

## **2025**

# SIZE INCLUSIVITY IN THEATRE INITIAL REPORT



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### ABOUT Ruth anna Phillips

Ruth Anna Phillips is a movement director, choreographer, director and researcher with a passion for promoting inclusivity in the arts. With years of experience across theatre in a plus-sized body, Ruth saw a glaring need to champion size inclusivity in the industry. In response, she founded the Size Inclusivity Org to work towards a performing arts sector where people of all body sizes are supported, represented and valued.

Driven by a commitment to dismantling size bias, Ruth developed practical tools and strategies to help organisations and individuals foster more inclusive practices. She leads staff training at universities, conservatoires, and arts organisations, and delivers talks and workshops for performers. In May 2025, she is launching the first cohort of a size-inclusivity online course to help facilitators make their work more size-inclusive. (More information is available at sizeinclusivity.org)



All photographs are from Ruth's Fat & Plus Size Performers Focus Group' at Battersea Arts Centre. Photo credit: Ellie Kurttz

# INTRODUCTION

In 2023, I received a Developing Your Creative Practice (DYCP) grant from Arts Council England, which allowed me to undertake mentorship, practice development, and research to deepen my professional focus on size inclusivity. As part of this journey, I surveyed 152 people across the theatre industry about their experiences related to body image, body acceptance, and size inclusivity.

I distributed two online surveys via my social media channels (Twitter/X and Instagram). The surveys were open from 25 March 2024 to 27 April 2024.

- Survey A welcomed responses from "anyone who has been or currently is in some form of actor or performance training."
- Survey B welcomed responses from "anyone who runs a room and/or works with performers (e.g. a teacher, director, movement director, choreographer, coach, intimacy coordinator, facilitator, etc.)."

The aims of conducting this research were multifaceted: I wanted to verify whether my perceptions of the theatre industry were accurate; to explore how my areas of interest resonated with others (so I could push my practice further); and to gain insight into challenges I may not have been aware of.

This initial research has already informed the creation of size-inclusivity best practices that I now share through training sessions, talks, resources, and workshops. These practices continue to evolve with ongoing research and practical application. I felt it important to share some of the findings and data from my surveys, but also to highlight a few of the beautiful and heartbreaking words people offered in their responses. (There were many more contributions than I can include here, and I plan to share them in the right way in the future.)

This report reflects anonymised experiences gathered through voluntary online surveys. It is intended to support more inclusive practice in performing arts and theatre training. It is not a critique of any individual institution, but rather a call for broader dialogue and action. I am fully aware that this is not an extensive study – it is an initial investigation born from my own specific questions and needs as an artist and facilitator. It specifically focused on performers in training and those who lead training spaces. I hope to continue this work, as the findings and testimonials submitted indicate there is much more to explore when resources permit.

# KEY TERMS AND IDEAS

To ensure clarity, here are key terms as I use them in this report. These definitions reflect my understanding, informed by the work of authors and activists like Aubrey Gordon, Sofie Hagen, Sabrina Strings, and the wider fat studies field):

01

### **Body Acceptance**

A mindset and practice of acknowledging, respecting, and embracing one's body as it is, without feeling pressured to change it to fit societal ideals.

02

### **Body Image**

Someone's perception, thoughts, and feelings about their own body, including its appearance, size, and abilities.

03

### Size Inclusivity

The commitment to accommodating and respecting people of all body sizes by ensuring equal access and experience. This is the term I landed on in 2024 to encapsulate the scope of my work and the topic.

04

### **Anti-Fat Bias**

The systemic and cultural discrimination, prejudice, and negative attitudes directed towards fatness and fat people.



# SURVEY A: PEOPLE IN TRAINING

Survey A collected 103 responses from individuals who have been (or are currently) in actor or performance training.

### **Key findings from Survey A:**

Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

- **Feeling pressure to look like peers:** 76% of respondents agreed that they feel pressure to look like their peers.
- **Disordered eating during training:** 61% agreed that disordered eating was or is an issue during their training.
- Need for educator training: 88% agreed that teachers and facilitators should receive training on body image and size-inclusivity topics.
- Open dialogue in training: 79% agreed that body image issues should be supported in being talked about within their training.
- Costume department awareness: 90% agreed that costume design students should receive training in size inclusivity.
- **Stage management awareness:** 63% agreed that stage management students should receive training in these topics as well.

61%

of people said the COVID-19 pandemic affected their relationship with their body in a negative way.



