

BIG GIRL

By Andrew Biss

An overweight young woman named Peggy appraises her recently purchased self-help book, "The Bigger the Better."

CHARACTER

PEGGY: Significantly overweight. Smart, independent minded, with a caustic edge. Early 20s.

SETTING & TIME

SETTING: Unspecified.

TIME: The present.

Big Girl premiered in New York at the Times Square Arts Center in 2008, produced by 3Graces Theater Company and directed by Kathleen Bishop.

At Rise: A spotlight reveals PEGGY, an overweight young woman in her early twenties, standing centre stage holding a book in her hands. PEGGY stares out at the audience with a proud, intrepid expression on her face.

PEGGY: (In a defiant announcement.) I weigh 276 pounds and I love every single God-given one of them!

(Pause.)

I don't, actually. Not if I were being honest. But that's what you're supposed to repeat, according to the instructions in the book.

(Beat.)

It's called, "The Bigger the Better." Written by ...

(Beat.)

Oh... isn't that odd. I can't recall her name. Ordinarily, I could quote you from here to eternity on just about anyone, but at this precise moment I'm drawing a complete blank on the author. An American, I think. (Squinting at the book cover.) Should have brought my glasses. (Holding the book before her.) It's meant to empower you, apparently – repeating this mantra. They suggest standing completely naked in front of a full-length mirror under overhead lighting and repeating at least twenty times before going to bed, "I weigh 276 pounds and I love every single God-given one of them." Not that it says "276" of course. It just leaves a blank space for you to plop in whatever it is you're lugging around. Then you're supposed to wake up the next morning feeling completely at peace with your physical being and the world in which it moves...or lumbers...or words to that effect. Whatever the case, it's not working. I'm

not sure if it's because I hate my body or because I don't believe in God...though I suspect the latter. At any rate, I've a feeling I was had.

(Beat.)

As Nietzsche so adroitly put it, "Does wisdom perhaps appear on the earth as a raven which is inspired by the smell of carrion?"

(Beat.)

Perhaps yes, perhaps no. But I did buy the book.

(Beat.)

Maybe I'll write a book someday. I'd title it: "How to Hate Your Bloated Carcass, Yet Still Continue to Enjoy a Relatively Happy, Healthy and Productive Life... Barring One or Two Exceptions...Especially When Sitting Alone on a Saturday Night with a Bottle of Vodka and a Bellyful of Bile." Or something like that.

(Beat.)

I think I'd need an editor.

(Pause.)

I've always been big. I was born big. I was a big baby. Still am in some respects. In fact, one of the earliest memories I have is of my Aunt Nester staring down at me, her thin lips contorted into a forced expression of adoration, saying to my mother, "My word, you've got a big girl there, haven't you, Georgie."

(Beat.)

She's dead now. Not my mother - my Aunt Nester. A severe stroke whilst pruning her beloved roses in her front garden. She fell into them face first, the thorns of her pride and joy gashing open her wizened face in her moment of need. They did a good job, though — at the mortuary, that is. She looked quite regal, all dished up and served before us, there in her casket. I stared hard at her face but I couldn't see even the trace of a scar. Mum fell apart. Sadly, all I felt was a slight twinge of guilt as I contorted my not-so-thin lips into a forced expression of loss.

(Beat.)

And so it goes.

(Pause.)

I think self-hatred is vastly underrated, don't you? I mean, everyone seems to have such a negative view of it. But if you really think about it, it makes life so much easier in so many ways. For a start, you don't have to bother giving yourself all those tiresome confidence-building pep talks inside your head every time you look in the mirror or step outside the front door. You can simply hate what you see before you, shrug your shoulders and get on with your business. And if someone insults you or shoots you a disdainful glare, it doesn't sting or chip away at your delicately crafted

shell of self-confidence it just lands harmlessly in that boggy pit of everything you already despise and fizzles out with barely a flicker. You don't wrestle with it, you just absorb it. It can save an awful lot of time in this fast-paced world of ours. Think about it.

(Pause.)

"It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see." That's according to Henry David Thoreau, and he'd have been quite surprised at what people see had he been me. When you're the size I am you become an object, a thing - not a person. People who might, in any other circumstances, be perfectly polite and well-mannered, somehow feel entirely comfortable staring at me in the most blatant, obvious way. They don't see me, of course, they see a mass -- a misshapen mass; never imagining for a moment that there might be someone living inside it...looking back. I become an object of curiosity. They look away self-consciously when a person in a wheelchair approaches, but with me it's open season. Some simply gawp, slack jawed. Others eye me more studiously, as if taking mental notes on the nature of this strange, deformed specimen they've just stumbled upon. Others, as I said before, spit looks of disdain or disgust, as if I were the living embodiment of the sins of overindulgence, and should, at my earliest opportunity, carve off large chunks of my flesh and mail them to malnourished children in developing countries.

