

BEHIND the curtain

"If you look up any one of my casts, you will see that there is body positivity in every single one of my casts because it's important"

Stuart Burt tells how he tries to make a difference within the musical industry

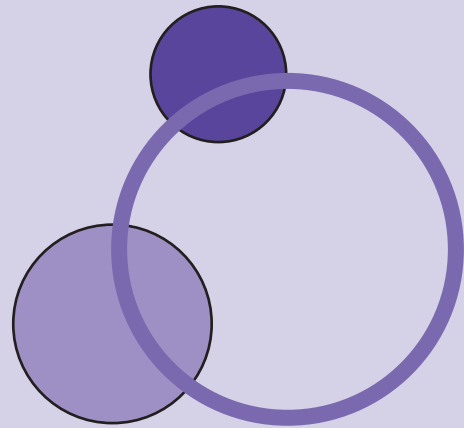
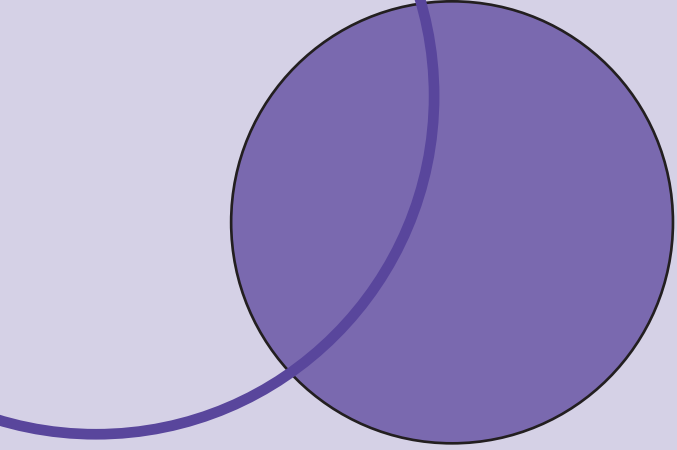
"We have to keep talking about it"

Mark Samaras on body positivity as a male actor

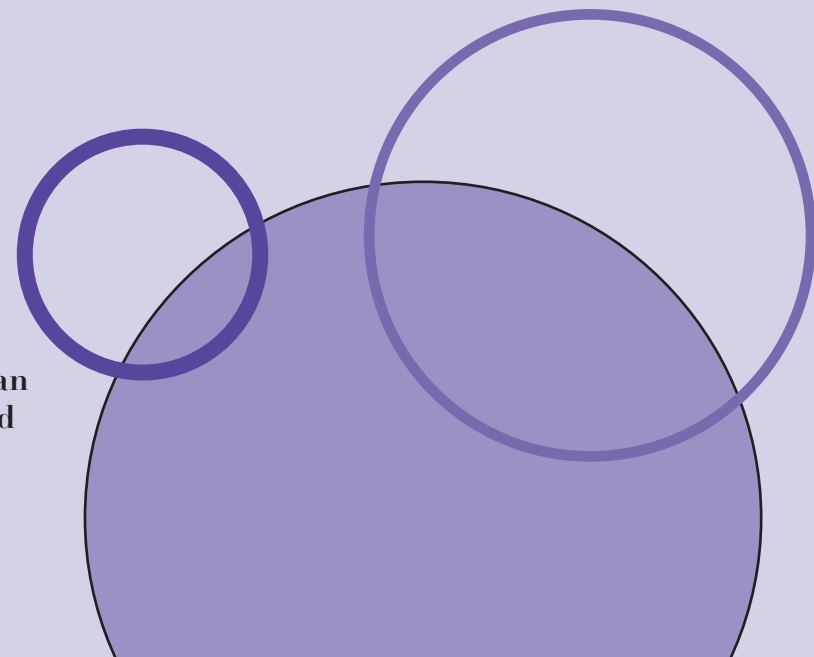
Every Tudor Rose has its thorns

The history behind SIX the musical





“We’re one of a kind,
no category”



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SIX

Hi everybody,

First things first. Thank you for showing interest in our magazine. We are [Nina](#) and [Soraya](#). Two Dutch students studying Creative Business at Saxion University of Applied Sciences located in Enschede, the Netherlands. We are fourth year students who made a trip to London to figure out what the people of London think about body positivity in the musical industry. You might wonder how we got to that subject so let us tell a bit more about ourselves.

My name is [Nina Versteegen](#) and I am 23 years old. I grew up in a place called Sittard, which is on the other end of the country from Enschede, and lived there with my parents until I moved for college. From a young age I was interested in musicals. It all started with my grandparents taking me to go and see Cats when I was five years old. I fell in love with the magic of theatre and musicals at that very moment. The smooth movement from the actors, the choreography and the beautiful songs made such an impression that even after seeing so many more musicals afterwards Cats is still my favourite. My grandparents would visit most of them with me, but the rest of the family would join a couple as well. At this point I think I have seen about fifty different musicals. Not to mention the ones I have seen more than once. I think the number will go over a hundred then. With On Your Feet rising above them all. I went to see the show fifteen times. Can you call it an addiction? Maybe, but at least it is a healthy one, right.

The thing that pulls me in to go and see a musical is in fact not the story, but the dancing in the show. I will judge how much I have enjoyed a musical on the choreography in the show and how it has been executed. I have a passion for dance and that started at a young age as well. I joined the local dance association when I was five years old. When I was twelve I reached the highest level of jazz-dance



in The Netherlands. Next to this I started teaching jazz-dance to the next generation when I was thirteen years old. I kept dancing and teaching at the association until I was eighteen and nineteen years old. One of the reasons I stopped at the association was that I could not combine it with other work and college. Of course this did not mean that I stopped loving dance. So last year I went to London as well to follow a study abroad semester in dance as part of my minor within Creative Business. It was a great feeling to again be able to improve my dancing skills, but it brought back memories as well. The dance and musical industry have a lot of similarities and one of them is that the environment can be very toxic and mentally hard to be in. Besides getting feedback on your skills you also get a lot of “feedback” on how you appear and how you look in comparison to the other dancers in the group. And I feel like everyone in the industry will know what I mean by that and what that does to your mental health. So that was one of my fears when starting my semester in dance, because this was in fact one of the reasons I quit back in 2019. I do think I am mentally stronger than I was when I was eighteen years old, but I think everyone can agree that there will always be a bit of uncertainty about how we look and perform in comparison to other dancers in the room.

My name is [Soraya Nijman](#). I am 24 years old and I am from a little town called Lochem in the east of The Netherlands. I like to educate myself on empowering subjects and subjects that are an important issue in our society. For example feminism or body positivity. When I am done with college I would love to have a job at an organisation that puts those problems to light.

Body positivity is the subject of our magazine and actually a subject that is close to my heart. From a very young age I have always struggled with my body image. When I was a teenager I started to compare myself a lot to other girls and think to myself “why don’t I look like that?”. Maybe it was because I was from a small town where there was not much diversity in body types or race. The use of social media is also something that made me compare myself a lot to others online. As I was getting older and body positivity became more of a thing, it really helped me to let go of the negative thoughts I had about myself and my body.

I find it interesting to hear other people's stories about their journey with their body image. I believe our society is changing because more people are talking about their own struggles more. That is why I want to be a part of something that helps other people deal with their body image and talk more about body positivity.

We have combined our interests which lead to this issue being focused on body positivity within the musical industry and how the musical SIX has such an impact on this. How your body looks is one of the things you can be certain of that you will be judged on at castings and in the musical world in general. Body positivity is growing within the industry, but how big is it really? And does The Netherlands grow as fast in this subject as the United Kingdom is. We bought a visit to the West End in search of our answers.

We hope you will get an inside on how different people look at the subject and enjoy reading this magazine!

Lots of love,
Nina and Soraya



“Don’t lose your head”

**Anne Boleyn,
SIX**



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First of all, love yourself

Body positivity refers to the assertion that all people deserve to have a positive body image, regardless of how society and popular culture view ideal shape, size, and appearance. Some of the goals of the body positivity movement include: Challenging how society views the body, promoting the acceptance of all bodies, helping people build confidence and acceptance of their own bodies, addressing unrealistic body standards.

Body positivity is not just about challenging how society views people based upon their physical size and shape, however. It also recognizes that judgments are often made based on race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Body positivity also aims to help people understand how popular media messages contribute to the relationship that people have with their bodies, including how they feel about food, exercise, clothing, health, identity, and self-care. By better understanding the effect that such influences have, the hope is that people can develop a healthier and more realistic relationship with their bodies.

History of body positivity

Body positivity has its roots in the fat acceptance movement of the late 1960s. Fat acceptance focuses on ending the culture of fat-shaming and discrimination against people based upon

their size or body weight. The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance was first established in 1969 and continues to work to change how people talk about weight. The term “body positive” emerged in 1996 when a psychotherapist and an individual who had been through treatment for an eating disorder founded the website thebodypositive.org. The site offers resources and educational materials designed to help people feel good about their bodies by taking the focus off of losing weight through unhealthy diet and exercise efforts.

The body positivity movement in its current form began to emerge around 2012, initially focusing on challenging unrealistic feminine beauty standards. As the movement grew in popularity, the original focus on acceptance of weight began to shift toward a

message that all bodies are beautiful. While body positivity has become increasingly popular, people continue to be confused about exactly what it means. Part of the reason why body positivity is so misunderstood is due to the fact that there are so many different definitions for what the movement means. Depending on who you ask, body positivity can mean: Appreciating your body in spite of flaws, feeling confident about your body, loving yourself and accepting your body's shape and size. Body positivity also means enjoying the body you have and not beating yourself up over changes that happen naturally due to aging, pregnancy, or lifestyle choices. Instagram played a pivotal role in the rise of the body positivity movement. In recent years, a number of magazines and companies have incorporated efforts to be more body positive in their

publications and marketing efforts. Some magazines have stopped airbrushing models, while companies including Dove and Aerie have developed marketing campaigns incorporating body positivity messages.

