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# “Shit Show” or Everyone That Needs to go to the Bathroom Should Go Now

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Personal Experiences No One Thinks They Need to  
Know

By  
Meghan Doerfler

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

Dr. Kent Neely,  
Thesis Advisor

Dr. Gavin Keulks,  
Honors Program Director

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Last but certainly not least, a special shout out goes to my thesis advisor, Dr. Kent Neely, who never really understood the full scope of what he was getting himself into when he agreed to mentor me all those months ago. I’ll always treasure your feedback, witty remarks, and willingness to dive into whatever weird idea I brought to the table. You literally helped me “polish a turd” and I will forever be grateful.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Through a comic one-woman show, I will involve the audience in an exploration of my own personal stories and experiences with menstruation and feces. I purpose to break down some of the stigma that is associated with bodily functions by talking about them with open and blunt language and dialogue throughout the performance. One person shows have arguably been around ever since the first storytellers. While this show would be different in the nature of the stories being told, it would follow a very similar theatrical tradition by having one person narrate a story in a way that made the audience feel as if they were present within the room where it was happening. My primary focus in these stories will be on how we view periods and feces as a society and the unnatural feelings of shame that are associated with these two functions. Although I will mention other bodily functions briefly, I will spearhead this show behind those two functions in order to give the performance a definite shape and focus.

This performance will include my own personal stories that I will retell by using present-tense language in order to fully engage the audience with what is happening on stage and to drive the action and plot of each story forward. At the end of this process I will have created a fully formed one-woman show that was performed June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019 at 5:15pm in the Rice Auditorium Black Box. I aim to have the show's run time be approximately 30-45 minutes.

## INTRODUCTION

Being a performer has always been something I've wanted to do ever since I had the brain capacity to imagine. I have this incessant need to create, and if something I make – at a bare minimum – helps someone forget about what's happening outside of the performance space for a little while, that would be a success in my eyes.

I started doing theatre in high school and will be graduating from Western Oregon University with a B.F.A. in Acting, so I've been involved with theatre for some time now. And the biggest thing that I've generally noticed about my peers is that theatre people essentially have little to no boundaries. Yet, despite this lack of social decorum, bodily functions and what goes on behind the bathroom door is a topic that most people don't talk about. This observation struck me, because here I am, among some of the most bluntly open and honest people I know, people who are hoping to make a career out of being vulnerable in front of complete strangers, not feeling comfortable enough with their own friends to talk about one of the most natural things our bodies can do. It was then that I realized that creating a piece to explore our hesitation about discussing what goes on behind the bathroom door would be a significant step in easing people out of this societally created shame.

So, you might be asking yourself why I chose to write about bodily functions as a topic for a one woman show that was going to be my Honors Thesis, and whether I'm even qualified to tackle such a subject. Can't blame you for that, it's a pretty interesting concept to pick. And the answer is quite simple; there's nothing that is more universal, more connective than the two (sometimes three) things our bodies do on a regular, and natural, basis. As for the qualifications, I've been a human on this Earth for almost twenty-two years now, and on average I believe that I defecate as much as the next person. And when it comes down to the bare bones of what it's like to be a human on this Earth, a good deal of our lives is going to be spent on the toilet. For some people that's a pretty bleak fact, but it doesn't need to be. No matter how you slice and dice life, people are going to spend a large portion of their life in a bathroom, doing their business, and the aim of this show was to celebrate that truth instead of shying away from it. While I know that I'm not going to erase every aspect of shame associated with bodily functions, what I am hoping to do is to get a conversation going that the people who see my show can continue with each other, even as they walk out of the auditorium.

So, the overarching-big-umbrella idea for this thesis was to create a show based off my own poop, period, and pee stories with the goal of creating a conversation about why we feel shame when it comes down to what happens in

the restroom. However, luckily for me, this discussion about shame having no place in the bathroom has been going on for a long time, and it will keep going on for as long as people are ashamed of their own bodily functions.

