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## Confessions from Theatre School

By Megan Robinson



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**T**he moment I found out I got into theatre school, my high school anxieties and fears quieted. Acceptance into the three-year conservatory-style program felt like a seal of approval for my career, permission to put trust in a future where I would work professionally. As I looked at the letter in my hand, at nineteen, I allowed myself to think: *I am good.*

What I didn't understand yet was that when you're an actor, you're not supposed to just be good. You're supposed to take risks. You're supposed to fumble and fail. The uncertainty you experience as a creator is a place to float in, with a curious and open mind, as you slowly figure it out.

This was something I learned in theatre school, something our teachers offered us. They spoke about the need to be "ugly," as we sat cross-legged on the floor, soaking up their wisdom, our tuition paid, our heavy load of reading material purchased.

But as a young girl, I was not so easily convinced. Sitting there, my class outline in my hand, I remember thinking that being ugly was not a goal.

In one of my first acting classes, we did an exercise where, one by one, we had to go up to the front of the room and tell a personal story. I was unfazed by the task, and went up and told my story with total confidence. When I was done I stood there, feeling good, and waited for a response. My teacher stroked his little chin and stared me down. "So you're, like, the funny fat girl?" he said. "Maybe that's not who you are now but that's what I'm getting." It was the worst insult. I couldn't say no. I didn't say yes. What I heard in his words was, "You are not fooling me."

I'm not exactly sure where the comment came from. Maybe it was a reaction to *how* I told the story, the habits of speech and movement that he perceived as a character I was playing up for the audience. Or maybe it was a reaction to the story itself and the personality that it revealed. But those words—"funny fat girl"—became something I was scared of; the image of what he saw in me became something I immediately wanted to shed.

Another classmate, a guy in his mid-twenties, went up and told his story. When he was done, our teacher turned to the rest of us and said something like, "Nobody would have sex with this person." I looked up at my new friend, who took the comment without so much as blinking. That day, I watched as the rest of my classmates were boxed into categories, one by one.

As actors, we often feel that we are our work. Learning the distinction between self and creation requires firm boundaries. These boundaries are unique in every situation, and to every person. But I was nineteen, without boundaries yet. And my sense of self was easily shaken.

I felt a little crack in me.

\* \* \*

Another shape-shifting moment came after an infamous game of mastering tactics, which was something like a theatre-school version of initiation.

The game has two participants. One plays the employee of a retail store, the other plays a customer returning a sweater. The rules are simple: the employee must not, under any circumstance, take back the sweater, and the customer must do everything they can to get them to change their mind.

During my turn, as the customer, I gave it my all. I flung my body on the table between me and the employee. I dropped to my knees almost in tears. I thought I'd done a fairly good job; my performance seemed about as desperate as my classmates' attempts. At the end of the class, the same acting teacher pulled me aside. He circled me before offering: "You're giving me *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. What I want is Tennessee Williams. You're a girl-child. Does that make sense?"

I was getting the sense that my place in the program, which I thought I had already earned, was a shaky one.

I felt the crack grow a little more.

\* \* \*

Later in the semester, I worked with a scene partner on a segment from *Angels in America*, where I played Harper. Here we were, recent high school graduates, trying to navigate our characters' complicated marriage. As we ran lines, the teacher hovered in the background, watching the groups from afar. Eventually, he moved up to us, silent. We stopped working.

He turned to my partner and said, "You like women right?"

My partner nodded.

The teacher turned to me. "And you, you like men, right?"

I hesitated, I nodded.

Back to my partner. "Have you ever been naked with a woman before?"

He mumbled an awkward yes. I held my breath.

The teacher turned back to me and asked, “Have you ever been naked with a man before?”

I sort of coughed and spluttered a no.

My teacher nodded. “Don’t worry, it will happen.” Then he proceeded to talk us through the intimacies of our characters, my face burning bright red.

I felt the crack grow yet again.

\* \* \*

Someone once told me that these theatre programs break you down in order to build you up.

In acting class, I was hungry to learn. Watching my teacher critique others, listening to my classmates’ opinions about what worked and what didn’t, I crafted my version of the ideal actor. My investigation brought me specific conclusions: be the thin beautiful girl, not the funny fat girl. Be smarter and have more depth. Get some real life experiences.