Mental health and body positivity

One of the major goals of body positivity is to address some of the ways that body image influences mental health and well-being. Having a healthy body image plays a role in how people feel about their appearance and even how they judge their self-worth. Research suggests that having a negative body image is associated with an increased risk for some mental conditions including depression and eating disorders. Body image refers to a person's subjective perception of their own body which may be different from how their body actually appears. Feelings, thoughts, and behaviours related to body image can have a major impact on your mental health and how you treat yourself. The formation of body image starts early in life. Unfortunately, even young children may suffer from body dissatisfaction. A report published by Common Sense Media found that more than 50% of girls and nearly 33% of boys between the ages of 6 and 8 felt that their ideal body weight was less than their current weight. Results also revealed that 25% of kids had tried some type of

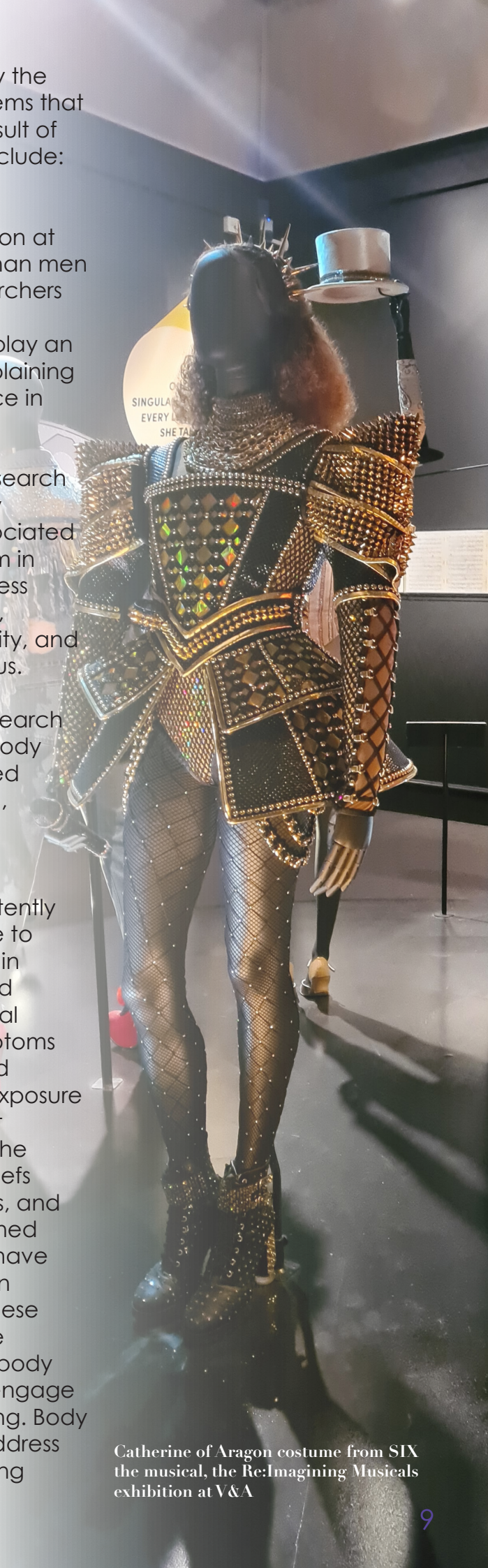
dieting behaviour by the age of seven. Problems that can emerge as a result of poor body image include:

Depression: Women experience depression at much higher rates than men do, and some researchers believe that body dissatisfaction may play an important role in explaining this gender difference in depression rates.

Low self-esteem: Research has found that body dissatisfaction is associated with poor self-esteem in adolescents regardless of their gender, age, weight, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Eating disorders: Research also indicates that body dissatisfaction is linked to disordered eating, particularly among adolescent girls.

Research has consistently shown that exposure to depictions of the “thin ideal” are associated with both behavioural and emotional symptoms related to disordered eating. It is not just exposure to these images that pose a danger; it is the development of beliefs that beauty, success, and esteem are determined by thinness. Studies have also found that when people internalize these ideas, they are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction and engage in unnecessary dieting. Body positivity strives to address these issues by helping



Catherine of Aragon costume from *SIX the musical*, the Re:Imagining Musicals exhibition at V&A

people recognize the influences that contribute to poor body image. The hope is that people will then be able to adjust their body expectations and feel more positive and accepting of their own bodies. Such acceptance may then help combat the toll that poor body image has on mental and physical health.

Source: <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-body-positivity-4773402>

Body positivity in London

Body positivity is a social theme that is increasingly being discussed. In the fashion world you see more and more people with different sizes on the catwalk or in photo shoots, for example. However, we personally rarely see it happening in the musical world. We therefore wanted to investigate whether this is really the case. We also wanted to know how the public in general thinks about body positivity. That is why we made a survey with questions about body positivity and musicals. We went to the University of Roehampton in London to hand out cards with a QR code to our survey online. The survey was made to give us a better view of the way that people who live in London think about these subjects.

According to our survey, the majority said body positivity is an important subject. Somebody said: "It is very important to encourage

"It is very important to encourage people on the acceptance of different body types"

people on the acceptance of different body types." 66,7% thought that London involves body positivity in the society mostly by seeing plus size clothing in stores. Most of the people's opinions are that London should incorporate more body positive campaigns in the streets of London. The students that replied to our survey visit a musical once a half year or once a month or have never been to a musical before. The main reasons why they would visit a musical would be for the story line, for the cast members, for the songs, seeing diversity in race and body types within the cast. Half of the people says it matters seeing diversity in body types if they go to a musical. SIX was named as one of the musicals

for being body positivity friendly. Majority of people agreed that the body types of the cast members don't influence the story line, their willingness to see the musical, the way they interpret the story, the quality of singing, the quality of dancing and the quality of acting. 83,3% said that only people who appear to be fit can play leading roles. They said that the musical industry in London is doing well by having a diverse cast in more musicals, but they also said that it needs to work more on castings. Everybody agreed on liking to see more body positivity in the musical industry.

You can build me up,
you can tear me down.
You can try but
I'm unbreakable

Jane Seymour,
SIX

“You can believe in dancing fairies and swans turning into princesses, a doll that comes to life and all of this...”



but you can't believe that a love interest or a leading man can be under six foot?”

We were lucky enough to talk to an actor who has given us all the details on the musical industry behind the curtain. We talked with Mark George Samaris. He was born in Cyprus and moved to Scotland at a young age. Mark moved to London when he was 16 and studied for three years at Central School of Ballet. He is currently 27 years old. The biggest musical he booked was Newsies, which finished running last July. Another highlight of his career was him playing and being an assistant choreographer on Rumi. In his spare time Mark studies British Sign Language and loves to read. He even has a tattoo of his favourite author.

We want to know which musical role you're most known for or proud of?

I've not done many musicals. I've done a lot of dance shows. But in terms of like a musical, I would say the one I'm most known for is playing Mike in Newsies

But is it also your favourite role you ever played?

That's really a difficult question, like I've loved a lot of the jobs I've done for different reasons. I'm a classically trained ballet dancer. So when that is a pure dance show that is solidly just movement, I connect to that differently than when I have to like sing and dance and act as well. Because I've done Swan Lake and I love the roles I played in that. I was in a film and I loved the role I played in that film. The job that I'm currently doing, I'm playing Clive in Nutcracker. I think that's probably up there, with one of my favourites. Also Newsies has got a lot of attraction, and a big fan base and yeah I did love playing that role.

So your main love is probably for ballet?

My main love is probably dancing as a whole. Rather than just ballet, because ballet can be quite stressful. But then movement, as like an art form, like dancing, is probably where I am most comfortable with and I feel most myself.

Do you notice any differences between the past and now regarding body positivity?

There's never been like a specific "you must be this body type". I think maybe because of the roles that I go for. It's never like Magic Mike in London, where you have to be six foot and shredded. I do feel a constant pressure. A level that I need to maintain in order to feel castable in things. I think a lot of people would agree that our art form is quite vain in the sense that most performers you meet are going to be attractive people, because you're on stage. There's like a vanity that people want

to see beautiful people on stage. I think with that comes the pressure of being physically attractive, whatever that means to someone. I definitely think in the ballet world there's definitely more of the pressure to be thin. The more commercial musical theatre side of things, for guys we have to be taller and go to the gym and that is more appealing. So it's kind of finding this balance for me because I come from that classical background, so getting bigger it's like a bit of a complex. I don't know if my outlook on body positivity has improved, I would just say I am more aware of my standing on it.

Do you notice a difference between the musicals that they make now and earlier in the days?

Absolutely I think with the rise of more queer, creatives, creative people of colour and those creative roles, they're given the opportunity to create these shows. You then open

the doors for everyone of size, race, gender and sexuality. Because theatre is all about suspending belief for however long and short. You can completely forget about what's going on outside and just delve into a story. I think for certain shows where you can believe there's a witch in the woods and there's magical theories, but the prince has to be six foot three. If you can believe in those theories for an hour, you can believe in someone that's not six foot, shredded or a cis white male. I think that's definitely changed from before, when every single role had to have a certain look in order for it to be believable.

So you could say like the musical industry is kind of letting go of those standards?

I think slowly and I do think there are still some moments where those sort of problems crop up again. I do feel like there are people in the industry, performers and creatives trying to pave the way. I think it's got a long way to go, but I think we are heading in the right direction. This is coming from someone who is queer, but I'm not a person of colour and I'm not a woman. I think these people are really paving the way for the industry.