(Beat.)

Wonder what I'd taste like? Sweet and sour is my guess. Probably go down a treat with some white rice and a Tsingtao. I could be big in China without even going there. Well, bits of me would be there, I suppose. And as Confucius so discouragingly pointed out, "No matter where you go, there you are."

(Pause.)

According to "The Bigger the Better," we all belong to one of three groups: endomorphs, whose metabolisms require a far greater amount of effort in order to lose weight; ectomorphs, who have the opposite problem; and mesomorphs, who can pretty much lose it or gain it at will -- think Robert De Niro in "Raging Bull." Thus, they say, as an endomorph, you should stop punishing yourself with the guilt and shame thrust upon you by the vacuous standards of an image-obsessed culture and begin loving and respecting the body you were given by Mother Nature. Or, in other words, tell Marie Claire to kiss your fat, flabby, cellulite-riddled ass.

(Beat.)

I have only one problem with this theory - I want to be Marie Claire. Well, maybe not Marie Claire herself - she's probably ninety-years-old by now, with mummified silicon tits and a face in perpetual G-force. But I'd kill to be one of those people...to be one of those bodies...one of them. (Becoming agitated.) Telling yourself you like the way you look is easy. Believing it is an entirely different kettle of whales. That's because, if I were being honest, I'm tired. I'm tired of feeling out of breath all the time; I'm tired of people looking through me not at me; I'm sick to death of buying crap clothes from "specialty" stores, or from mail-order companies whose crap clothes never fit right

anyway. I want to look chic. I want to look sexy. I want to feel sexy. I want to take my clothes off and not feel ashamed of my body the next time I go home with some drunk-off-his-head asshole who didn't get the girl he was chasing all night. Just for once in my life I'd like not to feel like the commiserating blowjob at the end of a disappointing evening.

(In a masculine voice.)

"Then lose some weight, ya fat bitch!"

(Beat.)

No shit, ya dumb fuck!

(In a masculine voice.)

"Ooh, Piggy's pissed!"

(Beat.)

Peggy isn't pissed; Peggy's up-to-fucking-here with fucks like you that perpetuate the specie with more dumb fucks with the same fat heads, the same small dicks, the same inability of independent thought, and the same brainless look in their eyes. That's what Peggy's sick of.

(In a masculine voice.)

"Oh, then fuck you, Miss Piggy. You need to lighten up - startin' with ya gut"

(Beat.)

Yeah, fuck off- go - get outta here! I don't give a crap! I don't need your shit ... I don't need you. I'm a big girl now... see?

(Beat.)

I can take it ... all of it.

(Pause, then quietly to herself.)

I'm a big girl.

(Pause.)

I don't have enough friends, according to my mother. "Peggy, you don't get out enough - mix, mingle -you've got ever such a pretty face." God, how I hate it when she says that; as if it were some sort of consolation prize for a contestant who didn't make the grade on a game show. And it is a game, that much I do know. Anyway, I don't like going out much it's usually more trouble than it's worth. "No vale la pena," as the Spanish say. And the question of friends is even deadlier. If I'm with other fatties I'm less self-conscious on one level, but on another I feel like a female-in-heat amongst a herd of roaming buffalo. On the other hand, whenever I hang out with skinny girls, I either get the feeling from some that I'm only there because they feel sorry for me, or from others haunted by the fact that they gained 5 lbs last month – are desperate to

look skinny by comparison, like in some rigged taste test. Needless to say, it's always me that fails the Pepsi Challenge.

(Pause.)

If negative feelings can eat you up inside, then I, by rights - and as you may have already speculated should resemble something not too dissimilar from Karen Carpenter in her latter stages by this point. I don't just eat my heart out; I chew the fat and gristle off of every bone. But somehow it doesn't work like that. See this ...

(Slapping her thighs.)

Pure nihilism it goes straight to my thighs.

(Beat.)

Every once in a while I'll take a little stab at a sort of resigned acceptance, but it doesn't usually last very long. Something really stupid happens and I'm back at the altar of self-loathing. For instance, every so often I'll pass by a shop window and see an outfit that strikes me as divine simply that. It is art - art to wear. As superficial as that may sound in this fucked up, hypocritical world, I'll sometimes see something so sartorially perfect in and of itself that all I can do is marvel. Then, as I'm marveling and admiring, my eyes gradually refocus onto something else, something quite different and much closer to me... my own image reflected in the window. And I'll stand there for a moment, trying to comprehend the duality of what I'm seeing. I try to reconcile the person I see in that pane of glass with the person who eyes and oh-so-adores and appreciates that...that perfect, stupid, perfectly stupid piece of perfection that's so completely beyond its reach.

