

How I Got Over
A Solo Performance of My Own Design

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Abstract

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

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How I Got Over is a thesis solo show that examines my experiences as a black woman making my way through the world. It follows my journey from a little girl, to a teenager, and ends with the present, a 25 year old woman whose trauma has manifested itself in her body and is now ready to be released. This show was both a challenge and an acknowledgement of where I have been and how far I have come. Look how far I've come. As a black woman, we rarely get to acknowledge that we've been through the valley and we've climbed to the mountaintop. We rarely get the chance to heal or to say "no, I am not okay," because we are expected to be these almighty, unbreakable, unshakeable beings. But we are not. Not all the time. This show was my "coming out" of sorts. It was my chance to tell the world who I was and not be ashamed for what I have been through along the way. This is my story. My journey to loving the good, overcoming the bad, and shedding the ugly to uncover something beautiful. Me. I am in the process of reclaiming who I am and this thesis was just the beginning.

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How I Got Over

A Solo Performance of My Own Design

My first year of grad school was super eye-opening. I moved to Seattle from New Orleans, LA and the transition was one I will never forget. I was the only black person in my cohort; the only black woman. That was such a culture shock for me because all my life, especially in high school and college, I had been surrounded by people who looked like me. I began to adapt to my new environment and had a tribe who lifted me up, loved on me and encouraged me to keep pushing as I navigated my first year of grad school. But as time went on, I felt like I was suffering in silence. I felt like I was expected to come to school with a smile on my face all the time. In fact, I knew that was the case. There were many times during my first year of grad school when I couldn't have a moment to feel whatever I was feeling because it seemed like I was "disengaged" or "not with the class." So, I started smiling more. Even though I was feeling something completely opposite on the inside. After the day was done, I would go home and cry or write about how I was feeling. I hid myself from others and dealt with the pain in silence.

In Mark Jenkins' acting studio, we did etudes every week, which I believe truly aided in the crafting of our solo shows. I would make these elaborate sets and fill the space with miscellaneous props and set pieces that, in my mind, was necessary to tell the story. I didn't realize at the time that the point of these etudes was to focus on building the character and developing the story. Who were they? What did they do in their quiet time? What brought them peace? What did they fear? It wasn't about how elaborate I could make the set. But still, I built them. Deep down inside, I knew why. It was because I wanted to give the audience, my classmates and professor, something else to look at just in case I wasn't enough. Just in case I dropped the ball. Just in case I failed. I was hiding myself behind the stuff. It blew my mind

when I realized that that is what I was doing. Even though I chose a profession where it's all about being seen, I did not want anyone to actually see me. It wasn't until my second year in solo show class with Valerie Curtis-Newton, that I realized I spent my whole first year hiding myself. That shook me to my core. So, from that moment on, I decided to try to let myself be seen. I performed my 10 minute solo show *SBW 365*, standing on a rolling platform with a skin tight grey bodysuit on that did not hide my plus sized body. That was step one. I knew that from there on out I needed to shed the parts of me that felt the need to cower and cover myself. And I began to do just that.

I will never forget the moment I realized I was carrying all of my trauma in my body. It was during voice class with Bridget Connors. Bridget assigned us to write body stories where we wrote about what our bodies have endured during our life's journey thus far. All of what our bodies have endured. As I was sitting at the computer proofreading my paper, I sat back and breathed in the words. I had no idea what I had just typed. I knew what I had been through, but to see it on paper was hard. Did I just write that I was molested as a child and was keeping it a secret from my family? Did I just write that I had been depressed? Did I just write about my experiences during Hurricane Katrina? It was eye opening. It was ugly. It was unbelievable to see my story reflected back to me on paper. Days went by and we did a vocal warmup in class and it was my turn to work with Bridget. I remember rolling on the floor and freeing breath, voice and sound while Bridget guided me and before I knew it, I just released it all. I couldn't stop. The class was silent as she was assisting me back to the breath and I remember feeling a weight lifted off of me. It was in that moment that I acknowledged what I had been carrying for so many years. The secrets. The pain. The hiding. The insecurities. It came like a flood. That was a step towards healing.

This solo show began as an examination of how black men mistreat and fail to protect black women and the ways in which we cope with the trauma caused by men. It turned out to be the exact opposite. I decided that I did not want to make my story about men, In fact, I barely wanted to include them in my show at all. It wasn't about them. I broke my show up into three parts: LOVE, PROTECTION, and HEALING. At first there was no chronological order to the show. I just had those parts. I found myself writing monologues that dealt with a young black girl whose story of molestation

was really my own, even though I hadn't named her. I made her a generic black girl and she grew into a generic black woman. I also stuck the little girl's story smack in the middle of my show so it appeared to be glazed over. I didn't want to hang on to it, even though I was moved to write about it. I completed the writing of my solo show and still felt something missing. I still felt empty in a way. Or dishonest, for lack of a better word. I talked with Val about my show and we looked it over, and she asked me "why can't it be you? You've done the generic black woman thing already. Make the audience feel her. Make her human and real." That was the moment I realized I was hiding again. I was telling my story without claiming it was mine. Why do that? Why not let people know it was me? I was frightened and then quickly reminded of Val's saying, "Feel the fear and do it anyway." So, I went back to the drawing board and re arranged my whole show to follow ALLYSON from a little girl until the present.