Do you think that some actors get more opportunities because of the way they look than others?

That's a really difficult

“We have to keep talking about it”

question, because I don't feel like I'm in a place to answer that in the sense that I think that devalues someone's work that they've done before. In our society a cis white man already has more opportunity on the table for roles, than a trans woman or a person of colour or gender queer person. That does not devalue like the work that someone does. I just feel that in the world of musical theatre, depending on who the person is, there's like a pool of casting. I think that is changing and people can start dipping into other casting pools. I would say there's more availability rather than like a stereotype. Again I'm never one to devalue someone's work in that sense and we all train for the role. So if you are in the industry, it's because you want to do it.

Do you also think that casting directors look at it in that way too? That somebody's work is more important than the way they look?

I think that's solely depends on the casting and also the show. I think for some shows it really does not matter. Like for example Magic Mike, obviously the way they sell tickets, one of them being that you're going to see absolutely shredded guys on stage. So there is a certain casting bracket you have to fit. Over something like SIX that is equally, if not more popular with the general public. I mean each show has their target audience. I think SIX can appeal to everyone. Therefore because it appeals to everyone, you can cast anyone in it. There is a likeness and people can relate to their character and see themselves on stage. I think that's super important.

Have you ever been casted or rejected because of the way you look?

I've not been rejected. I've been told that my stance in a certain show would not go any further. I would not be able to learn and lead a role because of my size. My argument is you can believe in dancing fairies and swans turning into princesses, a doll that comes to life and all of this, but you can't believe that a love interest or like a leading man can be





under six foot? I think that's absolutely ridiculous. I wouldn't say rejected but like "oh where you are in this company is as far as you will go" because you're small.

Does that make you want to prove them wrong?

I think in that instance I kind of clock out because that is something that I cannot change and I'm okay with my height. I don't feel small and I feel like I can dance fully and so in that instance I think it's ridiculous. Also I can use my height to my advantage sometimes with roles. For example, playing a child. Being small obviously immediately makes someone look like "oh they look quite young". So it kind of ebbs and flows again. I think it's sad that we have to have casting brackets. Sometimes it's a pro and sometimes it's a con.

Does that make you also wanna try out other roles, roles you're not used to?

Oh my God yeah, I mean I think as performers we constantly want to push ourselves and do more. Definitely grow and change. I think a lot of the time performers, if they are put in a casting bracket, they end up feeling stuck. That's why I will take any opportunity I can to do something that might make me feel uncomfortable, but does push me out of my comfort zone. I do love what I've done

in my career. I've been in the ballet company, contemporary company, I've been freelance, I've done film, I've been in musicals, I've done a flamenco show. So I do like to dip my toe into it as much as I can. I want to get as much out of my career as possible before I decide to pack it in.

So the musical industry is growing on the body positivity part, but do you feel like there is more chance to grow?

I think there's always an opportunity to grow. I think with the industry changing as to who they cast and roles. It's a butterfly effect in the sense of you see those people in those shows and they are like let's take a step further. Let's change this and this. It kind of snowballs from there and I feel like it will constantly change. There might be times when it ebbs and flows and they go backwards a bit and they get propelled forwards. I think body positivity and all of that we've been talking about thus far, it's like we have to keep talking about it. If we don't, then things might slip back into the way they were before. Why step back? If we can keep moving forwards?

In what way do you think they can still grow?

I can elaborate on things we've already spoken about. I think one of the ways, one of the many

ways, starts with the schools. Also in the colleges, musical theatre colleges and in the dance colleges. I had a great time in my ballet school. They were really amazing to me. I would never speak poorly of them. However body positivity and body image is always something that they spoke about quite frequently. It's not just my school, but every school. If you want to work in a certain part of the industry, you have to look a certain way. It wasn't until I left and I joined a company, I saw so many dancers with different bodies and the image is just not true anymore. I mean I was always told growing up that you have to be a certain height to be a male ballet dancer. Your feet have to look a certain way. You have to be strong on the legs, but they can't be too big. You want to have strong shoulders, but you want to be really flexible. You have different body types and not everyone is going to fit into that or has that body type to mould. So you have to work with what you have and it's taken me a long time to understand what's good for my body. Also how I perform at my best and in what shape. I feel like if they start teaching people at the colleges more about performing itself, than the way you look at an audition. Getting to see more representation on stage because of that. I'm not just talking about body types, I mean yes body types but also sexuality,

gender and race is so important. If not the most important and valuable thing you could put on our stages. Then you create such a diverse audience, which then creates more diverse people going into these colleges and you then have the most colourful and interesting group of people wanting to perform. I think the hardest one and the one that I'm really struggling with still is myself. Listening to your own body. Being vocal. The way that our industry has been built for such a long time, is that you don't really speak about those things. Because you start to think am I unwell or am I hyper fixating. I speak very openly. I have had an eating disorder, but I have recovered. The body dysmorphia and the body positivity side of things is something that not just as a performer, but as a person I have to navigate every day. Feeling good and feeling confident changes all the time and knowing how to handle that. So I think in this industry being really self aware and self assured is important. As to what you want to do with your career and not letting your body type or casting director define that.

We talked about body dysmorphia, but doesn't that make it hard for you sometimes to perform?
Oh my God yeah every day. There's a lot of things that I have to take into account. I know many performers who have

body dysmorphia or have recovered from an Ed. Ed is an eating disorder. But from my experience, my experience only is you do recover from an eating disorder, well hopefully. I have recovered from my eating disorder. And there is still a daily challenge of not going with the voice in my head and reminding myself that everyone is shaped differently. I have to have certain things in place, in order for me to feel secure. It's more about being healthy rather than looking a certain way. I can gain weight very quickly. That's just my body type. I can also put muscle on very quickly and it takes me a long time to lose weight and muscle, but when I do I can look very very very thin. I have this complex and it crops up from time to time when I'm doing a very intense show. When I started doing Newsies and I dramatically lost a lot

of weight because it's so intense. I started to really like how I looked and I was very thin. I would toy with that idea for a bit and I would maybe eat slightly less and still perform at such a high capacity. Behavioral patterns were very negative and said to myself "that's actually not very good". I have to practice what I preach. I'm an advocate for body positivity and an advocate for recovery. I also say that we should speak very openly. If you feel comfortable doing so and I need to practice what I preach in that sense. I know that there are certain checkpoints for me to help like going to the gym helps. Knowing I'm going to the gym because I want to, not because I feel like I have to in order to look a certain way. I want to go because I want to feel good. Because it releases serotonin. Not because of how it's gonna make me

“You have different body types and not everyone is going to fit into that or has that body type to mould”

look in two months' time. For performers, it's knowing when you're tired and when you need to rest and not pushing. Because then you suffer from burnout. That's a vicious cycle. If I'm tired my anxiety kicks in and if that kicks in my body dysmorphia gets really bad. So I need to break the cycle a little bit sometimes.

And how do you break the cycle?

I rest and I speak really openly. I will tell my partner I'm not feeling good today. This is how I'm feeling. And I usually know that I need to sleep and I need to rest. So then I prioritize resting. When I feel rested, I feel I have the energy to cook good food. When I've eaten the good food I have more energy and then it's like maybe I go to the gym after that. It's like clocking my mind and it's not just a one day thing that happens. It's over a few days I recognize behavioral patterns that's from a previous time that was not good for me. Slowly tweaking those habits. The other day I said I feel fat. I had to immediately change that thought. I said to myself fat is not a feeling, you cannot feel fat. I am slowly trying to break the cycle that's been embedded in me for so long.

Do you think in the musical industry male and female body positivity is treated differently?

There was a look that both male identifying and like

female identifying people had to look like. So there is a pressure in that sense. I keep using this as an example because I see them on the posters a lot, Magic Mike, they're all like shredded. I am not female identifying, so I don't really know their side. On the top of my head for example, like Victoria the White Cat in Cats. I'm obsessed with Cats. There's an element of having to look a certain way because you're going to be in a white unitard. For someone with body dysmorphia a costume and how you feel in it is so telling. It's so important to feel good in the costume on stage. That is the make or break for the show. For me personally, if I don't feel good in something on stage, but have to perform in front of many people it could be a real trigger. I have only ever taken a role that I enjoyed doing, but there have been roles where I've gone on stage and I did not feel nice in that costume. I don't feel either myself or I don't feel comfortable performing in this. It goes from one extreme to the other. I've done a show where I've worn so much clothing that I felt like a sack of potatoes. On the other end of the spectrum, I would go on stage and essentially wear a pair of underpants and a corset and feel so exposed. I could go on in like my little hot pants and feel fine, but then I've done shows where I've worked with maybe slightly more on and feel more exposed. I think

it depends on the actual costume itself and how it feels on your body. For females I can only speak on what I've witnessed in the ballet industry and musical theatre industry. I've not been in the musical industry very long and so I can only speak of my experience as a male identifying person. But in Ballet I think female identifying people have a real pressure of looking a certain way. I think there's some elements that can be transferred over to musical theatre in the sense that in some shows there's a lot of partnering. So women feel a certain pressure to be a certain size, so that they can be lifted and things like that. I think the image of that is thankfully changing now. I feel like with male identifying people this topic is rarely spoken about. I don't know many male identifying people who openly speak about their body dysmorphia and I know that a lot of performers have it. Which is also sad for female identifying people, that it's almost become cliché for them to be like "I feel big today or I can't be in this costume or I need to not eat for two days". I think they both have their pressures and that is unfortunately what our industry has made people feel. I'm grateful that I feel that it's slightly changing. It has got a long way to go, but it is changing.