### DO YOU EVER REMEMBER COMMENTS BEING MADE ABOUT YOUR BODY IN TRAINING?

68% said yes

63% of those who said 'yes' said it was negative.

Only 10% said positive.

All but 1 of those reinforced anti-fat bias.



### I then went through these comments to look for patterns across age or type of training.

#### KEY

**TP – Truly Positive: A completely positive response.** There was only one response, which simply stated "positive."

QP - Qualified Positive: Comments meant as compliments but reinforcing anti-fat stereotypes or praising thinness.

"The comments were meant to sound positive, but were actually negative. Things like 'for your size you can move well!'

P&N – Mixed: Responses containing both positive and negative elements.

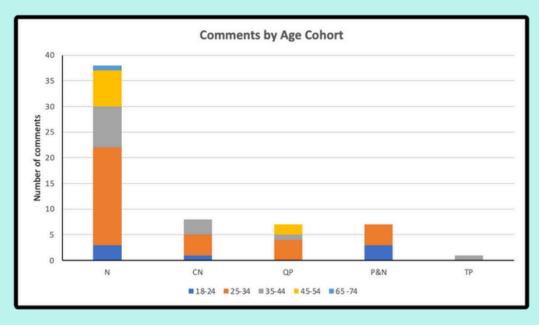
"Positive and negative. I am quite a small and thin male-identifying actor, and sometimes my appearance helps for certain characters, but I am also seen as weak and frail and not manly enough."

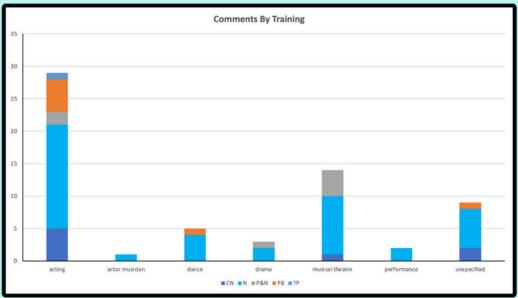
ÇN – Categorised Negative: No explicit mention of negativity, but content implied harm or bias

(e.g. body shaming).
"I would probably be the funny fat friend. Too pretty to be fat, too fat to be pretty. You might grow into your body type casting.

N – Explicitly Negative: The respondent clearly identified the comment as negative.

"Negative, I was overweight. The principal of the dance school used this as an excuse to take me out of certain dances or to leave the stage."







"I had a mixture, a lot of it sits with me now. And it came from a range of teachers, peers, parents and friends and how little people are aware of different body shapes and how you can be healthy without the 'dream body' - whatever that is even meant to mean"

"I have wondered my whole adult life whether I would have had the troubles I have had with body image and disordered eating if I had not been an actor. I will never know."



# THE DATA ABOVE INDICATES

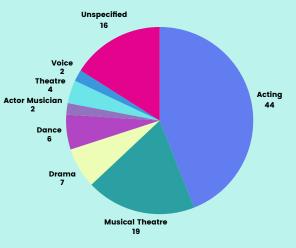
that, regardless of age or course, a significant proportion of respondents experienced negative comments about their bodies. This affirms the concerns that initially motivated this research and resonated with personal testimonies. It also highlights a clear desire for more support and training—not only for students in training, but also for facilitators, peers, and departments such as costume—within educational and organisational settings. Notably, the clarity with which participants recalled specific comments underscores the lasting impact even a single body-shaming remark can have.

"I was very lucky to have discussions of body image as an integral part of my training and my confidence in my body went up astonishing levels in the time."

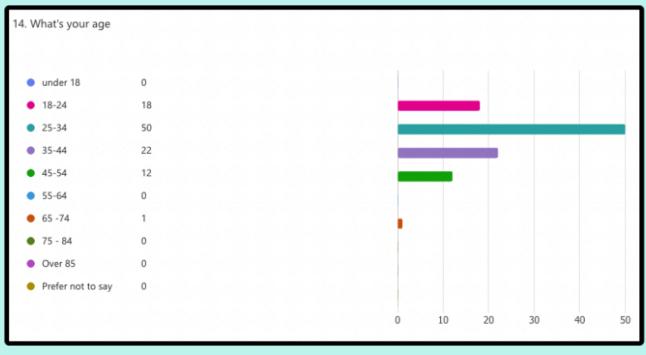


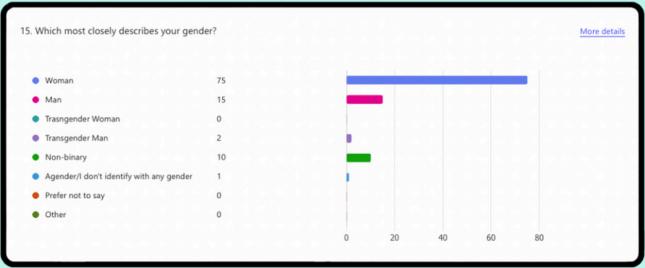
# ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS SURVEY A

