

Theater review: “skinny crazy small,” dir. Jenny Estill

Aleenah Ansari May 18, 2015



Now more than ever, people realize tough conversations about difficult topics must happen, even if they are uncomfortable. Hiding the presence of an issue does not make it disappear, and the topic of eating disorders is no exception.

This show attempts to break down those barriers and create an open dialogue among people who have eating disorders or want to learn more. “Skinny crazy small” is a 55-minute one-woman show that stars the writer Sylvie Mae Baldwin.

The production begins on a lighthearted note with a few jokes and sets the scene for the story of a girl, who remains unnamed, as she strives to fight the forces of puberty. This makes the audience feel more comfortable with her character and allows them to understand the development of her disorder.

The show packs a lot into a short amount of time. It’s peppered with insight into the mind of someone who struggles with food. Emotions are raw, and although intense moments can be uncomfortable, it’s hard to look away.

Although the play lacks an element of interaction, the presence of one actor allows the audience to fill in the gaps and create their own characters. Baldwin’s performance demonstrates her malleability. She seamlessly transitions between different character roles and convinces the audience she can adopt any persona.

The show may make some audience members uncomfortable because it taps into a first-hand experience with the distorted body image that causes these problems. Before the show began, director Jenny Estill informed the audience the show may be a potential trigger and offered the option for attendees to leave at any time. Baldwin’s performance does not hold back in her vulnerability and she speaks every thought that crosses her mind, creating a narrative that does

not hold back from revealing the harsh reality of an eating disorder.

The production periodically featured anecdotes from famous figures, such as singer Karen Carpenter or Diana Spencer, who suffered from eating disorders. Baldwin brings these personalities to life and reminds the audience that even the most unlikely people, those we revere for fame and beauty, also struggled with self-image. This addition attempts to break down the misconception that an eating disorder is a choice.

Since the show portrays a highly personal experience, it may not be as accessible as it could be. Baldwin's performance is certainly authentic and conveys the struggle that comes with an eating disorder, but it can be unclear at times what motivates her actions and what prompts her to cover. It does provide the harsh details that manifest during an eating disorder and, at the very least, invites attendees to recognize potential risk factors in their own lives.

The show ended with a short Q&A session with Baldwin, Estill, and Tiffany Hammer, community outreach specialist at the Emily Program, in which audience members could ask questions about the show and learn more about eating disorders. This allowed people to clarify questions about choices for the show and debrief about their perceptions. Hammer emphasized that eating disorders don't discriminate and stayed to talk to audience members who have questions or concerns.

The Emily Program focuses on offering a variety of services, from outpatient family-based treatment to residential programs, to ensure that participants can choose the most appropriate form of care. Representatives from the Emily Project were available after the show with pamphlets and handouts about how to rethink relationships with food and ask the right question if someone is concerned about a friend.

"Skinny crazy small" plays in the Isaac Studio at the Taproot Theatre (204 N 85th St). The production runs May 22, 23, and 24. Friday and Saturday performances begin at 7:30 p.m. and the Sunday performance begins at 3:30 p.m. Student tickets are \$10 and general admission tickets are \$25. Tickets for people under the age of 19 are \$5.

The verdict: Although the show addresses a subject that's difficult to talk about, Baldwin's commitment to her role allows the audience to experience the impact of eating disorders in an approachable way.

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