

My Body

Audience Survey Report



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a brief report which analyses the audience response to the practical element of my research project, titled: *My Body*. The performance used the physical theatre forms: LBMS, Butoh and Frantic Assembly to devise a short work-in-progress performance around the theme 'my body doesn't belong to me'. The theme was extracted from a public survey which asked women about their relationships with their bodies ([click here to see the full report](#)).

The audience response talks to some core questions in my research that interrogate the ethics of referencing womanhood as a shared experience, and which place the body as a central point of reference when considering the experience of women. As many of the responses will be difficult to understand without the context of the performance, in the analysis, I offer an expanded description of the performance where necessary.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was released on 1st July 2022 immediately following the performance. The full survey and participant information sheet are available as appendices. Participants had until the 4th July to withdraw their consent due to the tight deadlines approaching; submission of the thesis being due at the end of August. The audience were made up of five invited women.

The survey was crafted based on some principals of phenomenology, citing the body as the main point of reference for experience. As such, I asked the audience to describe a moment which evoked a strong response from them, then first to describe their physical response to the moment, followed by a question of the emotions they attribute to the response, and finally a question on why they believe they felt that way. The survey was divided into four sections; the first three repeated the formula above and the fourth allowed participants to offer any other responses that might not have fit within the main structure of the survey.

TABLE OF RESPONSES

Description of the moment	Physical response	Attributed feelings / emotion	Why?
When performer in red was moving at the start of the piece and there were multiple shadows reflecting in the background. I also found the way they were touching their body very evocative of that otherness which women often feel about their body.	Goosebumps	I felt a desire to escape from the performer and remembered feeling that way myself.	I felt it was a very shared female experience of feeling trapped in your body.
When the performers were mirroring a central performer. I found each part of that very powerful but especially enjoyed the contrast when the green performer was smiling and had such joyful movements. I felt like each performer responded to the central performer, some confidently, some tentatively. And that felt like the performative nature of womanhood	Holding your breath	-	Powerful display of the different aspects of being a woman. Nurturer, teacher, student, child
I liked when green and [purple] were exploring each other tentatively and emotionally and orange and red were being aggressive and fighting in the background. I also really enjoyed the shadows here	Perceived rise in body temperature	I felt the duality of the female relationship, supporter and competitor	The two pairs of performers and the way red used the other performers to hide was really interesting
When all performers moved in unison. When performers were in pairs moving harmoniously. Section where one performer is clearly subject to violence and overpowered	Perceived increase in breath tempo	A moment of connection/ recognition	Recognised something of my own experience, whether disempowerment or more positive interactions.
When performers came together and moved in unison	Perceived increase in breath tempo	Expression of individuality and shared experience	Chimes with my own experience
When performer is physically overpowered	Holding your breath	Fear - fear of physical violence and recognition that this could be a metaphor for a more subtle form of oppression	Recognition that this is experienced by many women
When there was aggressive behaviour and a sense of the victimisation of another	Gasp; Belly tightening and shivering	Feeling like I was suffering with the victim	I am naturally empathetic so it resonated in my body n senses

When the older woman [/green performer] found she was struggling to get up	Perceived increase in heart-rate; Holding your breath	I'm elderly n also find it hard to rise to standing once at ground level! Sympathy!	As above
When there was a synchronistic movement as each woman took her place as leader	Perceived rise in body temperature; inner smile	Loved the relationship between them all	It's so evocative of what's beautiful when there's harmony and beauty in body movements shared
[The red performer] scrubbing, rubbing and pulling at her body.	Crying and anxiety	Being upset usually.	I related to these movements in a mental capacity as I too wish I could scrub parts of my body away.
Lady in green routine when she physically smiles	I also smiled and felt warm pressure on my chest.	Unfortunately I do not have a specific answer for this.	It made me feel more joyful and hopeful that as I age I may start to feel happier or more content with my body.
When [the red performer] had no control of her body, she was being led by touch.	Perceived rise in body temperature; Perceived increase in heart-rate; anxiety	-	I hate not having any control over myself as it leaves me vulnerable. The thought of someone touching or moving my body without my consent is sickening.
In the opening sequence when watching the person in the green light I experienced the feeling of being trapped. It brought the words to my mind that my body is a barrier	Perceived drop in body temperature; Goosebumps; Holding your breath; Feeling tension and relief after the sequence had finished. Left feeling or becoming aware of how much tension I had been holding	Feeling restricted, feeling a disconnect between brain and body, my body changes who I am because I can't be who I want to be	Because you could see how pained every movement was and it externalised inward emotions we have to ignore [our] everyday in order to get on with life and be functional

