

# Fat Activism Conference

TOOLS FOR THE REVOLUTION

Speaker: **Jen Ponton**

Talk Title: **So Long Wacky Neighbor – Buh-bye, Best Friend: Changing the Game as a Fat Actress**

[RECORDING BEGINS]

Hi, everyone. I'm so happy to be here with you right now. My name is Jen Ponton, and welcome to "So long wacky neighbor, buh-bye best friend: Changing the game as a fat actress." Thank you so much for joining me, and my deepest thanks as well to Ragen Chastain and Joy Cox for their welcoming and inclusion. A few of you might recognize my name, but I think quite a bit more of you might recognize me by my face. For the last seven years of my life as a working actress, I've been referred to as, "Oh right, that girl." I'm credited as such on shows like 30 Rock, Blue Bloods, SVU, Boardwalk Empire, The Blacklist, Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt, Orange is the New Black, and many more.

I'm excited to be here with you today, because as fat people, we are often told, either explicitly or implicitly, that we will never be good enough. The self-flagellating Jewish side of me leaned into this and decided to become an actor too, where I am also constantly told, "That must be hard. Wouldn't you rather be a teacher?"

Artists and repressed minorities have something lovely in common: the privileged majority's confidence that we can never truly make it, that we are destined to fail. These are tough times, my friends, but I'm not here to lament our world today. I'm here to shake it up, turn it on its head, and give us some hope for the future, specifically pertaining to the inclusion of body diversity in entertainment.

After 10 years of actor hustle and a lifetime of listening to doubtful and concerned relatives, there's one thing I know for sure. The element that makes entertainment a ruthless field is that we so often turn to external validation, looking for approval from outsiders, people to tell us that we are worthy, good, or worthwhile. Staked in insecurity and fear, allowing others to define who you are, is the number one career killer. This is true for anyone in the arts, but especially a person who is already at a disadvantage as a person of size.

I was very fortunate to get my head right before I started pursuing an acting career in earnest. Having found the bloggers of the fat-o-sphere right out of college, my months of reprogramming my relationship with my body all came before I was out there auditioning for theater, feeling ashamed of my body or like I just wanted it to go away. For the first time in my life, I was drawing strength from the body that I

was blessed with. I felt confident that there was a place for it, even if I'd have to make that place myself.

My new-found confidence, coupled with a ride-or-die work ethic, was my self-worth anchor, while I got to learn just how un-size-friendly the industry was. Remember, we are also talking 10 years ago, now. I was assaulted constantly with sizeist, fat-phobic, character breakdowns. Misogynistic, over-sexualized ads for nudity and no pay, terrible fat tropes that included phrases like, "shameless chow hound." Yes, that is a true story.

But thankfully my brand-new foundation could take that pressure. Picture it: Broadway, 2007. Now we have *Hamilton*, and *Fat Camp*, and *Glee*, and nationally televised productions of *Hairspray*, but 10 years ago, and still to some extent, roles really didn't exist for a young, fat woman with the heart and voice of an ingenue. They existed for brassy, ballsy, fat women, who could belt their faces off at the 11 o'clock number, or for sweet desexualized mothers with a stiff and stuffy vibrato, but I heard my clear, ingenue, leading-lady, soprano voice lilting on high, from girls easily 10 times smaller than me, or more.

I was so frustrated. I really didn't know what to do with that information. I knew in my bones and heart that I was meant for great things and success, and to pursue this with every cell of my being, but I really didn't know how to get around this crappy reality that so much of musical theater, much of it recycled, was etched in archaic tropes. I was even tempted to start a theater company that was all about doing classic shows against type. Fat Juliets, female Caesars, trans ingenues, queer Romeos, truly blind casting that didn't adhere to even having family members of the same color. That was the world I envisioned, where whoever had the heart for the part was cast, regardless of color, size, age, or gender.

Soon after, I began working with a business coach who helped me with a crucial paradigm shift. In digging deep on my real-life goals and aspirations, we realized that I was using musical theater as a checkpoint to get into my real dreams, TV. "Why would you put an obstacle in your way?" she said. "Why wouldn't you go for the thing you really want?" At that point, I realized I could go very directly to a field that not only deeply interested and excited me, but was also serving and employing much broader demographics of actors.

Even if *Rogers & Hammerstein* was devoid of inspired diversity, I could see it on my TV any night of the week. Unlike the small and insular world of musical theater, in TV, I could tell brand new stories, all the time; being crafted with inclusivity in mind, by fresh, current, funny voices, women whom I admired, stories that I could relate to in my life today. These stories were the ones that I wanted to tell. I finally had the direction, foundation, and confidence that I need to move forward.

