

**Program Notes: Life in Plastic**

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Research Week

Performing Art Presentation

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**Program Notes**

This program addresses the issue of plastic surgery through four woven poems. In the piece, there are two distinct characters: Pretty Bird, who characterizes Barbie, and Barbara. Barbara, the narrator, represents who Barbie was before surgery. She depicts an average girl who slowly morphs into her Barbie idol. Throughout the program, the audience follows Barbara as she grows up in an image-conscience world starting from age seven. Pretty Bird (Barbie) is a pristine character who finds her identity in her outward beauty. However, the program eventually shows Pretty Bird's brokenness hidden behind the perfect face. Overall, this performance hopes to prove that a simple piece of woven poetry can bring awareness to this issue and foster more inclusive and authentic representations of beauty.

### **Oral Performance Overview**

This performance is a poetry interpretation. Poetry interpretation uses multiple pieces of poetry centered around a theme. In college speech competitions a little black binder is required to hold the manuscript (Alderdice, 2014). In poetry, the binder should be used as a prop to extend the performance. An introduction is necessary after a brief teaser. The introduction explains the theme and cites the authors. A single program lasts about ten minutes.

### **Prior Research Informing the Performance**

According to the Journal of Clinical and Aesthetic Dermatology, 370,000 teenagers underwent cosmetic surgeries within the year alone, and this number continues to rise (Amiri et al., 2021). This study contributes to the significance of the topic. Perhaps it is because, as the Journal of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery identified, girls typically believe their mental health disorders would heal if they could change something about their physical appearance. However, this study found that mental health problems worsen after cosmetic surgeries (Mehrzhad et al., 2021). To fill a void, girls spend a ridiculous amount of money to look like Barbie (Wen et al., 2017). Surprisingly, these cosmetic surgeries only make the void deeper and

darker. Pixie Fox, a glamour model, has had over 100 surgeries to look like a real-life Barbie. She had six ribs removed, eye implants, face alterations, and Pixie plans on having even more surgeries (The Sun, 2016). This research prompts the question: How does the image of Barbie contribute to the normalization and acceptance of plastic surgery for young girls, and how can this phenomenon be portrayed in narrative poetry? From this research question, different poems were chosen and woven together to reflect the Barbie worshipping culture.

### **How the Performance Contributes to the Discipline**

In the discipline of cosmetic surgery, this poem can provide an important perspective on the harm caused by the promotion of plastic surgery. It can raise awareness about the negative consequences of conforming to these beauty standards, and the importance of valuing inner beauty. Additionally, this woven poetry piece can offer a nuanced and powerful means of communicating these ideas to a broader audience. The poem's use of symbolism, characterization, imagery, and narrative techniques can serve as a model for other performers exploring this theme, and it can inspire further creativity in this discipline. Additionally, it can encourage a deeper engagement with questions of identity and value.

### **Reasons for Choosing Various Poems**

The first poem is titled "Song of the pretty Bird" by Shay Alexi Stewart in 2016. This is a powerful poem that explores themes of restriction, identity, and pressure to conform to the societal norms of beauty. The poem uses the image of a pretty bird as a metaphor to suggest that the beauty industry can be harmful and limiting. Just like Barbie is known for her blonde hair and shiny smile, Pretty Bird is known for her long, clean coat and pretty, pink legs (Stewart, 2016). This is why the performer embodies the Barbie persona in this poem. Pretty Bird has ridged movements, a forced smile, and a robotic voice which symbolizes the unnatural qualities of Barbie.

“What Guys Look for in Girls” is a poem written by Savannah Brown in 2015, and it contributes to Barbara’s narrative. The interpreter uses this poem to depict a little girl who is corrupted by beauty standards. Barbara starts off innocent and oblivious. At seven-years-old she just wants to be pretty like her Barbie dolls. At thirteen she continues to idolize Barbie, and she straightens her hair to fit in with her volleyball friends. The story starts to get emotional at sixteen-years-old. Barbara feels the pain of not being pretty enough for the boys at her school. At eighteen-years-old, Barbara turns to plastic surgery, and she starts to morph into the Barbie persona (Brown, 2015). The performer will act out each stage of life.

“Barbie Girl” by Jack of Spades is a 2015 poem that presents the falling action of the performance. Barbara quickly realizes that her life is fantastic because it is not plastic. She does not want to be like Pretty Bird (aka Barbie). This poem is a call to action for the audience. It portrays righteous indignation for society’s unrealistic perception of beauty (Jack of Spades, 2015). This poem is pleading to the audience. There is desperation and conviction in the performer’s voice.

The final poem is titled “Pretty” by Katie Makkai in 2002. This poem concludes the program by targeting future generations. In this piece of poetry, Barbara acknowledges that one day she might have a daughter of her own. She does not want her daughter to endure the same cycle she had to face. Barbara decides to end the generational trauma of idolizing Barbie (Makkai, 2002). The performer will speak with soft compassion when communicating with her future daughter. This poem leaves the audience with assurance and hopefully, a new perspective.