When red was body checking / looking at her body I felt knocked back because it was so powerful and felt sad or shocking	Perceived drop in body temperature; Goosebumps; Holding your breath; Feeling like you have been punched in the chest, separate from your body	The [relatability] of the movements and feelings, feeling the upset and frustration of not being happy with your body. Feeling betrayed by your body. Disgust with your body.	Because as a woman we have been taught to be critical of our bodies and because it is something I do
The end sequence where everyone was in slow sequence	Holding your breath; Feeling so tense, feeling uncomfortable	Struggle, discomfort, tension	I think everyone in this sequence made me feel the collective struggle we feel in womanhood, holding on to a lot of pain and struggling to move through it and let go.
Any other comments?			
<p>It was very powerful and tender. I thoroughly enjoyed the Frantic Assembly and Butoh influences as they are beautifully captivating.</p> <p>One thing I noticed whether it was purposeful or not is that I didn't see the performers faces too often, which in this context I really enjoyed. It implied this lack of autonomy over women's bodies.</p> <p>I also enjoyed the flocking! With implications of women having different timescales within their life e.g puberty, motherhood, menopause.</p> <p>The moment where green could be happy and free after perceived pain and struggling in the open sequence felt so freeing, happy, and true. It was such a powerful moment.</p>			
Lovely group of sensitive women who are able to really feel into a situation or emotional state and dreaming the flow into being			
Wonder if movement and music could be integrated further? Seemed to be at some times and not others. Really liked age range of performers - indicated common experiences across age - but difference also came through. Demographic factors could be relevant- interesting to consider how performance could bring this out more			
I connected with the first half of the performance more than the second. While I enjoyed the whole thing visually, I connected a lot more at the start. I think this could be in part due to the music, it felt very leading at the start and I helped to support my responses and reactions.			

ANALYSIS

Of the small audience, there is a good variety of responses. Some of the responses offer a strong personal approach; others reflect more broadly upon the wider themes of experience and identity. Of the responses, three each relate to the flocking sequence, the red performer's opening moments, and the reference to violence as key moments; two reference the green performer's opening moments; and one each references the dance between the green and purple performer, the pair work, and the Butoh sequence at the end of the performance.

The flocking sequence – where three performers shadow the moments of a 'leader' – is among the most resonant moment in the piece. The respondents who selected the flocking as a key moment identify themes of the 'performative nature of womanhood' and 'the different aspects of being a woman'; an 'expression of individuality and shared experience'; and the beauty in shared body movements. A fourth respondent identified flocking as a strong moment in the fourth section of the survey (other comments). In her response, she interprets the flocking sequence as the different life stages of womanhood. The physical bodily responses associated with this moment were: holding breath; perceived increase in breath tempo; perceived rise in body temperature, and an 'inner smile'. When asked about the emotions attributed to the physical responses, one respondent references the idea of shared experience, implying an emotional response rooted in belonging, resonance and connection; a second references the joyful movements, implying a joyful emotional response; a third references 'love', potentially also feeling belonging and resonance with the relationships onstage, or a feeling of joy from the sequence. This moment appears to generate mainly joyful responses, and talks to a central concern of my thesis. This concern questions the ethics of considering womanhood to be a shared experience; yet while the respondents do reference the individuality of the performers, they still clearly feel that womanhood is something shared. Four of the five respondents reference this sentiment in the survey.

