

**“Shine a Light” on Mental Health: A Look into the Psychological and Social Issues of  
Heather’s the Musical**

An Honors Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

On the surface, *Heathers: The Musical* may look like a typical musical set in the 1980s where there is big hair and denim jackets; however, the plot is more serious than what is shown on the surface. The show focuses largely on psychological and social issues such as bullying, suicide, and abusive relationships. Though the musical is fictional, the issues still are reflected in society today.

Working with my thesis advisor, Dr. Pagen, I observe bullying, suicide, and abusive relationships that exists in *Heathers: The Musical*. I specifically analyze the three main characters: Veronica, J.D., and Martha, and their social context and behaviors present in the show based on actual research conducted on adolescents. This includes but is not limited to: weight shaming, slut shaming, suicidal behaviors in resilient adolescent males, and the risk factors that lead to abusive relationships.

One Sentence Description: *Heathers: The Musical* provides an insightful depiction of the adolescent issues of bullying, suicide, and abusive relationships that are still relevant among high school students today

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“Shine a Light” on Mental Health: A Look into the Psychological and Social Issues of  
*Heathers: The Musical*

Imagine taking a step back in time and walking through the halls of high school. Only this time, it is the 1980s where shoulder pads evoked a powerful silhouette and the air was polluted with hairspray to keep even the worst sinner’s hair closer to God. You walk to the end of the hall and notice a girl being bullied about her weight. In the cafeteria, you see another girl is crying because everyone is calling her a slut. After lunch, you witness a couple yelling at each other and the guy begging the girl not to leave him. Finally, at the end of the day, the principal announces over the intercom that one of the students at the high school has committed suicide because they were afraid and alone.

High school can be the most challenging time of a teenager’s life. Though a fictional work set in the late 1980s, I believe that *Heathers: The Musical* provides an accurate depiction of the adolescent issues of bullying, suicide, and abusive relationships that are still relevant among high school students today. Although there are many other issues present in the musical, I chose to address these three main issues in the paper because they are dominant themes of the show. I will analyze the three main characters in the musical, discuss the issues they face, and compare these situations to research. Even though the story of *Heathers: The Musical* is fictional, the topics are serious and related to adolescent life, and as a result, should be presented to teenagers as theatre can serve to educate youth audiences on crucial, current topics.

In order for one to better understand the characters and issues prevalent in the show, a short synopsis of *Heathers: The Musical* is beneficial. The musical follows the story of Veronica Sawyer and her desire to make the world a better place. Westerberg

High is ruled by the three Heathers: Heather Duke, Heather McNamara, and the almighty, Heather Chandler. Veronica becomes the Heathers' assistant by forging notes for them in exchange for being popular. Amid her new-found popularity, she ditches her best friend, Martha Dunnstock and finds herself instantly smitten with the new bad boy, J.D.

At night, Veronica accompanies the Heathers to Ram Sweeney and Kurt Kelly's homecoming party and ends up vomiting all over Heather Chandler's shoes. The next morning, to save her reputation after embarrassing herself last night, Veronica and J.D. go to Heather Chandler's house to beg for forgiveness. Veronica is ordered to make Heather Chandler a hangover cure, but J.D. has a different plan. He jokingly pours Drano in a mug stating that it would end her hangover; Veronica accidentally grabs the poisoned mug and gives it to Heather. She drinks the Drano and dies at the feet of Veronica. To save herself and J.D., Veronica forges a note to make it appear that Heather Chandler has committed suicide. That is only the beginning.

J.D. and Veronica continue to exterminate the students at Westerberg High who make their world unbearable. J.D. finds it is his duty to murder anyone who has bullied Veronica. However, Veronica is not the only character to fall victim to bullying in the musical. Veronica, J.D., and Martha all are victims of bullying. "Bullying is intentionally harmful aggressive behavior that is repetitive and involves an imbalance of power between perpetrator and target" (Bauman, 341). Each character gets bullied at various times throughout the show and they experience different outcomes. J.D. is bullied for being the new kid at school and Veronica falls victim to slut shaming because of her association with the Heathers. However, Veronica's best friend, Martha Dunnstock, is

bullied the most in the show and is the first character to attempt suicide. Martha is constantly harassed because of her size, and her emotional stress becomes too much for her to handle.

