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# "Must Be Heavyset": Casting Women, Fat Stigma, and Broadway Bodies

by Ryan Donovan

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“We need a young girl who is—what shall we say—chubby/fat/big. But a healthy version of a fat girl, because she is dancing her ass off for two hours.”

—Bernard Telsey, casting director<sup>[1]</sup>

## Introduction

Casting director Craig Burns worked on Broadway’s *Hairspray* (2002) from its first workshops, and it remains his favorite production because of the opportunity to cast people who “weren’t normally considered for leads in a show, and now all of a sudden these girls are getting a chance because we need a fat girl. There was so much joy in that.”<sup>[2]</sup> Katrina Rose Dideriksen was one such woman given the chance to play *Hairspray*’s Tracy Turnblad on Broadway and on tour. She remembered feeling excited to play Tracy because she “is the ingénue, she wins the guy, she saves the day . . . she’s funny and she’s lovable and all those things, but in this very real-girl way.” Dideriksen then noticed a “weight clause” in her contract: “It was really this underlying pinch to realize that subconsciously I was being told I was still wrong for it, that there was something I had to fix. . . I don’t think they realized how hurtful, and how anti-*Hairspray* it really was for them to be like, ‘Lose 20 pounds.’”<sup>[3]</sup> Apart from a few roles (including Tracy), fat women are almost never cast in roles beyond the comedic sidekick or best friend in commercial theatre.

The casting of Broadway musicals reproduces aesthetic values from the dominant culture, especially the notion that thin bodies—ones that conform to these values—are superior to other bodies, especially fat ones.<sup>[4]</sup> The aesthetic values placed on bodies are gendered, especially relative to size. Author Roxane Gay explains, “most girls are taught—that we should be slender and small. We should not take up space. We should be seen and not heard, and if we are seen, we should be pleasing to men, acceptable to society.”<sup>[5]</sup> Society informs fat women that they are unfeminine and undesirable, which in turn determines everything from how fat women are represented to how and where they work. In her memoir, Lindy West notes the material effects of these values, writing, “As a fat woman, my body is also lampooned, openly reviled, and associated with moral and intellectual failure. My body limits my job prospects, access to medical care and fair trials, and—the one thing Hollywood movies and Internet trolls most agree on—my ability to be loved.”<sup>[6]</sup> When a fat female actor walks into an audition, these sociocultural strictures delimit her presence and reception there. While all actors are often told they aren’t the “right fit” because of their appearance, fat women confront a double standard: one actor I interviewed was bluntly told, “You’re not fat enough to be our fat girl.”<sup>[7]</sup> For fat women, the inability of the industry to think inclusively about

body size proves a major barrier to employment.

*Fat* is typically hurled as an insult rather than claimed as an identity position in the United States. It is something seen as needing to be eliminated, which sociologists Samantha Kwan and Jennifer Graves argue is due to the “fashion-beauty complex,” in which “advertisements remind us that unwieldy, loose, and jiggly fat must be tamed. The taut body . . . then becomes a reflection of moral fortitude, perseverance, and bodily mastery.”<sup>[8]</sup> Advertising exhorts women to be the right kind of consumers—purchasing products that help one achieve thinness. The word *fat* itself can be discomfiting, and in order to neutralize stigma associated with the word, fat studies scholars have reclaimed and repurposed *fat*.<sup>[9]</sup> Fat studies scholar Marilyn Wann explains,

In fat studies, there is respect for the political project of reclaiming the word *fat*, both as the preferred neutral adjective (i.e., short/tall, young/old, fat/thin) and also as a term of political identity. . . . Seemingly well-meaning euphemisms like “heavy,” “plump,” “husky,” and so forth put a falsely positive spin on a negative view of fatness.<sup>[10]</sup>

Casting notices are rife with euphemisms to avoid saying *fat*, admitting the stigmatization of fatness while aiming not to offend. *Hairspray* star Marissa Jaret Winokur notes, “People don’t want to say the word ‘fat.’” She kept a record of the words used to avoid describing her as fat when she was starring in the musical on Broadway; these included “‘chubby,’ ‘hefty,’ ‘dumpling-shaped,’ [and] ‘dimple-kneed.’”<sup>[11]</sup> The disconnected, tentative relationship between language and fat corporeality is thus reproduced in theatre from casting to reception.

Casting necessarily includes processes of disqualification, yet the lack of opportunities for fat actors reveals that size-based discrimination remains so widespread on Broadway that it is accepted as natural and, crucially, neutral. By examining casting practices, this article combats what theatre scholar Brian Eugenio Herrera terms the “mythos of casting,” namely the discourse around casting practices masking “how an actor’s labor is (and is not) valued as a commodity.”<sup>[12]</sup> To extend Herrera’s formulation, I suggest that the mythos of casting also masks how the actor’s *body* becomes a commodity in the theatrical marketplace. In the closed economy of Broadway musicals, this mythos provides cover for the operation of ideologies espousing bodily conformity (e.g., the plethora of articles about “Broadway Bodies” on *Playbill.com*).<sup>[13]</sup> Musicals celebrate performative excess while disciplining other kinds of excess: differences of ability, gender, race, size, and sexuality. This essay centers on the casting, production, and reception of *Hairspray* in order to demonstrate how stigma determines how fatness has been employed in Broadway musicals since the 1980s. The aesthetics and politics of casting Tracy Turnblad provide a history of body shame and questionable labor practices spanning from the early 2000s to today. Musicals embody how and where Broadway (and, by extension, U.S. society) expects fat women to sound, to move, to behave, and to labor; class, gender, race, and sexuality further impact these expectations.