## ***BLINDSIDE* AND THE IDEA OF SOLO PERFORMANCE**

When it comes to solo-female performance, there's a lot out there. So much so that it can get a little daunting to research, so it was incredibly lucky that Michael Phillips and Western Oregon University brought Stephanie Morin-Robert's production of *Blindside* to campus the Fall of 2017.

I knew that I wanted to create a one-woman show as I sat down and was getting ready to watch *Blindside* last year, however, at the time there was no concrete plans on what the one-woman show for my thesis would end up being. While I may not have known it then, Morin-Roberts proved to me that it was possible to have a deeply rich and impactful performance while keeping the overall tone of the show comic and light. And it was because of the comedy that Morin-Roberts crafted in her show that people in the audience felt that they could let their guard down and listen as she recounted childhood stories about growing up with a glass eye. Whenever someone is onstage and is genuinely being vulnerable in a room of complete strangers, it makes those strangers feel as if vulnerability is something that they're allowed to experience, too. Comedy is one of the biggest tools when it comes to sucker punching audiences with a main



topic of a show and making them feel good about it when they leave the theatre, and that was the biggest inspiration I took from Morin-Roberts. She inspired me to create a show based on genuine childhood stories that are full of emotional depth, while still allowing the comic aspect of each moment to shine through and drive those main points home.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF PERFORMANCE ART**

Throughout my time here at Western a lot of people have inspired me creatively, but none more so than performance artists. I became fascinated with this specific outlet of creativity and knew that there would be some aspect of it in my thesis script as well. The inspirational performance art focus of this show centers around the work of Stephanie Morin-Roberts, Carolee Schneemann, and Karen Finley.

As I mentioned before, the politicized nature of what goes on in the bathroom has already been discussed by many people before me, one such person being Karen Finley. If her name sounds familiar to you it's probably because she was one of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Four who had a grant proposal vetoed based on subject matter, after they had already passed through a peer review process (Timeline, "This Artist Smearred Chocolate on Her Body for Feminism, and Lots of Men Tried to Stop Her"). The performance of Finley's that I was most focused on was her *We Keep our Victims Ready* piece.

In this performance, Finley smeared what looked like a chocolate-y, cake like substance and other food items on her body and shouted into the microphone what it's like being a woman in society. It made people uncomfortable to watch, and it was supposed to. The largest source of inspiration this piece gave me was how quickly chocolate can take on the shape of something else if the performer manipulates it in a certain way. For Karen Finley, she wanted to show that "it is a symbol of women being treated like dirt" (Timeline, "This Artist Smeared Chocolate on Her Body for Feminism, and Lots of Men Tried to Stop Her"), for me, I became more interested in how I can use chocolate to create a feces looking substance while avoiding the bacterial hazard of actual feces.

Not only is chocolate a delicious treat, but it brought about a lot of different questions and potential ways I could use it in the show. With this idea of using chocolate (and other food items if necessary) as a poop substance, a lot of ideas began to surface for the performance art section of my own show. What I eventually settled on was creating a variety of different prop/food items to show the audience exactly what the substances look like that I discuss in my performance, instead of hoping that they would understand what the images actually looked like that I would be describing to them. A bonus of creating a chocolate-fecal matter prop is that it's permanent. Images fly through our minds quickly, but a prop that stays onstage the entire duration of the show doesn't.

Essentially the overarching goal of the props was to get the audience desensitized to them, so at the end of the show instead of it being a mason jar full of a liquid-y poop like substance, it would be something familiar that they've grown accustomed to, instead of something horrific that only fleetingly passes through their imagination once or twice. Plus, there's a level of control when it comes to creating the aesthetic of the props that was enticing, whereas telling a room full of people with different levels of imagination wasn't something that could be tested or monitored in the same way.

Besides discussing poop, another large topic of *Shit Show* is talking about menstruation. Period blood is the most non-violent, natural way of producing blood, yet it's the form of blood that many people are most grossed out with. And Carolee Schneemann was a huge source of inspiration on tackling this subject.