“Research suggests that weight-based teasing and negative body image among youth are correlated with depressive symptoms, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts” (Taylor, 179). In the study conducted by Taylor, 50 teenagers (30 female, 20 male) were observed participating in a gym class for one year and participated in individual and focus-group interviews. The individual interviews focused on body image ideologies, diet, and exercise, and the group interviews, comprised of friendship groups, focused on personal accounts. The friendship groups gave the teens an open environment to discuss weight shaming. Over the course of her study, Taylor found that there were two types of weight-based teasing: direct and indirect. Indirect teasing is defined as making comments about someone behind his or her back. “Although indirect teasing may appear to be less public and immediately humiliating than being teased directly in front of one’s peers, the emotional effect can be just as damaging for adolescents” (Taylor, 184). This is because victims of indirect teasing may still hear the rude comment and keep it to themselves. Direct teasing is defined as making comments about someone directly to him or her. Students that participated in the study described incidents where people would yell degrading names such as “wide load” to an overweight person walking by.

In “Guys, She’s Humongous!”: Gender and Weight Based Teasing in Adolescence,” Taylor found,

Direct teasing functioned as a very explicit and public means for adolescents to make someone who has displayed too much body fat as



“other,” whereas indirect teasing allowed adolescents to more subtly co-construct and communicate body size norms within friendship groups through constant surveillance, evaluation, and critique of peers. (Taylor, 188)

Martha deals with both direct and indirect forms of weight shaming. Girls in high school “were most frequently teased by their male peers and this teasing was primarily direct in nature” (Taylor, 186). An example of direct weight shaming would be in the first scene where Kurt exclaims, “Martha Dumptruck! Wide load! Honk!” (Murphy, 19), where he compares her to a dump truck using the same phrase as the example from the teenagers in Taylor’s study. At Ram Sweeney’s homecoming party in Act I Scene v, the student body collectively scoff at Martha when the Heathers dress up the pig piñata to resemble her with glasses and a wig. One decision that Heather Chandler made is to call Martha by her actual last name instead of the usual ‘Dumptruck’. This is used as a ploy to have Martha feel like she belongs at the party with the popular people. This miniscule decision makes the build up to the reveal of the piñata more damaging because for a moment, Martha thought she was well liked and accepted.

Martha also deals with indirect shaming from peers, specifically the Heathers. Heather Chandler has Veronica write a love note to Martha in Ram Sweeney’s handwriting. Veronica knows that Martha has been in love with Ram since he kissed her on the kickball field in Kindergarten. Heather McNamara states that the fact Ram kissed Martha was “disgusting” referring to her appearance. Indirect shaming is not always about weight, it can be a form of victimization which includes “aspects of social isolation such as ignoring, excluding, and backbiting as well as rejection” (Klomek, 167). Martha

knows she is not liked by the Heathers because they do not pay attention to her nor include her in their clique. She is also isolated and ignored by her best friend, Veronica. In Act I Scene ii, Martha sees the change in Veronica and she confronts her about flaking out on their movie night. She has not hung out with Martha because she has been selfish and believes that the Heathers can help her gain popularity.

Moreover, Veronica isolates Martha because she is the one who experiences relational victimization. “Relational victimization includes behaviors that cause or threaten to damage peer relationships, particularly friendship and acceptance” (Klomek, 167). Because Veronica is now friends with the Heathers, her relationship with Martha becomes distant. The reason that Veronica flakes on movie night and follows the Heathers’ orders is because if she does not obey them, they will ruin her reputation. Another factor ruining Martha and Veronica’s relationship is J.D. In Act II, Martha starts putting the pieces together about Ram and Kurt’s death. Veronica tells Martha that she wrote the love note and hurts her best friend’s feelings for fear that J.D. would kill her. He is willing to take down anyone who would get in the way of their relationship. She thought that by upsetting Martha she would protect her, but what it did was upset her enough to attempt suicide.

The study conducted by Dr. Brunstein Klomek indicates that, “indirect victimization is associated with depression and suicidal ideation and direct victimization is associated with depression and suicidal ideation among girls but not boys” (Klomek, 167). His study consisted of students ages 13 to 19 years from different high schools in the state of New York. Participants completed various questionnaires on depression, suicide ideation, suicide attempt history, and specific types of peer victimization. It was

found that the most common type of bullying was to have one's physical appearance degraded. This was linked to depression, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts.