### Fat Stigma in/and Casting Broadway Musicals

*Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* are the *only* hit Broadway musicals of the past fifty years where fatness is *sometimes* a prerequisite for playing the female lead. *Hairspray* (2002) was the first Broadway musical to star a fat woman since Jennifer Holliday starred as Effie White in *Dreamgirls* (1981). Bonnie Milligan’s

casting as Princess Pamela in *Head Over Heels* (2018) is arguably the first Broadway musical to star a fat woman in a role where the character's size is not mentioned in the libretto, and the role *could* have gone to a traditional ingenue-type instead.<sup>[14]</sup> Milligan explains how *Head Over Heels* differs from previous treatments of fat female characters in musicals: "This world celebrates her! And it's not just her. It's everyone on stage who calls her beautiful. That's part of the intention."<sup>[15]</sup> Jeff Whitty conceived the role expressly for Milligan, who played Pamela in every iteration of the musical on its way to Broadway.<sup>[16]</sup> Milligan's casting and Pamela's narrative reflect contemporary attitudes toward body positivity just as *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* represent then-contemporary stances toward fat women.

These roles (Effie White, Tracy Turnblad, and Princess Pamela) are unique because they give fat actors the chance to play a full range of emotions beyond self-deprecation. Fat women in Broadway musicals are always considered in terms of their bodies and fitness in very specific ways; being considered plus-sized isn't usually a plus for women on Broadway. Sometimes the stigma is overt: casting notices for the 2016 City Center Encores! production of *The Golden Apple* repeatedly stated, "We are not looking for heavy character actresses."<sup>[17]</sup> Discrimination in casting and enforcement of bodily norms exists in all arenas of theatre from amateur to professional. Men do not face the same kinds of body scrutiny—Nathan Lane has regularly played leading roles where the guy gets the girl during the time span covered by this article, and *The Book of Mormon* has regularly cast fat men in the leading roles of Elder Cunningham following original star Josh Gad. John Waters hoped the musical adaptation of his film *Hairspray* would be a hit because "there will be high school productions, and finally the fat girl and the drag queen will get the starring parts."<sup>[18]</sup> Part of *Hairspray*'s power comes from the fact that Tracy is portrayed as feminine and desirable while also being fat and being okay with that. *Hairspray*'s onstage narrative intersects with offstage narratives of casting its Broadway production, a process that often made a spectacle of young women hoping, like Tracy, for a big break. *Hairspray* exemplifies Broadway's ambivalence toward casting nonconforming bodies. Even ostensibly fat-positive musicals like *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* became complicit in labor practices contributing to fat stigma.

Stigma has been grounded in bodily difference since, as sociologist Erving Goffman explains, ancient Greeks coined the term "to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier."<sup>[19]</sup> Stigma rests on a paradox of visibility, because certain bodies become invisible due to the very visible attributes that stigmatize them—fat people may be stared at but not seen, or viewed as having uncontrollable appetites. The social psychology of stigma indicates that "'visibility' and 'controllability' are the most important dimensions of stigma for the experience of both the stigmatizer and the stigmatized person."<sup>[20]</sup> In other words, fat people are perceived to have shirked the mandate of personal responsibility that undergirds neoliberal capitalism.<sup>[21]</sup> Weight is seen through a moralistic lens equating fatness with failure; this perceived failure being the inability to control behaviors and appetites or to conform to dominant aesthetic body standards. As theatre and fat studies specialist Jennifer-Scott Mobley summarizes, "Fat people go against our collective social, political, and economic ethos."<sup>[22]</sup> This is despite the fact that "more than two-thirds of American women [were] classified as overweight or obese."<sup>[23]</sup> Despite vague and indeterminate meanings of "overweight" and "obese" (and their pathological implications), the vast majority of American women inhabit nonconforming bodies. The systemic, structural nature of the value placed on the minority of conforming bodies becomes further clarified by the data.

