

January 29, 2007

Ms. Dale Hall
Human Rights Advisor
George Brown College
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Dear Ms. Hall:

As a recent graduate of the George Brown Theatre School, I am pleased to say that my three years of training have afforded me an excellent set of skills for the beginnings of my professional acting career. I count myself extremely fortunate to have learned alongside many truly wonderful and remarkably talented classmates. Through the course of our program we were lucky to study under the guidance of some of this nation's top actors and most gifted instructors; I cannot possibly enumerate their contributions to my personal development as an actor or that of my colleagues.

There are, however, some serious deficiencies in our system and I wish to address them here.

From the very first orientation session, students are warned that the life of an actor is an extremely difficult row to hoe and are jokingly cautioned to "get out while they still can." No one can dispute this and the advice is apt. At the same time, however, misinformation is disseminated, misleading claims are made and some vitally important information is omitted throughout the application process. I think it is absolutely crucial that prospective students be made aware that the George Brown Theatre School routinely posts a graduation rate that generally hovers between 40 and 50%. Compared to most post-secondary programs this is alarmingly low and it is not a figure to be proud of. This abysmally poor performance is the result of what I firmly believe to be an unfair, inhumane and unwarranted system of expulsion (roughly the academic equivalent of a Stalinist purge happening every four months) combined with high rates of alienation and dissatisfaction in the student body leading to high rates of attrition. If the George Brown Theatre School wishes to have any honesty in its recruitment process it will make prospective students explicitly aware of its meager graduation rates and the reasons behind them. If the George Brown Theatre School wishes to have any honesty in its educational process, it will make a commitment to its current students to do everything in its power to guide them through to a successful graduation. This should not be a revolutionary concept.

I will confine myself to two other bits of misinformation in the recruitment process that I find particularly striking. Prospective students are often told that, “90% of George Brown grads work.” This is a very problematic and misleading statement. The 90% figure certainly cannot refer to regular employment as a performer (even if by “regular” one means employment for six months out of every year) because such a figure would be completely unsubstantiated by any statistical evidence, apart from being obviously fantastical. Moreover, one desperately hopes that it is not a figure for general employment given that the total *unemployment* rate for Ontario usually varies between 5 and 9%, meaning that at any one time the total number of employed Ontarians is between 91 and 95%. This would suggest that George Brown Theatre School is actually detrimental to one’s employability. A quick glance at George Brown College’s annual Graduate Employment Reports for the years 2000 to 2005 shows that there is simply insufficient data to draw any meaningful conclusions about the employability of theatre school graduates. The number of graduates surveyed is miniscule and the number of graduates who report employment in a related field varies from 16 to 83%: the higher figure in this case representing only five students.

The final bit of misinformation that I find particularly deceitful is Christopher Newton’s by now very familiar quotation which goes: “Of the younger actors at the Shaw [Festival], by far the greatest numbers now come from George Brown.” This old pony of a saying is trotted out at many a publicity event and published on nearly every bit of promotional material coming out of the Theatre School. I believe Mr. Newton’s intentions were completely honest and it was wonderful of him to be so laudatory. A quick glance at any season’s ensemble at the Shaw, however, quickly reveals a general paucity of young actors of which rarely more than two and certainly never more than four are George Brown alumni. Of the hundreds of actors who have passed through the George Brown Theatre School, the number who have achieved the moniker of “Prominent Graduate” and are listed as having at any time been employed by the Shaw Festival, is exactly eight.

Another quick glance at any season’s ensemble at the Shaw, or at Stratford or at many theatres across this country will also reveal an absolute dearth of visible minorities and a complete absence of people with disabilities. Prospective students must be informed of this: it is an enormous problem and an enormous obstacle to employment for any actor who is not both white and able-bodied. It also demonstrates the sad reality that **despite inheriting a long tradition of cultural innovation, social acceptance, and compassionate universality, many juggernauts and juniors alike of the Canadian theatre industry, amid much pretension to the contrary, remain in both substance and in product a bastion for retrogressive, neoconservativist values.** This is a problem that desperately needs to be examined and addressed at the training level. I think no one in my class will ever forget our 2003 excursion to the Shaw festival during which the current artistic director, in response to a question regarding the underrepresentation of visible minorities in Canadian theatre declared that she saw little reason to include such people on stage as such people are not generally given to attending the theatre. Nor will any of us forget when, a year later, one guest, widely considered to be one of Toronto’s top talent agents and a member of the George Brown Theatre School’s very own advisory committee no less, when asked the very same question in our second year Business of Acting course, declared: **“I just think it looks so stupid when they stick those people into period pieces.”**

A theatre school is a very unique educational environment with a very discrete and specific set of peculiarities and challenges: George Brown is no exception. Few post-secondary programs demand as many in-class hours as a theatre school (often around 70 hours a week over 6 days); few are predicated on the formation of small, insular, and tightly knit communities of students; and few rely on evaluative feedback of such a highly subjective nature delivered in such a continuous and public manner.

