

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Aaron Disbrow

Princess McNugget

by Whitney Weinstein

If you like the show [Toddlers & Tiaras](#) and are nostalgic for the '90s, then Close Your Legs, Honey (CYLH) is the perfect show to start your Fringe adventures. With scripts-in-hand, the group had only begun rehearsing this all-new performance when I attended a rehearsal, but it was clear that this show would be laugh-out-loud hilarious with an abundance of rock 'n' roll energy. "Can you do any tongue tricks?," Shamus Hunter McCarty asked a cast member, between lyrics about oxycodone and farts. I spoke with co-creators McCarty and Hannah Parke, along with choreographer Dana Kreitz, to get the scoop on this "high-glitzy" production, as McCarty would say.

Whitney Weinstein: How did CYLH come into existence?

Hannah Parke: It started out as a one-woman, backyard-barbecue sort of show called *Puberty Pool Party* over a year and a half ago. Then Shamus popped on because of common experiences around eating disorders. From there it morphed into a play about restricted eating and body shaming.

Shamus Hunter McCarty: It became a play with rhythmic routines such as cheers and chants. Matthew Mastronardi came on to add music and pointed out that it had become a musical, so we added Barrymore-nominated Damien Figures as our music director. He filled in instrumental parts and orchestrations.

WW: What's the plot line?

SHM : Welcome to the 1996 Little Miss Cutie Pie Pageant. The plot is the pageant, going from the beginning to the crowning. Honey is our title character, ready to win, supported by her foul-mouthed mama. But everything goes wrong, from creepy judges to costume

malfunctions.

HP: Set in the South, it's about how a young girl goes from childhood to womanhood but doesn't necessarily know what's happening. Mama is trying to keep Honey a perfect little girl, because that's what the judges want. But Honey starts developing physically, which is going to be held against her and she doesn't understand it.

WW: Tell us more about Honey's mother.

HP: She's a washed-up beauty queen from trailers, not money, dragging her daughter to live out her legacy.

SHM: The moral for me is about doing the best for your kids with what you have, passing on your skills to your next generation. Pageant skills are all her mom ever had and that's what she wants to push onto Honey. Because of the [camp](#) form we're taking, she's portrayed as a neglectful, abusive parent.

HP: Everyone knows *that* kind of mom, but she's doing it for the right reasons, in the name of love.

SHM: All our characters are over-the-top. It's supposed to be humorous. The characters we had for a long time were negative personifications of anorexia, but then we split Honey's character into real people, which are the other beauty contestants. We kept an imaginary-friend role of Dolly Parton, which speaks to her mother's idea of what beauty is.

HP: You see things through two specific lenses. Mama is giving Honey "Hee Haw Juice"—cough syrup and caffeine—so Honey is going through these drunken phases where we see what she *really* wants. We see both reality and fantasy and they all start to blend.

WW: During the rehearsal, I heard someone say that the movement should never be sexy. Why?

Dana Kreitz: These are children who are forced into a situation where they're expected to present in certain ways and behave like adults, but they're just kids.

HP: Parents are forcing them to do things, like being judged on cuteness, and they have no idea what they're *actually* doing.

SHM: The question to ask is, "Whose confidence is actually being built, the mother's or the kid's?"

WW: How did you find inspiration for the movement in this original production?

DK: It's difficult for a new musical. Initially I had to work off basic piano tracks and old lyrics. When I choreograph, I usually explore movements that fit the music, but I had very little sense of musical elements like tempos, which made it difficult to internalize. As we got orchestrations, I was able to fine-tune and make changes. Once we have a stumble-through with all the big chunks of choreography, we can fill in transitions and clean. Half of this play is basic childish movement, and the other half is highly stylized. It didn't need to be complicated movement, but trying to keep it varied is a challenge.

SHM: It's also tricky because in the low-budget pageant world, the music becomes purposefully repetitive, like being stuck in a recital of four-year-olds. We're finding movements that have charm and wit within that.

WW: Are we rooting for Honey to win?

SHM: We lean into '90s sensibility: underdog stories about young teens, the Hollywood expectation of watching a little girl discover herself and win the pageant. It's about self-realization, but also with an element of rejection.

DK: I want her to win, because of the story structure, but more for her to break out of a sad life situation.

SHM: Maybe for Honey, winning at life isn't winning the pageant. All she wants is a hug from her mother and Chicken McNuggets.

WW: What's next for CYLH and how can your fans support you?

SHM: We have an out-of-state tour in April 2019 and are submitting to festivals, hoping to continue growing it from here. Right now we have a [GoFundMe](#) page and [tickets](#) for our fundraiser are on sale.

WW: Why should Fringe-goers come to your show?

HP: The show talks about a time in a female's life that has happened for every generation of women and will continue to happen. Female puberty is a terrifying experience that's ignored, but it's universal.

DK: It's funny and fun to watch a story of young female empowerment. And I choreographed it. Star power!

SHM: Fringe is the time to experiment and we have assembled some of the next generation of major Philadelphia artists to create something original, showcasing shared skills that people might not know we have. There's nothing in Fringe like this.

Hannah Parke and Shamus Hunter McCarty, [Close Your Legs, Honey: A New Musical](#), Adrienne Theater, September 5-8, 14-15, 22.

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September 9, 2018