As with Karen Finley, I narrowed down my source of inspiration to one of Schneemann's performance art pieces, which ended up being *Interior Scroll*. Both women's careers in performance art was provocative and incredibly influential, so there were many pieces for me to choose from. However, *We Keep Our Victims Ready* and *Interior Scroll* dealt with themes and ideas that I was also going to be tackling within the context of the show.

In the *Interior Scroll* performance, Schneemann stood naked in front of the audience with a few distinct lines drawn on her body, which made her figure look stylistically like a pop-art figure. She then began to pull out a scroll from her vagina and read the text aloud, which was text that was taken from the artists' Super-8 film called "Kitch's Last Meal" ("Carolee Schneemann Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works"). With this piece, Schneemann was interested in demonstrating "the invisible, marginalized, and deeply suppressed history of the vulva, the powerful source of orgasmic pleasure, of birth, of transformation, of menstruation" ("Carolee Schneemann Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works"). While this piece has very little to do with directly talking about menstruation, what intrigued me the most about it was the plethora of potential possibilities it created for my own show.

The thing that interested me the most about Schneemann's piece was the image of a scroll unraveling from a vagina, and how it reminded me of the image of a used tampon being pulled out of a vulva, hence the connection to menstruation. While it may be wasn't the original intention of Schneemann to have that image popping up into people's minds, it was an image that I was going to take a lot of inspiration from. Of course, there are a lot of performance art pieces out there that deal more directly with the theme and images of menstruation and period blood, but for some reason I kept coming back to

Schneemann's performance, probably because the menstruation images that Schneemann's performance produced was something that may have accidentally happened and not something that was sought after by the artist.

As someone who's had their period since the age of twelve, dealing with period products in public is like a top-secret mission that you are tasked with making sure nobody else knows about. If there's any actual logical reasoning behind why people get so uncomfortable around these menstrual products I would like to be the first to know, because myself and many other people who experience periods have spent a large portion of our lives making their comfort our number one-priority by trying to make sure nobody sees or hears anything akin to a period product outside the safety of the bathroom. That is why I wanted to create a performance art piece for my own show that delved into this idea of how we have stigmatized people who have periods.

With this idea in mind, I set out to create something that would hopefully be both comedically inviting and slightly jarring for an audience to witness, which turned my sights towards ketchup. Thanks to Finley, I was now consumed with potential uses of food in my show and how I could make them something different than what they were intended to be used for. And what could possibly be a better food product to use to recreate period blood besides ketchup.

Now that I had what my period blood substance was going to be, I had to seriously start thinking about the technical aspect of using it within my show. What I wanted to do was to smear a bunch of ketchup on to a period pad, and to then wear it for the rest of the show, as a constant reminder of what some people deal with on a monthly basis. One of the effects I was going for was a grotesque dramatization of what an actual used pad looks like, without the potential safety issues of having a used pad on stage (I am trying to perform this on campus, after all). But before I could go through with this idea, I had a couple of safety questions I needed to answer first.

The first and largest obstacle was tackling the very real possibility of having a bunch of acidic ketchup near my (vulnerable) lady bits. Even though I want to have as much fun with this show as possible, I would love it if I could graduate without seriously injuring myself in the process, so I needed to do some research on the dangers of ketchup interacting with the pH system of a vagina. The short and quick answer is that it was a very bad idea. However, I am a creative arts student, so this didn't pose a massive issue for me. Instead of me wearing the ketchup pad (in the way that pads are meant to be worn) for the rest of the show, I landed on two potential ideas. The first one was to have the underwear that I would attach the ketchup pad around my knees, and to essentially walk bow-legged for the rest of the show which would allow the

audience to still see the ketchup-soaked pad. This would give a similar effect that I wanted to achieve visually without all the potential physical harm. The second idea was to use one of the tall blocks that we have in Rice Auditorium and to keep it on the block for the rest of the performance. This idea was attractive because it meant that I wouldn't need to even touch the ketchup-soaked pad in the first place. However, this didn't quite lend the same visual image that I wanted to achieve from the beginning, which is the idea of people who have periods wearing these feminine product monstrosities in the first place. So, I decided to go with option number one.