U.S. culture attends to bodies centrally through weight-based discourse. Fatness, according to American studies scholar Amy Erdman Farrell, has historically been used to determine who fits where in society, in

which venues one is allowed to participate, and what kind of labor one's body performs.<sup>[24]</sup> Many of the roots of contemporary fat stigmatization can be traced to the nineteenth century and the growing industrialization and urbanization of America, which changed the kinds of bodies capital needed for labor. Fatness went from being a sign of wealth to a sign of excess, self-indulgence, laziness, moral failure, and lower-class status.<sup>[25]</sup> Conceptions of ideal bodies increasingly tilted toward thinness during the twentieth century, to the point that what once was considered average is now considered fat, and weight loss carries its own kind of cultural capital. The growing power of the fit body as a physical and moral standard marked fat as other despite its statistical prevalence. In the U.S. workforce, fat women today face an additional economic burden simply from being fat in a society restricting their earning power—being just thirteen pounds “overweight” reduces a woman's annual earnings by an average of \$9,000.<sup>[26]</sup> At the same time that fat women in the early twenty-first century are more economically disadvantaged, the U.S. economy relies upon consumer spending on diet, exercise, and weight loss products devoted to eliminating fat, and “spending money on becoming thin is the perfect solution for both neoliberal subjectivity and neoliberal capitalism more broadly.”<sup>[27]</sup> This is on top of the wage penalty for being a woman, placing fat women in a catch-22. Farrell explains that thinness then becomes “a strategy [employed] to mitigate against the identity of ‘female,’ which poses so many risks of discrimination and inferior status.”<sup>[28]</sup> According to fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco, “a fat person's only shot at citizenship comes if he or she gratefully consumes the panoply of diet and fitness products made available by industry and government.”<sup>[29]</sup> Thus, Tracy Turnblad is simultaneously a good consumer (of beauty products) and a failed one (by not only being fat but celebrating it).

### A “Big Girl Now”: Performing Tracy Turnblad

Tracy stands out in a sea of theatrical representation that clearly articulates the devaluation of fat people and reveals uncomfortable truths about what kinds of bodies are valued in the U.S., where the fat body is actually the most common kind of body. The tendency to view fat people as somehow less-than is revealed by the number of leading roles continually cast with conforming bodies, even when the script or character description does not mention weight. Broadway has not cast a fat Annie Oakley or Eliza Doolittle—even though there is nothing about these roles inherently requiring a specific body type; to do so would be to concede that fat women can play and experience the full range of representation readily available to thin people. Broadway musicals thus admit, through exclusion, which bodies are valued as they attend to the imperatives of neoliberal consumption. That *Hairspray* is named after a beauty product makes it almost the perfect commodity, save for its body positivity.

*Hairspray* deliberately subverts the gap between representation and reality. Filmmaker John Waters openly wanted “to make sure that Tracy will be fat, not just plump. When was the last time you saw two fat girls as stars of a Broadway musical who also get the guy?”<sup>[30]</sup> Waters based his 1987 film on a local Baltimore television show from his youth, though he noted, “The one thing that was pure fiction in [*Hairspray*] was the idea that a fat girl could have gotten on that show. A fat girl never would have gotten on ‘The Buddy Deane Show.’ Even in segregated Baltimore, a black girl would have had more chance.”<sup>[31]</sup> For Waters, *Hairspray*'s fairy tale aspect was precisely why it was empowering: “It's about the teenage white girl who gets a black guy. The fat girl gets a straight guy, and her mother's a man who sings a love song to another man.”<sup>[32]</sup> Apart from Waters, *Hairspray*'s creative team embraced Tracy's fatness but also employed humor undermining its fat-positive stance; the film includes numerous jokes about the appetites of its fat women. As Edna sings in the show's finale, “You can't stop my happiness/'Cause I like the way I am/And you just can't stop my knife and fork/When I see a Christmas

ham.”[\[33\]](#) While *Hairspray* works hard to be in on the jokes, it also subtly subverts the identities it means to celebrate by laughing not only *with* but sometimes *at* its characters.

*Hairspray*'s setting in 1960s Baltimore speaks to social change and body image as mediated on television. When Tracy's mother, Edna, hears of Tracy's desire to dance on the local television station's *The Corny Collins Show*, she says, “They don't put people like us on TV—Except to be laughed at.”[\[34\]](#) Tracy breaks the mold of fat girl as doormat, victim, or comic relief as she is the musical's self-possessed, exuberant, romantic leading lady who can “shake and shimmy” with the best of them. The plot centers around her drive to dance on *Corny Collins* and win the love of its resident heartthrob, Link Larkin—this musical is *about* casting, too. She remains acutely aware of how her desires are viewed; in “I Can Hear the Bells,” she sings, “Everybody says/That a girl who looks like me/Can't win his love/Well, just wait and see.”[\[35\]](#) Tracy ends up winning a place on the show when Collins spots her dancing at her sophomore hop. The show's tongue-in-cheek tone extends to social issues like segregation. Paralleling Tracy's ambition to dance on television is her drive to racially integrate the *Collins* show. She inspires a protest to integrate the program and goes to prison as a result. Tracy ultimately wins Link's love, makes a jailbreak, and is crowned “Miss Teenage Hairspray 1962” as the *Collins* show is racially integrated in the musical's finale.