I began to shift out of my suburban, Ottawa-girl habits. My speech teacher encouraged me to speak without a Valley-girl accent. I flip-flopped between vocal fries and overly enunciated speech. I started saying no to cheese and taking the tops of buns off burgers. I stopped indulging in films starring Lindsay Lohan and Hilary Duff and started watching Tarantino and documentaries. I stopped listening to Broadway soundtracks and turned to music blogs. I started to fall for a guy in my class.

“

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”

I began working on another scene where I played a scorned girlfriend. At one point, after watching the scene, my acting teacher sat quietly before offering advice along the lines of: “We want to love you.” I nodded obediently as I tried to understand. He continued, “When you play Juliet, the audience wants to love you, we want to feel for you. We want to see you cry.” This is how I remember him speaking. He tried to get me to find the vulnerabilities of my character. What I heard was, “We want to see women cry.” I started to wonder if I was loveable enough to be playing a lover, and it became the role I chased, the one I

romanticized. As other girls stepped into the role of Miss Julie or performed wild monologues from *The Skriker*, I could not shake the simple need to be desired.

\* \* \*

Looking so deeply at who you are can be a little scary. In dance class, the reflection that stared back at me in the mirror was so frustratingly short and stubby. In neutral mask, as we stood in a circle and worked on an exercise where you silently make eye contact with every other person in the circle, my face turned beet red, my heart started pounding, and I began sweating. I had never felt so anxious. So aware of myself, my pores, my eyes, my mouth. The mask teacher came over to me, frustrated with my resistance to the exercise: “You can’t be an actor if you can’t be seen.” I had always loved the spotlight, had never experienced stage fright, but this experience was a different kind of exposure.

\* \* \*

It was hard to tell where my education ended and my personal life began, which became confusing when I started dating someone in my class. I had taken “being naked with a man” as an acting lesson, and I threw myself open to vulnerability and love in a real-life sense. I hoped, in the back of my mind, that it would also make me a better actor, give me some universal experience to sink my teeth into. But falling in love, that’s really hard too. And if I wasn’t lost enough in the exploration of self, I definitely lost parts of me as I learned what it was to love someone romantically.







*Megan in Man of Mode*

At the end of term, I had a meeting with the main teachers, the kind of meeting everyone has. My acting teacher sat on the far left, with his legs crossed, contemplative. “You know, I was told my whole life that I should like tall, blonde women. Then I realized that... that’s not my type. You don’t *have* to like classical text. Or this program. You can like what you want to like.”

His words confused me. I didn’t want to *like* something else, I wanted to *be* something else. I thought if I was taller I’d look better in classical garb. That if I had grown up in a different city, my speech pattern wouldn’t sound so contemporary.

\* \* \*

As school continued, I was especially selective about what I heard in the classroom. I would sit in voice class counting the calories of the lunch I had packed in my head, drowning out

my teachers' directions. I started to focus less on acting and more on my image. I thought it would somehow enhance my abilities, give me the confidence I needed to hold the stage. So when a student was told she was beautiful, it was all I could hear.

I remember once being hunched over watching a classmate perform a monologue. She was interrupted. "You are allowed to be that beautiful," the teacher said, staring at my classmate, a tall, slender woman with killer bone structure and shiny hair. I found myself wanting to be told this as well. It definitely sounded better than the fat funny girl.

“  
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”

As I tried my best to be the image of a loveable ingénue, I got cast in all sorts of roles: a little Irish man, Maria in *Twelfth Night*, Laura in *Glass Menagerie*.

Then, in my second year I got cast in a role that surprised me: a leading lady in a restoration drama.

My scene was directed by a guest instructor, a successful actress in Toronto who took a liking to me. As I strapped myself into a corset, she held the space for me to play. She was strong, and smart. She encouraged me to find an inner strength necessary for this character. My personal life was crumbling, and so was the character's I was portraying. I wept through my final scenes, descending into madness at the end of the show. I could not tell sometimes if I was acting or if I was just getting out everything that I had bottled up.

\* \* \*

In Alexander Technique, my instructor held a mirror in front of me. She told me I didn't have to wear little dresses and tight skirts. She gave me running shoes when my heels made my legs cramp. She asked me to be another version of a woman, one that she represented.

These two instructors were just as loud as the others, but it was hard to hear them, as my mind was full of jumbled thoughts about being the ideal.