Before I knew it, I began booking work that I had previously only dreamed of. I did *30 Rock*, *SVU*, an Adult Swim show with Patton Oswalt, that was such a blast. I did indie films that went to South by Southwest and Tribeca. It was project after project, like a monsoon after a long drought. Before long, I booked my first lead in an indie rom-com, *Love on the Run*. Yes, that's right. At a size 22, I booked my first romantic lead, and it was everything I believe in when it comes to size positivity and self-love. It was a defining moment for me.

All of a sudden, I'd crept out of smaller, more trope-y roles, and I was doing the kind of work and playing the kind of character that I had hoped and prayed I'd be allowed to play someday. At that moment, there was a new line in the sand. I decided I'd have to become more discerning about the jobs I'd take. Years ago, I don't know how he knew this, but my father told me that the best actors are the ones who were picky with their scripts.

This led me to some big questions. "Well, do you just want to be known as the fat actress forever? Do you just want to be known as the sassy, fat nurse, or the goofy, fat best friend, or the shy, fat doormat, wallflower?" These questions were important. The humongous responsibility of media and entertainment, for us, is fat representation and respect, as we project it onto society. We normalize what we see every day, right? So when we see fat characters as lazy, or insecure, or not deserving of love, we internalize that. Straight sized folks internalize that.

Not only was it important for me, in the microcosm of my career, that I was taking roles with growth opportunity, larger character arcs, meatier journeys of the self, finding confidence or worth, it was also wildly important for people of size on the consumer end of entertainment. As someone who is also an avid TV fan, I could count on both hands the number of fat actresses that I regularly see working in these more fulfilling story-telling roles with large character arcs. Whole people. If the size is relevant, it's not the narrative, or it's not the only narrative. They have goals, desires, strengths, vulnerabilities. So count them. Both hands? That's not okay. For a group that makes up 67% of women, size 12 and up, for 67% of the populace, we need to see more than 10 regularly working, fat actresses. We need a media and entertainment diet of more than just size 2s and 4s. It's crucial. Not only do we need to see more actresses than that, we need to see better stories, constantly, always.

The decision making that I found was not just serving my career, it was serving a larger role that I ultimately want to play in my life; as an inspiration, and role model, for people of size. Because I, and I'm sure many of you, didn't have the luxury of role models in media as a kid. Granted, there were your standard, kick-ass adult women, Camryn Manheim and Kathy Bates. If my parents had let me watch it, I would have idolized Ricki Lake as Tracey Turnblad, but that's it. We need to be able to see people who look like us on television. We need to be able to see them modeling the traits that we deserve to have, as beautiful, animal, creator, doer, human beings: self-worth, fierce belief in yourself, desirability, sexuality, sensuality, owning your body, being magnetic and worthy of being seen and taking up space. We need to see that because, as I'm sure you are well aware, those are qualities that are not just gifted to fat people.

We are systemically taught our whole lives that none of those things are ours. None of those things are up for grabs. Until we get lucky and we learn another way. We read a book, or a blog, or a fellow fat friend reaches out to deprogram us. It's why, I'd imagine, you're all here. It's certainly why I'm here, and I count my lucky stars for that every day. So that decision making, that story-telling line in the sand, which will only become more profound as my career progresses, it serves so much more than just my career. It serves my whole purpose in life, as well as the community that I care about more than anything.

I know, I said this would be hopeful, and right now we're just staring at the stark, impossibly steep face of the mountain. The question that I'm asked most often is, "Is it hard to be a fat actress?" I think being an actor, period, is as hard as you allow it or perceive it to be. I don't think it has to be hard. And that doesn't mean it's not hard work, which it does require a metric shit ton of, but hard work is rarely hard when you're having fun or pursuing your dream. It might be exhausting but it's exhilarating. It only feels hard if you have to suffer, and I don't think you have to suffer. I think it can be easy, and exciting, affirming, and rewarding as hell.

And I think the same goes for being a fat actress. I would say it's made my life easier, because while the world isn't changing as quickly as I, or I'm sure you, would want it to, and while there are not as many roles open to having a woman of size as I would want there to be, there are far less women of size on the talent market. While the wildly saturated 2s and 4s with Maxim bodies, and model faces, have the most opportunities, individually they're a dime a dozen. So you have to be so much luckier, let alone being actually good, right? Being good is just another game altogether. But you need to be so much luckier with opportunities placed in front of you as a size 2 actress, in the most over-saturated demographic in the talent pool.

For me, I'm part of a small community allowing me to let it to be less about luck, and more about being good, crossed with laser-focused business smarts, with marketing and networking. I can rely less on an errant shooting star, and more on my absolute controllables. How good am I? How targeted am I, with getting to know the writers, producers, and directors out there that I think would dig me and what I have to offer? How targeted am I in getting in for shows and films that are appropriate for me? All of that information is so much more potent in my hands, or frankly, in the hands of anyone in a minority demographic.