Another of the moments which was most commonly shared by audiences as a key moment was the red performer's opening moment – individual moments showcasing a disconnection from the body – in which she fixates on individual parts of her body which she finds unappealing (e.g the lower belly, the thighs). Three performers describe very strong responses to this moment, one describes themes of 'that otherness which women often feel about their body' and 'a very shared female experience of being trapped in your body'; another suggests that 'as a woman we have been taught to be critical of our bodies', and describes the 'relatability of the movements and feelings, feeling the upset and frustration of not being happy with your body'; a third performer offers a personal response, stating: 'I too wish I could scrub parts of my body away'. The physical bodily responses associated with this moment were: goosebumps; crying; Perceived drop in body temperature, Goosebumps, Holding your breath, and they offer 'feeling like you have been punched in the chest, separate from your body'. The second respondent also offered 'anxiety' as a physical response but I propose that this is the emotional response attributed to the physical response and is potentially linked to physical body or muscular tension. The respondent who experienced goosebumps describes her emotional response as: 'a desire to escape from the performer and remembered feeling that way myself'. The third respondent's emotional response references her relating to feelings of frustration and upset. The performer in red offers an experience which is vividly shared by these performers, each of whom knows feeling disgusted by or disappointed in the

physical form of the body and its deviation from society's expectations of women to be small in stature, slender, toned but not muscular, clean-shaven all over, and naturally or effortlessly pretty. These respondents also recognise that this is shared beyond the space and is subject to our education and socialisation as women. In contrast to the joy and beauty of shared movement, this moment produces responses which call to some of the worst parts of being a woman in relation to our bodies. It also talks to the initial survey in which 'body image' was of the most common themes.

The third most commonly shared key moment are in the violent interactions. There are two points during the piece where the movements become specifically violent; the first is during the manipulation of the red performer where the others toss and carry her around the stage, before laying her down upstage to prey on. The second is between the performers in orange and purple where the orange performer physical overpowers the performer in purple to a point of submission. One performer states that the themes of physical violence and oppression are 'experienced by many women'; another explains that, 'the thought of someone touching or moving my body without my consent is sickening'; and a third empathises with the receiver of the violence, describing how it 'resonates in [her] body [and] senses'. The physical bodily responses associated with this moment were: holding breath; gasp, belly tightening and shivering; and perceived rise in body temperature, perceived increase in heart-rate. In reference to their emotional responses attributed to their physical responses, the first respondent describes fear; the second describes an empathetic connection to the 'victim'; and the third (as above) references anxiety as a physical response, but I propose this is an emotional response. Like body image, and the joy of shared movement; harassment, abuse, and violence sits among the most common experiences of womanhood. Almost all women will know sexual harassment or assault in their lifetimes. One of the performers also alludes to other forms of oppression that are violent in nature, that cause us harm, and may be a reference to oppressions such as the male body bias which means that women are more likely to die in surgery, and on the roads; and the continued fight against anti-abortion legislation. Another of the core concerns of my research is a proposal that in Feminist theory, we move towards a theoretical approach which returns to the body; that a majority of these women identified with these themes of violence and oppression reinforces the importance of women's bodies in the discussion of their oppressions.

Two of the audience resonate with the green performer's opening moments. One performer relates as an older woman with the body pain and struggling to rise. Another describes the idea of her 'body as a barrier', that there is a mind/body disconnect where she wants to be something that her body can't be, and that women are expected to ignore their pains, fatigue, etc. to be able to be a functioning individual. The physical bodily responses associated with this moment were: perceived increase in heart rate, holding breath; and perceived drop in body temperature, goosebumps, holding breath, and feeling tension and relief after the sequence had finished. Left feeling or becoming aware of how much tension I had been holding. The emotional responses which were attributed to the physical sensation were: sympathy, and restricted (respectively). One of the respondents references a sentiment that 'in order to get on with life and be functional' we must ignore our pains (physical or not). I believe that we do live in a society whose capitalist values mean that productivity is crucial. I know though my own experience and the experience of peers that sickness, fatigue, and rest, are faced with prejudice of laziness or weakness. The two audience members resonate with the performer's reduced ability and the frustration of having a body that doesn't do what you want it to do. Within the context of a reclamation of the body, perhaps more rest, and more

tolerance for disability, pain and poor wellbeing would make space for healthier and happier people who are more in-tune with their bodies. This echoes of LBMS.