Later in the semester, Daniel MacIvor came to talk to our class. As an established artist, he was idolized by us. But of all the advice and wisdom he offered, I remember most the moment when someone asked him what it was like working with Ellen Page and he

answered, “She’s great, but she needs to eat a potato.”

His comment felt directed at me, though it obviously wasn’t. I hadn’t had bread in months.

\* \* \*

In third year, I got cast as a love interest in one of our shows. I was all dressed up in my little dress and heels, and I remember thinking that I had achieved my goal. The girl looking back at me in the dressing room mirror did not make me want to run away. I had no issue standing on the stage and being seen as the thin blonde woman I had become. But the role bored me. Playing the ideal was not the answer I wanted it to be.

\* \* \*

Towards the end of my final semester, the class began prepping with monologue coaches for the Theatre Ontario showcase, which was an opportunity for theatre school graduates to perform two contrasting monologues for agents and casting directors.

Our coaches wanted us to choose something that represented who we were. I sifted through every play I could find in the reference library with a young woman in it. I could not find my story. I ended up choosing a monologue spoken by a sixteen-year-old girl to an older man she was in love with.

I thought this monologue would be my go-to for auditions after graduation. But when I performed it for a renowned theatre director in a workshopping session, he interrupted me halfway through.

“Is this you?” He looked at me, quizzical.

“Um, I mean, I get where she’s coming from.” She was begging for love. It was something I finally understood.

“But she’s never *been with* someone. That’s not you, is it? We want to see you.”

It was a strangely perfect bookend to the program. In my first year I was pegged for my lack of experience, and now, for having too much.







*Megan (far right) as a germaphobe in Happy End*

As I walked out of the room, his words moved through my mind. I was uncomfortable with my answer, just like I had been back at the beginning of the program, even though it was different. Since playing Harper in first year, I had learned how to cook tofu so that it tasted okay, I had learned the value of being on time, I had fallen in and out of love. I had landed somewhere in between those two characters.

Looking back, I can see where my curiosity was compromised. It was by searching too quickly for answers, not settling long enough in that place of uncertainty, that place of youth, where you are floating through the possibilities of who you may become. The same place actors are meant to play in.

At an end-of-year party with the teachers and students, my acting teacher surprised me by striking up a conversation about the final production I had been in. “What was that character you were playing? Was it an alien or something?” He was referring to a non-speaking role where I had draped myself in a yellow poncho and sucked on the nozzle of a spray bottle, embodying an OCD germophobe from my hometown. “That was the best thing I’ve ever seen you do.”

I moved away from him, grabbed a piece of pizza, and sat on a couch in the corner of the room. I was thin and blonde and the role I had had most success in was the one where I was

something other than pretty. In that moment, I realized the value in being a bit of both; in existing somewhere between ugliness and beauty.

*Tags from the story*

acting, acting class, Megan Robinson, teachers, teaching, theatre school



*Written By*

## Megan Robinson

Megan writes and teaches yoga in Toronto. She likes chickpeas, exploring new places, and talking on the phone.

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## 71 Responses to “Confessions from Theatre School”



Judith Thompson says:

February 17, 2017 at 8:51 am

So its still happening.

The predators are still out there, given the privilege of teaching emotionally hungry and desperate-for-approval young actors; in a Conservatory, unlike a University, the students can be dumped at any time for any reason, and consequently are too cowed to speak up against teachers who engage in personal insult, often bizarrely sexualized, disguised as “digging deep “to make a young person a “better actor.” Its none of his business whether or not the student “has been naked with a person.” If a Professor at a University asked that question he would be fired. To ask her if she was the “funny fat girl” without any understanding of the impact that phrase might have on a young woman-basically he was prescribing an eating disorder-is cruel and irresponsible in the extreme.

The teachers described in the article need to be fired now. As tax payers, and theatre artists, every one of us supports these institutions. The students in theatre school are so grateful to be there they will rarely speak up against their program, even after they have graduated, as they are afraid to alienate the instructors, who are usually professionals who might be in a position to hire them. Brava, Megan.



Vinetta Strombergs says:

February 23, 2017 at 12:12 am

Love you Judith. That is soooooo right on. That teacher is an abhorrent destructive mess and should not be teaching anything. He just makes judgemental statements to make himself superior when he really isn;t. For shame, whoever you are. Those kinds of comments help no one.



