

A LEGACY OF TRAUMA

Reflections on Professional Misconduct at George Brown Theatre School

April 8, 2008

Excerpts Written by Former Students of GBTS

Compilation by Patrick Cieslar, GBTS Graduate 2006

PREAMBLE

The following is a collection of excerpts taken from emails written by former students of George Brown Theatre School in Toronto, describing instances of professional misconduct by faculty members and the personal impact of these experiences.

The majority of the source material for these excerpts is derived from emails received by Ms. Dale Hall (Human Rights Advisor of George Brown College) in the days leading up to her February 22nd, 2007 meeting with Mr. James Simon (Coordinating Director of George Brown Theatre School) and Ms. Fran Dungey (then Director of the Faculty of Business and Creative Arts).

These excerpts have been categorized into five areas of concern which together comprise the most frequently cited examples of professional misconduct at George Brown Theatre School:

- Systematic and Intentional Mark-Rigging
- Fostering a Constant Fear of Expulsion
- Thought Policing and the Repression of Critical Thinking
- Sexual Harassment
- Physical Assault
- Emotional, Psychological and Verbal Abuse
- A Legacy of Trauma

In some instances, these excerpts have been edited for one of three reasons: for syntactic clarity, to protect the identity of the authors, or (in the case of potential criminal allegations) to conceal the name(s) of the alleged perpetrator(s). Where such variations from the original text have been made, the changes have been marked with square brackets.

A small number of excerpts have been included which were taken from personal emails sent to Patrick Cieslar by former students (or parents of students) around the time of the February 22nd, 2007 meeting. These excerpts were not necessarily a part of the original letters sent to Ms. Hall's office, but have been included here for their relevance to the issues at hand.

The vast majority of excerpts, however, have been taken directly from letters received by Ms. Hall, which had been CC'd by the authors to Patrick Cieslar. For the sake of clarity, and with an eye to illustrating the inadequacy of the actions taken in response to the emails received by Ms. Hall, these excerpts have been marked here with asterisks.

At the time of this writing, none of the statements and reports included here has ever been followed-up or further investigated by George Brown College or the theatre school.

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SYSTEMATIC AND INTENTIONAL MARK-RIGGING

*“[T]hey have a policy of not giving high marks. It is a policy which even non-faculty teachers were forced to mark by. I have been told by at least two teachers who were hired for short term contracts that Mr. Simon asked them to lower my grades from A's to B's, in most cases, to C's.”

*“The faculty changed my marks to F's in all subjective courses (Acting, Voice, Period Study) without validity. They did this to offset all the A's I had in all ‘academic courses’ (Theatre History and Business of Acting). Two years after I left the program, one of the guest instructors of my year admitted that the faculty encouraged him to fail me, in order to make my GPA low enough so they could legitimately expel me from the program.”

*“By the end of my first year at George Brown I realized I would not be able to return for my second year because my scholarship had been revoked due to my low grades. I was the recipient of [a] scholarship for previous academic excellence and was no longer able to receive [it] because my grades were so low. I had no way to finance my second year. I went to Mr. Simon with my problem and he agreed to write a letter explaining that they have a system of intentionally giving low grades to their students. [...] He was admitting to doing something completely unethical. The reason for lower grades? They were concerned an A would be taken to mean we didn't have anything more to work on, that it would mislead students to think they didn't have to improve. A student who does the work and does it well, meeting all the requirements, deserves a mark which reflects that. We would put in every ounce of effort and be so terribly discouraged and confused by the grades. It was such a losing battle and only made us feel inferior and unskilled. What in the world gave them the idea they have the right to manipulate us through grades?”

“I believe other institutions would find this type of grading policy less than satisfactory, if not abusive. I would not expect any other institution to follow these practices.”

*“I was wondering if there was anything that could be done about the extremely low grades that the school gives to the students [...] I don't know if the school fully understands the ramifications of that act, but in many ways they are closing many doors for these students to get accepted into any other program or educational institution. So not only are these students being punished for not meeting the standards of the theatre school but many of them are unable to further their education in any other discipline because their transcripts are riddled with D's and F's which of course drops their GPA to not be considered for entrance to any program level. [...] [P]eople worked their asses off and in the end were sacrificed because they didn't quite make the aesthetic make up of what George Brown Theatre School wanted their final ensemble to be. In the end this leads people to great depression and sense of no self worth because they feel that they were doomed to even go for their dream and now are prohibited from striving for a new one.”

