different in various theater schools. The research should be deepened and broadened, for example, by including actors (men) or the students of all courses at acting faculties in the sampling. Nevertheless, we think that we were able to reach key aspects of the origin of this social problem, that is, eating disorders.

An exception is the case when they work on a role, which justifies complying with practically any regime. In their opinion, the body can be freely transformed and disciplined. They see it as a process in the making.

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