Kaitlin says:

February 17, 2017 at 1:58 pm

Thank you for this. I went to this same school and experienced and witnessed similar things. It's an important and brave discussion.

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Alex says:

February 17, 2017 at 2:29 pm

It doesn't take much to figure out who that teacher might be... So many teachers in theatre schools don't take risks in the real world and be vulnerable as artists themselves; and yet, students place so much importance on their opinions.

Thank you Megan, for sharing your stories and experience. You're right that we're not our work, regardless how much it "feels" like we are. At the same time, we're not what other people's thoughts about us, good or bad. We're not even the thoughts and feelings we have about ourselves. All the best to you, Megan. I look forward to seeing you on stage in the future!

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Patrick Cieslar says:

February 17, 2017 at 7:36 pm

Dear Megan,

Thank you so much for your bravery.

What happened to you at theatre school is not okay. It is professional misconduct. It is sexual harassment. It is abuse.

You may be shocked to learn that it is also something that every person who has been entrusted with your theatre education – from the administrative support team, to the entire teaching faculty, to the Artistic Director, to the Director of the Faculty, to the college President, and to the Board of Governors of the college, has been aware of (and has apparently continued to allow) for more than a decade.

Clearly, they have been either unable or unwilling to stop it. With tremendous sadness and anger, I suspect the latter.

You may find this hard to believe, but next Wednesday (February 22nd, 2017) marks the ten-year anniversary of a meeting that was held between the college's Human Rights Advisor, the Director of the Faculty of Business and Creative Arts and the Artistic Director of the theatre school which you attended. This meeting was held in response to very similar – and worse – allegations of abuse and harassment at your theatre school. The experiences you have described exactly match many of the same things we experienced as students there.

Ten years ago, I led a peaceful campaign against it. The college and the theatre school responded with

silence, intimidation and retribution. No investigation was ever conducted.

Correctly sensing that the threat of litigation was imminent, I offered a truce with the college under assurances from many that the dark era at your school – our school – was over. I pledged my withdrawal from the battle.

All I ever wanted was for the college to uphold and enforce its own policies concerning harassment and abuse. All I ever wanted was to ensure that future students would not experience the same things we did. In this regard, I failed you. I also failed the many brave alumni who came forward and who had placed their hope in me.

I now see that our school has clearly broken the long-standing uneasy truce by allowing harassment and abuse by faculty against students to continue unabated.

If our school is still of the mind that suing students is an appropriate response to identifying gravely serious professional misconduct, then so be it. I do not anticipate it will look good on them. I do not fear litigation. I do not fear retribution.

You are a hero. You may experience a terrible backlash because of your bravery. Please know that you have an army of allies who have been waiting for you in the wings.

Women's rights are human rights. Students' rights are human rights.

Yours in solidarity,

Patrick Cieslar

Class of 2006



Briana Brown says:

February 21, 2017 at 11:54 pm

I've been thinking of you since I read this, Pat, and of your bravery all those years ago. Hoping upon hope that perhaps a decade later people might be ready to listen. I have such respect for you sir, and for Megan too. Thank you both.



Evan buliung says:

February 18, 2017 at 1:08 pm

Wow, thank you. What a thoughtful, troubling and heartbreakingly honest article. This certainly brings me back to my own experiences in theatre school which, because of my sex, were not in the same realm as yours. Teachers who engage in personal attacks or sexualisation of students "in order to rip open the psyche" of an "artist" need to be fired and replaced with caring, imaginative, firm, supportive people who recognize how fucking difficult and BRAVE it is to start this journey of story telling. Theatre school is a messy realm of self discovery for a young person, we all suffered through it in our own personal ways. I was fortunate to have wonderful teachers that, though sometimes I wanted to run out of the room screaming (and might have on several occasions) they didn't seem to

judge this raw, uncontrollable emotion. But that was my journey. It breaks my heart to read this. If artists are expected to grow and expand their pallet, then teachers are to be merely a supportive guide. We may not get it the first day, even the first year, but the best art comes from the artists OWN discovery of truth. Nothing makes us happier than when the kernel of truth pops in our own mind. There needs to be without doubt, a line of communication to make you feel safe to find these, and not preyed upon and made to feel small. I had a grade ten teacher who told me in front of the class that instead of reading to kill a mockingbird, he was going to get me a book on dieting. Who came to my defence quickly and without question? The girls in my class.