## **Script**

I've lived 30 pretty bird years  
Of this great big pretty bird life  
And I think I pretty bird pretty much know what I'm talking about  
Look at my long clean coat  
At my pretty pretty bird pretty pink legs  
When pigeon men track me cross sky highway  
  
They are happy to trace hungry orange eyes  
between my pretty pretty bird bird feathers  
To busy fantasizing pretty bird  
to poke fun at permanently preening pretty bird

Life in plastic so fantastic

We live in a world where the media  
pulls us out, nurses us and teaches us our first words  
skinny pretty skinny pretty  
girl: soft quiet pretty  
boy: manly muscles pretty

Well somewhere along the line of aging and scrutiny and time  
I was taught to despise myself  
but i kept myself beautiful so someone would love me someday  
so i could belong to someone someday  
because that's the most important thing a little girl could ever want right?

I have only lived 7 pretty bird years

I want to be A blonde barbie-woman with a miniskirt name like sarahhhh or Jenniferrr

Instead, I was named a name that sounds like mouse brown hair -Barabara  
I want child-sized heels, lipstick, and to be mistaken for a nine year old

I want nothing more than to be beautiful,

I think barbie is the most beautiful human I have ever seen

Oh, barbie tell me

Is your life in plastic so fantastic?

Pigeon man wants pretty bird to be pretty bird

Until pretty bird fulfills ideas of prettiness

Then she's too paralyzed and preened

Look at my long clean coat

At my pretty pretty bird pretty pink legs

Barbie, I think you are the most beautiful human I have ever seen

I have only lived 13 pretty bird years

I spend half an hour before volleyball, every day, curling my hair

Once, I dropped my curling iron on my leg.

My thigh read Revlon for a week.

At least my hair was curly for volleyball practice

Oh Barbie tell me is it true that pain is beauty?

I grew up on a diet of breadcrumbs catalog clippings and sidewalk cracks

Pretty sure i know what im talking about

Pretty sure

pretty sure

Maybe not

Sorry sorry sorry sorry

Barbie, can i ask a question

Sorry look at my sorry look at

Look at my long clean coat  
At my pretty pretty barbie pretty pink legs

I have only lived 16 pretty bird years

It's such a waste I grew into my mother's face crooked nose and pox-marked where the hormones went finger-painting.,

“Don't worry. We'll get it all fixed!” She would say, grasping my face,  
Twisting it this way and that, as if it were a cabbage she might buy.

I'm pickled with ointments, medications, peroxides

Hair bleached, neck aching from the uncomfortable hair rollers I slept in last night looking like  
George Washington

I do pray to something that I Could look beautiful enough today  
for the ruthless boy who told me I wasn't worth loving because I didn't meet his attraction  
standard

and I would go home and put on a sweatshirt with my eyes closed  
denying myself the right to be shown myself

because I didn't dare insinuate beauty in regards to something so insulting as my body

Oh, Barbie tell me, how do you afford your surgery?

Do you promise he'll stay forever if your face stays together?

Look at my long clean coat  
At my pretty pretty bird pretty pink legs  
Take a picture I beg you  
Take a picture pretty bird pretty bird  
My left side is my best side  
I have a best side  
I have a better half  
I am, I am a half

When I had only lived 18 pretty bird years

I laid in a hospital bed, face packed with gauze, cushioning the brand new nose the surgeon had carved.

Belly gorged on 2 pints of my blood I had swallowed under anesthesia,  
And every convulsive twist of my gut like my body screaming at me from the inside out,  
“What did you let them do to you!”

All the while this never-ending chorus droning on and on, like the IV needle dripping liquid beauty into my blood.

“Will I be pretty? Will I be pretty? Will I be Pretty

Pretty enough for my friends to like me, pretty enough to get hired for that job, pretty enough for my boyfriend to stay, enough so that his eyes don’t wander in another direction.

echoic accusations of not good enough never good enough

All I’ve ever wanted to be is enough

Life in plastic so fantastic

Oh Barbie tell me, have you ever felt so numb that it hurts?

Baby bird used to sing

And baby bird could compose whole symphonies

But the reviews came in

And they preferred apology

So she shrank

learned to make herself small enough

to nearly fit back in her eggshell

but they caged her up

for her pretty pretty bird long clean coat

and they said sing pretty barbie sing

but I forgot how



so I said  
pretty pretty bird bird look at my long clean coat

at my pretty pretty bird pretty pink legs  
but they were bored of me

They condemn mediocrity  
But how does one achieve complexity when all she was ever taught to be was basic

I've realized...

Life's fantastic, because I'm **not** plastic.

I've sat here listening to complaints about society but I don't think we realize that society is  
made by us.

We complain about masks, but we're masked by our poetry and trust me, it's trendy:

But words are just air.

I can stand on this stage and tell you you're beautiful, but this isn't a call for help.

This is a call to arm yourself.

This is a battle cry because I am sick of waiting for a future that should've happened yesterday.

Now, I have not seen my own face in 10 years.

I have not seen my own face in 10 years, but this is not about me.

This, this is about my own some-day daughter.

When you approach me, already stung-stayed with insecurity, begging,

“Mom, will I be pretty? Will I be pretty?”

I will wipe that question from your mouth like cheap lipstick and answer,

“No! The word pretty is unworthy of everything you will be, and no child of mine will be  
contained in five letters.”

“You will be pretty intelligent, pretty creative, pretty amazing.

But you, will never be merely 'pretty'.”

## Performance Preview

<https://youtu.be/8wPvzY6m2ts>



## References

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