Talking to the stars

What do other musical actors think of body positivity within the industry. We have asked some of them to share their opinions with us. So here are some musical stars' thoughts on body positivity in the musical industry



Name:
Maiya Quansah-Breed
Most known for:
Catherine Parr in the original West End cast of SIX the musical

“Stop putting yourself and letting others put you in a box of what you can and can not do”

“As I always think it should be the person right for the job, the person who absolutely embodies that character, not because of the way they look, but because of their talent and what they bring to the table!”



Name:
Genesis Lynea
Most known for:
Anna of Cleves in the Original Arts Theatre Production of SIX the Musical

“Theatre is meant to educate, shift and change people’s hearts and minds.”

“Maybe we need to look at the intention behind it and break it apart a bit more. Go deeper in our explorations of these taboos in order to make it a new normal to be different.”



Name:
Dom Simpson
Most known for:
Elder Price in Mormon and Christian Moulin Rouge

“There are many factors that go into being cast or not. It’s never been said but I am certain my appearance has played a part.”

“We can always strive for more inclusivity, but there is still a story to be told and roles can be wrongly cast if inclusivity is put ahead of the storytelling”

I kind of leave it up to talent, to tell me if you can play the role

To learn more about the view on body positivity from someone who loves musical theatre and is in the industry herself, we talked to Mýa Onwugbonu. She is 22 years old and lives London. At the moment Mýa is in her third year of film and drama studies at the University of Roehampton. Recently she directed a show called "Hear me now" and won a best director award for it at the Black British Theatre Awards. She is currently directing another play and she has a spoken word theatre production in February. Next to that she is also doing "Seize the day" in January. She loves poetry and working with instruments. She also enjoys being a writer who writes scripts and plays.

Can you tell us your opinion on body positivity In general?

I think society is really trying nowadays to make the media look a bit more body positive, but I think it's definitely an issue that's growing. And completely needed to help kind of boost everyone's opinion of themselves as well. There is a lot of work needed because there's so many different body types and there's so many different industries where it constantly gets warped. Yeah, I think it's important and needed.

How do you think London incorporates body positivity?

I think in terms of modeling for brands, they really started to like pushing outside the box. I think Asos is a good example. Zara too is usually quite a good example, they always try to have different body types modeling their clothes. So it's more realistic to all their customers. But I still think it's an issue in terms of what is popularized and the feedback that is given. Although they are trying to diversify it, they also want money and sometimes what sells is the skinny people.

How do you think the musical or theatre industry uses body positivity?

In the theatre world I would actually say specifically body positivity is quite big. Because if you think about a show like Dreamgirls one of the characters is a larger character, so there was always a presence of different sizes on stage. Thinking of shows like Waitress who usually has a quite spread of actors and I think it's because the talent is prioritized within these productions quite often. I know it definitely depends on what show. For example Tina Turner, they're all quite skinny. The actors and performers and then Tina Turner too. They all kind of have the same body shape. But I guess That's just kind of what Tina Turner looks like and totally what was around at the time of Tina Turner. So it ranges between the different productions you can go to. I will say it's probably gotten better in some aspects. Because the shows that are being on are a bit more diverse, which means



that it comes with a more diverse cast, but I don't know if they're really changing their casting types for roles. They are not like "Oh yeah Tina Turner is gonna be a fat person" because that's not who Tina Turner was. But like it's not changed in that aspect. But I think the shows that they're showing have changed a bit that's helped to evolve.

Maybe it is very hard for the leading roles to change, but how do you feel about maybe changing the ensemble?

It's usually quite the same. I definitely think they could diversify their ensemble parts specifically in Tina Turner. There's quite a lot of dancers and performers and they're all very similar in body shape. Even the same like race or anything. There definitely needs to be some work done on that.

What is your way of dealing with body positivity when you are making a role for your theatre pieces?

I feel like for me often my role, I am quite open in terms of who plays them. The main

part that needs to be is ethnicity. I write a lot for black British audiences including lots of black British actors. So that's the only requirement I usually have is that they just need to play according to their race just so it's like a sensitive subject. I've never had anything to do with body type or body shape or even added in any of the roles that I write. So I also direct a lot of other people's work and they have specifications in terms of their age, in terms of their ethnicity. But the rest of it I kind of leave it up to talent to tell me if you can play the role, then you've got the role and it really should not be affected by what you look like or your body type.

Do you like seeing body diversity when you watch a musical?

Yeah, I think it's always nice to see yourself represented in media and theatre just because. Especially as the industry that I want to be in, this world that I surround myself in. If it's always portraying a specific body type then it's damaging to like my own mental health. So it's always nice to see it diversified and as much as I can make it diversified, I will.

Do you think that they can switch up the leading roles of classical musicals with bigger people? Or do you think they can't do the role because of their stamina?

I'd say no, because I feel like there's definitely people and performers who have the stamina to do the roles and it should purely be based on talent. But I think the society that we're in now, we're in a culture where not that we don't like change, but we sometimes, especially when it's a classic, we just want it to stay the same. It's like "oh this is how it was back then, why are we changing it now?" I think there's that battle. But then there's also the battle of not appropriating, but like just putting it in. Just putting a fat person there because. Just changing it from a white person to a black person just because, rather than like actually creating roles that represents them. Instead of like setting them into a different role. I think that's the battle that

everything's facing. Do we just diversify the roles that are already created, like the classic roles or do we create new roles that are diversified and can be played by anyone?

And what parts of a certain musical do you think can change?

I actually think Sandy is a good one. I don't know if Sandy needs to be played by a skinny person. I feel like the character of her is changing. So I feel like it could be played by anyone. I do think part of her role is based on what she looks like and how she changes what she looks like. But I don't think that has to do with her body shape in any way, so there's definitely flexibility in terms of her role. Even if you think about Wicked. There are no requirements in terms of body shape, body color or race or anything like that. So I feel like they definitely tried. There's a black performer playing in one of them now I think. But I know that they have casted someone who's black now, so they're definitely trying in terms of diversifying it that way. I think they can definitely push further on the body diversity. Yeah, I think there's some good key examples.

Do you feel like the storyline would change if you see a person with a bigger body type or do you think it would matter for the audience?

I don't think it should change. I guess it kind of depends on what the storyline is, but I don't think it would change for me because it's more about the story that they're telling and it's not about seeing a fit person, then it won't change the story, but I do think the public would receive it as that if it has changed. And they would notice it and think 'ohh should they change plot? The story is different.' So maybe that's the issue. it may not change the meaning. But the public would receive it in a different way.

So you would say it's more realistic if they create new roles in musicals?

I don't know if it's more realistic. But I feel like we're at a point where we just keep repeating the same stories and I think it's interesting to have new stories mixed in. There's more scope for more roles to be created than pushing people to fit in roles that are already there and exist, especially when they have already made names for themselves in a specific way. Changing it now creates, probably cancel culture and all of that kind of things i think.

Do you think that within musical theatre there is a difference between men and female body positivity wise?

I actually do think it's bigger for men. I'd say most of them would be fit because I guess the demand of their character is usually more fit. Also they're playing roles that are often the tall handsome guy, the lover or they have to be topless in scenes and things like that. So I do think the pressure on the men in the musical industry is probably larger because there are roles out there for bigger women to play. Although they

may be characterized like "Oh this is a role for a big woman" but they're available. Whereas I don't think there's many roles for big men. I guess a good example would be Hamilton has a wide range of men. Look at their full cast they do look very similar in terms of their body type. On the other hand I guess a good example would be & Juliet. They have quite a good mix of body positive men. I do think the pressure is more for men. But I feel like there's probably also a stigma with men going into musical theatre anyway. So potentially that's also a reason why the men that are in the industry, are already receiving a lot of hate anyway about other stuff. So they don't really think about the body positivity side maybe.



“You said that I tricked ya
‘Cause I didn’t look like
my profile picture...
Too bad I don’t agree”

**Anna of Cleves,
SIX**

Every Tudor Rose has its thorns

You have probably already heard from this new sensational pop musical. They have won many awards including 'Musical of the year 2018', 'Best off West End production 2019' and 'Best West End show 2022'. We are of course talking about **SIX** the musical. The musical written by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss lets the ex-wives of Henry VIII tell their side of the story about living with the King. Let us remind you about *what really went down* in history.

Without him this was never possible

Let us introduce you to the King with the six wives: Henry VIII. Seven years after the passing of his older brother, Henry VIII becomes the King of England. His first marriage was already arranged and they were going to live a happy and long life together. You thought.

Divorced (1509-1533)

Henry VIII's first wife is Catherine of Aragon. She was married to the King's brother first but after his passing was put in jail for seven years. This was until Henry VIII was old enough to marry her. Henry read a bible verse that Aragon was *cursed because she was his brothers wife* first and that that was the reason she had five unsuccessful pregnancies and could not produce an heir. Of course this was not true. Catherine gave birth to a daughter, who later becomes Queen Mary I of England, but a girl is not an heir in Henry VIII's eyes. Meanwhile Henry VIII is searching for someone who can give him his so desperately wanted heir and moves one of his ladies-in-waiting into the palace. So after 24 years of marriage Henry VIII and Catherine divorce.

Beheaded (1533-1536)

You can call her the most famous one. Henry VIII's second wife and the one who moved into Catherine's palace. It is the

one and only Anne Boleyn. The one with a voice and the person who was capable of breaking England from the church. Henry VIII is still trying for an heir and Anne gives birth to a girl, later known as Queen Elizabeth I. Not the outcome Henry VIII was hoping for. Three miscarriages later, Henry VIII starts mingling around with one of Anne's maid-of-honours. So Anne searches for excitement somewhere else as well. Henry VIII finds out about this and shows no mercy. *"Off with her head."*

Died (1536-1537)

The maid-of-honour mentioned earlier is going to be Henry VIII's third wife. Jane Seymour is *the only one he truly loved*, they say. She did give Henry VIII the heir he wanted. A boy called Edward, later known as King Edward VI. We hear you thinking 'What could go wrong?' After giving birth



to the little boy, Jane dies of postnatal complications just two weeks after giving birth. This means that Henry VIII needs to go on a wife hunt for the fourth time now.