“First and foremost, the problem with this program is certainly [...] the grading policies and the lack of accuracy in their results. One would assume that investing your own person, your time and money into such a ‘prestigious’ program, that they would be gracious enough to share some detailed information as to where my marks were lost, obvious or not, and where some could have

been regained. In the evaluation sheets we received every semester, detail had been washed over with repetitive language, questions instead of suggestions, and a lack of understanding as to who I was or how to advise me as a unique individual.”

*“My George Brown transcript is a consistent Achilles' heel. My GPA at George Brown was approximately 2.4. This is very problematic at the level of scholarship at which I compete. When I expressed my dissatisfaction with this to James Simon, how much I felt the austere marking policy at GB disproportionately hindered the future success of its own students, he suggested I take George Brown off my resume! I couldn't believe it. The director of the school was suggesting that I hide the fact that I had attended. How would I explain what I had done with three years of my life? Didn't George Brown want its reputation bolstered by award-winning alumni? Mr. Simon's suggestion was preposterous and unethical.”

FOSTERING A CONSTANT FEAR OF EXPULSION

*“Every student spends their entire time in the program [...] in fear of expulsion. Expulsions happened every term, and often without any warning. It is a horrific environment in which to be expected to grow and excel.”

*“If I were to sum up my three years at George Brown, I'd say that I spent most of the time feeling intimidated, insecure and unhappy. I was made to feel inadequate both as a person and an actor, and perpetually frightened that I was going to be expelled. This is in spite of being a diligent, punctual and dedicated student.”

*“A much better program, the National Theatre School of Canada in Montreal, which is the model upon which George Brown Theatre School was founded, is committed to graduating all the students they accept. They have been known to expel students on the grounds of failed attendance and inadequate work ethic: basically, students who don't show up for class and don't do their work. This may happen to one student, once a year. Whereas at George Brown, it's a much higher number because they expel students they claim to have no talent. Which begs the question, why were they accepted in the first place?”

*“I found it very hard to work with the Artistic Director of the school during our Canadian Scene Study exercise because I knew that he was playing God with my future and this stress that had been building for two years made it very hard for me to be open to suggestions or to trust that what I was doing was right.”

*“It is this policy of 'cutting' that is most detrimental to the theatre school where the students should be participating in an environment of support and trust, not of competition and paranoia. When you act with someone it is a great act of vulnerability, trust and courage and you do not want to be thinking that the two of you are fighting over that coveted spot in 3rd year. This policy consumed a great deal of energy from myself as well as my classmates.”

*“[T]he faculty made it very clear from the outset that my placement in the program was always subject to change. I was made to feel that they were doing me a favour by keeping me in the

school. By Christmas, our first classmate had been expelled. We didn't understand. It all seemed so arbitrary.”

*“Recently I was hired to work with one of the most successful theatre companies in Toronto. Any normal actor would be excited out of their wits at this great opportunity. But due to my experience over the last three years and the fear that anything good will and can be taken away from you, I was always on edge that I would be fired the next week, the next day, the next hour.”

*“I completed two arduous and expensive years in the program only to be kicked out at the end of second year without warning or academic probation (the faculties most ‘legitimized’ way of creating fear and intimidation amongst its students).”

*“[The faculty] spoke about this elusive open door policy that should make us all feel safe. But safe is the last word that I would say is in the minds of any first or second year student.”

*“If George Brown is only going to support and promote 15 actors into the profession of acting, they should only accept 15 students into their program. Period. Anything else is unethical and unfair.”

“George Brown is a very impatient environment where very little time is given for second chances.”

*“[My experience] left me with the impression that one false move would mean my expulsion, that I was walking a very fine line.”

*“I made mention during my end of year interview with the faculty that I found it hard to be artistic and creative in an environment that was stifling. I gave them the metaphor that I had felt as though there was a heavy sword dangling over my head that was being held by a very thin thread. Basically that I was constantly on a cutting board and that it made me and the rest of the students feel very uncomfortable. They appeared shocked when I shared that with them and admonished me for having such feelings.”

*“I showed up at school every morning feeling bitter, angry and scared. I was positive I was on my way to being expelled. At that point, several students had already met this fate. It made for a miserable environment.”

