

Dahlia: A Solo Performance of My Own Design
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Abstract

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Dahlia is a solo performance piece about a young woman's journey for self-advocacy in the face of systemic and institutional sexism, under the guise of a doctor's appointment. This story derives from the universal experience of individuals who are assigned female at birth (AFAB) who seek out help when in need of medical assistance or guidance and what happens when doctors don't take their patients seriously.

Amber Walker

Graduate Thesis – *Dahlia*

Jeffrey Fracé

3 March 2022

From the beginning of my time in the Professional Acting Training Program at the University of Washington, I made a promise to myself: *I will not let my mental health ruin my education.* After four years of navigating an undergraduate education with a cycling mood disorder, I was ready to leave all those cyclical periods of depression behind me. I deserved to give myself fully and wholeheartedly to the program that had accepted me after my first year of auditioning for M.F.A programs. Surely, if I was serious and committed myself enough, then attending graduate school would be nothing like undergrad. I would handle myself. I would show up for myself consistently. I would not fail.

Alas, the brain does not work like that. Whenever I brought up my mental health issues to my adviser, Cathy Madden, she would respond, “What if your graduate journey as an actor *is* about your mental health, and how you can take care of yourself while pursuing your artistic goals?” Impossible. That’s not what I came to grad school for; I came here to expand my acting technique and my understanding of what an artist can be. I could not let myself succumb to that darkness once again. Otherwise, it would take over and I would not make it to the other side. Yet, this idea that I fought against with my entire being was the biggest revelation of my entire graduate experience.

It was never my intention to write a solo show about my struggle with Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD), and that shows in the timeline of my solo show creation. Up until

three weeks before the performance, I was working on an entirely different show that involved an experienced oneironaut who gets stuck in a lucid dream of her own creation. It wasn't until a doctor's appointment at which I was too frustrated, embarrassed, and ashamed that the seed of inspiration for *Dahlia* was planted and began to sprout, grow, and bloom with a fury.

I needed to learn more about the experiences of women in doctor's offices as patient advocacy is a multi-layered issue. I sat down with colleagues and friends and had a series of honest conversations about what it takes to ask for and get the medical help you need when related to women's health. On a general level, AFAB individuals have always had a hard time making themselves heard when it comes to their reproductive health, and in most cases birth control is the first thing thrown at them to solve any issues. But what happens when birth control doesn't solve anything, and in fact, might be an aggravator? Due to limited research in the field, there isn't a clear answer, and if we add additional qualities such as being a woman of color who also happens to have a mental health diagnosis, or also happens to be overweight, then, you have to fight tooth and nail to get a doctor to listen: "Your pain? It's probably anxiety. You should lose weight and then we can reevaluate." Meanwhile, you suffer in silence like thousands of other women, because you cannot get anyone to take your pain seriously.

After this, a character began to take form and she took the name of Dahlia. Her voice came out strong and distinct. She said the words I was never able to. The words that my friends wish they had the courage to say while in the room. I recalled my work with Bridget Connors in the Michael Chekov Technique and Archetypes to begin to discover her physicality, desires, and fears, and how they lived in her body. This physical research led me to finding the duality of 'Regular' Dahlia and 'Life Coach' Dahlia, and how those parts of her managed their pain. Words came next. At first, Dahlia's dialogue was scattered and rambled into nothingness, but thanks to

my work in classes such as Composition and Solo Show, I was able to take the disjointed series of monologues and daydreams I spoke into a voice recorder, such as Life Coach Dahlia's first monologue and Regular Dahlia's confession, and join all them into a cohesive emotional journey: thus Dahlia was born. I wanted the piece to resemble a regular doctor's appointment as much as possible, and as such called upon my Alexander Technique training to build and respond to my environment. This included the cold harshness of the exam rooms and the two other characters that the audience doesn't see: Nurse Lydia and Dr. Michaels. I also used my AT work during rehearsal and performance as I shifted through the emotional arc of Dahlia.

Given the sudden change of show topic, I am proud of the show and character that I created from the ground up. Dahlia became her own archetype as the voice of the unheard: a banshee crying out in the night fighting for her own health and liveliness, and that of hundreds of other women. This piece turned into an offering of sorts for others with similar struggles, to encourage them when they feel like they can't find the words for themselves. And how lucky am I, to take this offering with me as I leave the sweet cocoon of higher education and begin my journey into the professional world? My only hope, and wish, is that someone, even just one single person, will see or read this play and feel the same way.