Divorced (1540)

With the help of painter *Hans Holbein*, Henry VIII is searching for a new wife overseas. Anna of Cleves caught his attention and he ships her over from Germany to England. Once arrived in England Anna and the King met. Henry VIII thinks she does not look like the painting of her at all and leaves her alone in a palace in Richmond while he searches for a new wife. Anna has to live in the palace all by herself with no men around to tell her what to do. So *tragic...* Their story together ended after not even one year of marriage when Henry VIII found his fifth wife.

Beheaded (1540-1542)

Number five is Katherine Howard, cousin of Anne Boleyn. Katherine was one of Henry VIII's ladies-in-waiting and started courting Henry VIII while he was married to Anna. At this point Henry VIII was 49 years old and Katherine only 17. He has got a lot of health and physical problems and she was a young, beautiful, playful girl who definitely was not ready to rule a country. She was

too young to take part in administrative matters of State or any sort of those things. Henry VIII being busy and her having a lot of free time, she starts having affairs with two of the men who work for the King. *Playtime is over*, Henry VIII finds out about the affairs she is having. He puts her behind bars until her execution.

Survived (1543-1547)

Will it ever end? Yes, Catherine Parr is our last Queen. She will survive Henry VIII. You can say Catherine is the female version of Henry VIII. She herself had four husbands in total. Only difference was that she went through the marriages without decapitating one of them. Her previous husbands had the awful habit of dying. Catherine is not only famous for being the one who survived, she is also known for being the first woman in England to publish an original work under her own name. She was the feminist of that century. She *fought for female education* and even got a *woman to paint her picture*.

Divorced,
beheaded,
died,
divorced,
beheaded,
survived.

And London tonight they are live!



What makes it that everybody is falling head over heels in love with this musical. Is it the diversity within the cast? Is it because of the catchy pop-songs? The fabulous costumes? Or do we enjoy the female empowerment in the show? Maybe it is all of that and more. We could not let this musical slide and paid a visit ourselves. Let us tell you why it is worth the hype!

Warning: spoilers of the plot incoming.

Making it HERstory

Everyone has their favourite Queen and during the musical the audience will decide who is going to be the leader of their band SIX. How you may ask? Well, the queens will each sing a song about their times with the King and how they have dealt with all the BS he was giving them. So the one that had the hardest time with Henry VIII will take the crown and lead the band. But is comparing these individual females an okay thing to do? No and they discover that as well. So instead of grouping them by the fact that the same guy fell in love with them, they rewrite history and tell you what they would have done if Henry VIII did not come around.

We are SIX!

Female empowerment is a big topic in the musical. You do not need a man or anyone to tell you what you can or cannot do. But the musical breaks even

more standards. Body positivity plays a big role as well. With the writers of SIX the musical, Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss, not giving each Queen particular physical features anyone can be casted or can play each part. This is not only very convenient because each understudy can learn multiple roles and can fill in for more queens. It is also a big step forward body positivity wise in the musical industry. The casting directors can choose whoever they feel capable of playing the part instead of having to make sure they fit the appearance that the role requires. Your talent skill is more important than the way you look at castings for these types of musicals. SIX the musical has shown that within the cast on and off the West End. Fun fact: during the Covid-19 period writer Toby Marlow had to fill in as Catherine Parr twice because of the original Parr being in quarantine and her understudies not able

to play the part because of the same reason or having to already fill in for one of the other queens. This shows again how body positive the show has been written.

Sorry not sorry

This improvement may seem like it is not much but for the musical industry this type of new musical writing is a big step in the right direction. You would think that as long as the musical actor looks the same gender as the role that they are portraying and has the same ethnicity features, if that is required, every one that fits those can play the role without the storyline being changed by their appearance. That may be true on paper, but unfortunately it doesn't always work that way in practice. There are a lot of classic musicals where people expect a main character to physically look like how they have always seen the character being portrayed. It is very hard to be the one who wants to

change that. The success of the musical depends on the enthusiasm of the public about it. So if you - the writer, the casting director, the director, the musical actor - take the risk by changing the physical appearance of one of the main characters you can make or break the success of the musical. A musical actor will always try to stay in the same shape or try to fit the body shape of the role they got cast for. This can be physically hard but also mentally. This does not guarantee anything though. Every musical actor has at least been rejected once for a role because of their body shape not being the one that the casting director is searching for. One of the solutions for all of this is in fact writing new musicals without the characters having a certain body type. This opens new doors for musical actors who normally get cast as a funny sidekick or older person because of their body shape. Or musical actors who are considered not short or tall enough for a leading role. So the progress the musical industry is making right now will affect so many musical actors and future musical actors in such a positive way.

What did the audience think of it?

Most of the reasons why people visited SIX the musical were because of the storyline, they liked the songs/music and for the feminism within the musical. Before watching the

“I loved it, seeing it made me feel more confident”

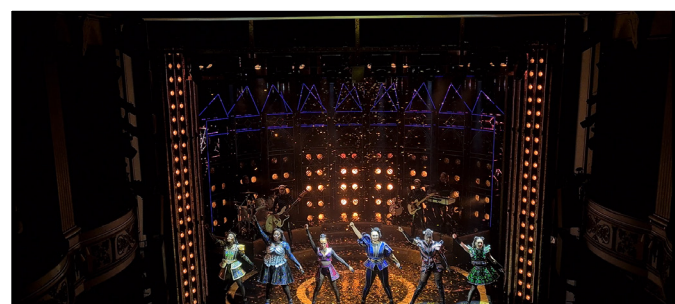
musical most of the people did not really know what to expect, but they did think that the songs were really catchy. Some of their opinions after watching the musical were: “Very fun musical, unlike any other musical I’ve seen and love that body shape has nothing to do with the play. The actresses and audience can focus solely on their roles” and “I loved it, seeing it made me feel more confident”. The audience also had strong opinions about casting people with different body types. Here are some quotes: “I’ve always believed your body type has nothing to do with your acting/dancing ability, but SIX was a living example of this.” and “I love it, so empowering seeing talented women of different

shapes and sizes. That is true feminism to me.” All of the people that filled in our survey were excited about seeing more body positivity in future musicals. They all agreed that having a diverse cast creates a body positivity friendly musical. Most of the people said that seeing different body types on stage did not bother them. After watching SIX the musical some people said their opinion changed on thinking that any body type can play in a musical in a positive way. Everybody’s opinions about SIX the musical were very exciting, but one quote stood out for us: “All the talent on stage is amazing and the fact that the way you look is not a factor to the casting of the queens. Also the storytelling is amazing.”



One of a kind

If you look at the photos on this page they may seem the same, but take a closer look and you will see the different unique casts of SIX the musical on the West End and on tour. As you can see none of the queens have a particular colour of hair, ethnicity or body shape. The appearance of each Queen changes when someone else is playing her. The understudies are not getting cast because they look like the person who is playing the same queen in the main cast either. That is a unique thing within the musical world.



Get down to the West End.

Are there more musicals like SIX the musical who are letting loose of casting people because of their body being a certain shape? Yes, there are a couple of musicals who, just as SIX, have no requirements regarding the way their cast looks. The Choir of Man and & Juliet are newer musicals which are written with only a gender requirement. You also have musicals who are body positive but because you need to have a certain level of stamina and flexibility to portray some of the roles it is often not doable for musical actors who are not slim. They have no problem with casting people with different body shapes in the ensemble or smaller roles where it is possible. Moulin Rouge and Newsies are some of those musicals.

We want to hear from you!

Do you mind seeing a role in a musical being played by someone whose body type is different from the ones who portrayed that role before? Let us know how you think about this subject by sending an email to bodypositivity@musicalmagazine.com



I'm too skinny to be a Tracy Turnblad,
but I'm too fat to be Cinderella,
you know what I mean?

Jasmine Canziani is an American student with Italian roots. She is currently doing a masters degree in choreography at the University of Roehampton in London. She is 28 years old and she has been dancing since the age of three. She struggled with body image because of the high expectations in the dance and musical industry. She is going to explain to us more about those high expectations and her opinion on body positivity.

In what dance shows and musicals did you play in?
My first musical was Peter Pan in the fourth grade when I was nine years old. The company that did the musicals in our schools back then, would split up the parts so everybody gets a chance to have some lines and be a character. There would be like 15 Peter Pans. One Peter Pan per scene, so that you get a chance to be Peter Pan and then for the rest of the show you're in all the group numbers in the ensemble. Well, that was my first. I was Peter Pan

for one scene in the fourth grade and then I just didn't stop after that. So I don't even know if I could count the amount of musicals that I've been in my life, yeah.

Which one are you the most proud of?

Probably my senior musical in high school. I was 18 and I had to play Mama Rose in Gypsy, which is pretty difficult when you're 18 years old and you're not like an overbearing stage mom in their 50s. It was my first real lead role that I

ever had to do. It was just a really intense experience, but a really good, cathartic experience for me. I'm pretty proud of 18 year old me for getting through that and it was fun.

Do you notice any differences between the past and now in the musical industry regarding body positivity?

Totally. I haven't auditioned in a while, so I don't have any recent personal experience in the audition room or in the rehearsal room with professionals in

regards to body positivity. Just in the shows that I have seen that are being produced and that I have gone to watch. I definitely see a difference, specifically the first one that jumped to mind when you said that was & Juliet. I feel like it just made me so happy to see some of the more unconventional or the more conventional stereotypes of what you view Romeo or the male lead as. It was just slightly altered. I feel like they picked people because that specifically looks different and they have a non-binary character and they have like a love subplot between two older characters which you often don't see. I think ageism is also a huge thing there, so it was nice to see that someone has put time and effort into highlighting people that we don't normally see in those kinds of roles. Compared to what used to be somebody 10 years ago.

