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Weighing in on 'Circumference'

Amy Salloway's one-woman show is all about self-image

By Julia McCann

"OH MY GOD, how did you get to BE the size of a CITY?"

This is the definition of obesity, sensitively termed by a junior-high gym teacher in the one-woman show by Amy Salloway, "Circumference."

Salloway performed her 70-minute show in the Swan Hall Auditorium at the University of Rhode Island on Feb. 19.

The show, free to the public, was attended by a mix of students – almost exclusively women – and a number of older, adult couples.

Salloway's performance flashes back and forth between junior-high gym class and a six-month period of Salloway's life, when she was pursuing coverage for gastric bypass surgery.

During the play, the mandatory six-month diet and exercise regime required before the surgery lowers Salloway's body mass index so that she's out of the danger zone. Because she is otherwise a healthy individual with no diagnosis of any "co-morbidities" to the obesity, she is ultimately unable to proceed with the surgery.

Salloway's tragic reaction is that she is not thin enough to be socially acceptable, but not fat enough to be able to do something about it. She refers to it as "obesity purgatory."

The play isn't just about being fat, it's about isolation in general and there are other characters named as outsiders. For instance, there's a girl in gym class with sickle cell anemia.

In Amy's adult life we meet another outcast who has a profound effect on both Amy's body and her mind.

She meets him at her gym when he falls off a treadmill. He is handicapped, due to a car accident, and their respective deformities bond them. She comes to fall for him as she is in the midst of her six-month diet and exercise regime in preparation for surgery.

In losing weight and earning the attention of a member of the opposite sex, she begins to notice that she actually looks cute. The positive results snowball until he reveals that he met someone else. The buildup of positive feelings, self-confidence, good food choices and happiness come crashing down.

In her binge-eating reaction, she passes a gyros stand and as she sees the gyro meat falling off the bone in thin slices, wishes she could be the gyro and have the fat sliced off effortlessly.

Perhaps one of the funniest and most visually stunning descriptions during the show comes during a dark daydream where Salloway imagines herself gorging on food, never leaving her house, gaining hundreds of pounds and dying alone in her home. When she imagines herself being extracted from the home, she imagines that “sandwiches would fall from my crevices like a gentle rain.”

Universal themes

The event was sponsored by URI Hillel, in partnership with the Women’s Alliance Endowment Fund of JFRI and URI Student Senate.

URI Hillel’s mission for this year was to collaborate with other university organizations on events that involved Jewish issues but also issues that could be viewed as more universal.

The topic of body image certainly met this criterion. In fact, the only suggestion that the play’s character was Jewish was when she mimicked her mother’s reaction to her desire to be approved for gastric bypass surgery. Her mother gave a typical “Jewish grandmother” response: “There are people in Ethiopia who don’t even have a stomach. You have a perfectly good stomach, and you want to give it away?”

The title “Circumference” is referenced at the beginning of the show when Salloway describes the gastric bypass procedure as shrinking the stomach to the circumference of a dime. The character is additionally forced to run the circumference of a school track in a heartbreaking scene. The cruelty and lack of sensitivity on the part of the gym teacher is demonstrated when she forces the entire class to be late for their next class while the teacher literally pushes her around the track. That moment is revisited during the play’s conclusion.

While the show is classified as a one-woman show, there was a taped sound component to the show, with a melange of kids and adults teasing Amy while she runs on a track or treadmill. The background soundtracks also include several energizing 80’s tunes from The Bangles, Journey, Flock of Seagulls, and Twisted Sister.

Talking Back

In the talk-back after the show, Salloway said that changes to her performance were made after previewing it at the Minnesota Fringe Festival.

One woman recalled that she was always the last one picked in gym class.

Salloway described her work in “Circumference” as the 22-year process of learning to like movement and the pursuit to get interested in being “a body that moved.”

Fighting low self-esteem

Salloway said that she’s often described as a spokesperson for those with low self-esteem, becoming an outspoken voice for all those who feel detached or outcast.