For those who ask me if it's hard to be a fat actress, I say it's up to you, but for me, no. I am so happy it's not hard, I'm so happy to not buy into that. That's hopeful fact number one. Hopeful fact number two, my luck has been wildly nonpartisan. While I can be fairly confident that I'll be seen for most fat character breakdowns that are released, most of the roles I've played in film and TV are not size specific. How is this exciting, and what does it mean? It means that against all odds, in an industry that constantly tells fat people that their size is the only thing that matters, people are looking at me and not just seeing a number. They're seeing someone exciting, or engaging, or funny, or enchanting, or interesting, not just a joke or commentary, or a cautionary tale, or the personification of obnoxious, crude, or grotesque behavior. That stuff is not being put on me, and it's worlds away from the auditions that I had 10 years ago in a more toxic dynamic. It's a sign of progress for casting, for the networks, for fat actors, and a sign of progress for consumers.

Think about it. When was the last time you saw a lead on a TV series, who happened to be larger than TV size, where their weight was played as a joke? It just doesn't happen very often these days. I'm thinking Retta on Parks and Rec, Phyllis on The Office, Dina on Superstore, Paula on Crazy Ex-Girlfriend, Todd on Last Man on Earth, right? Fairly, these all are comedies, but I think that actually

serves my point even better. Are they offbeat or underdog characters? Sure, but the weight is not played for laughs, or used as an easy joke. And that is key.

That said, for the fewer roles I've booked where size has been a major trait of the character, there have been a few that necessitated a woman of size. I will try to find every opportunity to serve that character with as much fat acceptance, health at every size, and self-love as that script will allow. And I have a unique opportunity as the actor to allow the writing to open up and go off the page, taking a character who may be written as fat and depressed, and allow her to be more confident, less terrified of her body, less stressed or littered with food issues. Maybe she's depressed because her car got towed, or her friend ghosted her. Does she have to be depressed because she's fat? I don't think so. I do everything in my power to subvert that narrative and, perhaps, even unconscious impulse to make a character who is fat, pathetic, and small. I spin it on its head, lean into the positivity and the atypical, the subtle subversion of expectations. Because, you know what, even if it goes right over the heads of straight sized people, my fat brothers and sisters are going to see it. They're going to see a fat character, and they're going to hold their breath, knowing what's inevitably coming, until it doesn't. And then maybe, just maybe, it'll be the one thing that they needed to not feel shitty, and like the world was conspiring against them for a day. That might make all the difference to someone. It would for me. And lots of those little moments add up to big changes across the board.

If you're all like, awesome, we're on the right path. When will we get more of this? I am so right there with you. While I personally am waiting for the perfect project to come down the pike, a starring role for a confident woman who happens to be fat, but it's not about her size at all, there is a very important wave of work happening right now that I really want to highlight. I want to preface it by starting with one of the most well-known transitions in pop culture right now, which is Crazy Ex-Girlfriend on CW. Now, I think we're all on the same page, Rachel Bloom is not a fat person, but if you've seen her on the show, you'd probably agree that she is larger than your average television star. I don't know what that is, a 6, an 8? It's probably not larger than that and I know it is really seriously indicative of normalizing body issues, but one cannot help but notice that she is larger than your average leading lady, on the screen.

I've had my eye on Rachel Bloom, she has been paving the way, putting her nose to the grindstone for years. Crafting a manic, impulsive, crazy character, that combines her trademark lusty, crass, and brassy sexuality with her love of musical theater. She has been doing this for years. Her YouTube history is nearly 10 years of this hybrid: musical parody, obsessed and mentally unstable, sexpot. She's been doing this for years. The blueprint has been there since at least 2009, and at this moment, it's been in its television incarnation now for 3 years. She's killing it. Killing it.

Another less famous but appropriate example for this particular audience is Katherine Alyse, who I'm sure many of you are familiar with. She has a YouTube series called The Fat One, and it stars her as the leading lady, in a series about a young, fat woman, who actually loves herself. And why is that a weird thing? Of course, because she's in Los Angeles. What do these two have in common? Starting

from the grassroots, and moving on up. There has never been a better time for self-produced, creative content to be mined for larger scale recreations.

We are in a really exciting time for entertainment. It's such a blue ocean climate right now, with through-the-roof demand for original, diverse content, along with a low-stakes and easily accessible means for putting your stories out there. What's the alternative? Well, 10 short years ago, it was a closed-door situation where the same white male writers were courted, time and time again, to write pilots or series pitches for the same big television networks. That still happens, and I would even say it's still the rule, but the more options that consumers have for entertainment, the more apps, digital platforms, sponsored and branded content, or even curated YouTube and Vimeo content that we consume, the more that these platforms will search for alternative voices and ideas.