Have you experienced any negative things regarding body positivity when you auditioned?

Definitely. I definitely felt impacted because of my body type. In the past, definitely not in a positive way and from my classmates around me. Especially in a musical theatre programme. I had one teacher who would go around and pet all the guys on their stomachs and be like you just gotta think about being a leading man. Which is horrible. Or when you're bigger they categorize you as a funny sidekick or the comedic role or the older character, or the mom or the whatever, even if you're 22. I'm getting callbacks for in college when we did Anything Goes and there was one character, the old mom with grey hair. That's what I was called back for at a young age. When it's like I'm the same age as all of my other classmates. I guess fatter means more



mature apparently. That's how it's been for a while. Hopefully if I continue, if I audition again, I will see a switch in that. I feel like there are small moves being made. For example with SIX, all the girls look very different, which is nice. So it's nice to see like bigger people not being only categorized into like the comedic role or the sidekick you know. So hopefully there will be change.

Did it affect your motivation to dance?

For a while I forgot why I started to do it in the first place. I loved it and it really took the pandemic for me to fall in love again with the reasons why I started a career in theatre and dance. When all that pressure is off and you're not competing against 500 girls waiting outside in lines from 6:00 AM. Who also look exactly like you or are singing the same songs or you know that pressure to be the best or be better. You only have one minute in that room to show everything that you have and compete against all these other girls. When that pressure was taken off and I could just dance because it made me feel good and sing because it made me feel good. And then I was like oh duh that's why I started doing this, because it feels really good. So the more you can put all those pressures outside of your mind, then the better that would be. So hopefully when I start again I can

carry some of that with me.

Do you feel like there is a difference between male and female body positivity wise?

Male body positivity doesn't get spoken about as often, I don't hear about it as often. I just watched this documentary, I think it's on BBC. Where they interviewed a bunch of Royal Ballet School ballerinas and male ballerinas about eating disorders and the way they're treated. It really talks about both sides of how you know you have a specific image, you have to look a different way or be expected to have all of these things, but even when you look that way, that doesn't mean you're healthy and it's actually worse for your health.

You're also young, maybe 18 and all these teachers are telling you that this is what you have to do. So then you're not eating and losing weight. That's when you get all the praise, even if you feel really sickly and start to see your bones through your skin. But hey that's what you're getting praised for. So you must think that that's right. Other than that example from my teacher going around to all the guys, I feel like when I was in that programme that's the only thing I heard about it. In this aspect of you have to look like the leading man if you want to get those roles. As in you gotta bulk up your arms, you're gonna slim down your waist, you have to

have a six pack and abs, you have to have all those things. Both issues for male and female are just as important, but we don't hear about the male side as often. I also think beauty standards in general are very different and there's a lot more stuff out there for women that exist. Men don't have makeup marketed towards them, like men don't have spunks marketed towards them. All these other things that society tells us that we need in order to look a certain way or to be desirable, men don't have that. So that's also probably part of why we hear about it more just to see all those things in the magazines advertisements for the makeup and whatever just to strap you in.

Does the story line change for you if they change the leading roles in classical musicals from a fit person to a different body type? And what do you think the public's opinion will be about changing that?

Personally, it doesn't affect the story at all. I don't think so and if it is affecting the story then something is wrong. Then somebody, the director or the choreographer, somebody's not doing their job correctly, if that's what I'm focusing on as opposed to the plot and the storyline and the actual things that are going on on stage. Unless that's a Specific directional choice from the director and the

costume designer and the lighting designer. That's a different story, but it doesn't matter for me and I would prefer to see that because I think on the general side, we are conditioned to see specific boxes from the youngest age, even with cartoons with all the Disney princesses and stuff like that. That's just the stuff that we are fed from a really young age. That's what we think of just because we're used to it. Maybe in general it would be harder for somebody to go in and accept that right away. It might take them a little while to like get back into the story and not be distracted by that just because it's something we're not used to seeing over and over again. But if we see it over and over again, then it would hopefully be the same as the other thing that it wouldn't be distracting and that it would just be something we're used to and it wouldn't affect the story at all.

Do you think only the classic roles need to be changed or they have to create new roles?

Both. I think unless the story is about a specific race or a specific gender like West Side Story, you probably shouldn't do it if you don't have Puerto Ricans and a gang of Caucasian people like that story is specifically about those two groups of people. So I think it just depends on the play. Also all of the things that were written before in the 1920s and the 1930s and so on

came out of a different society than we're living in now. If you look at the society we're living in now and you want to make stories that reflect the people that are living now, then it should look different because we're not the same as we were even five years ago, let alone 100 years ago. It just depends on the show, but I would love to see more modern contemporary musicals coming out of what our society looks like now. I also think you can go back to some of those old roles unless it specifically requires something like Hairspray would be really hard to do without a significant amount of African American cast. But it also shouldn't matter what type of bodies they have, as long as they fit the role. If the only profile is race, then the body type shouldn't matter as long as they fit the race profile.

How much does it matter to you to see different body types within a musical cast? Does it make you want to go more to musicals when you see diversity?

I don't think it has affected my choice so far. When I go to see a show, the first thing that I look for is a story that I want to see. So I look for the story first that I know and recognise. But it would definitely be an added bonus if that was something I saw once I got there and the curtains opened and the cast was extremely diverse. It would just be like a thing that would heighten

the experience. Maybe going forward I will look into that more and only seek out productions that are being inclusive in that way. So I don't think it has affected me so far, but that doesn't mean that it won't affect me.

Do you think the musical industry can still improve body positivity wise and in what way?

I think they can. We've made it this far. Society is changing the world, it's changing every day. There's no reason why certain things that have been in place back in the 70s shouldn't be revamped for us, a current society. A narrow view of bodies is perpetuated in this industry through costuming. If it's a revival of a show that has already existed or a tour of a show that has already existed where they have all of these costumes already made before they cast people. That puts them in a box where they either have to spend more money to or make costumes that fit the people they cast, as opposed to saving money by using the costumes they already have and finding people who fit those costumes. I think that is a very specific easy way to change who your cast is. If you're not worrying about the costumes, if you have the funds to make the costumes for the people that you cast later, then that opens up. It gives you more variety who you're then able to cast because

I know a lot of that is the case with a lot of tours and it's a case with a lot of amusement parks and things like that. If you're not a specific height or you can't fit into a specific costume and then they can't cast you because they don't want to spend the money to remake a whole costume. Even if that person is the perfect person for the role. There's all those other financial outside factors that come into it. I think that's an easy place to start to just lift those restrictions. Take a couple of seams out for example to make a change.

So you would say that talent is more important than the way somebody looks?

If I was a casting director that's what I would look for and it varies. It definitely varies. I've been to dance calls where it is way more important to perform the combination even if you miss x amount of steps. If you're acting and you are putting 100% effort into the performance quality of the movement and if you lose yourself you get back on most of the time, they will pick those people. Because they don't have to teach them the steps you can learn later, but you can't teach them stage quality or performance quality. That's just something you either naturally have or you don't. So it just depends on the casting. Some rooms I've been in where the way you're performing the dance is more important.



Even if I miss a full eight count or not is way more telling and gives them way more information than someone who has nothing going on in their face and does all of the steps perfectly. But some people are also just looking for that very specific technique, it's someone who can pick up quickly and nail it on the first try. I don't necessarily think the most talented people have gotten the jobs that I have competed for. But I would say it's probably like 70/30 almost. I feel like 30% of people care more about the talent and the other stuff later. More it's the people that look a certain way that will get more. I went to a lot of castings too where they don't even have you audition. All they'll do is line you up or just look at all your head shots and pick who they want. Just based on what your headshot looks like or based on what you look like on that day. You could have been waiting around for hours and then they are like we looked at you and you're not right so you can go. Without even an audition to begin with.

Does that affect your own body image?

100 percent. I've never been the skinniest in the room. I've never been the biggest in the room. I feel like I'm in a weird average middle area. I'm too skinny to be a Tracy Turnblad, but I'm too fat to be Cinderella, you know what I mean? So there's not really a box

for me in that way. So I definitely have struggled to find my place. Like I know I'm talented. I know I could sing those songs and do those dances and I could be a chorus girl. I could keep up with the dancers and all those people. But I'm not a skinny looking chorus girl and a lot of people want that. So I never have really felt like I fit into one box that they have created, this industry has created for us to try and fit into in order to get cast in these shows. That's definitely affected me. I feel like I tried really hard to squeeze myself in and it just never felt right. So I'm waiting on the person that says we want you because you're talented and none of that other stuff matters. Those are the kinds of people that I want to work with.

What helps you get over those negative thoughts of your body image?

Find your support system or know who your support system is. I have a lot of friends and I'm still in contact with from undergrad experience. My friend Marie is kind of in the same situation. She's really short and her ethnicity is both Hispanic and Japanese, so she's considered what they call ethnically ambiguous in the industry. Where they can kind of get away with casting you in a race or a role that is not necessarily yours, but you can pass for looking like it. Which is its own issue. She is also in

a weird inbetween where she's a great dancer, a great singer but she's really short so she's not a tall chorus girl. She has this ethnic ambiguous vibe going for her, so she gets passed over for like your traditional ingenue roles and there's not really a box for that. So if you find people who have similar situations you can go to them and complain about your problems together and go through together. That definitely helps, but I think it's also for me at least about doing work on yourself. To have a system of mantras or things in your arsenal that you use to help yourself feel better and pull you out of those mentalities. I have a therapist, I love therapy. That's one big thing that really helps. Just find little reminders for yourself. So you don't lose your power or your confidence and remind yourself that you are just as capable, probably even more than some of them. None of that means that you are any less than anyone else.