“Receiving those evaluations (pinned to a poster board on the final day of school) is something I would compare to walking the green mile knowing that in a few short moments, opening that letter is like pulling the lever on your own electric chair.”

*“The whole experience was like sitting on a torture table and every time you knew that you made a slight mistake the bindings on your limbs would tighten and death was imminent.”

THOUGHT POLICING AND THE REPRESSION OF CRITICAL THINKING

*“The faculty told me at that time they were concerned that I was resisting the training, that I had a ‘superiority complex,’ and that I was too cold-hearted, too ‘cerebral’ to be an actor. This was hurtful and upsetting. I swore up and down that it wasn't the case, that I was determined to improve my skills and would continue to work as hard as I could. When I asked them to explain how I was resisting the training, I was told that I ‘thought’ too much, questioned too much. From that point on, I was terrified to ask questions in class for fear the faculty would see this as my so-called resistance.”

*“The core members of the program have taken on a sort of ‘guru’ stereotype.”

“These ideas are archaic and should be abandoned immediately. They simply serve the purpose of controlling every visible aspect of the students’ life and thoughts.”

*“I think it's extremely damaging for these two people to have any contact with students. They were very irresponsible with their power.”

“I found the evaluation meetings to be equally inefficient. The 3 on 1 sessions did not offer any privacy or a suitable environment for one to share or receive input, troubles in class, or issues in one’s personal life. I venture to suggest it had a resonance of an interrogation, given the tone of some of the questions, and the stance the teachers took on the students. I recall being asked something quite off topic, and along the lines of: ‘Who do you believe the bad apples are in your class?’ What a waste of money.”

*“I formed some very strong relationships with the other students even though the teachers say that you shouldn't become too close to them. ‘This is not a drama club’ was a famous line.”

*“George Brown Theatre School's environment is not conducive to learning who you are as it occurs many times you are being told who you should be: ‘molded,’ if you will. This benefits no one's acting or self-esteem.”

“As an organization, they can deny, deflect, distract, detest and even divert everything that is being thrown back at them. Does one not teach what one believes in? If they then continue, not only to deny their own faults, to systematically remove resistance, to dissolve freedom of speech, and to continue to be unable to take critiquing, then why do any of us give them the true credit and title of being teachers? How can they call themselves professionals and teachers, but be so closed-minded? How can they teach what they do not obey? This is where they fail, without any repercussions.”

*“Had I continued on with the program I would have felt that I was no longer able to ask questions in his class.”

*“I went to school to learn and I feel that a school should be a safe place where you can take risks, make mistakes, and feel good doing it. I didn't feel that way when I was at George Brown.

I always wanted to say something about the way my classmates and I were treated in acting class but I was too afraid to because I thought that I would risk my career at becoming an actor.”

*“At one point at school I thought about leaving so I could go to the doctor but I couldn't do that while I was in school because of their attendance policy.”

“I recall being in the same class as an individual with physical issues and watching [this student] being instructed to disregard or completely ignore professional medical advice/instruction. Instead, to substitute their effort into whatever that teacher required from them. This student was constantly threatened that they would be given a failing mark if they disregarded the procedures and advice the class teacher offered in order to tend to their mental stresses and medical needs.”

*“Having an opinion at GB that was not in agreement with the faculty was signing your own death warrant at the school.”

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

*“I was a little shocked when I performed my Shakespeare piece that the head of acting, when he re-directed me said that I was a ‘slutty actor who made cheap and slutty choices.’ ”

*“Things seemed to get worse and worse for me in acting class. I would often get the comment, with a negative tone, [...] ‘You seem to default to a wacky superficiality; it just looks fucking ridiculous. Who would want to be your scene partner? You're not sexy and I would certainly not want to dance with that.’ ”

*“My friend at school came out crying after an interview with [an instructor]. He said that when he walks by her, ‘He gets a whiff of little girl, and it makes him sick, because he hates them, but loves women.’ ”

*“When he entered the room we both became tense and felt that we performed worse when he was watching. The next time we performed our scene he asked me if ‘I was the fat girl from high school.’ This comment really hit a chord in my heart. It really hurt: I started to tear up, but fought back the tears. I could feel the room becoming more and more uncomfortable.”