Dahlia
By: Amber Walker

((Lights up. Dablia stands in the Doctors Office, rehearsing her medical history speech exactly as she wants it to go. When she is satisfied, she puts an earbud in one ear and begins to play a recording. As she listens the mediation music, she transforms into her own personal life coach.))

D: Hi Dahlia. If you're listening to this audio that means you're probably feeling a little bit anxious. Don't worry, we planned for this. Just let the soothing sound of my voice...your voice...our voice— whisk you away to another place. Now take a deep breath. Ahh, doesn't that feel better?

I want you to listen to me carefully. You are going to get through this. You know why? Because you are a BOSS ASS BITCH. You are intelligent. You are empowered. And you know. Your. Shit. Ain't nobody gonna tell you otherwise, because you got the stacks to back it up, and you did your research. So you are not going to let no wrinkly ass doctor make you question all of the work you've done. You have fought for months to get this appointment and you're not walking out of here until you have made yourself heard. Got it?

((Life Coach Dablia begins to interact with regular Dablia in the space.))

Now stand up. Stop looking around the room, nobody else is in here. Stand up. Put your hands on your hips and do that Amy Cudi power pose everyone talks about. Don't roll your eyes, we need all the help we can get.

((Regular Dablia is not doing the pose correctly))

Girl, nobody wants to see a limp limbed scarecrow. Stop looking like your momma ain't love you and stand up straight. There we go. That's what I'm talking about. This is the picture of a woman who knows her shit. Now I want you to say it out loud. I am a boss ass bitch.

Say it out loud.

I am a boss ass bitch. I know my shit. And I will get the help I am asking for today, or so help me god I will burn this office to the ground and dance on its ashes. |

There we go. Girl, I am so proud of you. I have my fingers crossed. I hope today goes exactly as we planned. I don't need to hope though, because it WILL. Love you. You got this. And, dammit, stop picking at your fingernails. You're gonna be left with finger nubs when all of this is over.

((Life Coach Dahlia is gone, but regular Dahlia notices a Nurse has entered the space))

D: Oh-my-god! Sorry, I didn't hear the door open. How long exactly have you been standing there?

You didn't see all of that, did you? Haha, don't mind me. Doctor appointments make me nervous. So I do whatever it takes to pump me up.

Yes, my name is Dahlia Jones.

D-A-H-L-I-A

Aw, thank you. It's one of my mom's favorite flowers. Thank god she won the coin flip, because my father was ready to name me something like Diamond or Treasure, and this would be a different appointment if I had to spell the name of my dad's favorite stripper.

What's your name?

Lydia? That's a pretty name too. I knew a Lydia my first year. She lived down the hall from me in the freshman dorms. No one liked her because she would sneak into peoples rooms and steal their ramen. Also she was a *total bitch*.

But I am sure you're much nicer.

((The Nurse gestures for her to sit on the exam table. Dahlia continues the conversation as she gets her blood pressure taken, temperature checked, etc.))

What's that? Yes, actually. I'm a communications major. Do not ask me what I'm going to do with it. I have no idea. I don't even know if I'm going to graduate college. Ow, ow, this is getting a little tight. But there's a lot of options, lots of potential. That's why I picked it in the first place. My life is so chaotic right now that I—

No, I don't take any medication. I do take a multivitamin though. And... (she checks her note cards) Ferrous Gluconate.

My last period was...hold on.

((She checks her notebook))

You'd think I'd remember the days when my uterus has decided to punish me for not giving it a baby, but they all seem to blend together. Last period was...April 19th. So that was three weeks ago?

Oh no.

Do you know a lot about Dr. Michaels? What's she like? It is so rare that you find a doctor who's covered by your insurance, in the specialty you need—and is a woman of color? It's like a fucking unicorn. I haven't had a doctor I actually liked since elementary school, and let me tell you, that was the last time I felt heard by anyone when it came to my body...that sounds a lot more sad now that I've said that out loud. Listen, Lydia, I booked this appointment six months ago and I don't want to mess it up, so if you could just tell me what she's like. What's her favorite color? How do I get her to like me?