Fat, in *Hairspray*, is both specific and universal; its creators explain, “Tenacious Tracy Turnblad, lovable as she is, is fat, and all of us, lovable as we are, are somehow, metaphorically, fat.” They describe Tracy's fatness as a metaphor for being “skinny, clumsy, new in town, female, foreign, black, Jewish, gay, naïve, brainy, too short, too tall, overeager, shy, poor, left-handed, over-freckled, pyrokinetic (like *Carrie*), scissor-handed (like *Edward*), or musical-comedy-loving.”[\[36\]](#) Tracy never lets dominant cultural views of fatness stop her and does not view herself as inferior—a new narrative for a fat female character in a Broadway musical. Such supreme self-esteem was certainly not represented in *Dreamgirls*'s narrative arc; Effie had to admit “I Am Changing” to find success in a thinner body. Tracy's narrative arc “implodes the myth of the unlovable fat woman” (as *Head Over Heels* too would go on to do) at the same time that, according to social psychologist JuliaGrace Jester, “it gives unrealistic representations of the ease with which Tracy is both accepted by others and how she accepts herself.”[\[37\]](#) The show functions as a fantasy for the very real reasons Jester critiques it: its alternative world of empowerment and wish fulfillment sidesteps actions toward real fat acceptance. *Hairspray* instead creates its own myths in which struggle and injustice are resolved through song, black people and white people are assimilated into a community through dance, and all are linked through being consumers (of music, television, and beauty products). Tracy uses her consumption of hairspray to break the rules of what 1960s white girls are supposed to look like, teasing and spraying her hair into a bouffant, while challenging how she was prohibited from moving by dancing with the black kids.

Casting *Hairspray* for Broadway presented challenges, beginning with choosing the language used in the casting breakdowns. Despite Waters's comfort with *fat*, the casting breakdown for Tracy scrupulously avoided using it. Telsey Casting decided on “heavyset” instead:

[TRACY TURNBLAD] Female, Caucasian, 5'3” or shorter, to play high school age. Must be heavyset. Outgoing, unstoppable, goodhearted with a vibrant, lovable, spirited personality. Loves to dance. Becomes a teen heroine. Strong pop belt singer and great mover. LEAD.[\[38\]](#)

Burns explains that the word choices were made “because . . . you don’t want to offend anybody in a breakdown.” He went on to add that initially they knew “you need a fat girl. It’s like, ‘that’s the role’ . . . . But it was definitely set up at the beginning, that on the breakdown, that we would always use ‘heavysset.’”<sup>[39]</sup> Size was of course only one element under consideration for potential Tracys. Broadway actor Kathy Deitch was brought in to audition for Tracy several times over a period of four years, never getting cast because she read as “too sophisticated” for the role. She remembers, “Just because I’m chubby, everyone assumed that I would be Tracy.”<sup>[40]</sup> Being the right body “type” alone is not enough, though it helps the actor get an audition. The height requirement noted in the breakdown further limited the applicant pool, in addition to the specific 1960s-inflected vocal style and dance ability required.

Winokur played Tracy in all of *Hairspray*’s readings before she was contracted to originate the role on Broadway. Telsey Casting launched a national casting search in Baltimore to find unknowns to play Tracy while Winokur was rehearsing the role for the final reading in New York.<sup>[41]</sup> Burns notes this was not, as was reported, about replacing Winokur before the opening, but rather was about finding understudies and future replacements: “We knew we were going to need to start finding these girls, so I think it was about starting early.”<sup>[42]</sup> Casting replacements effectively began before the musical even opened in New York. When the production held auditions in New York the month after its Broadway opening, hundreds of hopefuls showed up, including many who saw playing Tracy as their chance to break through. “The role is something that I can play, because I can never be Eponine in *Les Misérables*. I’ve struggled with this for a long time, because on stage it doesn’t matter what you look like, but what you weigh,” relates Tracy-hopeful Lisette Valentine.<sup>[43]</sup> Casting director Bethany Berg notes, “These girls are real people; they’re what most of America looks like, and we’re looking for those people that are happy and confident.”<sup>[44]</sup> Berg’s language acknowledges fat women as real people as well as explicitly nods to what actual American bodies look like—implicitly admitting the composition of the musical’s audience.

However, even when acknowledging the progressive elements of casting a fat female lead, the press was still unable to resist weight- and size-related puns and metaphors. The title of the article referenced above, for example, is “Sizing Them Up.” Despite (or perhaps because of) *Hairspray*’s fat positivity, the press felt licensed to write numerous feature stories commenting on the body of the actor playing Tracy in addition to emphasizing her diet and exercise routine. Fat became a punchline for headline writers: a typical headline was *Variety*’s “‘Hairspray’ s’ Full-Figured Tony Tally.” To a degree, the production itself encouraged this kind of winking treatment; its advertising tagline was “Broadway’s Big Fat Musical Comedy Hit.” A *New York Times* feature on Winokur repeatedly made the point that she was breaking “conventional wisdom” about how fat women should act and what they should wear: “Heavysset women are expected to wear their clothes long and loose-fitting. Ms. Winokur likes her skirts short and her T-shirts tight.”<sup>[45]</sup> Winokur noted the significance of her opportunity as Tracy, saying, “Here I am, the young character actress . . . I’m the lead this time.”<sup>[46]</sup> She was positioned as transgressive for doing things considered normal by thin women. It was not just the press who focused on the body of the actors playing Tracy though; the production team had its eyes on those bodies as well.