- 86% were 'out of training/trained in the past'.
- 14% were 'currently in training'.
- The earliest point of training was 1982, spanning over 40 years to current training.
- The average (median) training occurred around mid-2013 and the most common (mode) was 2018.
- The average (median) amount of time in training was 3.5 years.



**Types of training** 





# SURVEY B: PEOPLE Leading a room

This survey welcomed responses "from anyone who runs a room and/or works with performers"

It **received 49 responses** from directors, teachers, movement directors, choreographers, coaches, intimacy coordinators, facilitators, and others who "run the room."

(It is worth noting that a large portion of respondents work in movement-based disciplines—likely due to my own professional network as a movement director but also potentially due to movements close connection with working with the body.)

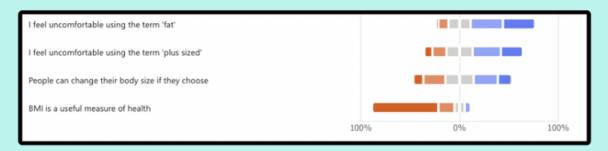
The aim was to better understand how other facilitators relate to topics I've been deeply engaged with, particularly around size inclusivity and body acceptance. This helped me shape support and resources that speak to where people currently are in their practice.

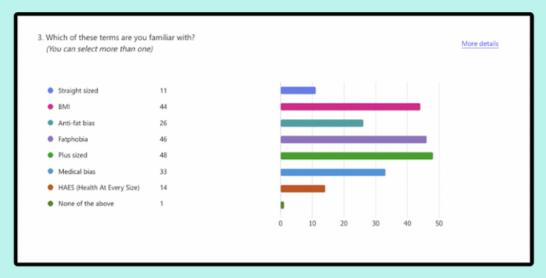
I also wanted to create space for facilitators to reflect on their own experiences, both personally and professionally.

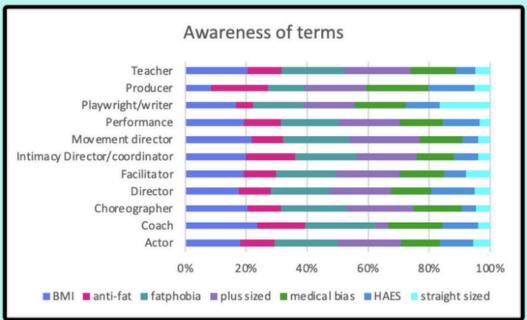
### I asked about their view of their practice with a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale.



### and about some aspects connected to fat activism and body acceptance.





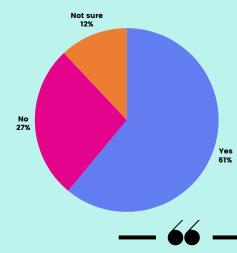


The terms straight-sized (a term connected to bodies fitting in the sizes offered in the majority of fashion retailers) and Health at Every Size (HAES) (a health framework that focuses on health regardless of body size, promoting body acceptance and intuitive eating) were the least familiar to respondents. BMI, fatphobia, and plus-sized were the most widely recognised across the disciplines. Several people criticised BMI as a measure of health, which was encouraging given its widely documented inaccuracies and inconsistencies (see resources). Overall, this aligned with what I expected and helped me shape training, resources, and workshops that are both useful and accessible -meeting people directly where they are while still offering space to grow.



"As someone in a thin body, who also works from a place of embodiment as cognition, I know I can never understand what a fat/bigger body feels like. So I wonder how else I can learn about this experience to make my work accessible without exploiting people."

# HAS A CONVERSATION ABOUT BODY IMAGE EVERY COME UP IN YOUR SESSION/REHEARSAL ROOM?

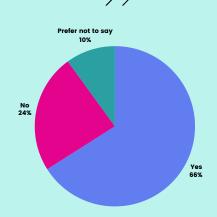


Participants who answered yes were asked **what was the context**.