Or, or, or, you could listen to my intro? That's what I was practicing before you came in. I'm so nervous that I'm starting to sweat through my shirt, and pit stains don't say boss ass bitch, they say weak little bitch who doesn't know how to use antiperspirant. So, would you?

((Dahlia takes out her notecards and resumes the position she held when rehearsing her speech))

“I'm here before you today because my quality of life is being severely diminished. I am at a point in my life where I am not sure how to continue forward and I am coming to you for help. My period is killing me. That is not an exaggeration I am actively wishing for death. None of my experience matches that of my peers and I am turning to you for help. I look forward to our collaboration together”

Does that sound too much like an email? Because that's weird, right? So fucking weird?

Oh.

I'm not getting weighed today.

I know that it is typically protocol, yes, but I don't want to be weighed today.

Listen—hold on— (gets notecard) getting my weight recorded today would be detrimental to my mental and physical health during and following this appointment and therefore I request—

YOU WILL NOT BE TAKING MY WEIGHT TODAY.

I'm sorry. But I was at this office months ago for a physical, and my weight was taken then. So if anything has changed in those past few months...well...you'll find out at my next physical. Thank you.

The purpose of the appointment?...Did you not...listen? I gave a whole intro before. I can read it to you again, if you'd like.

((Nurse Lydia leaves.))

Okay, bye Lydia.

((Dahlia gathers up all of her materials and returns to her bag. She scrolls through her phone and picks a song to help pump her up. She listens at the door, to make sure no one is coming in. Her dance starts off timid and slow. She keeps an eye on the door to make sure no one comes in. Finally, she lets herself be carried away by the beat, until she is full on feeling herself.

(Another body enters the room.))

God Damn It. Does anyone in this office knock?

((She takes in the doctor in front of her.))

I'm sorry this room is being used right now.

Yes, I'm Dahlia.

No that's not...you're not Dr. Michaels. No, no, I specifically booked an appointment with a black queen, you know someone who looked like me and you're not that. No offense, sir.

Oh...really. You should get I.T. to fix that. Like immediately. Like the fact that this has happened more than once is kind of concerning.

Oh, thank you. I have a couple of classes after this appointment so, I figured I might as well get ready for the day. I don't dress up like this for every appointment, I swear.

I was actually really hoping for the other Dr. Michaels. No offense to you, sir. I just...don't think I'm comfortable with you as my doctor. Especially at the last minute. I had this whole thing prepared just for my Dr. Michaels, and I'm kind of mortified by the fact that I made an appointment with the wrong doctor because someone in your office hasn't done their job and updated your website in a year. I can't wait another seven months. I don't think I'll...You know what? Let's just roll with it. I'm a boss ass bitch. I'm adaptable.

((She gathers her cards again and starts the speech from the beginning))

If you could just have a seat. Right there. Thank you.

"I'm here before you today because my quality of life is being severely diminished. I am at a point in my life where I am not sure how to continue forward and I am coming to you for help. My period is killing me. That is not an exaggeration. I am actively wishing for death. None of my experience matches that of my peers and I am turning to you for help. I look forward to our collaboration together"

"I have been on multiple oral contraceptives, including Lo Lestrin, Lo Lestrin Fe, Apri, Yaz, Yasmin, Alesse, and Safyral. I have gotten the Mirena and also had it taken out a few short weeks later due to extensive bleeding that started to cause severe complications. During both of these times, I was experiencing a severe range of symptoms that made it hard to live my everyday life including: pain, mood swings, severe fatigue, anxiety, depression, and a lot more. I would appreciate your help in finding solutions to the problems at hand. The files next to me contain all of my daily logs and their associated calendars, some notes from previous doctors, and some research on what could possibly be going on with my body. I was hoping we could start with some hormonal tests..."

I'm sorry what?

Well...um. No. I don't have any severe pain outside of my menstrual cycle. You know. Just cramps.