### Winning the Role and Weighing In

*Hairspray* stands out for its celebration of size, and yet its costume design and contractual weight clauses undermined its fat-positivity.<sup>[47]</sup> The show promoted fat acceptance as it simultaneously mandated weigh-ins for cast members, a practice much more common in ballet companies. The irony is that Tracy

is essentially a dance lead—the show’s structure bears this out, as she is not even given the traditional leading lady spots for her songs (Maybelle sings both the eleven o’clock number and the act one finale). Dideriksen, initially a standby Tracy, discovered at her first backstage weigh-in that she was not alone in having her weight monitored; the actress regularly playing Tracy was also contractually obligated to maintain a certain weight, whereas Dideriksen was told to lose 20 pounds. A member of the production’s wardrobe team would round the scale’s number up or down accordingly out of kindness. She remembers the weigh-ins as “sending us into panics” over whether their contracts would be terminated if the scale moved in the wrong direction, even though both actors wore fat suits.<sup>[48]</sup> Burns said the fat suits were not an issue as far as he knew during the casting process:

It didn’t really come up, because I think everybody just knew . . . You look at the costumes and they just want a certain shape. A girl could be heavy, but they might need padding somewhere else to just give that Tracy-kind-of-shape that [the creative team] wanted. So, it really wasn’t something that we said, “Oh, you’re gonna need to be padded,” it just went with the territory, and girls just accepted that.<sup>[49]</sup>

Whether the young women cast as Tracy knew before they signed the contract does not mitigate the complexity of feelings stirred by being padded and/or weighed, the ambivalence of the simultaneous burden and privilege of playing Tracy, or the fact that many understood this was their only shot to play a lead. The use of fat suits emblemizes this ambivalence because fat suits exacerbate the bind of inhabiting a fat body: being perceived as excess *and* lack, simultaneously too much and not enough. Yet using fat suits is more complicated than simply exercising artistic license. The fat suit itself reinforces stigma because it can be put on and taken off at will, an act unavailable to the fat person perceived as morally suspect for their inability to take off the weight.<sup>[50]</sup> At the same time, it is the literal embodiment of the myth that inside every fat person is a thin person who is somehow more “real.” Fat suits, and fat itself, then are seen as a performative embodiment. If the creative team and producers were so invested in maintaining the weight of the actors playing Tracy, then why bother with fat suits at all?



LAS VEGAS, NV - FEBRUARY 15: Actress Katrina Rose Dideriksen (L) as the character Tracy Turnblad and actor Harvey Fierstein as the character Edna Turnblad perform during the opening night of the Broadway musical "Hairspray" at the Luxor Hotel & Casino February 15, 2006 in Las Vegas, Nevada. (Photo by Ethan Miller/Getty Images)

One plausible reason why the production used padding is because Tracy's physicality was so demanding. Tracy dances so intensely throughout the show that the creative team was afraid actors would lose too much weight. The *New York Post* reported, "Winokur has lost weight—enough to send a frantic theater crew bringing candy and chocolate shakes to her dressing room. As the chunky star of 'Hairspray' . . . [Winokur] needs to stay plump to play the Ricki Lake role."<sup>[51]</sup> The article's headline, "Worth the Weight," raises the question of what is worth the weight—Winokur? The chocolate shakes and candy?

Starring on Broadway? The seesaw of being told to maintain your fitness while being “fed”? As the production was trying to fatten up its leading lady, it was also pressuring her to exercise and increase her stamina. For the creative team, Tracy’s weight was always a concern during casting. Employment law scholar and fat activist Sandra Solovay details stereotypes concerning fat people’s employability: “They are not fit so they should not be in any position that requires strength, speed, stamina, or other significant physical demands.”<sup>[52]</sup> In the *New York Times*, “Jack O’Brien, the director of ‘Hairspray,’ said he never doubted that Ms. Winokur was right for the role, only whether she had the stamina for it. ‘Did she have the chops to do eight shows a week?’”<sup>[53]</sup> Winokur had previously appeared on Broadway in a revival of *Grease* and regularly performed eight shows a week without apparent issue.

Concerns about stamina and ability significantly contribute to fat stigma in general. On Broadway they added pressure to an already-tough job. *Hairspray* was the first time many actors playing Tracy were asked to carry a show, let alone a Broadway production, and they had more than their weight to worry about. Winokur was bluntly informed during the show’s Seattle tryout that she was “carrying a ten and a half million dollar show.”<sup>[54]</sup> Keala Settle explained the pressure of playing Tracy:

Truth be told, every Tracy had that [pressure]. They went through the same thing . . . Each of us got shot out of a cannon, expected to become this torch for their company, and for everybody around them, producers. That’s what it was. I can’t even describe what that feels like or how to even deal with it because I didn’t deal with it so great. But if I was asked to live it again, you bet . . . I would do it again.<sup>[55]</sup>

Some candidates for Tracy were sent to “Tracy Camp,” a training program for actors whom the creative team determined needed more vetting before being offered a contract.<sup>[56]</sup> Dideriksen went to “Tracy Camp” with no promise of future employment.<sup>[57]</sup> Burns notes “Tracy Camp” was borne out of practical considerations to keep the various productions up and running smoothly, because it was a struggle to cast the role. He explains, “They had to be really special, so we found them all but it wasn’t like we had twenty people in our back pocket that we could go to . . . We definitely had to go out there and train and find the really special ones.”<sup>[58]</sup> Yet “Tracy Camp” was arguably as much about seeing whether the fat women’s bodies were fit enough as it was teaching the role. Dideriksen describes her perspective on the process:

It was really this challenge of feeling they needed this extra preparation, also worrying bigger girls weren’t as coordinated . . . that’s what it seemed like, because we had this extra week of dance that was just dance rehearsal, and a lot of talk about getting our stamina up, and how to last . . . It’s a lot of dancing and singing at the same time, it would be a lot for anyone, but they were especially concerned that this was supposed to be a bigger girl on top of it.<sup>[59]</sup>

Burns backs up Dideriksen’s assessment of the particular demands of this role: “I remember Jerry Mitchell saying what the girls would have to . . . be really good at cardio to dance the show, and he was like, ‘I need you to do 45 minutes on the bike and then you’ll have a milkshake.’”<sup>[60]</sup> Kathy Brier, Broadway’s first replacement Tracy, told *Newsday*, “It’s a weird kind of a thing. You’re supposed to be this chubby girl, and yet the show is so active you have to train to be an athlete.”<sup>[61]</sup> Tracy had to be fit *and* fat in order to perform the role, which are not contradictory demands despite popular misconceptions

including those of the musical's creative team.

As much as getting cast as Tracy was an opportunity, it often came with a price once the contract was over. Dideriksen played Tracy on Broadway and opposite Harvey Fierstein in Las Vegas but details how after she left the show, "There was this stigma of still seeing me having Tracy on my resumé."<sup>[62]</sup> No actor who played Tracy during *Hairspray*'s nearly eight-and-a-half year Broadway run has since appeared in another leading role on Broadway.<sup>[63]</sup> Winokur herself has maintained her celebrity status by becoming associated with weight loss. She was a contestant on ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* and hosted a cable television weight loss competition show called *Dance Your Ass Off*. In 2009, she wrote a blog series for *People* magazine titled "Calling in Fat," aimed at taking readers along on her "weight loss journey."<sup>[64]</sup> Winokur's notion that one could "call in fat" to work emphasizes the relationship of fat stigma to labor issues. The inability to be cast in leading roles after playing Tracy exists for those who played the role on Broadway as well as actors who have played the role in regional theatres. Personal trainer Geoff Hemingway regularly trains performers, including a client who played Tracy: "When she started she was like, 'I just played Tracy Turnblad in this regional production of *Hairspray*. That was my dream role, and now I've done it and I don't want to be fat anymore.' Since coming in to Mark Fisher [Fitness], she's shed about fifty pounds and is now being seen for ingénue roles."<sup>[65]</sup> Tracy, of course, *is* an ingénue role, but her fat body prevents her from being seen as such. This anecdote underlines the internalization of fat stigma within the industry and its relation to actors' legitimate concerns regarding employability.

### **Broadway Cares?**

The lack of fat actors cast in leading roles belies Broadway's vision of itself as a fully inclusive institution, and the use of fat suits and contractual weight clauses has perpetuated fat stigma. Stated simply, if you are fat, you will rarely be considered for a leading role in a Broadway musical because of how your body looks—being fat means being seen for fewer roles, which translates into less work. Ethnographer D. Soyini Madison exhorts us to remember that the stakes of representation are not merely about who is seen: "representation has consequences: how people are represented is how they are treated."<sup>[66]</sup> Casting contains the possibility to alter these consequences and make an immediate, visible impact because it reveals which bodies *are* considered fit for Broadway.<sup>[67]</sup> Casting directors can bring diverse, nonconforming bodies into auditions, but they are still bound to the small army of decision makers comprised of the creative team and multiple producers. Power over what and who makes it to the stage remains in the hands of those controlling the money. Commercial theatre's profit motive materially affects the lives of all actors, especially fat actors who will not be considered or seen for leading roles—the highest paying ones.

When asked whether he had been able to cast anyone who played Tracy in another leading role, Burns demurred: "That's a good question. . . There have been other opportunities, but I don't know. I still think it's definitely a type, and it's harder to find roles that are right for these girls."<sup>[68]</sup> Finding the right roles proved tough not just for the Broadway Tracys but also the stars of *Hairspray*'s film and television adaptations, Nikki Blonksy and Maddie Baillio respectively, who have worked sporadically in featured roles since playing Tracy. What would happen if fat women were recognized as deserving of the full range of representation given to women with conforming bodies? It might look something like *Head Over Heels*. During the show's brief run, Milligan tweeted, "We are serving amazing body positivity at @HOHmusical, where I get to play the most beautiful girl in the land, who has a love story, and nothing

about my weight!!”<sup>[69]</sup> Audience members would wait for Milligan at the stage door to tell her what seeing her onstage meant to them. She explains,

It’s been really lovely meeting so many women who are moved and say, “Thank you! You don’t know what it means to have a big girl up there being joyful and pretty and dancing.” I understand how important and beautiful it is because *I* never saw that, so I’m happy to oblige. I don’t think we talk enough about size diversity in casting. I very much want to be a template.<sup>[70]</sup>

Unlike *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray*, *Head Over Heels* struggled to find an audience and closed after just 188 performances.