*“[M]y friend went up to do the exercise and [the instructor] remarked that she was trying to seduce her scene partner. He said, ‘It doesn't work, ice princess: you're cold and I just quiver in my seat. It's not sexy. I'm repulsed at the thought of sleeping with that.’ ”

*“He said, ‘You look like a woman who’s had three children up there.’ ”

PHYSICAL ASSAULT

Each of the following excerpts was written independently by students of different graduating classes and all refer to the same instructor.

*“I was even physically pushed so hard as to fall back onto the floor by my acting teacher [...] as to ‘wake me into my scene.’ I never said anything because I was 19 years old and didn't understand my rights at the time.”

*“I was actually struck by a teacher across my shoulders with rolled up newspaper to create a sense of fear in a scene we were working on. This was in full view of the class. I personally do not feel a sense of personal humiliation and portraying a sense of fear are one in the same. The teacher then remarked that this was all in the name of theatre and should not be taken as an attack.”

“In first year I had some very eye-opening experiences which later led me to my mistrust of the program and the people who ran it. I have verified my details, and it is indeed true that a 1st year student of my class was physically abused by an acting teacher, in class, in front of other classmates. I believe the tool used was a long wooden pole, used to prod the student into ‘creative thinking’. [...] At least one half of my 1st year class was a witness. I remember a bunch of us sharing tears after. Why were we paying to be abused? Who do these people think they are?”

A fourth excerpt (from an email which was received by Ms. Hall) describing two separate instances of physical assault again by the same instructor has been omitted here at the request of the author.

EMOTIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND VERBAL ABUSE

*“The aura of fear engendered in the first year students was palpable when we visited our daughter. We were told that at any given time there would be at least one, if not several, students crying in the hallways.”

*“The comments I received over the years [...] were so unbelievably unprofessional I would usually read my report card in total shock. [...] When I was younger and much more impressionable, already on 'probation', and feeling threatened, afraid, humiliated and powerless to change anything, it was not funny at all. It was absolutely inappropriate.”

“I do know in my heart that I was performing at far less than my potential because I felt so terrorized while I was there.”

*“In acting class, criticism of the students’ work was freely delivered in a demeaning and often malicious way, and was rarely followed by any useful suggestion as to how the work could be improved. Comments such as ‘That was shit. Get the F... off the stage!’ were not uncommon.”

*“I got up once to perform the ‘sweater exercise’ and after I was done, one of my classmates said I was a good writer. [The instructor] turned to them and said, ‘Yeah, if you want to write for community theatre. It was like a high school play; the writing was like Margaret Atwood on crack.’ ”

*“It's shocking to me that either of these people are still teaching students. I honestly don't know why they chose to teach. They don't show any genuine care for their students, and absolutely no joy in teaching. If anything, I felt I was subject to their resentment and bitterness, as we all were.”

*“A few weeks later we were working on *Glengarry Glen Ross*. He came up to me and my scene partner and he stated that I ‘had my head in my ass’. [He said that] I was a selfish scene partner and I didn't know what I was doing.”

*“An example from my first year [report card]: ‘On stage you look like an awkward, disjointed giraffe.’ ”

*“The faculty said they were unsure whether I could stay in the program. They expressed concern that ‘I didn't have a soul.’ ”

*“He also asked [a classmate] if she understood the concept of art and if her parents read. When she responded that her parents were both teachers, he said: ‘Very interesting.’ ”

*“I experienced abrasive behaviour and critiques that I question within the studio, and also have written examples of such conduct in my end of term evaluation.”

*“As parents, we had serious reservations about the school by the end of the first term. By the end of the first year our daughter was taking antidepressant medication, and we were encouraging her to leave.”

*“As I have begun working in independent theatre I realize that there is no room for bullying, manipulation or coercion. I fail to understand why something unacceptable in the professional world would be acceptable in the academic world.”

*“They misuse this power and exercise it over young, ambitious artists who don't understand their rights and the difference between criticism and abuse.”

*“[A certain instructor] was, by far, the most extreme in the studio as far as his approach to the work and his style of critique are concerned.”

*“I met a girl at my audition who came out of the room, practically in tears. She said, ‘He told me that I ruined Shakespeare and that I have a horrible voice; there's no way I got in.’ ”

*“There are also students who are being verbally abused by the instructors. I had to sit through many a rehearsal and watch it happen.”

*“I was always terrified to go to acting class. Horrified. I was so scared that I was going to get picked on, because I had been the past few classes before.”