On a scale of 1-10? Listen, I've been through all of this before. You're welcome to check my records and what previous doctors have said but...I find the scale rating kind of, bullshit? I mean, if I say 10, you won't believe me because if I was really at a 10 then I would be dying, or in the hospital, and if I say anything below a seven, then you'll say that's normal, and I should take a hot bath, drink some tea, exercise, and take some extra-strength tylenol, even though that does nothing for me. So instead I will say that the pain is severe enough that it keeps me from leaving bed. I can't fall asleep because it's all I feel, and nothing over the counter works, so I end up crying and screaming while in child's pose and eventually I'll have tired myself out enough to go to sleep.

Birth Control? If you recall a few seconds ago when I was giving my introductions you will remember that I've been on a ton. And although, yes, they helped with the pain, the drawback of that was completely losing my mind. You know, mood swings every hour, I couldn't eat much, sleeping too much, not being able to sleep at all, depersonalization, derealization, all the works. I started hallucinating goats that popped out of the shadows in the middle of the night? It was so chaotic, and it messed with a lot of my personal relationships that I still haven't been able to repair, so I don't really feel comfortable going back on and I would prefer if we don't consider that an option.

Again, I just said that I am not a good fit for the IUD. Besides passing out at my appointment from the pain, I was bleeding for months, and I kept passing out because of all the blood loss, and it did nothing to help me with what I'm feeling now, so I don't think that would be a good idea.

I'm gonna be real with you for a sec. It feels like there is something, deep within me, that is slowly killing me from the inside. It is ruining my life. Poisoning my friends. Pushing them away, lashing out them. It's poisoning *me*. And I can't stop it. I turn into this uncontrollable monster who won't rest until I ruin every part of my life. I don't eat. Not because of weight control but because I get some sick satisfaction out of it. I don't know. And it gets so bad that sometimes I'm ready to just stop. it. the whole living thing. I just have one too many moments of looking out my window and considering what would happen if I just made the choice to jump. I'm not a person anymore, I am a shell that merely exists to hurt myself and others.

And then I just snap out of it. Like nothing happened. And it's easy to forget that I was this other person but she leaves scars, so that I never forget that she is there, underneath my skin, waiting take control again. I try to talk to people about it, but no one believes me? They keep saying things like "oh yeah, I feel that too," and I promise what they are talking about is NOT the same thing. So I'm sorry that I'm being complicated because nothing that has worked for others works for me. And I know this all sounds like I'm making it up, but I seriously, genuinely do not know how I can go through the rest of my life existing in this demonic cycle. I need your help.

I just want to repeat what you said back to you so that I can be sure I heard you correctly. Your response to my confession of months of an eating disorder, self harm, suicidal ideation and genuine loss of a desire to live, as a board-certified doctor and medical expert, is that I just need a boyfriend? And then this will all go away?

Is this a joke?

Ohmygod

Could you just...give me a referral or something, to someone who will do the testing?

((She begins to pack and exit the room, but stops herself before she opens the door))

I lied earlier. I don't have classes on Thursdays. Why the fuck would I wear heels to a lecture? No, all of this is because the only time my doctors take me seriously, if they ever do, is when I dress like I'm going to a fucking business interview. I can't believe I wore heels for you. You. Don't. Deserve. My. Heels.

Why why why why why are so many of you like this? Do you get some sick joy from driving women to the point of insanity when all they want is some god damn help and basic respect? Or is that too much extra work for you? I know, I should've grabbed some random guy off the street, brought him in here, and told you he was my boyfriend. Would you take me a little more seriously, then? If I had a man complain about how much of an absolute bitch it is to deal with me and all the complications that come with my period, would you actually be concerned? Or would you just tell me to get *another* boyfriend?

I will be reporting you. And you *will* give me a referral because I am not spending \$75 on my shitty copay for my doctor to prescribe me *dick*. There are many ways I could get that for a lot cheaper.

No, no, don't call security!

((Dahlia gathers the rest of her things and runs out. She puts her earbuds in. Music plays.))

Hi Dahlia. If you're listening to this, that means things did not go exactly as planned. So let's take a deep breath. Wrap your arms around yourself, and listen to everything I say. Your pain is real. No matter what any of those fuckers say. You did not made up any of this. Your pain is real, and you need to remember that. I know you're tired and I know you want to give up and but you are a fucking

phoenix. You always rise. So go ahead. Scream, cry, kick, punch, and do whatever you need to do to feel what you need to feel. And then you will go and make another appointment.

Now...Let's go get some Wendy's, because you deserve it.