Do you see many differences between the school you went to in New York and the school you are at now in London? Also in terms of different body types in school or maybe in auditions?

Well, in terms of schools in New York they only take 20 people. Like 10 guys, 10 girls from the thousands and millions that are auditioning. So definitely a specific number. But they generally

like to keep musical theatre programmes smaller. Because of class size or if they had like 100 people it would be almost impossible for everybody to get cast in one show for the four years that they're there. It's also probably to make sure they focus on the people that they have and are getting cast in shows and are getting that practice. So it'd be really difficult. In musical theatre programmes I think you already have them like you if you're not white because they want to show that they have the statistics of accepting people from all different backgrounds. it's still an issue if you're tokenizing them to begin with. To get them into the programme, just so that you can say that you have a diverse programme. That's not the reason you should be admitting them, but because they have

something that you want to work with and you want to help foster their talent to be successful later. Race, gender and body type shouldn't matter. One time I went to a school and the head of the theatre department came out and said like "If we already have your type in our programme, we're not going to accept you" so they have a very clear view of what types they're looking for and who they want to fill those boxes. To me that says regardless of talent, if we already have one big girl who can dance and you're a big girl who can dance then we don't need you cause we already have filled that role already. It just depends on the school. At my own school I kind of feel like we have a big mishmash of people of various economic backgrounds and ethnic

backgrounds. We look very different and also body type wise. We definitely have a wide range of body types which is nice. So the schools already do a lot for body positivity and it wasn't really the open audition castings that brought in more body sizes. I'm seeing a lot more now about the postings for the open calls to the auditions. They want any gender, any race, any disability, any whatever, everybody is welcome to attend. They have the statement that they're required to have to be inclusive. Whether or not that audition or that production is as inclusive as it says on the addition. I think a lot of the time they say it just to say it. Just because it has become more of an issue and you're also seeing a lot more productions that are inclusive.



“You wanna
replace me
baby
There's no way”

Catherine Of Aragon,
SIX

The man who put a ring on it

He has been putting several of his wives in all different castles but where did the King himself live all this time. Take a look inside Hampton Court Palace and see where Henry VIII searched for his next wife. Fun fact: after Henry VIII's death Hampton Court Palace had some Dutch owners as well. William III lived in the palace from 1689 to 1702 with his wife Mary II and William IV of Orange-Nassau moved into the castle in 1799.



When it comes to casting in terms of body positivity, there's no point in having an open casting if the panel doesn't have an open mind



Somebody who knows all the ins and outs of castings in the musical world is Stuart Burt. We talked to him about his opinion on casting people with diverse body types. Stuart is 44 years young and is originally from a place called Fife in Scotland, north of Edinburgh. He has been living in London for 24 years and finds it terrifying realizing he is more of a Londoner than a Scottish person. Three or four times a year he visits Scotland, but his parents love London and they love to see the show's he casts on the West End. Working in theatre is a full time job, so he does not have many hobby's outside of his work which is having his own casting company. Recently he picked up candle making and he likes to experiment with different moulds, colours and scents. He likes it because for a brief moment his mind is switched off from work.

How long have you been in the musical industry and where did you start?

Basically I've been committed to theatre since I was 11 years old. It's the one thing that picks me up and carries me and I love that. I'm very lucky that I managed to make this hobby into my career. I've been working in theatre since I was 11, but for fun. Then I went to University and I studied French and European history at the University of Edinburgh. Also when I was there I did the University Footlights Club, which is like the musical theatre group. So I

did that all the way through. Then I decided I wanted to be a performer myself. I went to drama school at a place called Mount View in London. I did that for three years. I was an actor for two years. I realized I've taken a hobby a little too far. But I knew that I loved theatre. But I hadn't found my place yet, so I applied coldly for a job as a production assistant on Billy Elliot the musical in the West End. I did that for two years and I applied for a job as a casting assistant at the Ambassador Theatre Group, which is the largest independent theatre



& Juliet, 2022

group in the world actually. So I was an assistant and associate across the first five years. Then I was the head of casting for that company for five years. So I was there for 10 years and then six years ago, I set up my own business, Stuart Broadcasting. I've been working ever since, like across plays, musicals, National, International, yeah.

How does your company do business?

So basically it's always led by an artistic conversation about what we want to create and how we do that. It's not only just through design. It's by the humans who inhabit this space, so it's huge. It's like a very, very early conversation. The type of directors I work with, primarily like Rebecca Frecknall from Cabaret, Jamie Lloyd's Sunset Boulevard, Luke Sheppard from & Juliet. They want a company on stage where you can look at that company and say I think everyone could connect to someone on that site. So it's

very deliberate, but not contrived. Where we can go, we want anybody who's in the audience to be able to connect and view themselves on that stage. It's all done through castings. Sometimes we have worked with actors before and so it could be a straight offer. We meet, we talk about it and make sure that they're on the same playing field and vision that we want. That can be for a lead one meeting if they're well known or for an ensemble it could be six or seven auditions.

What was your favourite musical that you worked on?

They are all quite recent. Actually one is & Juliet and that is because it had never been done before. There's no legacy of casting that existed before. Knowing that because we're casting it for the first time, when it moves on it becomes other shows that might carry forward. So we took a lot of time, a lot of care and thinking about

who we put together. In the first company there were something like 10 professional debuts. They've never worked before. They were graduates or there were a lot of West End debuts because they've never really worked at that level before. So that was a highlight. I think Sunset Boulevard, which is playing at the moment. I do a production called Sister Act which is very well known around the world and we've made very specific choices in our casting on this production. It's like there's certain iconography in the cast involved. If you think about the movie you think about Whoopi, you think about the larger, the fuller figured women. Who's the funny woman and then you think about the big singer, who's this tiny, skinny white girl. Because that existed for a long time, people are used to that because the movie comes on the TV all the time. So when you're doing the musical you think oh that's what we have to do and when we casted for London. If you are brave enough, you have to go back and go, what are the bare bones of this character? What is the crux of this character? I'm gonna say fat just because some people can have ownership of that word and I'm going to say OK they're fat, they're full. For example if you look at Sister Mary Patricks role, she's the funny one. We said no, she's just overexcitable. You should go back to the basics. You know that character is just so full of energy. All very excitable and just know what to do with that energy. Then we looked at the role of Sister Mary Robert, who is traditionally a tiny white girl and we went why does she need to be out? Because the essence of her character is, she feels insecure. She hasn't found her voice yet. It's just the fact that she has something inbuilt in her that she can't connect with people. It had nothing to do with her body shape. So our sister Mary Roberts, who's the one who can't find her voice, is the magnificent Lizzie Bea. Who everybody thought we'd cast as sister Mary Patrick, who we've cast as this person. It's because their spirit matches the character, not because their body matches the character. You have to go back to basics. Some people feel like audiences are not

ready for bold casting choices. But of course they are. I feel like it's more exciting for the audience because they feel they've discovered something new. It's not just like same old because they'll say "oh and the woman playing that was totally different, but they were great" and so they feel like they're part of that discovery which is exciting.

So you would say that's like your favourite thing about creating a musical?

Yes, I personally view casting as an artistic process. I don't view it as a functional process. I find it purely artistic. The same as a choreographer, as a director, as a musical director, as a designer and we don't just move people across. We can make decisions which influence the perception that will make up what the show is today through those choices. I enjoy challenging perceptions.

Is physical appearance mostly the main reason why you cast someone now or is it different from the past?

There's like for shows that have been established, there's certain iconography. There's the people's expectations. Look,

“Historically there's the fat funny one or there's the fat ugly one and there's no real narrative being created”

we can never shy away from ethics that are ingrained in a character's story. For example, if they are from a Southeast Asian family, then that's what it needs to be. Because we're talking specifically about body shape, I think that gender can be quite specific. I think that race can be very specific in a character's story if it's written in. That can be quite specific. Age can be quite specific if it's written in. But body shape very rarely is written in. It's about challenging this world. It's like a trope. There is a usual way of doing it, it's the expected way. That is what's old fashioned. I think there was a massive change. I also think that it's cultural and it depends on age, because if you would get certain directors work they may not have embraced that change. Same with casting directors. There's a really incredible dancer I know named Kate. I have hired her three times already and she's exceptional. She went to a workshop recently with a very established West End casting director in his 60s. She'd never been seen by him. In the Q&A section, she said "do you ever see plus size dancers?" and his reply was no because they don't have the stamina and can't keep up. And she was there and she

was like I've been in all these professional shows. So I think that it's a cultural and a generational mindset change.

So for your company you could say talent is more important than physical appearance? When I speak to especially graduates, drama students or any young actor or emerging actor, I just want them to have a sense of worth like that's the most important thing for me to know when an artist just knows. I've asked to see you, you come into the space, you share some of your artistry and hopefully you're happy with it and you walk out. That's it. In terms of body shape unless the writer has written it, I want to find the best spirit and point of view for whoever that is. I'm open. There's artistic freedom in that. By the way there are moments where we do have to ask ourselves about fitness levels. Because it's eight times a week for three hours. So as long as their fitness level is up, it doesn't matter what shape they are because they're two very different things.

How often have you seen restrictions from



the director in terms of body shape?