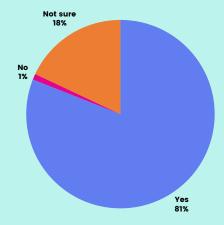
There was frequent mentions of working with costume, fear or self consciousness, students speaking about their bodies, working with weight in a movement context, comparison in casting. Also when the themes of the show called for it with several mentions of feminist work.

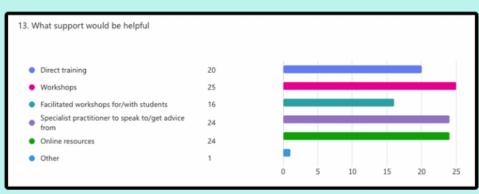
"I'm a movement teacher that often works with students in musical theatre. I find that physical aesthetics play a different role to their training compared to other groups."

Survey B also invited facilitators to share their personal experiences. I asked if they had ever felt discriminated against because of their own body. Some did report personal experiences of size-related bias in the workplace.



When asked if support or resources on this topic would be helpful to them as practitioners, 81% responded yes (pie chart bottom left) – indicating a strong desire among theatre educators and directors for guidance on how to be more size-inclusive in their work.





Survey B aimed to gain insight into other facilitators' experiences, challenges, and understanding.

# THE RESULTS INDICATED THAT

overall, practitioners believe their work is inclusive, with 85% stating their work is inclusive of all sizes and 93% inclusive of all shapes. This was supported by a solid understanding of key terms. However, it's important to acknowledge the potential bias in these results, as the survey was completed by staff who were already engaged and willing to provide feedback. There was a clear demand for further support and training, with 81% expressing a desire for more resources.

Survey B revealed that 65% of those leading a room have experienced discrimination due to their body, a statistic that closely mirrors the prevalence of negative comments directed at individuals in training. This underscores the alarming normalisation of body-based discrimination and reinforces the urgent need for a shift in how bodies are commented on and treated within these spaces.

In response to these findings, I have started taking action. I've developed a new staff training module and facilitated workshops for students, focusing specifically on size inclusivity in theatre. Additionally, I'm launching an online training course for artists and facilitators in May 2025, with plans for further workshops and resources rolling out from Spring 2025. These initiatives aim to provide practitioners with the tools and confidence to address body diversity in their classrooms, rehearsals, and productions with confidence and support.



Accepting different body shapes will make dance and dance training more accessible.

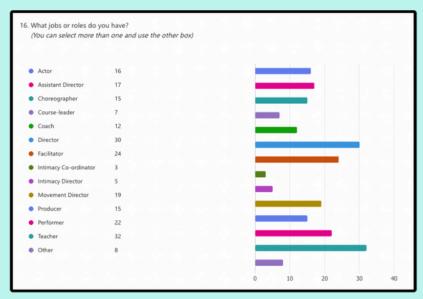
As an industry we need better representation of all body shapes and types.

I'm really glad someone is researching this



# ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS SURVEY B

There were 49 responses to the survey. I asked about their job/roles and field of discipline.





# THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR BODIES

Across both surveys, participants were invited to describe themselves and their bodies in their own words – "similar to providing a self description or audio description of yourself". The responses were incredibly diverse, highlighting not only the uniqueness of each body, but also how personal and varied the language people use to describe themselves can be.

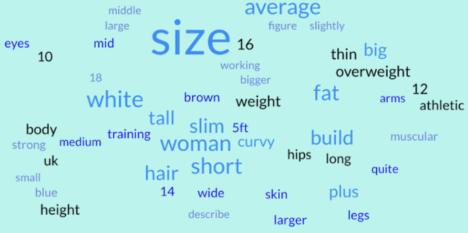
A particularly insightful conversation with someone working in audio description reminded me how important it is to keep developing this area. The way we talk about our own bodies—and the bodies of others—is complex. But if we're committed to inclusivity, we need to find ways to support open and respectful conversations, grounded in body neutrality rather than the oftenunseen norms of anti-fatness.

# THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR BODIES

**Descriptions included:** 

sizes ranging from 8 - 24, tall, short, fat, short-ish, slim, small, thin, average, athletic, lean, big, plus-size, petite, curvy, overweight, obese, strong, healthy, soft, heavy, fit into my clothes, mid-sized, medium-heavy build, heavy weight, big bones, hourglass figure, broad, narrow frame, voluptuous, beautiful, chubby, "what my mother would call a chunky monkey".

