

FULL EXPOSURE

Sharing the meaning of manhood

By Lee Burdette Williams

OFTEN THINK of my students as being lovely. I think it when I see one of them float across a freshly mowed lawn to grab a Frisbee, when I overhear a snippet of conversation that is actually about a class, when I see one reading quietly in an out-of-the-way corner of the Student Union. One sunny morning last week, while sitting at a stoplight, I watched two women who were in the middle of the crosswalk when the light changed. As they hurried across the street in their impractical shoes, balancing coffee cups, long blonde hair sashaying behind them, I thought, *How lovely.*

But I had never seen a single student naked, much less ten of them at once, until one night last spring. They ranged across a spectrum, these ten men, from perfect body built by years of rock climbing and biking to 6'6" and rail-thin to vastly overweight. They stood naked before me and a hundred or so classmates and professors, and their loveliness brought tears to my eyes.

For a number of years, the students and faculty of our departments of Visual Arts and Theatre and Dance have collaborated on a performance art production called "Pieces of She," a feminist effort by, for, and about women. Each year, the issue of men's involvement has been raised and gently rebuffed. "Create your own production," was the response from the women involved. Two years ago, an interdisciplinary studies major named Irv took up the challenge. He created "What's Left of Him," what he referred to as a "respectful dialogue" with "Pieces of She" that would explore the interiors and exteriors of masculinity in our society. It was performed in the Student Union and ended, so I heard, with the performers naked in front of the audience.

I didn't attend the original production, mostly because I had worked several successive nights and chose to go home instead. The reports the next day, and for weeks afterward, made me regret the decision. When

I heard that another group of students was going to perform it a second time, and that most of the performers were members of Watauga College, the residential college I direct, I knew I had to go.

What does it mean to be a man in our culture? I teach women's studies. For five years, I advised the university's Women's Center. I have a husband, two brothers, ten nephews. But even though I can talk for days about what it means to be a woman, I honestly never gave this other question much thought. I would have told you, a year ago, that I understood maleness, masculinity, the guy thing, at least as much as a woman could understand it. I would have said that there are many men I respect and who are as committed to feminist values, to equality and opportunity, as I am.

Honestly, though, something happened to me in the process of watching my students drop their drawers that made all of my assumptions and simple platitudes crumble.

I had known, when I decided to attend "What's Left of Him," that this would happen, and I was prepared to be nonchalant about it, being the hip and not easily fazed educator that I am. I invited my friend, Betsy, who also teaches in Watauga College—home to some of Appalachian's most daring, creative, and entertaining students.

"Come early," Chris, one of the performers told me when I mentioned I was going. "We're only doing it one night, and it's in the arena theatre in Greer, so there won't be many seats." That was an understatement. Half an hour before show time, there were no seats left at all.

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Betsy and I had arrived early enough to find empty chairs in the back row of this four-row theatre in the round, if you can call it that. Other students shared seats or sat on the floor. Still others stood outside, peering in open windows, waiting for the performance to start. I tried not to think about fire codes and such, which is hard for a former hall director.

FINALLY, the lights dimmed and one by one the performers, dressed in black, came through a door onto the floor (I hesitate to call it a "stage," as it was actually lower than the audience). They held aloft signs with messages about the suicide and mental illness rates among men. Wordlessly, they held up these signs, turning slowly so each audience member could read them. The message was clear: as much as we might think of it as a "man's world," there are costs to being a man, tightly tied up in the expectations we have of them.

Good point, I thought. I know not all men are WWF aficionados, fascinated by guns, in love with Pamela Anderson, etc., etc. But I could have read that in the *Utne Reader*. Would there be more than simple assertions about how tough the world is for men?

Then the students sat in a circle. One by one, they told stories that were far from simple. Each story was in a response to a question: What is my favorite body part? What was my favorite toy as a child? Who is my hero? What is my least favorite body part? When did I discover masturbation? After a few rounds, they would leave the stage, and one or two or three would come back out and perform. Two of them did a hysterical dialogue about a sadistic driver's ed teacher. Two did a beautiful, touching dance so filled with longing and uncertainty that some of audience members wept. One sang, accompanying himself on guitar. One did a monologue about learning, during his first year at Appalachian, that his mother had been raped as a teenager. He learned this while visiting a cemetery with her over spring break. He saw her spit on a grave they walked past on the way to a family plot. He asked why. She told him. He returned to school a day later and

cried in his room, afraid to share his new knowledge with any of his friends.

More questions: What was my first sexual experience? What did I want, as a child, to be when I grew up? Each did his best impersonation of his face and voice during an orgasm. What did they like about male friendships? Female friendships?