The presence of a show like *Head Over Heels* on Broadway might seem to precipitate casting practices becoming more inclusive, yet Broadway’s recent history indicates that, despite economic imperatives to return investors’ money, the financial success of inclusively cast, albeit conflictedly-so, musicals does not automatically beget more inclusivity. If we recognize the twenty-one-year gap between *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* and the sixteen-year gap from *Hairspray* to *Head Over Heels*, then we must confront the fact that money must not be the sole concern: *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* were both long-running, award-winning, financially lucrative successes that proved stories about fat women starring fat women *are* viable money-makers. While *Head Over Heels* was a financial flop, it nevertheless marks important progress in the representation of fat women on Broadway. The presence of only these three roles, along with the handful of supporting roles in musicals like *Escape to Margaritaville* (2017) and *Waitress* (2015), demonstrates how fat stigma operates on Broadway from conception to casting. LeBesco explains, “the stigma attached to being fat is a control mechanism which supports a power structure of one group of people over another.”<sup>[71]</sup> By not casting fat women outside of prescribed roles, Broadway musicals enforce a system of gendered bodily norms that police how *all* women act, consume, and labor in the U.S. A few months before *Dreamgirls* opened, Bennett described his view of that musical’s central conflict in three questions summing up the lens through which Broadway, and arguably US society itself, continues to understand representation: “[I]t’s about, are you marketable? Is it saleable? Will it make money?”<sup>[72]</sup> Despite the smash hit status of *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* and the progress made by *Head Over Heels*, Broadway continues to say no to most fat women.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Ira J. Bilowit, “Hairspray,” *Back Stage*, January 31, 2003.

<sup>[2]</sup> Craig Burns (casting director), in discussion with the author, September 2017.

[3] Katrina Rose Dideriksen (actor), in discussion with the author, April 2017.

[4] The framing of bodies as either conforming or non-conforming is drawn from Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), and Samantha Kwan and Jennifer Graves, *Framing Fat: Competing Constructions in Contemporary Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

[5] Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 13.

[6] Lindy West, *Shrill* (New York: Hachette Books, 2016), 67-68.

[7] Dideriksen, discussion.

[8] Kwan and Graves, *Framing Fat*, 28-29.

[9] The interdisciplinary field of fat studies' beginnings can be traced to the 1980s, though it emerged from movements for fat acceptance that began in the 1960s and 1970s. By the turn of the twenty-first century, scholars were publishing fat studies monographs and collections and *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* was established in 2012. Marilyn Wann, foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), x-xi.

[10] *Ibid.*, xii.

[11] Joe Dziemianowicz, "Baby, You're a Big Curl Now," *New York Daily News*, August 14, 2002.

[12] Brian Eugenio Herrera, "The Best Actor for the Role, or the Mythos of Casting in American Popular Performance," *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2015), available at <http://jadtjournal.org/2015/04/24/the-best-actor-for-the-role-or-the-mythos-of-casting-in-american-popular-performance/>.

[13] A prime example of this kind of article is Richard Patterson, "The Secrets to Broadway Bodies: How "Theatrical Ninjas" Stay Trim, Toned, and Tight for 8 Shows a Week," *Playbill.com*, January 31, 2015, <http://www.playbill.com/article/the-secrets-to-broadway-bodies-how-performers-stay-trim-toned-and-tight-com-340312>.

[14] *Dreamgirls*, *Head Over Heels*, and *It Shoulda Been You* (2015) could be considered ensemble musicals as opposed to *Hairspray*, in which Tracy is very clearly the leading lady. While Jennifer Holliday won the Tony Award for Best Leading Actress in a Musical, Jennifer Hudson won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for playing the same role in the film adaptation of *Dreamgirls*.

[15] Bonnie Milligan, interview by Holly Rosen Fink, *Women and Hollywood* (blog), September 25, 2018, <https://womenandhollywood.com/bonnie-milligan-talks-representation-female-empowerment-in-broadways-head-over-heels/>.

[16] Raven Snook, "Big, Blonde and Beautiful in Her Broadway Debut," *TDF Stages* (blog), July 24,

2018, <http://bway.ly/4o61zu/#https://www.tdf.org/stages/article/1960/big-blonde-and-beautiful-in-her-broadway-debut>.

[17] Michael Gioia, "Heavy Character Actress Need Not Apply? Women Get Real on Casting," *Playbill*, August 25, 2016, <http://www.playbill.com/article/heavy-character-actresses-need-not-apply-women-get-real-on-casting>.

[18] John Waters, "Finally, Footlights on the Fat Girls," *New York Times*, August 11, 2002. *Head Over Heels* complements Waters' ideas about casting and LGBTQ+ representation: it featured the first trans-woman, Peppermint, in a Broadway musical in addition to the fact that Pamela is fat *and* comes out as a lesbian in the musical, replete with a kiss.

[19] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 1.