My classmates and I discussed making a list of set pieces and I waited until a week before my solo show to tell myself that I didn't need a set. I had spent so long hiding behind things that I wanted to challenge myself to be alone in space. My goals were to explore movement with breath and sound, to limit the amount of excessive blocking, and to engage deeply with the audience so that they felt like they were growing up with me. I also did not want to hide my body. I wanted my costume to represent royalty, vibrancy, freedom, new life, and my bubbly personality. I wanted to be the center. To be seen. I'd like to think that I achieved that. I left my show feeling proud, feeling vulnerable, feeling like I took another step towards healing. I left my show knowing that I was worthy. That's a good feeling; to know you are enough.

As I further expand this show, I am looking forward to continuing to "unleash the parts of me that trauma caused me to lock." There's no better discovery than self-discovery. There is no better acceptance than self-acceptance. There is no better love than the love of God and the love of self. I am in the process of doing all of those things.

HOW I GOT OVER

A solo show by Allyson Lee Brown

BLACKOUT.

All **sound** cues are in **BLUE**

All **light** cues are in **RED**

(**Sound CUE**) We hear a snippet from *As Told by Ginger Theme Song*.
LIGHTS UP (slow fade) Ally enters the space with her teddy bear/doll and begins to play. The audience witnesses her joy. The words begin to become static-y, jumbled, like a broken record. She places her doll down and scopes out her audience of dolls. *She takes a seat and begins to read her favorite book, Oh the Places You' ll Go! by Dr. Seuss.*

Little Ally: OH THE PLACES YOU' LL GO!!! BY DR. SEUSS!!! (beat) Congratulations! Today is your day. You' re off to Great Places! You' re off and away! You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any way that you choose. You' re on your own. And you know what you know. But you can' t control where their hands will go. They' ll look up and down your legs. Look em over with care. And then they will say, "I choose to go there." With your head full of bows and your shoes with ruffled socks, they' ll make you do bad things and in the closet you' ll be locked. In their home things can happen and frequently do, to little girls as cute and innocent as you. And when things start to happen. Don' t worry. Don' t stew. Just go right along. You' ll start happening to. Now the things that may happen may leave you confused. They' ll make you touch them in places and your body, they' ll peruse. You' ll think this is normal. They threaten you not to tell, for they say if you speak of it, they' ll send you straight to hell. Oh! The places their hands will go! The end!

A shift has happened in Little Ally. She closes her book and speaks to her audience of dolls and friends. Where she once saw them as equal, now she seems them as separate. Something isn' t right.

Did you ever have to do it? Did you? Did you ever have to do IT? Lift up your skirt and get to it? Fix your curls back right, make sure ya barrettes in tight? Cuz when their parents come back home, you can' t look like nothing' s wrong. (*she thinks*) Maybe their playtime was different growing up. What they make me do sometimes just doesn' t add up. But they say it' s normal though. We' re playing doctor and they' re

my patients. But I better hurry up cuz while the sister is making me play with her, the brother is running out of patience. They said all kids do it, but I couldn' t tell or I' d get in trouble. Can' t let their parents know cuz then I' d get double the pain. Won' t let me leave the room until playtime is finished. (she throws a temper-tantrum) God, is it just me whose innocence has diminished?

(Little Ally freezes and transforms into Teen Ally)

Teen Ally: Now, I' m a teen, discovering my body and feeling all the things. *(beat, as if she' s being questioned)* Yea, I think I figured it out. What happened to me wasn' t supposed to go down. Time after time being told what to do. By the sister first and then the brother too. My body don' t feel like it' s mine no more. Tryna make it react to my touch but it brings me disgust. Other times it feels fine. I mean I' m only 14, but I' m feeling 29, cuz my body done grown up quick. Guess that' s why I started telling my people "I' m a woman" so young, I probably really thought that shit. Didn' t know it wasn' t right til the thoughts of all those playtimes kept me up at night. *(smacks teeth)* I ain' t telling nobody though cuz, well, two against one. You know, suffering ain' t a game I wanted to play this young. But who' s gonna believe me if it' s two against one?