Reportedly, the more types of victimization an adolescent experiences, the higher the risk of suicide.

Martha experiences various forms of victimization, most dealing with her weight but the one occurrence that brings her to her breaking point is when her best friend, Veronica, hurts her. By telling Martha that she wrote the note, it destroyed their friendship and Martha's hope that Ram could love her. Forced to live alone with her unrequited love for Ram, Martha finds that she "can build a dream" she can live in, and this time she will "never wake up" (Murphy, 112). She jumps off of the Old Mill Bridge holding a suicide note and ends up in the hospital with some broken bones. Heather Duke believes that it was "just another geek trying to imitate the popular people and failing miserably" (Murphy, 115), but Martha knew what she was doing because the victimization lead her to this event.

In addition to Martha's weight shaming and emotional distress that caused her to attempt suicide, Veronica experiences a different type of shaming that damages her reputation. Slut shaming is defined as "stigmatizing a woman for their behavior that is judged as immoral or for engaging in sexual activity" (Pickel, 90). Pickel and Gentry, proposed that "a victim who is seen as a 'slut' will be blamed for their victimization more than a control victim" (Pickel, 91). Slut shaming is a form of bullying, but victims are viewed as bringing the bullying upon themselves. Pickel and Gentry had 142 undergrad psychology students evaluate a 17-year-old victim who was bullied. They tested four different variable combinations: no promiscuous behavior with low self-harm,

promiscuous behavior with high self-harm, no promiscuous behavior with high self-harm, and promiscuous behavior with low self-harm. It was observed that harm did not influence guilt estimates, but that “participants felt that the defendant’s conduct, as opposed to the victim’s, was clearly the primary cause of harm to the victim” (Pickel, 95). They felt that the control victim (not promiscuous) deserved much less blame than the defendant, but that the sexually available female caused the harm she endured.

Veronica falls victim to slut shaming in the show which leads to the murders of Kurt and Ram. Before Veronica became friends with the Heathers, she was an outcast. Now that she is the Heathers’ assistant, she is viewed in a different light. In Act I Scene ix, Veronica is called by Heather McNamara to come to the cemetery; so Heather McNamara can avoid being date raped by Kurt. Both Kurt and Ram were highly intoxicated and craved relief, however Veronica ended up leaving unharmed. The next day at school, Heather Duke spreads a rumor that Veronica had three-way sex with Kurt and Ram. The boys state that there was a “big sword fight in her mouth” and Duke says that “she’ll do the same for you” (Murphy, 76-77). The students believe it because she is popular, dresses more risqué, and is associated with the Heathers. This, however, would not be the case if she acted more like she did at the beginning of the show. The students call her a ‘slut’ and a ‘whore’ because she is now seen as someone who is willing to be sexually promiscuous.

Slut shaming, depicted in *SLUT: The Play* written by Katie Cappiello, also addresses the damaging impact of slut shaming on teenagers. The play was developed by members of The Arts Effect All-Girl Theatre Company in January of 2012. Twenty high school girls “delved into heated discussions about how often and why they used the word

slut to describe themselves and others” (Cappiello, 72). From their discussions, came *SLUT: The Play*, which tells the story of Joanna ‘Joey’ Del Marco who was sexually assaulted by three of her friends. The play was selected to be a part of the New York International Fringe Festival in August 2013. Their intention was to bring awareness to slut shaming and rape culture and how it is different for everyone.

Even though *Heathers: The Musical* is set in the 1980s and not as modern as *SLUT: The Play*, I believe that it can still be used to bring awareness to slut shaming and rape culture in a similar way. For example, Veronica is slut shamed for a rumor and not a real occurrence. In contrast, Joey found herself a part of the ‘slut’ group and even though she was raped. Her peers deemed her a slut for being sexually active and letting the event happen. Because of the group Joey was associated with, the students at school felt no sympathy for her. The same feelings are shown towards Veronica in “Blue (Reprise)”. Heather Duke, Ram, and Kurt explain what happened at the cemetery, but because of her popularity, how she dresses, and her association with the Heathers, she is deemed a slut and a whore.