Another obstacle of using ketchup as product during the show is the clean-up factor after everything is said and done. Currently, I'm set to perform in the Rice Auditorium Black Box as a 5 o'clock Shadow piece. This means that there are some rules and guidelines that I need to adhere to, the largest being the time constraint. Starting at 5:00, I have an hour and a half to set-up, perform, take down, and be out of the building by 6:30. So, if I was going to do the kamikaze, getting ketchup everywhere, type of aesthetic I wanted to go for, I was going to need to set up some serious plastic tarps on the ground that would (hopefully) make the cleanup process go by smoothly.

Each one of the women that I've talked about has greatly influenced this show in ways I could have never expected, and not just with their performance

art pieces. Karen Finley, yes with the chocolate, but also with all her ferociousness and refusing to be anything other than herself. Carolee Schneemann gave me the courage of opening myself up and talking about my period to a room full of potential strangers. This is all thanks to her bold acceptance and empowerment of women, and her willingness to reflect that within herself and her art. And of course, Stephanie Morin-Roberts, who, with her performance of *Blindside* at Western Oregon University, almost single-handedly inspired me to do my own one-woman show. Because when one gets the privilege to watch an artist who can take a six hundred and above seat house and make it feel like she's talking intimately at a coffee shop, you tend to get inspired to make your own art, too.

The reason I talk about these women is because my show is just going to be a little ripple in a vast ocean of artists who have come before me. And every artist has tackled this subject in their own way and put their own spin on it. This thesis is just going to be a small droplet of water in a sea of ideas, but it feels good knowing I'll be among some pretty good company.

## **SHAME**

I've mentioned shame before, but now it's time to get to the real heart of why I'm doing this show. Shame is everywhere in our society. The topic of shame



is too extensive for one person to tackle in a lifetime, let alone in a one-woman show, which is why I narrowed it down through the lens of bodily functions.

One of the most unique things about shame is that it's not an emotion, but rather a concept or an idea that has been placed in our minds. Shame is never inherent in us when we're born, but it is something that we learn. In addition, shame cannot survive with only one person, it needs a group of people in order to manifest. If someone were to live in complete isolation, there wouldn't be anyone around to judge their actions. Loosely what I've found is that shame is the result of somebody acting outside of the "societal norm", and others being around to witness and comment on the event. However, this is of course simply what I've noticed, and not necessarily coming from an expert source.

I'm not writing this thesis to try and get you to change your opinion on shame, if you even had one. I'm also not going to deny that there are certain benefits of using shame as a tool. When I was younger, around the age of two-five, I had zero shame which meant that I streaked often. If my sister and I were on our way to a friend's house, my mother and I would initiate a bidding war. Oftentimes she would bribe me with the potential of ice cream so long as I kept an article of clothing covering my body, and I would usually acquiesce. For children, this behavior is their "societal norm", but that changes as we get older. We eventually learn that what once was acceptable when we were kids is no

longer accepted now, and shame is typically the hand guiding us through that transformation. In certain ways, shame is beneficial. However, there are substantial examples of shame being used to the detriment of specific groups of people, typically used to keep the hegemonic in power.

One such example is how we treat people who are menstruating. As I discussed earlier, oftentimes pulling out a tampon or pad in the middle of a packed class – whether in elementary, middle, or high school – is social suicide. This is most likely because it's during this age when the pressure on children to start behaving like adults is the most adamant. And how does this society treat those who are on their periods? From experience I can tell you not well. This shame revolving periods starts with simple phrases such as “don't tell your father, he doesn't need to know” and “they're hormonal because they have their period”. One of the biggest problems I faced for this thesis was how to start reducing this shame induced by our society, and the answer became quite simple once I started looking at the root of where shame comes: a lack of communication.