I felt, at times, like I was watching a high-jump competition, except it wasn't a competition with each other. It was a competition within themselves to share moments, fears, and beliefs with one hundred of their closest friends. I watched the audience as well and could see from their expressions that I wasn't the only one entranced by this anything-but-masculine display of emotion on stage.

The performers retreated behind the door, readying themselves for their finale. Not a single student had left. In fact, more had wedged themselves into the tiny theatre than I thought possible. The temperature was uncomfortably warm. Betsy and I sat there, hot, sweating, tired from a long day at work.

You couldn't have dragged us out of there with an offer of a cool breeze and a frozen margarita.

The lights dimmed, the stage door opened, and the performers walked out. All but one was completely naked. They sat in a line on the floor, knees crossed, one behind the other. Then, in turn, each got up and talked, with

perhaps the most honesty I've ever encountered in a student, about what it meant to them to be men, to be owners and users of male genitalia as well as owners and users of all that our culture offers and expects from men.

Zeb told a story about going to church camp as a high school sophomore, terribly self-conscious that his body had not developed any of the hair that would mark him as an adult. "When I saw the gang showers, I wanted to go home. Instead, I washed my hair in the sink so I could avoid having anyone see me."

Adam, who tips the scales at probably 350 pounds, stood up. "I hate my body. I hate the way my breasts sag

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onto my belly, and I hate the way my huge belly sags and covers my penis. And I know this: you hate my body, too. Each of you. Oh, sure. You can sit there and say, 'No—it's the person I care about.' But I know you're judging me, wondering 'Does he eat too much? Why can't he lose weight?' But don't worry. There's no judgment you can make of me that I haven't made of myself."

Nothing I have ever learned in two graduate programs and fifteen years in higher education prepared me for the heaviness of my heart at that moment. From what well did this twenty-year-old draw his courage? He, who hated his body and rightly assumed that most of us did, too, stood stark naked before us and made a fair number of us weep. When he sat down, a small voice called out, "I love you, Adam." He returned a slight and sheepish smile.

The final performer to stand up wore a white sheet around his waist. Zach is a student I have known since his first year, and now, at the end of his junior year, he represented to me the best that our students can be. A brilliant scholar. An amazing athlete. A thousand friends. A ten-thousand-watt smile shining out from an impossibly handsome face and a perfectly formed body. He was the first male to take my "Women and Leadership" class, and if the university had allowed us I would have given him an A-plus for all that he contributed. For two years, he had served as a volunteer at the Women's Center, where he had founded "Men Against Rape," a student organization that prods men to accept some responsibility for the epidemic of sexual assault on our campus and in our society.

He wasn't naked. The sheet covered him from his waist to the floor. He walked around in front of the audience, eyeing us carefully, almost accusingly. He stopped. Bending over, he grabbed the ends of the sheet. "Is this me?" he asked us all, looking at us with piercing eyes. He then pulled the sheet up, covering himself from the waist up. "Or is this me?" Like a beautiful marble statue fractured by age or violence, only half of him remained. He dropped the sheet, and there was his face and torso. "Is this me?" he repeated. He raised the sheet again. "Or is this me?"

His monologue about the essence of manhood—

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about the struggles to be a whole person living in a culture that fragments men into not just their hearts and their heads, but into a third section, their sexuality—was gripping, but in all honesty I don't remember the words. I remember the sheet. I remember watching Zach's lovely face disappear, and how it felt to me to look instead at his legs, his backside, his penis. I understood something that, until that moment, had been well beyond my comprehension: that my male students are as crushed by the expectations of a gender-based soci-

ety as any of my female students, that they are denied too much of what they need as humans who hurt, who love, who seek connection, and the cost is profound.

Tears welled in my eyes as I looked around at the audience, all of them standing, cheering wildly as the performance ended. One student, another member of Watauga College who is a thoughtful and intelligent man, walked onto the stage floor and dropped his pants, then hugged one of the per-

formers. I knew exactly how he felt. There is no way to sit through something like "What's Left of Him" and not feel thoroughly compelled to get naked, physically and emotionally, in front of an audience that has proven itself trustworthy.

I DIDN'T, though. Fully clothed, at least in a physical sense, Betsy and I made our way through the crowd and into the cool night air. Before the performance, we had discussed what it would be like to see our students in such a vulnerable and intimate state. Would they look the same in class the next day? Would we ever be able to see them without thinking about their performance, about how they looked naked?

I'm happy to say that the answer is no. I've not viewed them the same way since. When I see these men, as I often do, I think of their remarkable bravery, their willingness to risk so much, their insightful comments about their own lives. I think about my good fortune in being there on a night that they will remember their whole lives, as will I.

In a way I never quite considered before that night, I think they're unpredictably, unfathomably, incredibly lovely.

