

skinny crazy small: “Bringing Anorexia Center Stage”

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Everything in the theater is white: walls, floor, ceiling, and chairs—a stark contrast to the black box used for many small productions. The stage is set up with child’s furniture: a wee bed and bureau on one side call to mind Baby Bear from *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, and a tiny table, chairs, fridge, and stove on the other look like a toddler’s make-believe kitchen. Spotlights beam, and cheery dollops of red, purple, yellow, and blue in props placed around the stage further brighten the atmosphere. Which strikes me as somewhat odd, and intriguing...for this is the set for a play about anorexia nervosa, a devastating and often fatal eating disorder.

skinny crazy small is a one-woman show written by and starring [Sylvie Mae Baldwin](#). It takes place in the world of a sixth grade girl who is struggling to fit in with her peers, navigate the foreboding onset of puberty, and realize her emergent identity as a young woman. As the play unfolds, the protagonist Sylvie (a younger version of the playwright), devises a “Puberty Prevention Program” in an attempt to take control over what feels scary and chaotic in her life and body. This regimen, though somewhat humorous at first, quickly spirals into the heartbreaking development of a full-blown eating disorder.

Sylvie based the piece on her personal experience with anorexia, and cleverly integrates her story with the stories of famous women throughout history who have also struggled with the disorder like singer Karen Carpenter and psychoanalyst Anna Freud. Sylvie hopes the piece “allows audience members to viscerally experience what it feels like to have anorexia nervosa,” which she achieves through the drastic acceleration of pace and eeriness of tone and lighting as the play progresses.

The insecurities Sylvie depicts her sixth-grade self as dealing with are relatable for anyone who has attended a traditional American middle school, even if they did not develop an eating disorder. For me, the play hit very close to home—I was around Sylvie’s age when I, too, developed a severe case of anorexia that lingered in my life for fourteen years. It was at once unsettling and comforting to see a variation of my disorder’s onset captured so vividly on stage, in another’s body and voice.

As an actor, Sylvie possesses an extraordinary ability to morph from one character into another—despite being a one-woman show, the play is filled with a whole cast: adolescent Sylvie, present-day Sylvie, her mother, teacher, doctor, peers. The gravity of the topic is softened by the many comedic elements Sylvie incorporated into the script. However, she does not shy away from capturing the loneliness, obsession, and panic that being immersed in anorexia—or being the caregiver of someone with the disorder—can entail. The emergence of her eating disorder as a character—both a voice and a character Sylvie embodies—steals the second half of the show as a haunting figure berating Sylvie to follow her rules. The play also captures the distress parents often feel when their adolescent child has an eating disorder—the character of Sylvie’s mother is one that elicits a tremendous amount of consideration and empathy.

The show ends abruptly just after Sylvie takes her first step away from the eating disorder’s demands. In the miniature kitchen, her mother—increasingly panicked at her inability to do the one thing parents are meant to do: keep their child alive—begs, pleads, and orders Sylvie to eat a muffin. After much agonizing internal debate with her eating disorder, Sylvie finally consents and consumes the muffin. But it isn’t so simple as “eat, restore physical health, and recover.” Sylvie proceeds to have an embodied breakdown after eating the muffin, suggesting that recovery is going to be a long and tumultuous journey. On that note, the lights are cut, Sylvie bows, and after a pause invites audience members to ask questions and engage in a discussion about what they just witnessed.

Sylvie developed *skinny crazy small* through readings and workshops, and it premiered on the West Coast in May 2015. The East Coast premiere ran from March 31 through April 24 at Theaterlab in New York City. After a much-deserved vacation on the West Coast with her family, Sylvie hopes to tour the performance “so I can bring the experience to people across the country and in all stages of life.”

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