Not only does Veronica experience victimization from her peers, she also experiences abuse from the person she looks to the most, her boyfriend J.D. “Relationship violence can happen to both males and females, but abuse has a greater impact on females than males” (Cleveland, 325). In a study conducted by Cleveland, Herrera, and Stuewig, 603 opposite sex relationships were observed. There were six different characteristics of participants observed in Wave I of the study: family-based predictors, school and IQ measurements, attitudes about sex in relationships and sexual behavior, drinking, externalizing behaviors, and

internalizing behaviors. Wave II of the study involved observing sexual behaviors, physical behaviors, and the seriousness of the relationship. Findings revealed that individual-level characteristics and relationship abuse depended on the seriousness of the relationship. Although J.D. and Veronica's relationship is not long, their attachment for each other is strong from the beginning. They skipped the dating phase and went right to the sexual attachment. An example of the seriousness of their relationship is in Act I Scene viii where Veronica meets J.D.'s dad for the first time. After she meets him, she expresses that he will not be speaking at their wedding. They have only been dating for two days and Veronica is already thinking about marriage.

It has also been found that "contextual factors tend to influence violent behavior in males" (Cleveland, 335). Contextual factors can include: family, school, past relationship history, externalizing problems, and internalizing problems. The first factor that J.D. faces is his poor attachment to school, which is "associated with abuse in high serious relationships" (Cleveland, 335). J.D. has moved around all of his life; the audience finds out that he has gone through ten high schools. He does not bother to make any friends because he moves around a lot due to his dad's work. Because of his poor attachment to school, he is even more attached and demanding of Veronica. He has never allowed himself to become close with any other peer until he met Veronica. I believe that he knows Veronica also wants to make the world a better place just like him and he chooses to connect with her. As a result, J.D.'s connection with Veronica becomes very strong because she is the one person he has grown to love and trust.

J.D. also faces internalizing and externalizing problems with his home life and school, which then takes effect in his relationship with Veronica. When J.D. was young, he witnessed his mom die in an explosion cause by his dad. His dad, Big Bud Dean, is a deconstructionist who is hired to implode buildings. The audience learns that J.D.'s mom has passed away in "Freeze Your Brain". Veronica asks, "does your mommy know you eat all this crap" to which he responds, "not anymore" (Murphy, 41). Then the audience learns in Act I Scene viii, the last time J.D. saw his mom was "waving out the window in a library in Texas" (Murphy, 67).

It is not until Act II Scene ii the audience learns how J.D.'s Mom dies:

"My dad said it was an accident. But she knew what she was doing. She walked into the building two minutes before dad blew it up. She waved at me out the window, and then . . . kabooooom. She left me" (Murphy, 91).

J.D. has carried his mom's death with him through his adolescence. Internalizing behavior is negative and is concentrated on an inward focus. He has gone through half his life without a woman figure present and he carries a negative energy with him, which is why he is so attached to Veronica. She shows him love and affection, which is something he has not felt for a long time. The only constant in his life is his dad, who as far as the audience knows, is not that great of a guy. It is apparent that J.D. and Big Bud Dean have gone through family therapy because they communicate by reverse roleplay. For example, when

Big Bud Dean enters the room in Act I Scene viii, J.D. calls out “why, son, I didn’t hear you come in” (Murphy, 66) instead of just calling him, dad.

According to a study conducted by Wolfe and Wekerle, “teens with maltreatment backgrounds report to be more hostile, have lower problem solving self-efficiency, and more aggression with peers and dating partners than do nonmaltreated youths” (Wolfe, 280). Participants in the study were 14-16-year olds that had child maltreatment histories. The results showed that adolescents in this age group represented a valuable window for reducing violence amongst others and involved “youths in raising awareness of the nature and harm of violence in romantic relationships” (Wolfe, 287). However, J.D. never had anyone care about enough to impose on his home life. Because of his domineering nature towards Veronica and the events in his past, one is led to believe that Big Bud Dean is abusive towards him. Big Bud Dean implodes buildings for a living, he pokes fun at the family therapy they went through, and J.D. believes his mom walked into the building because she knew she would die. I do not believe that J.D.’s mom would have committed suicide if she was happy in her relationship with his dad. His mom knew about the library being imploded and saw it as her opportunity to leave. J.D. had to live with the fatal death of his mother, which is the reason he is protective of Veronica. He does not want to repeat the past.