I'm glad you asked this question because I find it quite challenging. I have definitely been in a position where I presented someone for a role and because of their body shape got rejected. A director or someone on the panel said that because of their body shape, they feel like they are less attractive. It's very tricky, but I've definitely been in that situation where I am like would that person fancy this person. It's really hard and I have to judge at that moment whether I can speak up, whether if I do speak up, they'd be open to any challenge. And if that challenge would be useful in any way. I will always challenge. But if it's battered off in a couple of instances, I know I'm not gonna make any leeway, but I've made my personal point as never before. That's definitely come up. The thing about stamina fitness is that actually the audition process itself is very challenging. So if you can get through the audition process, I feel like you've got the stamina. If we found the right person, we could also invest in that person to make them fitter and ready. Not to make them lose weight, but just to make sure that they have good lung capacity. Like we might say we're gonna pay for you to go to the gym, not to lose weight but because you need to make sure that you are match fit like a sportsman. We could accommodate those choices by making sure that we can help them with their fitness levels.

So is body positivity a thing that has always been around or just these past years?

We really only started talking about it in the last five years and more so post pandemic. So I think it was a massive change in everybody's perception of what we want to see. Also what we want to engage with on stage or in any performance or TV or film. We've really talked about it for five years only, which is scarily recent. Historically there's the fat funny one or there's the fat ugly one and there's no real narrative being created. There's definitely space to change that. Ultimately we have to make up for lost time. So basically we're at a point where as an industry we've just

let that pass by us. We have to be quite deliberate in our choices now to make up for that, to make that change. In the same ways we've been doing that in terms of racial and gender identity for a bit longer. Especially in the early days for them to just become the norm.

Do you think there is a better way to change the musical industry, maybe not only changing the classical musicals?

Again I think that's a very good question. I love new musicals. I'm also really happy that the great works that existed before still get made. Like I love Rodgers and Hammerstein. I love Oklahoma and all that fun stuff. It's possible but I think it's harder, because I think that they tend to be a bit more specific in writing. They'll actually say in the character's original character descriptions how it was intended to be played and intended to be cast. Whereas I think there's a clear interpretation for newer musicals. Where it's just like this is the fundamentals of this person, rather than this is what they look like. I still think it's a responsibility for contemporary theatre makers to push that.

Does that happen a lot more these days?

There was a really amazing production of Oklahoma. They ripped up the rulebook and so not only was the piece almost unrecognizable, but the cast was unrecognizable. Nothing like everything that had ever been done before. That's probably three years old. So I think that is really a direction that a lot of people are gonna move in. The older musicals I cast, Cabaret for example in the West End. We went by John Kander and he is still alive. He's like 94 and he still has to approve all casting choices. So you have to go through the casting choices with the older musicals, you have to go through a state approval or an author approval and it's whether they're ready for change. He doesn't even see it all because he has got a team. He is locked up in his giant mansion in New York. He's got a team of people who deal with it, but it is another barrier to

casting sometimes you don't think about. I recently was attached to a production of something very famous and we wanted to make the leading man a person of colour, a black man for the first time ever. Then a state said well no. It highlights that there are certain choices that are out of our control, directors control, casting directors control producers control. There's a lot of other things that go into it.

Does that make you want to try harder to do those things?

Yes. I feel like it's our responsibility to challenge and discover because otherwise why? With the older stuff, why do it again? You don't wanna replicate something that has already been done 10 years ago, which was similar to something done 10 before that or even more than 60 years ago. What's the point of doing it now and I think that the point of doing it now is having a contemporary view over something which has happened. I think that casting choices and body shape is right at the forefront.

When people talk about body positivity they mostly think about women, but do you think body positivity for men is talked about enough?

That's again a very good question. I think that because when we talk about positivity in musical theatre, I think that women do draw the forecast and I think it's because they talk about it more. They want the conversation to be heard and be vocal about it. I think that there are really exceptional performers I know who are male and want to talk about it, but they're just fewer. I think that there's a systemic cultural thing where men are not vocal and public about those concerns. So I think that at the forefront it will be women's voices that are heard and by default men's voices will be heard after that conversation.

How do you think the industry can still improve?

If I could talk from my point of view.

Things I do struggle with is that I will have a choreographer who will say I want all shapes and sizes. Now a fuller figured dancer cannot kick their leg and touch their shoulder because there is a stomach inbetween and mostly only skinny girls can. Our choreography should be achievable for all body shapes. We are being deliberately excluded. For example I was casting for Sunset Boulevard and I invited a wonderful singer who sang. But she's an amputee and so she has no arm from the elbow down. She was invited to the dance call and I said to the choreographer can you give her an alternative, because there is a moment where you have to push back on your arm. I said you're going to have to give this person an alternative because they will not be able to do that. He chose not to and he just expected her to do her best. So it's those moments where I feel like we can, as like creatives, say we are fully inclusive. But they have to be adaptable for the people they say they want to engage with. That boils my blood by the way. They said well they can't do it and I said of course they can't do it. So we hope to make space in the future for that.

Does that make you not want to work with those people again?

That does make me question things. But the thing is I can't in that moment because it happened in an audition room. You don't want to create a falling out. I did make my point, but like I have to cast the show so I have to just put that away and that happens unfortunately.

So you had to cast somebody else?

There were many fully able bodied people but we were excited for her and the fact she sounded beautiful. She was there in that room, but we did not make space for her in that room and that makes me sad. And that's on like the highest level of West End theatre.

Do you think open castings give more opportunity to people with different



“If you look up any one of my casts, you will see that there is body positivity in every single one of my casts because it’s important”

Is body positivity something that has always been on your mind?

I grew up in a family where I was on my first diet when I was eight years old, like I've had my own journey with my body shape. My family continued to have a journey with their body shape. It's really a conversation that started, if we're lucky, in the last 10 years where it was just seen as unhealthy, lazy, you choose to be this way and thin is everything. So I suppose that is just because of my own relationship with my body shape, with my family and those around me. It's always been something that has been on my mind, but something I probably properly tackled until about 10 years ago. As an adult, I have other opinions and points of view.

Do you see a lot of actors struggling with body image?

Yeah, which is why it's important that we make choices where people go “that's me”. It's happening. There's change happening. There's a responsibility in the choices that we make. If you literally look up any one of my casts, you will see that there is body positivity in every single one of my casts because it's important. With conscious casting, it makes people with different body shapes wanting to be in leading roles. We can't change the world right away, it takes years. But a single piece of casting can change everything for people. When we casted Lizzie in *Sister Act* it caused quite an impact, because a lot of women went like “wow, she's not playing the funny fat one, she's playing the one with the biggest song and the sweetest story!” and that's important. Well we didn't cast it because it's important, we casted her because she was the best person for the role. Moving forward, if we recast it we might carry forward that choice because it was important to a lot of people. The thing is though, I deliberately do go into a casting session saying I wanna leave this process knowing we are representing across the board. I don't know how that's gonna happen but I want it to happen. It has to be deliberate now for it to be natural in time.

body shapes because there is no musical background required?

Open casting is tricky. It's fantastic because you do have an outreach to people that you might not normally have outreach to. When it comes to casting in terms of body positivity, there's no point in having an open casting, if the panel doesn't have an open mind. You might have the opportunity to audition, but does that does not necessarily mean you're gonna get cast. I don't really have many open castings. In the UK, we work in a very over saturated market like across the board. There are too many actors, too many casting directors and not enough jobs. So I feel unless it's extremely precise and specific what I'm looking for, I won't have an open call. Because I know that I'll be able to find that in probably the more traditional castings. Which is usually people who went to drama school or have got an agent. Because it's so specific and the pool is quite small. You might find one person in 300. Sometimes it's worth the risk, but generally I don't do it because I've got an open mind.

Auditioning LDN vs NL

You read about the casting process in London for the bigger musical productions but how does an audition look like in the Netherlands. That is something that we are going to tell you about right now. Let's see how different it is from the United Kingdom.

Getting in

On Dutch websites like *Musicalsites* and *Stage Entertainment* you can find the auditions that are currently out there. When you click on the different auditions on those sites you can see what they require from you. These vary between appearance and achievable singing pitch. The smaller the production, the less is expected of the actor in terms of training. For productions that are going to run in the bigger theatres only people with enough experience or with a finished musical theatre or dance degree can audition. Open auditions is a thing in the Netherlands just not at the bigger productions. Musicals produced by smaller companies have the option for people who want to audition without training or experience. But, as Stuart said in his interview, an open audition does not necessarily mean that the director is open to everything. An open audition is however a good place to practice auditioning.

Audition Time

After getting an invitation to audition you get the material which you have to prepare for the audition. Online you can not find a lot of information on how an musical audition is build up. But if you check sites of colleges that teach in

musical theatre or dance you can find their audition process. Speaking from Nina's own experience we can say that these two are very similar. With musical auditions you very much always have to send in a video of you doing a monologue of your choice next to your curriculum vitae and headshot. With the invitation to the audition you often do not get material from the musical to perform in round one. However you do get material that is similar to the stuff that you need to be able to do in the musical. You have a singing and dancing audition and after that you have to wait until you get a call back. When you are lucky enough to get a call back you have to perform a singing piece, a dancing piece and a monologue from the musical that you auditioned for. They, the people from the casting, want to see who fits the part. In this round it is very much possible that they want you for another part than you auditioned for. So you can get a call back for the part you auditioned for and/or for a part that you did not. If the casting director is still in doubt they let you come back a third time for just a monologue of the character that they want you to play. Musicals that are produced by bigger companies often have more call backs and rounds than the smaller produced musicals.

So as you can see there are not a lot of differences between the musical audition and casting process from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Both auditions include a singing part, dance part and a monologue part. The call back process is the same as well in both places. The only big difference is the way you get into the audition. In London you can audition for big musical production if you have done a course in musical theatre or dance. Besides this some West End shows hold open auditions. In the Netherlands open auditions are often only held when searching for children to play a part or in less big productions. For the bigger productions they require you to have done a course in musical theatre or dance or you have to have a lot of experience as a musical actor.

**We're free to take
our crowning glory**

SIX