(Teen Ally freezes and transforms into Allyson. The grown ass woman)

Allyson: I' m in my 20s. A grown woman for real now. I started loving me unconditionally, on occasion. But there' s an issue. That trauma runs deep in my veins. Imma keep manifesting greatness, while bearing the pain. *(recounts in silence)* Yo, that was a real problem. Thought I could brush it off, act like it wasn' t bad. But nothing can give me back those sleepless nights I had. Spent so much time wondering why people kept saying "girl, you a flirt" "you exude sex" I guess it all makes sense. Felt like my body wasn' t never mine to have. That was taken away when I was like 7 and a half. I reclaimed it though. Realized that my body was resilient. She' s been through a lot. I' ve started to unleash the parts of me that trauma caused me to lock. *(beat)* Breathe. Huh Huh. Yes, I' m freeing my natural voice, but I' m freeing my trauma too. I feel a little lighter now. But right before I take off and fly, here' s a reminder. Little black girls turned black women keep our mouths closed too long. We' re told that our trauma ain' t nothing to speak on. So, we don' t say shit. We hold it all in, cuz the first thing someone asks us is "What were you wearing again?" Nigga I was wearing Shirley Temple curls, little girl clothes, standing tall in my Mary Janes. So, was I asking for it? Asking for the pain? Man, stop shaming us. Stop blaming us cuz you can' t keep your hands to yourselves, cuz your minds are twisted, cuz you feel entitled to me and my sistas. We are not yours. Too many of us have been labeled dumb bitches and whores cuz we were violated. God, I hate it. But Time' s Up. Stand up for us. Black women might look like we have it together, but ask a woman you know how many times somebody failed to protect her.

(Musical Interlude- We Deal with the Freak' n (intermission) by Solange)

Allyson: You ever been told you were a Queen? And you had to fight yourself to believe it? Tried to convince the person who told you that you were not the rightful heiress to the throne that you KNOW you were born to sit on? Bullshit. We calling it quits, sis. We were meant to glow. That' s why our skin is made of gold. Our lips drip of honey. Our thighs too thick. Our mouths too quick. Our backs strong and home grown. Our hips sway. Our necks roll. Our hair is our crown. Our eyes glisten like the sun. We are divine. We are the chosen ones. Black Nubian Sistas. Worthy of God' s greatest love. LOVE.

(Allyson has a visceral reaction to the word, the thought, the meaning of LOVE. She takes this in.)

Allyson: I was once told I deserved the world. So, I gave myself away to it fully. In turn, the world spit me out. Thought I deserved the world' s greatest love. But love rejected me. Left me in the pits to dwell. To pick myself up off the floor. It was an unrequited love. The love where you bear your soul and leave hollow. The love where they feed off of your magic, your light, but they hate you deep down inside. Yea, that' s this love. (beat) I was convinced. Convinced that the world had a place for me. Convinced the earth would shake for me. Was created in 7 days for me, (beat) but I guess I was. Wrong? It took. He took. She took. They took from me. I told myself, Ally pull up yo sleeves and get to stepping. Find you a love that won' t deny you, won' t deprive you. A love that will lift you up on Mt. Zion like Lauryn Hill did. Shiiiiit. So, I found it. Guess where I found it, ya' ll. Right here *(she points to her heart.)* The love I needed was right here. Can you believe it? I was love. After I been sucked on by the leeches of society, shamed for living in my body, told I was too loud, too proud, too black, too this, too that, stabbed in the back by some of my sistas, called a raggedy ass hoe by some of you ni—(she stop herself), shit I figured there wasn' t nothing left for me no mo. But there I was. Feeling myself. Loving me unconditionally. Told the world “I' m good luv, Imma enjoy me” and all my black girl magic. And nah you can' t have it. That' s shit' s for me.

Lights slowly shift to a deeper, warmer light.

***** Breath and Movement sequence *****

Allyson begins to mimic the gestures of trauma and how it clings to her. We see her cycle through these motions as the little girl, preteen and woman and how the same movements manifest themselves with time. This is the beginning phase of Ally' s healing process. It is not pretty. It is a visual representation of the trauma that Ally has carried with her throughout the years. She attempts to recover.

Allyson: *(sharp breaths)* Breathe. Release. Breathe. Relinquish. Breathe. Heal. (deep inhale) Heal.

I thought that one cleansing in my life was sufficient, but as I' ve gotten older, I' m feeling things different. There' s a deeper need for a spiritual cleansing. Yea, I know I' m resilient, but my body, my spirit needs healing. A re baptizing of sorts. I can' t always be strong for you while I' m trying to build me up me too. There is strength in healing. *(she realizes the power in this)* There is strength. In healing. But know that the healing ain' t pretty. The healing takes time and I' m just beginning. Got trauma engrained in my bones, but I' m ready to breathe again. To release. To BE. Mind, body and soul. cleansed so I can feel whole, so I can feel like ME. What you' re about to witness is sadly rare. A black woman healing. Raw. Free. Open. Unapologetically selfish about taking care of my being. Freeing myself of the things that have scarred me, the secrets that have haunted me. It' s an invitation of new possibility, a ceremony of renewal, a getting back to God. To feel divine again. Bless this water, Lord. I' m ready give in.

LIGHT CUE: Lights crossfade from black to a deep blue as if she is immersed in water.

SOUND CUE: Retrograde by James Blake *It is a birthing of sorts...a rebirth of Allyson. A baptism. A spiritual cleansing.*

FADE TO BLACK

END OF PLAY