[20] John F. Dovidio, Brenda Major, and Jennifer Crocker, "Stigma: Introduction and Overview," in *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, edited by Todd F. Heatherton, Robert E. Kleck, Michelle R. Hebl, and Jay G. Hill (New York: The Guildford Press, 2000), 6.

[21] See also Jennifer Crocker and Diane M. Quinn, "Social Stigma and the Self: Meanings, Situations, and Self-esteem," in *Ibid.*, 153-183.

[22] Jennifer-Scott Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 24.

[23] Deborah A. Christel and Susan C. Dunn, "Average American women's clothing size: comparing National Health and Nutritional Examination Surveys (1988-2010) to ASTM International Misses & Women's Plus Size Clothing," *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education* 10, no. 2 (2017), 129.

[24] Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 18.

[25] Laura Fraser, "The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 12.

[26] Jennifer Bennett Shinall, "Occupational Characteristics and the Obesity Wage Penalty," *Vanderbilt Law and Economics Research Paper* 16-12 (2015), available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2379575>.

[27] Julie Guthman, "Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 193.

[28] Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 115.

[29] LeBesco, *Revolted Bodies*, 57.

[30] Patrick Pacheco, "Water's 'Hairspray' Is Beginning to Gel," *Newsday*, December 20, 2001.

[31] Chris Jones, "Welcome to the '60s," *Chicago Tribune*, January 18, 2004.

[32] Mark O'Donnell, Thomas Meehan, Marc Shaiman, and Scott Wittman, *Hairspray: The Roots* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2003), 12.

[33] Mark O'Donnell, Thomas Meehan, Marc Shaiman, and Scott Wittman, *Hairspray: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Hit Broadway Musical* (New York: Applause, 2002), 123.

[34] *Ibid.*, 14.

[35] *Ibid.*, 24-25.

[36] O'Donnell et al., *Hairspray: The Roots*, 5.

[37] JuliaGrace Jester, "Placing Fat Women Center Stage" in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 250.

[38] Craig Burns, email message to the author, September 2017.

[39] Burns, discussion.

[40] Kathy Deitch (actor), in discussion with the author, April 2017.

[41] "Spotlight: *Hairspray*," *Variety*, April 21-27, 2003.

[42] Burns, discussion.

[43] Elena Malykhina, "Sizing Them Up," *New York Newsday*, September 23, 2002.

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] Robin Pogrebin, "Big Hair and Personality to Match; For a Young Actress's Career, A Bouffant Moment in 'Hairspray,'" *New York Times*, August 21, 2002.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Dideriksen, discussion.

[48] *Ibid.*

[49] *Ibid.*

[50] Fat suits have been widely used in contemporary theatre, notably in musicals like *Dreamgirls* but also in plays like Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig* (2004) and Samuel D. Hunter's *The Whale* (2012).

[51] Farrah Weinstein, "Worth the Weight," *New York Post*, August 8, 2002.

[52] Sandra Solovay, J.D., *Tipping the Scales of Social Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 160-161.

[53] Robin Pogrebin, "Big Hair and Personality to Match; For a Young Actress's Career, A Bouffant Moment in 'Hairspray,'" *New York Times*, August 21, 2002.

[54] O'Donnell et al., *Hairspray: The Roots*, 39.

[55] "Keala Settle," *Theater People* 31, podcast audio, February 8, 2015, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/19639.rss>.

[56] *Hairspray* was one of the first musicals to groom potential cast members this way, followed by *Billy Elliott* (2008), *Jersey Boys* (2005), and *Hamilton* (2015), among others.

[57] Dideriksen, discussion.

[58] Burns, discussion.

[59] Dideriksen, discussion.

[60] Burns, discussion.

[61] Kathy Brier, interview by Gordon Cox, *Newsday* (New York), September 28, 2003.

[62] Dideriksen, discussion.

[63] Two exceptions are Tracy understudies Shoshana Bean and Donna Vivino, who went on to play or understudy Elphaba in *Wicked*.

[64] Staff, "Marissa Jaret Winokur: I Had to Call in Fat," *People*, August 25, 2009, available at <http://people.com/bodies/marissa-jaret-winokur-i-had-to-call-in-fat/>.

[65] Patterson, "The Secrets to Broadway Bodies."

[66] D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 4.

[67] Scholars have largely studied casting's power dynamics by focusing on race and ethnicity. See Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[Blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011); Donatella Galella, "Being in 'The Room Where it Happens': *Hamilton*, Obama, and Nationalist Neoliberal Multicultural Inclusion," *Theatre Survey* 59, no. 3 (2018): 363-385; Brian Eugenio Herrera, "Looking at *Hamilton* from Inside the Broadway Bubble," in *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America's Past*, edited by Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press,

2018); and Angela C. Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

[68] Burns, discussion.

[69] Milligan, Bonnie, Twitter Post, September 6, 2018, 1:18 pm, <https://twitter.com/beltingbonnie/status/1037752011335376896?s=11>.

[70] Snook, "Big, Blonde and Beautiful."

[71] LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, 63.

[72] Michael Bennett, interview with John Gruen, *After Dark*, (unpublished manuscript, October 2, 1981), MGZMT 3-1038, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.



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