There were descriptions of where people hold weight and how their weight/size/shape has changed or 'fluctuated' at various points, including over touring, in or out of training, age, when not working and due to illness and eating disorders. How different countries they lived in changed the labels used. Different parts of the bodies are described such as long torso, wide hips, short legs, love handles, visible muscles, big bum, boney back, slight paunch, wide shoulders, curvier hips, bigger chest, big boobs, small waist, thick thighs, bright smile.



Terms of comparison or identification were used such as above/below/around average, kind of, apparently, sometimes, slightly, not traditionally attractive, short for a dancer.

4 people mentioned having a disability.

15 individuals described themselves as White. One person identified as White-presenting with South American heritage. Other self-descriptions included: "Hispanic facial features," "Black," "Bi-racial (White/Arab)," and "beige-coloured skin (Mixed Race)."

With further resources I would love to continue this research ensuring wider intersectionality and diversity. Anti-fat bias is inherently connected to racism, ableism and many other forms of systemic marginalisation. I am aware of the limits of this study but also feel that it provides substantial evidence of the need for further work.

# CONCLUSION

This initial survey into body image, body acceptance, and size inclusivity within the theatre industry has provided valuable insights into the experiences of both performers and those who lead creative spaces. It supported my development as an artist but also tells us wider aspects about the industry.

The data make it clear that many individuals, especially students in training, feel persistent pressure to conform to certain body ideals. It was common for participants to report receiving comments about their bodies during training, and most of those comments were negative or critical. There is also the suggestion that disordered eating continues to be an issue within theatre training environments. Encouragingly, there was overwhelming agreement that more education and conversation about these issues would be beneficial: participants believe that size-inclusivity and body-image awareness should be integrated into training for performers as well as behind-thescenes roles like stage management and costume design. Additionally, those in teaching and directing roles are asking for support – 80% of survey respondents who lead training spaces said they would welcome guidance or training on this topic. I have begun to address this need through my courses and collaborations with organisations, but larger systemic change is needed.

Overall, this report serves as a call to action for the theatre community. There is a collective responsibility for us to challenge ingrained biases about body size and to expand our understanding of inclusion. Every body on stage or in a classroom deserves to feel represented, valued, and empowered. I hope these findings prompt deeper reflection among theatre practitioners and leaders: to consider how our training practices, casting choices, design processes, and day-to-day conversations might be unintentionally reinforcing harmful norms – and how we can change that.

This initial report is just a starting point. It lays a foundation for further research and development in this area, and I am committed to continuing this work. My aim is that together, we can foster a theatre culture where people of all sizes can thrive and where the narratives we create and stages we inhabit truly include everyone.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Incorporate size inclusivity into staff training at drama schools, conservatoires, and creative organisations.
- **Embed supported conversations about body image** into performer training and curriculum development.
- **Expand inclusion training** within costume, design, and stage management departments.
- Recognise size as a valid axis of inclusion, even if not legally protected.
- Support facilitators with resources and CPD on size-inclusive practice.
- Develop national standards and best practices through collaborative research.

### RESOURCES

Research and resources I found helpful connected to this subject.

#### **BOOKS**

- Happy Fat, Sofie Hagen (2019)
- Health At Every Size, Lindo Bacon (2008)
- Fearing The Black Body: The Racial Origins Of Fat Phobia, Sabrina Strings (2019)
- The Fat Studies Reader, Esther Rothblum, Sondra Solovay (2009)
- Things No One Will Tell Fat Girls, Jes Baker (2016)
- Your Body Is Not An Apology, Sonya Renee Taylor (2018)
- "You Just Need To Lose Weight "And 19 Other Myths About Fat People, Aubrey Gordon (2022)







#### **PODCATS**

She's All Fat: A Positive Podcast
The Maintenance Phase
The Fab Fatties
Is it a fat thing? - FatLib London

#### Other resources

- Report <u>2022 All Bodies Representations Of Fat Women & Girls In Hollywood</u>, The Rep Project
- Article "Why BMI is inaccurate and misleading" by Christian Nordqvist, Medical News Today
- Article "Seen but not heard: an embodied account of the (student) actor's aesthetic labour" by Roanna Mitchell, Theatre, Dance and Performance Training (2014)
- Article "<u>The Bizarre and Racist History of the BMI"</u> by Your Fat Friend (Aubrey Gordon),
- **Tedx talk** "The fear of fat The real elephant in the room" by Kelly Jean DrinkWater, Available at: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXGwJevjOfs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXGwJevjOfs</a>
- Playscript "Fatty fat fat", Katie Greenall (2020)

Training and other resources at

www.sizeinclusivity.org

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to extend **my gratitude and acknowledge Arts Council England** for their invaluable support via the initial Developing Your Creative Practice in 2023.

