

Jane Comfort is currently creating *Beauty*, a dance/theater work exploring the American notion of female beauty and its metamorphosis over the last 50 years. *Beauty* frames the dialogue of the cultural pressures surrounding women's physique, attire, and appearance around the quintessential icon of American beauty: Barbie. *Beauty* addresses the plasticity of a variety of "benign" beauty regimens as well as self-destructive habits such as eating disorders and extreme surgeries. The performance will include lighting design by David Ferri, costume design by Liz Prince, and movement and text by Jane Comfort for the company of eight performers. The forty-minute piece will be performed in an evening of mixed repertory with a total touring company of ten people.

The cultural pressures surrounding women's physique, attire, and appearance seem to grow exponentially with each passing year. Even now in the third wave of feminism, when women are no longer constrained to the home and are fully in the workforce, the image of beauty has become even more impossible to achieve. A woman who has graduated from Wharton and works for a hedge fund is still expected to do so with a triathlete's body, a courtesan's grooming, and the current "it" handbag.

In the forties and fifties, girdles kept women molded into the idealized shape. Now that shape must be genuinely made and maintained through daily gym routines and obsessive diets. Heels have grown to towering heights, giving a precarious connection to the earth. In earlier days, powder, lipstick, and buffed nails were the routine; now hair extensions and highlights, eyelash extensions and dyes, threaded eyebrows, lip plumpers, fillers, teeth whitening, skin bleaching, Botox, facial peels, mani/pedis, and bikini and full pubic hair waxes have all become part of the beauty regiment. The wide array of plastic surgery options to alter the body and the face now includes labiaplasty, which enables women to procure "prettier" genitalia. Interestingly enough, the majority of pictures patients bring in of their desired look are from porn.

Media and advertising imagery raise the bar even further with Photoshopped bodies and faces that are a complete fantasy. The underlying message is: "Buy this and look like me." But this impossible aesthetic goal leaves women feeling inadequate and unworthy.

The cultural image that is created is one of a hyper thin, but highly sexualized female. This sexualized look begins at an earlier and earlier age for girls and now, thanks to the promotion of the "cougar," can extend as long as a woman can maintain it. Through this impossibly thin body with reed like legs, narrow hips, waxed pubes, tiny waist, extra large breasts, luscious eyes and long, flowing hair, we are presented with a form girls know very well: Barbie.

Barbie is 50, but she hasn't aged a day. Her real life measurements would be 36" 18" 33" and at 5'9" her body fat less than 17 percent. She has no nipples or body hair and has maintained a perfect complexion all her life. She represents a blonde, blue-eyed, white "All-American" girl. When she first appeared as "Colored Francie" in 1967, her Caucasian-featured face was simply given dark skin. Barbie has had over 50 careers, including US Army officer, sign language teacher, firefighter, hairdresser, flight attendant, cowgirl, Canadian Mountie, dance teacher, paleontologist, babysitter,

presidential candidate, and business executive. To many girls she represents freedom to play in many personas; to many others she represents an impossible ideal. Girls around 11 or 12 often mutilate their Barbies by chopping off their hair, decapitating them or putting them in the microwave.

*Beauty* will feature a Barbie Beauty contest that will recruit four audience members to act as judges who will select a winner. The company's beauty contestants will look and dress in a variety of Barbie Doll styles, including Miss Astronaut Barbie, Alvin Ailey Barbie, NASCAR Barbie, and McDonald's Cashier Barbie. Movement vocabulary will be derived from investigating Barbie's limited, robotic movement abilities: some will move like the older Barbies who can't bend their elbows and others will move like newer Barbies who can run their hands through their hair, twist, turn, and touch their toes.

Periodically, the contestants will break out of Barbie's physical language and move with fully functional and expressive bodies. The linear stick-like use of space will give way to rounded, weighted sequences, evoking an organic and introspective dialogue with oneself and the world. The abstract movement will itself be interspersed with pedestrian activities such as eating (there will be a pizza delivery), making cell phone calls, etc.

This onstage competition/offstage interior life will continue throughout the piece, becoming a metaphor for the presentational quality of beauty and also allowing the audience to get to know each "real" Barbie through her performative and private personas. The judges will select their winner based on criteria from beauty pageants, including questions asked of each contestant about her worldview.

With this piece, Comfort explores the notion that the beauty ideal continually presented to women by our culture and media is impossible to achieve. Women's efforts to attain this perfection only perpetuate abuse of their bodies and ultimately sacrifice who they truly are as individuals.