Congratulations! If you've made it past the last paragraph – menstruation, woof am I right? – then it probably means you're the target audience for my show. Now that I had diagnosed what the core of where shame comes from when it deals with bodily functions, I had to come up with a way of beginning to

break that shame down. And what better way than to share my own horrific poop and period stories from my childhood in a comedic way. Again, comedy helps to break down even the toughest pill to swallow, and it does this by getting people comfortable to the idea of being vulnerable. Some of the most tragic plots in the history of theatre come from comedies (*Much Ado About Nothing* for example), and it's because the two are intrinsically linked, and my own personal examples fill the criteria that I had set out to achieve.

At the time of each event, it felt as if my life was ending. It wasn't of course, but that feeling of intense embarrassment and degradation is why I find these stories so hilarious now. Without revealing too much of the script, the "hard poop" story was somewhat private, but I needed my mother's help to get out of that situation. The "soft poop" story was perpetrated by my own actions and was more public because I was with my dad, his friend, and his friend's younger daughter, both of whom were essentially strangers for me. The last story that I tell has to do with the first time I got my period, which is the most public story. This event happened over the course of a day at school where I was surrounded by my peers and teachers. Armed with these stories, I propose to unpack and break down the shame that surrounds the bathroom, while also giving the audience a good laugh.

**[The text of the performance has been deleted at the author's request]**

## **PRE-PERFORMANCE CONCLUSION**

Hopefully when all is said and done, the audience walks away from the performance knowing that it's okay to talk about what happens behind the secrecy of the bathroom door. I've certainly gotten much more comfortable talking about this subject since working on this thesis. I actively talk very openly about my bodily functions with people, and I wish the same level of comfortability for the people who come and see the performance.

Ultimately, there's no real way I can track whether the goal I've set out to complete with this show ever actually gets realized. I can track it during the show by asking for audience participation, raising of the hands, etc., but once they leave the space it's out of my control. All I can do is to give them my best open and honest self during the show, a couple of interesting bodily function stories, and send them on their way.

Hopefully this comfort will be contagious and will encourage other people to start unpacking their own “shameful” bodily function story. Because let’s face it, everybody has one. If anything, the shame that people produce and drop on others when it comes to the topic of bodily functions is self-produced, and until everyone feels comfortable with what their body does naturally this shame will continue. Everyone, whether they want to realize it or not, has perpetuated shame at some point in their life. And it’s almost never vocal. It can be as simple as the way your head tilted at the mention of something that’s been deemed “unsavory” by the hegemony, or the way your lips pursed at something you didn’t like. It can even be demonstrated when someone has the best of intentions in a situation, which is something I learned a long time ago.

There’s never going to be a “right” answer when it comes down to dealing with shame, especially in a society where it’s incredibly prevalent in everyday life. All we can do, as humans on this Earth, is to strive to treat ourselves and others kindly. It’s okay to be nicer to yourself. I promise you your body isn’t this horrible monster that was created to plague you for the rest of your existence. In fact, your body is probably just doing what it’s supposed to do.

And that, in all its gross oddities, is beautiful.

## AFTER-EFFECTS: DID EVERYTHING GO AS PLANNED?

This thesis, as many theses are, was a labor of love. In the end, *Shit Show* wasn't just my own creation, but a collaboration by anyone who ever encountered the show. It takes a village, and in this case, it took the village two years to complete this chapter. Yet, I have a small inkling in the back of my mind that this isn't the end for the little show that could. Not in the slightest. Then, when I went to take a shower after it was all said and done, I may or may not have had ketchup in places where ketchup should never be.

However, if you were to ask me: "Was it worth it?"

I'd say: "Yes. Yes, and I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat."



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This is the piece that started it all for me. After having watched Morin-Robert's one-woman show "Blindside" in Fall Term 2017 I knew that I wanted to do something similar for my thesis. I can't express how much this show has impacted me and if I could get my show anywhere close to Morin-Robert's production I would be incredibly satisfied. The way she was able to tell her story and keep it interesting and relevant for the audience is one of the main things that I would want to emulate in my show. I don't want my production to end up being all about me and only me, I want to take the audience on a journey that will hopefully make them more accepting of the topics I will be talking about.