Salloway, who graduated from the University of Minnesota, has spent most of her adult life in Seattle and Minneapolis.

In her performance piece, she explained, she distanced herself from her body to the extent that she created a second character for it – a juvenile delinquent who smokes and has a rebellious attitude.

At this point, after her embarrassment in front of the entire class, she “divorces” her body and imagines it leaving her, over the fence, outside of school grounds, and out toward the highway.

The show is intensely physical, with many scenes taking place at that junior-high track and later, at her gym. Salloway said that she works out every day in order to perform her show at her high level of onstage energy. An elliptical machine sits among the tie-dyed curtains at Salloway’s home.

The set for this traveling show was sparse, but Salloway’s energy and script set the scene and painted clear pictures for the audience. A chair to the audience’s right served as the character’s small apartment and more specifically, her bed. This bed is the location for some of the most intimate moments, both tender (molding her pillow into a figure so that she had someone to sleep with at night), and revealing.

The play ends on a positive note, with Salloway imagining the adult version of herself comforting her younger self running around the track. They fly away together. The lasting message is of unity of body and mind.

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Her Way

Profile: Solo performer Amy Salloway's comedy has a serious edge to it

by Pamela Henrickson

"I love writing about the times that I have been inept and awkward and pathetically,

horribly, devastatingly human because if those stories can allow other people to laugh and to feel a wave of identification and compassion and empathy and relief ... then my work here is done."

- Amy Salloway

As a girl, Amy Salloway often wore two different colored socks, two different shoes and jewelry made of macaroni. Though she knew she was not like other kids, she didn't want to change. "My earliest memories of playing are of playing dress up and dancing around the living room in my mother's nightgowns," Salloway said. Her biggest dream was to be on the television show "Zoom." She doesn't know where her love of theater came from, but "it seemed like genetically that was what I was preprogrammed to do."

Creating her own reality

Next came children's theater companies, leading her classmates in educational skits, and high school productions. Salloway, who grew up in Milwaukee in a family she describes as "complicated," credits some of her teachers for recognizing she was creative and letting her write plays that she and others performed. "This love of performing was always there," she said. "I think I had this deep intrinsic sense that theater arts were a way to communicate things that other forms of communication couldn't serve." Salloway said she was often teased as a child and that many people didn't understand her eccentric behavior. She was a self-proclaimed outsider and misfit. "I got mocked and made fun of viciously my whole life, and I think theater for me became the escapism tool, the tool to create a different reality," she said. "I'm sure that's why I was drawn to acting, I'm sure that's why I was drawn to be anybody but me as soon as possible." It is many of those self-described "quirky" attributes that made Salloway into the performer and writer she is today. She uses those experiences as an outsider as inspiration for her work; it is so central to her performing that her one-woman theater company is named Awkward Moment productions.

Growing up, Salloway always knew she was not going to play the princess - that role fell to her younger sister, who won starring roles at auditions. "If there was any good that came out of the competition ... it made me want to do what I love in life that much more, it made me want to succeed that much more," Salloway said. "If I wasn't going to get it at 12, 14 or 15, I would get it at 19 or 21." Although she never did play the ingénue or the girl who was kissed by the handsome prince, she stuck with theater for a different reason and now aspires to make an impression on her audiences and, most important, communicate a message.

Salloway, who has lived in Minneapolis since 1999 (she previously lived in the Twin Cities from 1985-1990 when she went to college) debuted her latest solo show, "Circumference," at the Minnesota Fringe Festival on Aug. 5. The solo performance comedy interweaves two themes, "memories of seventh-grade gym

class and the attempt to be a free-formed kinetic physical body in adulthood. ... It's really about the intersection of body image and exercise or motion ... the ability to know one's self as a physical being," Salloway said.