J.D. also has externalized problems which is mostly focused on his deceit and control over Veronica. Once their relationship begins, Veronica puts all her trust in him because she believes that he will protect her. He does protect her, but through aggression and jealousy. According to the book “Aggression and



Violence in Adolescence” by Robert F. Marcus, there are “five features in a romantic relationship in adolescence: involvement, partner-selection, content, quality, and cognitive and emotional process” (Marcus, 112). As stated before, Veronica and J.D. are in a highly committed relationship, which makes their attachment stronger. The best example for involvement would be the last song in Act I, “Our Love Is God”. J.D. feels that he and Veronica are destined to be together and that his sole purpose in life is to protect the woman he loves because the last time he tried to protect someone he loved, she died. J.D. compares their love to God because he feels that they are destined to be together and they have a job to carry out – to play the role of God and execute the people who hurt them.

Veronica and J.D. chose to be partners because they are both misunderstood and have the desire to make the world a better place in which to live. The content of their relationship is murdering the evil in the school (Heather Chandler, Kurt, Ram), and then covering it up to look like suicide. For instance, in Act I Scene vii, J.D. knows that Veronica grabbed the cup with Drano but he said nothing to stop her. She never finds out that he knew and therefore he makes her feel guilty for killing Heather Chandler. They need each other because J.D. commits the murders and Veronica feels that they are her fault. She goes along with his plan to forge suicide notes so neither of them will go to jail.

The quality of the relationship is based on the extent to which the relationship provides a beneficial experience. The benefit that both J.D. and Veronica get from their relationship is someone else to care for and love. They share intimacy and show affection towards each other even though it is not

healthy. In Act II, Veronica goes through a transition where she realizes that J.D. is controlling her. However, after she pleads with him to live a normal life with her in “Seventeen”, she believes everything will go back to normal. Veronica will never have a happy life if she always must bear the burdens that J.D. creates for her.

Perhaps the most detrimental feature of the relationship can be seen in their cognitive and emotional process, which deals with “how each partner responds to situations” (Marcus, 112). Because of J.D.’s upbringing, he does not know how to emotionally handle situations. When he becomes upset or jealous, he handles situations the only way he knows how, extreme aggression. Other than the deaths of Heather Chandler, Kurt, and Ram, the most extreme measure that J.D. takes is in Act II after Veronica tells him that their relationship has ended for a second and final time. Veronica is upset that J.D. lied to her about the ‘ich luge’ (which means ‘I lie’ in German) bullets used to kill Kurt and Ram. He also promised her that he would put away his gun, but she knows that he cannot be trusted. When she leaves him, he devises a plan to blow up the entire school. In the song “Meant to be Yours”, J.D. states that, “Those assholes [students] are the key! They’re keeping you away from me” (Murphy, 117). He clings to her because he feels she is the only person alive that cares for him and without her, he is nothing.

In the same way that J.D. feels he is nothing without her, Veronica believes she is nothing without him, exhibiting potential Stockholm syndrome. Stockholm syndrome is defined as when the kidnapped have feelings for their

kidnappers. “The condition of ‘traumatic psychological infantilism’ could cause the victim to cling to the person who is endangering his or her life” (Ledwig, 103). There are four causes of Stockholm syndrome: a person threatens to kill another and has the capability to do so, the other cannot escape, the threatened person is isolated from outsiders, and the threatening person shows some kindness to the one being threatened.

All four of these causes can be found in Veronica and J.D.’s relationship. J.D. does not explicitly state that he will kill Veronica but in Act II Scene v, as Veronica leaves J.D.’s house he makes a pleading gesture and inadvertently points the gun towards her. The audience knows that he has the capability to kill her because he has access to guns and bombs from his Father. Because J.D. has Veronica write the suicide notes of the students who are murdered, she is linked to the murders and cannot escape the relationship in fear that J.D. will disclose information that will send her to jail. All these secrets are kept in isolation, which then keeps Veronica isolated from everyone else. The isolation progresses as J.D. becomes more protective over her. For instance, when Veronica tries to isolate herself from J.D., he believes that everyone in the school is trying to isolate her from him. He slowly wants to take out each person that has ever said anything mean to Veronica, and he is willing to kill everyone in the school if it means he can be with her. Even though J.D. is threatening towards Veronica, his protective nature is what she believes to be his kindness towards her. In Act I Scene ii, before Veronica even knows J.D.’s name, she becomes attracted to him during the fight against Kurt and Ram. She wants a guy who will fight for her, and in return

she would fight for him. Throughout the show, even when his aggression escalades, he still protects her until the very end.