Thank you **to everyone who participated in the survey.** This report represents just a small fraction of the rich insights gathered, but I have read every heartfelt, thought-provoking, and inspiring response. I will continue to honour and share your words as my work evolves and resources grow.

To those who have already brought this work into their schools, organisations, or communities — thank you for helping this work grow and making it a part of your spaces.

To my friends and peers, your ongoing encouragement, collaboration, and support have been essential in my continuing to bring this work to life.

To my parents, whose love for learning and research has shaped who I am today, and for your support emotionally, statistically and via much-needed spell checking!

To my 'buddy,' Christina Fulcher—thank you for your unwavering wisdom, guidance, patience, and friendship. Your support has been invaluable.

This work is built upon the foundations of fat activism, with significant learning from the impactful work of Sofie Hagen, Sabrina Springs, Aubrey Gordon, Katie Greenall and many more. Their voices have inspired me and shaped much of the direction of this research.

### **Contact**

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# APPENDICES SURVEY A

### Bodies In Training Survey (Students and participants) &

#### ABOUT THIS SURVEY

This survey is designed to aid Ruth Anna Phillips in her furthering of inclusive practices and advocacy in the industry.

It has an emphasis on the complexities surrounding body sizes, shapes and body image so your input is invaluable. Ruth would welcome responses from anyone who has been or currently is in some form of actor or performance training.

Thank you for your participation and support. Please note that by completing this survey, you grant consent for your responses to be used completely anonymously as part of Ruth's future research, work and practice.

For further details or enquiries, please don't hesitate to contact Ruth Anna Phillips directly at <a href="https://www.ruthannaphillips.com/contact">www.ruthannaphillips.com/contact</a> or on <a href="mailto:ruthph@btinternet.com">ruthph@btinternet.com</a>

	1	2	3	4	
I think we should talk about body image issues as part of training.	0	0	0	0	
I have been unable to access an exercise because of my body	0	0	0	0	
Being self-conscious of my body in an exercise takes me out of it or hinders my experience	0	0	0	0	
Someone can change their body if they want to	0	0	0	0	
I feel pressure to look like my peers	0	0	0	0	
I feel pressure to look like the teacher/facilitator	0	0	0	0	
Disordered eating was/is an issue during my training	0	0	0	0	
I think teachers/facilitators should have training on this topic	0	0	0	0	
There was a diversity of body shape amongst my teachers/instructors	0	0	0	0	
I think costume students should have training to ensure they work in an inclusive/body positive way	0	0	0	0	
I think stage management students should have training to ensure they work in an inclusive/body positive way	0	0	0	0	

<ol><li>Do you ever remember con</li></ol>	illients being made ab	out your body in tra	ining? *		
○ Yes					
○ No					
O Not sure					
0					
4. Were those comments posi	itive or negative? (If you	u're happy to share t	hem please do)		
Enter your answer					
5. Please read the statements There is a box below to exp			l.		
	A very negative way	A negative way	No way (i.e no change)	A positive way	A very po
My time in training has affected my body in	0	0	0	0	(
The covid-19 pandemic affected my relationship with my body in	0	0	0	0	(
i. Please use this to expand, e	explain or give context	to any of your answe	ers		
Enter your answer					
7. What topics or issues arour	nd bodies in training do	you feel are import	ant?		
Enter your answer					
8. Any other thoughts you wo	ould like to share?				
Enter your answer					
ABOUT YOU					
. I am *					
. I am *					
	e past				
currently in training	e past				
currently in training out of training/trained in the	e past				
currently in training out of training/trained in the	past				
currently in training out of training/trained in the	e past				
currently in training out of training/trained in the When did you train? Enter your answer	e past				
currently in training out of training/trained in the . When did you train?	e past				
currently in training out of training/trained in the	past				