One audience member identifies pair work as a key moment; this may be the early moments of the sequence where the orange and purple, and green and red performers are engaging in playful improvisation. They reference a recognition of their own interactions, though it isn't specified as being with other women or simply others in general. The physical response they describe is a perceived increase in breath tempo and reference the emotion attributed to this response as recognition.

One audience member references the dance between the green and purple performer as a key moment. During this sequence, the two performers engage in simple, dance-like contact as if encountering each other for the first time; meanwhile, the red and orange performers engage in a chase or hide-and-seek around the dancing pair. The respondent describes the 'duality of the female relationship, supporter and competitor'. The physical response they describe is a perceived rise in body temperature. The emotional response which they describe is more intellectual than emotional, implying that they felt interested or stimulated, meaning that the moment easily generates creativity and metaphor.

What interests me about the observations made above is in the concept of duality. Another of the themes that emerged from the initial survey was the idea that women are raised in competition with one another over partners, opportunities and status. This contrasts the general sense of community and shared experience that is more often referenced in regards to womanhood. That these images returned in this audience survey, despite our moving forward with a different creative themes reinforces that there is another side to our community of women and that a patriarchal world means we have to compete for the still few platforms open to us.

Another audience member identifies the extended Butoh section at the end of the piece as being a key moment. In this section, the performers spend approximately 15 minutes moving from upstage to downstage in meditative journeys, reclaiming their bodies. The aesthetic of the piece is incredibly slow which means that the performers are constantly exerting themselves to maintain difficult postures and sustained (slow) movement. The respondent describes the image of 'the collective struggle we feel in womanhood, holding on to a lot of pain and struggling to move through it and let go'. The physical responses they described is holding breath, feeling tense and uncomfortable. The emotion they attributed to this is a sense of struggle and discomfort. What has unintentionally emerged from the final Butoh sequence is that the journey to reclaiming the body is challenging and requires that we make difficult shifts in our ideologies. This respondent interpreted this journey in relation to their personal experience and concerns but perhaps she is right that, as women, we do move through pain, anger, violence, oppression. Perhaps there is a letting-go, an overcoming, or an encompassing to be achieved as part of the reclamation of our bodies.

CONCLUSION

This survey comes at a crucial stage of my research; it follows the establishment of key arguments within its theoretical framework, the actual practical exploration through rehearsal, and sits as a conclusion to the PaR element. The purpose of this survey report is to evaluate the PaR within the context of its theoretical landscape.

While the majority of this evaluation and contextualising will be left to the thesis, there are three observations from this report which will influence the direction of my final arguments. Firstly, almost all of the audience members reference a shared experience. While this is sometimes referenced alongside individuality and competition, it is important to observe that despite our intersectionalities, many women do feel a shared identity. Secondly, that body image, and the way we view our bodies is a hugely damaging and alienating experience for women, that to foster better relationships with our bodies *as bodies*, we need to stop objectifying ourselves. Thirdly, violence is another resonant image in the research; to generate a holistic picture of womanhood and all that entails, we cannot ignore the body as it is a primary mode for the oppression of women.

There are further questions to pose in relation to this stage of the research, specifically whether all of this may change with the introduction of other and intersectional voices (e.g. women of colour and transgender women), and what the phenomenological survey approach has to offer the research. Unfortunately, this project doesn't have the capacity to explore these questions in full but I expect they will return in future extensions of this research.

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