This is the largest source of inspiration for me and this entire project and will be my main guidepost in determining how and in what format I want this show to end up being in. Morin-Robert's did such a beautiful job at being able to break up her dialogue with a dance interlude and that is what I'm going to be modelling my performance art pieces off in my production. There's so much from this show that laid the groundwork down for my own. I will be specifically using the type of dialogue that Morin-Robert's used which is first-person narrative. A story becomes much more vivid, realistic, and present when being told in first-person so this is how I will specifically be modelling my own dialogue after Morin-Robert's. Obviously, the subject matter of the dialogue will be changed, but the ultimate format will be pretty much the same.

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In terms of performance art stardom Karen Finley is sitting at the top of the list for me. While Stephanie Morin-Roberts is my biggest inspiration for how I'll be getting my main message across to the audience, Finley is my biggest inspiration in how I'll be visually doing my performance art. I've been playing around with this idea of using chocolate as a substitute for using actual feces in my performance, and Finley is the one person I must thank for that. Not only is she very influential for what I want my performance art pieces to be like during this play, but she's incredibly inspirational in what happened to her and the other members of the NEA 4. This article is a response from Finley herself addressing the issues and censorship that herself and three other people went through, as well as a direct response to Robert Novak publicly slandering her and her work.

I will be recreating something like her *Chocolate-Smeared Young Woman* piece but other than using the same medium of chocolate, I believe my performance art piece will be very different than hers. Even if I don't end up using chocolate (there's a plethora of reasons why I'm leaning against it such as cleanup after the performance) Finley and her work was incredibly personal and political, something I know my piece will end up being. In all her performances Finley played around with the use of her voice as well, which she mentions in the article, and so during my performance art pieces I might try to embody some of her vocal patterns too.

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The Guerilla Girls are an excellent inspirational source for me to draw from. Not only have they been drawing attention to some of the same themes I would want to explore in my show, but they're completely anonymous and have been around for a couple of decades.

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15. Jones, Jonathan. "Blood, Semen and Tears: Why Artists Are Obsessed with Using Their Bodily Fluids." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 14 May 2014, [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/may/14/lood-semen-tears-artists-bodily-fluids-rose-lynn-fisher](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/may/14/lood-semen-tears-artists-bodily-fluids-rose-lynn-fisher).
16. Keidan, Lois. "Study Room Guides." *Live Art Development Agency*. Live Art Development Agency, 2013. Web.
17. Sider, Sandra. "WOMANHOUSE: Cradle of Feminist Art by Sandra Sider." *WOMANHOUSE: Cradle of Feminist Art by Sandra Sider*. Art Spaces Archives Project, 05 Aug. 2010. Web.

This is a great analysis of the exhibit *Womanhouse* by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro who are two of the biggest inspirations for the performance art I will be incorporating into my one woman show. The detail that Sider goes through was very helpful in helping me to narrow what topics I wanted to explore.

18. Sinclair, Leah. "The History of Bodily Fluids in Feminist Art." *Broadly*. N.p., 06 Oct. 2015. Web.

My one-woman show will be exploring bodily functions, and this article that Sinclair compiled of some of the most famous and impactful art pieces involving bodily fluids was very helpful in its creation. By looking through the pieces in the article and then reading Sinclair's commentary I was able to narrow down what kind of bodily fluid I would be talking about and in what ways I could talk about them.

19. Warr, Tracey. "The Informe Body." *Brookes*, [people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/1no1/TRACEywarr.html](http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/1no1/TRACEywarr.html).
20. *Womanhouse*. Dir. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. 533 N. Mariposa Street, Los Angeles. Performance.

Chicago and Schapiro were the first artists to unashamedly explore the hidden topic of periods and to put it into the public eye through such a groundbreaking exhibit. While my one-woman show will be very different from their art exhibit, I will be following in their footsteps in exploring the shame that comes with having a period and the societal expectations that follow.