12. Which of these topics would you be interested in hearing more about?  (You can select multiple)
Body Image
Fatphobia/Anti Fat Bias
Fitness from a body positive perspective
Owning your body i.e. auditions setting
Discrimination and privilege
Advocating for yourself e.g in costume, casting, movement classes
Other
Other
13. How would you like to get this information?
Workshop
Online Training
Mentoring
Online resources
Other
14. What's your age
under 18
O 18-24
O 25-34
35-44
O 45-54
○ 55-64
O 65 -74
O 75 - 84
Over 85
Prefer not to say
15. Which most closely describes your gender?
○ Woman
○ Man
○ Trasngender Woman
○ Transgender Man
O Non-binary
Agender/I don't identify with any gender
Prefer not to say
Other
16. Please describe yourself physically
Enter your answer

### SURVEY B

### Inclusivity in Theatre (Survey) % ection 1 **ABOUT THIS SURVEY** This survey is designed to aid Ruth Anna Phillips in her furthering of inclusive practices and advocacy in the industry It has an emphasis on the complexities surrounding bodies and body image so your input is invaluable. Ruth would welcome responses from anyone who runs a room and/or works with performers. This could be as a teacher, director, movement director, choreographer, coach, intimacy co-ordinator, facilitator etc. All questions are optional unless indicated with an asterisk. Thank you for your participation and support. Please note that by completing this survey, you grant consent for your responses to be used anonymously as part of Ruth's future research, work and practice. For further details or enquiries, please don't hesitate to contact Ruth Anna Phillips directly at <a href="https://www.ruthannaphillips.com/contact">www.ruthannaphillips.com/contact</a> or on <a href="mailto:ruthannaphillips.com/contact">ruthph@btinternet.com</a> Section 2 STATEMENTS Please read the statements below and use the 1-5 scale to indicate your thoughts. Where 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure/don't know 4=agree, 5=strongly agree There is a box below to expand on any or all of your answers. 2 My exercises/ways of working are inclusive to all body **sizes** My exercises/ways of working are inclusive to all body shapes I am comfortable talking about body shape and size within my sessions/teaching/ facilitation I feel uncomfortable using the term 'fat' I feel uncomfortable using the term 'plus sized' People can change their body size if they choose BMI is a useful measure of health 2. Please use this to expand, explain or give context to any of you answers Enter your answer 3. Which of these terms are you familiar with? (You can select more than one) \* Straight sized BMI Anti-fat bias Fatphobia Plus sized Medical bias HAES (Health At Every Size) None of the above

Section 3	***
4. Has a conversation around body size or body image ever come up in your session/rehearsal room?  Yes  No  Not sure  5. What was the context / key points?	
Enter your answer	
Erica your arower	
6. How did the conversation make you feel?	
Enter your answer	
7. Please describe yourself physically (similar to providing a self description or audio description of yourself)	
Enter your answer	
8. Have you ever felt discriminated against because of your body?  Yes  No  Prefer not to say  9. In what way? (Please share as much as you're comfortable with)  Enter your answer	
Section 4	***
10. How important are performers bodies in your practice?	
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  Not important at all Essenti	al
E-SPETITO	
11. What topics to do with bodies feel most prevalent or pressing to you?	
Enter your answer	

12. Would support in holding conversations about body image/acceptance/discrimination be helpful to you?	
○ Yes	
○ No	
O Not sure	
13. What support would be helpful	
Direct training	
Workshops	
Facilitated workshops for/with students	
Specialist practitioner to speak to/get advice from	
Online resources	
Other	
14. Which of these topics would you be interested in hearing more about or get support on (You can select multiple)	
Body image	
Fatphobia/anti-fat bias	
Fitness from a body positive perspective	
Working with fat and bigger bodies	
Owning your body	
Discrimination and privilege	
Casting and bigger bodies	
Costume and bigger bodies	
Other	
15. Anything else you'd like to add?	
Enter your answer	

ally, the	ree brief questions about you.
Mess	jobs or roles do you have?
	can select more than one and use the other box)
	Actor
	Assistant Director
	Choreographer
	Course-leader
	Coach
	Director
	Facilitator
	ntimacy Co-ordinator
	ntimacy Director
	Movement Director
	Producer
	Performer
_ 1	feacher
	Other
What	discipline(s) do you work in e.g movement, voice, clowning, puppetry, mo-cap, dramaturgy
Ente	r your answer
	would like to hear about workshops, training and events from Ruth on this topic please leave your email address. You can opt t any time
Ente	

### **End of Report.**