Abusive relationships cannot always be foreseen right away. The article, “My Boyfriend Almost Killed Me”, is a personal account of Abi Ferrin and her abusive relationship with her boyfriend, John. The beginning of their relationship was wonderful, until John started to convince Abi that her friends and family did not have her “best interests at heart” (Booth, 147). He then began to constantly criticize her image telling her she was never beautiful enough and he would flirt with other women. Even though he was taking advantage of her, she felt that it was her fault. She would think to herself that “things will go back to the way they used to be” (Booth, 147). One day he got extremely mad and held a gun to her head. He said he was sorry and that he loved her. Abi always forgave him because she was afraid. She did not end the relationship until two years later and it took a long time for her to heal.

There are similarities between Abi and John’s and Veronica and J.D.’s relationships. “Anger in a romantic relationship is largely an accusatory or a provocative display in which one partner blames the other partner for something” (Marcus, 123). John used his anger and jealousy of Abi to hurt her and break her down. J.D. also uses the same emotions towards Veronica to make her upset with him. For example, in Act II Scene ii, J.D. makes Veronica feel guilty that she would rather go to jail and “give a free pass to thugs who hurt people” (Murphy, 91). He knows that Veronica wants the world to be a better place and he feeds off of her emotions. Every time Veronica would have a pleading moment with J.D.,

she thought he would change and everything would go back to normal. In reality, he agreed with her only to keep the relationship alive. Once Veronica realizes that J.D. is toxic, she tries to leave him only to be back together with him in a few short days. J.D. and Veronica's relationship finally ends when J.D. blows himself up because he feels he is too damaged to be saved.

According to the study, "Micro- and Macrosystem Predictors of High School Male Suicidal Behavior" by Beck-Cross and Cooper, "diminished protective factors, such as lack of hope or sense of life purpose, place youths at an increased risk of suicidal behavior" (Beck-Cross, 232). The study observed 9,910 males in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, ages 16-18 years in the state of Iowa. It was found that "individual behaviors reflecting risk and resilience were statistically significant predictors of suicidal behaviors" (Beck-Cross, 235). School can enhance or detract a youths' risky behavior and males that show risky behavior at school are more likely to demonstrate suicidal behavior. Another factor that increases the probability of a suicide attempt are "males that carry weapons and partake in fights" (Beck-Cross, 232). J.D. exhibits these factors that cause him to commit suicide. He engages in risky behavior in and out of school such as the two fights that occur with Kurt and Ram and their murders. Perhaps the main factor that leads J.D. to commit suicide is his lack of hope and self-purpose. In the final battle between J.D. and Veronica in Act II, Veronica accidentally shoots J.D. in the leg, wounding him. She then takes the trigger bomb to the football field to save everyone except herself. J.D. manages to follow her and explains that he is "far too damaged" as a human being but she's "not beyond repair" (Murphy,

125). He firmly believes that his job is to protect Veronica and he trades his life for hers. His final statement is for her to stick around and make things better because he has finally come to the realization that what he did was wrong. He knows that because of his childhood and the events that transpired in his life time, he has become a hateful person who is beyond repair, but Veronica can still revert to the way she was before they met and set things right.

In regard to J.D. having Veronica make things better at Westerberg High, *Heathers: The Musical* can be used to educate young audiences to help make their own lives better. While the musical presents scenarios of bullying, suicide, and abusive relationships in a manner that is, at times, humorous, the content can be used as an eye opener for youth audiences. However, in a survey conducted by Matt Omasta, producers of theatre for young audiences constantly question if the material is appropriate for children. The material could be anything including the topics presented in *Heathers: The Musical*. The survey was given to 300 adult stakeholders in theatre for youth and they ranged from directors and actors to teachers. It was found that “79% of respondents indicated that TYA should not shy away from addressing particular topics” (Omasta, 78). However, they should avoid topics that are not age appropriate to a specific group of individuals.

In “Adult Stakeholder Perspectives on Social Issues in Theatre for Young Audiences”, Matt Omasta found,

The majority of respondents indicated that TYA should not be censored. Some argue that if companies used appropriate

advisory/rating systems to inform audiences about content, this would prevent issues from arising (Omasta, 79).