*“I was really shocked that learning environment was as severe as it was to the student body.”

*“It seemed to me that the more vulnerable, insecure, weak or quiet you were, the more abuse you got. This childish, rude, unproductive behaviour reminded me of a grade six bully who was very mad at the world.”

*“I think this lack of action attributed to my lack of trust in the school and for their concern for my success in the future.”

*“Something I find very hypocritical is that at George Brown, the teachers are always trying to get you to open up and be vulnerable but how do you expect people to do this when they are just going to get verbally abused, torn down, and made to feel inadequate? The school is all about taking risks but when you do you get bombarded with negative criticism for making the wrong choice.”

*“When I read the comment and the mark, my heart dropped, my soul died a bit and I truly debated if it was worth coming back to suffer through the program for another 8 months. If it wasn't for the support of my classmates I would have walked the other way.”

*“One teacher in particular would put down other institutions by saying, "This isn't fucking Windsor, this is George Brown Theatre School. We are training you how to become actors, not how to get your B.A." I always asked myself what the point of saying something like that was. Doesn't that just make George Brown seem insecure?”

*“It was with shock that I read my written evaluation as I had been led to believe by faculty that I had been improving over the course of the semester.”

*“There is nothing more disturbing than to see your fellow actor/friend be put down by someone who is supposed to be a professional, by someone who works in the industry, and in the end feel as if you have no voice because of the power they hold in the industry and because you doubt that the school will support you and your outrage at the situation. It left a bad taste on everyone's pallet and in turn made for a terrible learning environment and one of the most terrifying rehearsal processes I have ever had to live through. The berating and insulting of students' work in a public or private setting needs to come to an end.”

*“We are not there to learn how to be treated badly.”

*“This hardly put me in the frame of mind needed to foster any kind of risk-taking, artistic development.”

*“The atmosphere at school made me insecure, upset and feeling powerless.”

*“True creativity is not possible under the psychological trauma that many of the students face.”

“The theatre school sounds like such a toxic environment. Very scary. I worry about [my daughter] all the time.”

*“I think George Brown Theatre School is run by some very unethical people who indulge in very unethical behaviour.”

*“By November of 1st year I had to have a drink before certain classes to take the edge off.”

A LEGACY OF TRAUMA

*“Even though I have successfully completed all of the requirements for graduation from the Theatre Program and I have been truly lucky with my success so far, I would be remiss not to tell you that I am emotionally scarred from the experience.”

*“They gave up on me and I still am not over it.”

*“After leaving GB it took our daughter several months to recover her sense of balance.”

*“In fact, all of the comments I received have affected me in some way in regards specifically to my educational pursuits since, but also in other respects.”

*“I felt robbed and abandoned.”

*“And when it did finally settle in that this [professional theatre] company hired me for my talent [...], I couldn't shake the feeling that I was constantly being judged. [...] That should not have been the way I walked into that experience and I completely believe it is the remnants of my experience at theatre school that put me in that mind-set.”

*“I didn't feel like I was given a fair chance.”

*“My time at George Brown was, for the most part, filled with a lot of self doubt and lack of confidence. It has taken me almost a complete year to finally rebuild a sense of worth and feel like I am a capable and adequate person and artist.”

*“Although I'm beginning my career in film and television, I still don't have the confidence to return to the stage. This is entirely due to the psychological traumas ingrained in me from school.”

“So many students are so afraid of what so many of us have experienced and shared, some feeling like they will never have the legs to stand up again - like a soldier coming back from a war, never able to explain the tortures and horrors they faced. Shell-shocked.”

*“Too often the students that graduate the school need to recover, and somehow redeem their self-esteem. The faculty knows this. On occasion it is referred to as ‘The Long Sleep.’ The way people are being treated is not acceptable.”

*“I paid this institution to work with me and to teach me the skills of a stage actor. They took my money, then told me to leave. This is not what I signed up for.”

“GB really did do a number on me and made me feel so low about myself as a person.”

*“I consistently tell people how much I disliked the program, and advise potential students against attending in light of my experience.”

*“I was a passionate actor before George Brown Theatre School, and it has taken me the full three years since being expelled from that program to regain the confidence and pride in myself, and in my work as an actor. This is completely due to the psychological abuse, fear and intimidation tactics and general negative support I received while training at George Brown.”