There are only so many white male, established writers, who can get a script pushed. But we have so many holes to fill. There's something like 400 series being produced on all of these platforms right now. Where do we find more content to fill those needs? Add to this, the clamor, which is getting louder and louder by the day, for more diverse voices in entertainment. Well, if the same white, privileged, cis male writers are creating all the same old content from their world view, that clamor will only insist on getting louder. Studios and producers are getting the message, slowly but surely, to look elsewhere and pay more attention to the voices of women, PoC, and LGBTQ folks, and slowly but surely too, to us.

Self-produced, self-created content from marginalized voices has never been as powerful as it is right now. For folks who've been making their own stuff for a while now, Rachel Bloom, Abbi and Ilana of *Broad City*, Nicole Byer, and Issa Rae, right down to little old me, self-creation is becoming a little diverse biosphere. Allowing a show to form, coalesce, and develop in a low-stakes environment, where a producer doesn't have to take a huge risk on an unknown talent. They don't have to wait and see how it works out, because you wrote it, and made it already. They can see it. They can see the story unfold, and either continue to be excited, or pass on it.

Now more than ever, executives and producers are looking to take on what was quality independent content, alongside the old-fashioned writer-pitches-series way. Self-creation's beautiful moment of relevance makes it more important than ever for us to take opportunities where we can, and tell our stories. For anyone who is listening and somehow identifies as an artist — actors, directors, writers, producers — now is the time to get your stories out there. It is so wildly important. Even in the clamor to get oppressed voices' stories up there, we as fat people are so often lost in the shuffle.

I think in many ways, our oppression is not apparent to straight sized people. It's not viewed with the same lens that people view racism, ableism, homophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia, all of those aversions to the other, right? It's easy for people to forget that we're marginalized, and that we fight hard every day to be shown respect, and tolerance, and human decency.

For me, self-creation is about sowing the seeds of what I want Hollywood to be: size inclusive, with a broader definition of beauty and intrinsic worth. I can turn on

a camera and make things that star me as a fat woman, whose size has never been mentioned in 5 seasons of programming. I get to look pretty, and wear fun dresses, and be desired, and have multiple love interests, and dreams, and goals, and talents. In the biosphere of my show, I can normalize fatness. To that end, I think it's very important for us to express our experiences as fat people, in whatever way it resonates with us. Whether it's seeing fat folks who struggle with self-worth then grow into themselves, size being a non-issue altogether, or even someone who only struggles and never sees the light.

One thing I love about Chrissy Metz, who plays Kate on NBC's *This Is Us*, she is doing the best that she can to serve her community, while still being a full-time employee of NBC and being paid very handsomely to represent their prized show pony. One of the best things I heard Chrissy say is that, "In all of the appropriate interview questions of 'are you okay with telling this story about a fat woman who hates her body?'" Her reply has been, "It's really important that we have stories for everyone. There are people for whom this story is important. There are people who live this, and need to see their lives reflected."

It was a true answer, and so well-crafted with respect to her job, and her body being intrinsically political. I know that even if she felt disappointed with the character's arc, her point was valid, and Kate's storyline is helping someone out there. Hopefully, many someones. Different people connect to different things, making it all the more important that we have an abundance of choices for people of size. Shows where it's a non-issue, shows where it's an issue, while the lead is confident as hell and stares it right in the face, yes. Stories about someone who finds their worth and magnificence. And yeah, even stories where fat people are completely subsumed by their plight and separated from their self-worth. Someone benefits from seeing that. Someone's heart grows three sizes bigger, as the Grinch might say. But there's only one *This is Us* in a great blue ocean of 400 and counting opportunities. This is a promising market and we are in a promising time.

People are losing their tolerance for bullshit and oppression. I mean, obviously not everyone, it is 2017 and you know exactly what I mean, but by and large, I think this is true. It is so important for us to have our stories out there because people are looking for them. And it's more accessible than ever. The tools are at your fingertips, in your hands, you're holding a high-quality camera and word processor. You're looking at a computer with a built-in camera and microphone, not to mention editing software and free web-based options to final draft. The technology is more affordable than ever, and self-producing is not only more accessible than ever, but it allows someone who wants to make, to simply make. You don't have to pay out the nose or convince someone to take a chance on you. Our stories are not being told nearly as much as they should be. I encourage you, get out there, tell your story. Someone is seeking it. It is only a matter of time.

I hope that the old wallflower, best friend trope is a story I tell my grandchildren before bed to give them a good scare and leave the nightlight on. I truly feel that better days are well on the way, now more than ever, as entertainment gives a big old snub nose to a culture that increasingly oppressing and bullying the very demographics that are most unprivileged. Our stories will be told, I have no doubt in my mind. The best is yet to come.

Thank you all so much for joining me, and I will see you on Netflix, my friends.

[RECORDING ENDS]