For many students, theatre school can become an extremely intimidating, even a threatening, environment. Very few enter the school accustomed to having their own voices, their own bodies, and their own interaction with others held under a microscope around the eyepiece of which thirty strangers are gathered. Luckily, most students adapt to this strange process over time and their ability to give and receive oral criticism improves. One thing, however, remains fundamentally crucial from the first day to the last of the program: **the formation and maintenance of a trusting and respectful environment**. Without this, a student's ability to take artistic risks and to improve his or her craft are utterly debilitated. No substantial progress can be reasonably expected or made.

Again, I feel that I was considerably fortunate to work with faculty members, part-time instructors and guest artists who prized and fostered an atmosphere of trust in which everyone felt worthy, valued, and able to make bold choices knowing that a misstep would be courteously adjusted and that his or her courage to risk failure would be praised. In such an environment imagination flourishes, understanding deepens and community strengthens. This climate of trust relies heavily on the magnanimity of the students, but it is fully contingent upon the intelligent, professional, and mature leadership of the instructor. The majority of instructors at the George Brown Theatre School, I am pleased to say, are rife with such qualities.

Their efforts, however, in an institution where volatility and vulnerability are so prominent can be so easily undermined. Instructors at the George Brown Theatre School find themselves every day in a position of enormous power over the psychological and emotional health of dozens of students and the susceptibility of this power to corruption is very real and very palpable. I have wrestled with this idea for three and a half years now and my painful conclusion is this: **at any given time there is a small minority of instructors at the George Brown Theatre School whose tone, words and actions indicate a deliberate attempt to undermine the self-esteem and general well being of its students, thereby creating a poisoned environment in which learning is impossible**.

I have witnessed the deleterious effects of this questionable ethos innumerable times throughout my three years at George Brown. Varying degrees of anxiety and paranoia were the most prevalent and persistent responses, in addition to depression; demoralization; drug and alcohol abuse; feelings of humiliation, low self-worth, jealousy and guilt; body dysmorphia; distractedness; as well as a general atmosphere of mistrust and misunderstanding. Most insidious is the distressingly common belief amongst students that they somehow deserve or are in need of hostile, vexatious and disparaging comments to keep them motivated or to further their progress. Such an attitude of compliance is, I believe, fundamentally flawed and serves only to permit the problem to worsen.

What I find exceptionally nefarious about this problem is the degree to which its existence is both acknowledged and tolerated (perhaps in some cases even encouraged) by the faculty and administration. Responses I have heard given by instructors on numerous occasions to distressed students looking for help are:

- “You’d better get used to it now, because it’s a lot worse out there.”
- “You’ve got to want this badly enough; don’t expect to be coddled.”
- “We didn’t come to you; you came to us.”
- “No one’s making you stay here; you can leave anytime.”

It is my firm belief that such excuses are as callow as they are unprofessional and betray a fundamental lack of concern for students’ well being. In the case of the first, **I am forever bewildered as to why an educational institutional, recognizing serious flaws in the industry for which it is preparing its students, would not only emulate but pander to those flaws rather than set and encourage a more dignified example for its pupils.** The basic legitimacy of the claim is suspect to begin with, given the clear anti-harassment policies of both the Canadian Actors’ Equity Association and the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists. The remaining three excuses speak enough on their own, needing no further comment here.

The words and actions of one ill-meaning instructor can quickly counteract the hard work, dedication and professionalism of the others. A student who finds him or herself the object of intimidation or snide, sarcastic remarks in the morning rarely regains full composure by the end of the school day. When he or she experiences such influences on a regular basis, the result is a rapid erosion of trust, a distaste for the school in general, and a quickly waning desire to learn. I have seen some of the finest, hardest working, most dedicated and courteous people I have ever had the pleasure to work with reduced to sullen, jealous, angry, unmotivated wretches as the result of an instructor’s unprofessional behaviour. **I have seen such behaviour range anywhere from juvenile petulance to, in the case of one guest director in my final year, vitriolic abuse.**