(Beat.)

And that's about the sum of it, really me looking enviously through a window; me eyeing stick figures in beautiful clothes, trying to avoid the middle image in the space between us - the one that's there now.

(Beat.)

And so I eat more than I should...to feel better than I can...and make it all so much worse than it is. It all feeds upon itself, you see. I cannibalize myself. Which again begs the question, why am I not thinner? And there's that voice again.

(In a masculine voice.)

"Cause ya can't stop shovelin' food into that huge belly, ya greedy cow! Why don't ya get ya fuckin' jaw wired?"

(Beat.)

To which I ever so warmly reply, "Oh, just listen to you, you great big loveable lunk. Come on over here and let me give you a great big hug. Come on. Let me embrace thee, sour adversity, for wise men say it is the wisest course."

(Beat.)

That's William Shakespeare, hot stuff ... What? ... No, not Shatner – Shakespeare.

(Beat.)

He's not as bad as he sounds. If he spent as much time on giving his brain a workout as he does his biceps he might even be quite nice. As it is, he's destined to grow up to be his mother. And there's another fine example of the human race. She's one of those that always gives me "the look." I get a lot of people that give me "the look" – especially in restaurants. It's the look that says, "My God, she's so fat ... why is she eating?"

(Pause.)

Another "fun" aspect of being massive, according to "The Bigger the Better," is being able to look beyond the physical attributes of those around you and appreciate the true beauty that exists within them.

Your own abnormality, in effect, becomes a gift that grants you insight into the true nature of all of mankind, no matter how far removed they might be from the ideal. And that, quite frankly, is the most insulting suggestion of all in this worthless piece of dried pulp. How dare they suggest that I should give up my long-held and highly cultivated petty grievances against other members of society simply because I'm carrying around excess body fat! Do they honestly believe that just because I'm stigmatized by society that I'm about to give up my own personal prejudices and start smiling benevolently and buy the world a fucking Coke? How ridiculous! It's one of the few things I still have in common with everyone around me. It's my last little bit of mainstream. And don't pretend you don't have them - we all do. We all have a little well of contempt inside us that we dip into every now and then - even the perfect people when they're having an off day. Sometimes it's just a way of surviving, because sometimes we all feel like miserable fat bastards in one way or another. Pointing a finger at someone else is sometimes the only solution to the feeling that you're the one at the bottom of the heap.

(Beat.)

André Gide once said, "There is no prejudice that the work of art does not finally overcome." And he may well be right. But all I can say is, that had better be one hell of a big canvas for someone like me because as it stands, I'm the last safe prejudice in society you can have a good old, side-splitting, roll in the aisles laugh at without feeling guilty. The day that laughter dies down...well, maybe then I'll begin seeing a little more inner beauty. When I see a little more outer empathy, perhaps then I'll have more of a mind to start blithely handing out cans of soda to complete strangers. Let's call it "The Coke Challenge."

(Pause.)

So, I've come to the conclusion that "The Bigger the Better," by generically named and instantly forgettable author, is nothing more than the self-justifying, gratuitous ramblings of some bored, bloated housewife who's married to some filthy-rich entrepreneur that's fucking every skinny brainless twink he can get his gnarled hands

on. I've also a sneaking suspicion that part of her daily vitamin regimen consists of vitamin P as in Prozac. I could be wrong, of course. It's just hunch.

(Holding the book before her.)

In short, as a self-help tool - not to mention a work of literature — this amounts to little more than a trifle. In fact, that's not a bad idea. Yes...yes, I think I shall go now and buy a can of Reddi-wip and some squeezable butterscotch topping, spread it all over the pages of this book and eat it from cover to cover. This will be the first book that I can honestly say I have ever truly digested. And who knows, once it's inside me, being attacked and broken down by all my lazy little enzymes, maybe I finally will see the big picture.

(Beat.)

Don't hold your breath though.

(Beat.)

I shall leave you with a few words from Quentin Crisp: "In an expanding universe, time is on the side of the outcast. Those who once inhabited the suburbs of human contempt find that without changing their address they eventually live in the metropolis."

(Beat.)

So ... perhaps I'll see you there.

(Begins exiting R. then stops and turns. Then, to the tune of the song by Osvaldo Farres.)

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps!

(PEGGY exits R. A second later the book is tossed back out onto the stage as the lights fade down to BLACK.)

END OF PLAY