"The same issues have run through everything I've ever written," she said. Those common themes are body image, self-esteem, relationships and loneliness. "I could be writing an essay about saltine crackers and it will still end up having those themes in it," she said. Salloway said these are themes she knows and wrestles with, and feels other women can also relate to.

Theater and sociology As she grew older, Salloway became interested in issue-oriented theater, improv, original performance and ensemble-created performance. She didn't have an interest in big productions or Broadway plays. She received her B.A. in theater and sociology from the University of Minnesota, where she studied how theater tackled current cultural issues. "I just retained this love for theater as a medium to discuss what was going on right now and to get people involved in these issues," she said.

This love of issue-oriented theater led her to Seattle; among her work there was issue-oriented children's theater that included topics from child sexual abuse to deforestation. She played characters such as squirrels, planets, spawning salmon, old ladies and children.

The patchwork-quilt life

Like many performers, Salloway has struggled to make a living at times and doesn't have many of those things middle-class Americans consider "necessities." Though she's garnered good reviews and won awards, Salloway has never owned a car or a house; she doesn't have health insurance or cable TV. But she is living her childhood dream. "I started doing more of the patchwork-quilt life, where I pieced together all different jobs that had creative outlets and components that were as close to acting and the theater arts as I could get them to be, and made a living out of that patchwork," she said.

Often Salloway would work and try to do theater simultaneously. "I started a cycle of working boring day jobs during the day and trying to do theater at night," she said. Occasionally she would get paid theater work during the day, which began to happen more frequently when she worked in Seattle at a museum.

Going it alone

While she was in Seattle, Salloway became inspired by her colleagues who were doing solo performances. "I was really excited by the work I saw my friends do. I was excited by how real it was, how authentic it was, and how much it touched the audiences that got to experience it. When they shared personal experiences ... in a theater format, there was just this incredible sense of community that

was created," Salloway said.

When she moved to Minneapolis, Salloway started writing more and was able to find the courage to get on stage alone. "The desire to communicate and the desire to write a solo piece became greater than the terror of doing so," she said. About 10 years ago, she started writing plays, solo shows, for herself to perform. Her first two one-woman comedies debuted at the Fringe and have spent the past four years touring in the United States and Canada. "Does This Monologue Make Me Look Fat?" was her first solo show, a collage piece about food, love, sex, body image and relationships. It is seven stories loosely connected around ideas of body image, relationships and loneliness. Her second solo show, "So Kiss Me Already, Herschel Gertz," debuted in 2005. This mostly true story is about adolescence angst and Jewish summer camp, tackling the questions of what are love, attraction and friendship.

Connections

Life in the theater business often is not glamorous or easy. Salloway spends more time doing administrative grunt-work and self-promoting than she'd like. One of the things that keeps her going is her friends and mentors in the local performing arts community. "I'm definitely connected with the community that writes, acts, and creates original performances," she said, citing as an example working on a show that is twice as long as it should be and being able to call on friends for advice and commiseration.

Salloway is determined to avoid repeating stereotypes about women's bodies; Salloway wants the show to say some of the things even she has been afraid to say. "I want to find a way to get an audience to understand how relentlessly brutal size discrimination is, how much it really beats a person down." She finds that people who don't have size issues, even those who are friends, discount her experiences. "People will roll their eyes, say, 'Yeah, Amy, all right' or 'You're not that fat.' [They don't understand that] it's not based on a degree of size, but size [itself]. A massage therapist refused to give me a massage [because] she didn't think she could penetrate through the fat to the muscle.

"The things that I tend to want to share are the moments in my life that have been awful but funny," she said. "I love writing about the times that I have been inept and awkward and pathetically, horribly, devastatingly human because if those stories can allow other people to laugh and to feel a wave of identification and compassion and empathy and relief ... then my work here is done."

Salloway said she wants her audience to feel connected to her story and to feel a part of a community while they are watching. "Doing that as a performer, that's the most rewarding thing there is, when people come up to me after my performance and say 'it was like you were talking about my life' or 'I have to hug

you because I felt everything that you felt."