Tied to my concerns of protecting the psychological health of this group of students, I also have misgivings about the school’s more general public health policies, or lack thereof. Firstly, I wish to assert my disapproval of the Theatre School’s official, unofficial and pseudo-official policies regarding attendance. As early as the auditioning process for acceptance into the school, students are told that they must be present for all classes and that even illness itself does not constitute a valid excuse for absenteeism. In the case of illness, students are told that they may be excused from participating in exercises, but they are still required to attend all classes nonetheless. Clearly, this policy helps no one and, in a program where substantial physical touch is a matter of course, only guarantees the widespread transmission of colds and flu germs. Fortunately, some students catch on that the policy is complete bunk and totally unenforceable from a public health or human rights perspective and discover perhaps in their second or third year that absences can be excused with an accompanying doctor’s note. Nevertheless, most feel or are made to feel guilty for taking a day to recuperate. I myself once received written notice that an unexpected trip to the emergency department on my first day of second year was recorded as an “inexcused absence” and that the single class I had missed was “lost forever”.

The biggest and most pressing concern that I have for the health and safety of George Brown Theatre School students is the readiness with which some staff members, despite their complete and total lack of any relevant qualifications, not only dispense medical opinions, but in some cases actively discourage students from following the medical advice of their own physicians or other health care workers in favour of “alternative” therapies. I am personally a strong proponent of enhanced research into non-western approaches to health care, but **I utterly condemn the practice of any instructor with barely a smattering of scientific knowledge under his or her belt and the complete absence of any medical training whatsoever presuming to dissuade a student from the advice of a qualified health care provider.**

At the top of this letter I mentioned George Brown Theatre School’s cutting system and I wish to return to that point. Of all the deficiencies and misguided actions of the school, there is not one that creates as much damage and havoc every single day of the school year. There is not a single policy that runs so against the fundamental purposes of the school. It is often claimed that because of the continuous nature of the school’s evaluative feedback, every student who has his or her neck on the chopping block will know about it well in advance. This assertion must stop immediately because it is simply untrue. I have yet to see the student whose reaction to reading his or her own academic death warrant, after pouring thousands of hours and thousands of dollars into what he or she reasonably believes to be the best means to his or her most cherished dreams, was not one of devastation and humiliation. This amounts to an enormous betrayal of the trust between teacher and student, not only for the victims of this friendly game of Russian roulette, but just as much for those left standing when the smoke clears. **Where the school expects to create a trimmer, more streamlined, more dedicated class for the next term, it generates, in reality, a pervasive climate of paranoia, suspicion, jealousy and uncertainty.**

Imagine for a moment what effect such a system would have if applied to the college faculty itself. How would college employees behave knowing that every four months an untold number of them, for any number of arbitrary reasons, would be asked to clean out their desks and move on? Would their productivity increase? Possibly, for a short period, before crashing. Would they prize and admire their employers and feel proud to work under them? The fawning sycophants amongst them might. How could we possibly expect otherwise from this system when it is applied to students?

Expulsion is our most extreme form of academic punishment: in the workforce, its counterpart is termination; in the law courts, it is execution. Why then is the George Brown Theatre School consistently wielding the most punitive weapons at its disposal with such shameless flippancy? Is this a case of systemic *schadenfreude*? I would suggest then that the school adopt an appropriate Latin motto: “*Ira et lacrimae!*”: “Wrath and tears!” Does this system of mass expulsion not ultimately constitute a widespread admission of failure on the part of the instructors to teach students some basic fundamentals of acting technique? Is this a school built on passivity? If so, perhaps a much different motto would be more fitting: “*Nihil agere delectat*”: “It is pleasant to do nothing.” There are many questions surrounding this system which favours punishment over persistence, but perhaps the biggest one of all is: “*Cui bono?*”: “To whose profit?”

For these reasons above, I have prepared a list of recommendations for your assessment and consideration, arranged into five categories.

Admission and Graduation

I recommend:

- That transparency and honesty be pursued at all in times in the recruitment of prospective students.
- That graduation, expulsion and attrition rates be explicitly and voluntarily provided to prospective students at an early stage in the application process.
- That any claims of employability upon graduation made by the administration or faculty be accurate and verifiable.

Visible Minorities and People with Disabilities

I recommend:

- That prospective students who are members of a visible minority be made explicitly aware of the obstacles facing non-white actors in the Canadian performing arts community.
- That barriers (currently amounting to outright prohibitions) facing people with disabilities from participating in the Theatre Arts program at George Brown College and the Canadian theatre community in general be examined and vociferously combated.
- That the second-year Business of Acting course include an investigation and discussion of the enormous obstacles facing visible minorities and people with disabilities in the North American television, film and theatre traditions.