*Heathers: The Musical* deals with topics that are not suitable for all youth audiences, but the material should not be censored because the show can be used to educate teens. The musical does poke fun and take issues to the extreme, but it still presents issues that teens are currently facing. Reportedly, addressing the question, “Is it necessary for adults to talk with young audience members about issues before/after the show” (Omasta, 80), 97% of participants indicated that it is.

In the Department of Music and Theatre at California University of Pennsylvania, we presented the musical to area high school students on Friday, April 13th. As a university academic department, we labeled the show with an R rating because of violence, sexual content, and language. We had an event on campus called the #thatcouldbebeautiful Campaign. The students first attend a lecture by Abbey Sager, who after struggling with bullying in school and online wrote a graphic novel to let others struggling with bullying know they are not alone. The students then watched a video that was made with the help of the Allegheny Image Factory and featured cast members who discussed their personal high school experiences. After the show, faculty from the theatre, counseling, and psychology departments, including Dr. Michele Pagen, Dr. Elizabeth Larsen, Dr. Emily Sweitzer, Dr. Elizabeth Gruber, Marine Hall, and student cast members had a talk back session. We are had faculty and student cast members present for the high school students to talk to address any issues that wanted to discuss We also

had organizations on campus present in the lobby of the theatre, who handed out brochures and talked to teenagers going through a rough time.

In conclusion, the characters in *Heathers: The Musical* deal with adolescent issues of bullying, suicide, and abusive relationships that a high school student may go through today. By comparing the information from the musical with research evidence, one can conclude that *Heathers: The Musical* gives an accurate depiction of adolescent issues. Martha goes through indirect and direct weight shaming, which ultimately leads to her suicide attempt. Veronica is a victim of relational abuse, slut shaming, and is in an abusive relationship with J.D. He is abusive towards Veronica because of his childhood and how he learned to handle stressful situations. J.D. realizes how destructive he is and decides to take his own life to save Veronica. *Heathers: The Musical* can also be used to educate teens on behavioral issues. Although the musical is upbeat and exciting, it presents important topics that need to be addressed to teens today. *Heathers: The Musical* might make someone take a step back and think before they act and that truly is something beautiful.



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## APPENDIX

### Reflection on *Heathers: The Musical* and the #thatcouldbebeautiful Campaign

*Heathers: The Musical* was an experience that was just as much exhilarating as it was exhausting. The cast, crew, and creative team worked for two and a half months on the show and collectively felt that more time was needed. Personally, I was worried that the show would not come together because we had a large amount of music to learn, movement to block, and characters to develop. It was a rough process, but on opening night, everything came together and we finally had a show.

Veronica Sawyer was by far the most challenging role I have ever tackled. She had a large character arc and I wanted to play her as truthful as possible. I had to work on developing convincing chemistry with J.D., keeping my dorkiness throughout the show, and allowing myself to get out of my comfort zone for “Dead Girl Walking”. Veronica was also a vocally demanding role, which had really stretched me to my limits. I have never had to belt anything higher than a E5 on stag before and for this show, I had to belt an A5, which was extremely challenging for me. I tried to warm up with belting exercises every day before rehearsal. I was worried I would lose my voice for the show, but thankfully it did not happen. This role taught me to pace myself as a performer and to not dwell on mistakes.

The most rewarding item of the process was the #thatcouldbebeautiful Campaign, which occurred on Friday, April 13<sup>th</sup>. The students were attentive during the performance and retained information about the serious topics discussed within the show. At the talk back session, students were eager to ask questions. Some of the questions asked pertained

to the psychology of the abusive relationship between Veronica and J.D. and other questions were directed at specific cast members regarding how they prepared to play characters that were bullies or were bullied. The students' questions allowed for fruitful discussions on the psychology, sociology, and over all execution of the show. I enjoyed talking to students from the high schools and what they thought about the show. I was approached by one student about how he connected with the show and that it is now one of his favorite musicals because of the meaningful performances set forth by the actors in our cast. Hearing this comment and many others reminded me as to why I love performing. Live theatre can take us away from reality and immerse us into the lives of the characters on stage. We can feel their emotions and hear their stories. Conveying a story to a live audience and making a connection with people you have never met is something truly remarkable.