Intimidation, Coercion and Vexatious Comments

I recommend:

- That special attention be given to students and instructors of the George Brown Theatre School to ensure their familiarity with the rights and responsibilities detailed in the College's anti-harassment policies.
- That a formal and binding set of policies be developed by the George Brown Theatre School regarding the delivery of oral and written criticism in the classroom, rehearsal hall, end of term interviews and end of term reports to ensure that such criticism is both helpful and respectful.
- That the administration be forbidden to edit letter grades or comments in any way after their submission by instructors for end of term reports, except in such cases where letter grades may be deemed overly punitive, or comments may be deemed scurrilous or vexatious.
- That the second-year Business of Acting course include an investigation and discussion of the anti-harassment policies of Actors' Equity and ACTRA as well as strategies for dealing with harassment in the professional world.

- That the George Brown Theatre School strive to be a leader in the field of human rights in education by doffing once and for all the tired, uninspired, worm-eaten cliché of the abusive theatre instructor and create a reality of trust and respect that is finally commensurate with its own reputation.

Health and Welfare

I recommend:

- That the College's counselling staff be made aware of the unique and special challenges of student life at the Theatre School.
- That the possibility of hiring a part-time or full-time counsellor specially trained in the unique and special challenges facing young performing artists be strongly considered.
- That the George Brown Theatre School permit students free access to both the College's counselling services and to outside medical and mental health services without fear of reprisal for missed class time. So long as the theatre school operates on an all-day/all-evening basis, students must, by necessity, miss class time to attend to their physical and psychological health needs.
- That students explicitly be made aware of their right to miss class time on medical or compassionate grounds and that such admonishments by instructors as: "The only legitimate excuse for missing a class is if you are hospitalized or attending your own funeral," be discontinued and disallowed.
- That any member of the George Brown Theatre School staff, unless expressly hired for the purpose of doing so, be forbidden to dispense any medical advice or to utter any remarks pertaining to the validity or value of medical advice given by a qualified health care provider to any George Brown student, including such cases in which a staff member's advice is sought.

The Cutting System

I recommend:

- That the George Brown Theatre School immediately discontinue its oppressive and inhumane cutting system and consider the climate of abject fear and paranoia that it fosters.
- That the school, in lieu of its cutting system, enact an admission process whereby the number of incoming students in any one class is exactly equal to the intended number of graduating students in that class. If the school wishes to graduate only around 15 students per year (and it appears that it does) it should admit only around 15 students per year.
- That the use of expulsion, as it is used in virtually every other educational institution of any legitimacy, be reserved for cases of gross misconduct.
- That the school recognize that the admission of a student into its program is tantamount to a covenant which has as its primary aim the eventual graduation of that student and that this covenant must be entered into by both parties with the utmost seriousness and dedication.

The Canadian theatre community is very small and I have written this letter with its accompanying recommendations knowing full well it may amount to an act of infanticide upon my currently nascent acting career. I have intentionally eschewed the naming of names or the pointing of fingers because I am not motivated by any roiling grudge or personal vendetta. By any account, I enjoyed a very successful academic career at George Brown and am very pleased with the beginnings of my professional career. I also enjoyed the mutual respect of many instructors and I truly hope that such respect may continue in a spirit of renewed cooperation. My wish is only for it to be known that problems exist at the school, that their consequences are dire, and that solutions need to be sought. George Brown Theatre School is poised for some very great things, but if it does not strive to move beyond the hackneyed stereotype of education as confrontation (which a very long tradition of theatre pedagogy has bestowed upon it) it is most certainly destined for a very slow and very unremarkable end.

I thank you for your time and consideration and hope to hear your thoughts on these matters. I would also like to request the submission of this letter to George Brown's Diversity, Equity and Safety Committee. Please feel free to respond to the reply address at the top of this letter or by email at patrickcieslar@hotmail.com.

Yours sincerely,

Patrick Cieslar
Class of 2006

cc: Patrick Case, Director of the Human Rights and Equity Office at the University of Guelph
Fran Dungey, Director of the Faculty of Business and Creative Arts
Mark Grant, Manager of Counselling and Disability Services
Maureen Loweth, Dean of the Faculty of Business and Creative Arts
Anne Sado, President of George Brown College
James Simon, Coordinating Director of George Brown Theatre School