**Miles Potter says:**

February 19, 2017 at 12:22 pm

Thank you, Megan. Quite a number of years ago, I directed a final project at this school under the same regime. We were doing restoration, for which these third year actors were woefully unprepared. When I met with the teaching staff to question how they had arrived at this point with an inability to handle text, the acting teacher basically blamed the students. We worked hard and the students responded and they put on a creditable production. I was told I had to grade them, and no, they couldn't all get A's or Pass, it had to be hard grading. So they did not all get A's, but wherever the grade was lower than an A, I explained why and put in each persons report that it was not their fault, but the result of "A failure of training". I have not been asked back to that school.



**Michael Kras says:**

February 19, 2017 at 6:20 pm

Wow. Thank you for this.

I myself did not attend George Brown, but auditioned. My brief time there, I felt incredibly unwelcome. I romanticized the gorgeous setting of the Young Centre, but the audition process was unsettling and quietly intimidating.

While training in a different conservatory, I met lots of students who came to my school after jumping ship at George Brown. The stories of the verbal and emotional abuse I heard from them seriously dropped my jaw.

It's heartbreaking to think of students who go through that kind of training and accept it for what it is despite their traumas. But I myself got fucking good training elsewhere, emerged from my conservatory a well-prepared actor, and NEVER had to be hit with this kind of abuse masquerading as pedagogy along the way. No one had to destroy my soul under the guise of uncovering my transparency.

I hope this changes, and fast.



**Jordan says:**

February 19, 2017 at 9:44 pm

Really Miles Potter? Perhaps they didn't ask you back because you yelled at the students, treated them poorly, and made a number of them cry including one of the guys during rehearsal. I'm sure Patrick can verify all of this since it was his class you directed.



Miles Potter says:

February 20, 2017 at 7:46 pm

Jordan (and Patrick) I would welcome a conversation about this whole experience, if you think it would be helpful. I responded to Megan's letter because I believed her bravery should be supported. I don't recall behaving in the manner you describe; I do remember that the students seemed to be quite stressed; and I would have to say if there were crying, I'm not surprised. Memory after so many years is unreliable (at least mine is) so I am not going to attempt to say that any particular persons version of that experience is not valid. As an actor turned director it has been and is my goal to not only help actors to be as good as they can be, but to treat them with the respect any person deserves in their workplace (or school). If in that particular circumstance, Patrick recalls me failing in that endeavour, I apologize without reservation. In my response, I tried to outline where I felt the students were being 'let down' by their training, and (at least in my memory), I felt I had the students backs, and would not grade them without being clear where I felt the responsibility lay. Lastly, I'm sorry I included the remark about "being asked back". It was irrelevant and unnecessary, and mostly for effect.



Sherry MacDonald says:

February 19, 2017 at 10:28 pm

I attended a conservatory acting school in Vancouver many years ago. The experience left me so traumatized I was unable, until just recently (33 years later) to attend any shows there (and they put on stellar shows!) I developed a serious eat disorder while attending the school. And, although it may have happened anyway, somebody there should have done something, like, I don't know, send me to a counsellor (being a school housed in a college there is counselling on hand), instead of commenting on my weight loss like it was a joke. I've spoken to several people who experienced the same types of abusive situations you describe, similar situations I experienced myself. I remember the first day of class, one of the first things they told us was something like "You will hear from some people who attended the school they were mistreated, but those former students are merely pissed off because they didn't 'make it'." Well, I certainly didn't 'make it', having been asked to leave after 3 terms, but then so did most of my classmates. In fact, out of the original 13 in our group only ONE student graduated, and that student told me he couldn't step foot inside ANY theatre for two years after completing the program. The philosophy of stripping actors down and building them back up doesn't make any sense until you realize some of the instructors (in our program anyway) were followers of EST, a notorious cult-like personality re-programming sect who give workshops where attendees are made to endure hours of insults and aren't even allowed to go to the toilet! If you're going to submit students to harassment, at least let them keep their defences intact. They get to strip you of your



defences OR they get to fling shit at you, but they don't get to do both.



Patrick Cieslar says:

February 20, 2017 at 1:57 am

It is important that I be mindful of the amount of space I occupy in this discussion. This struggle has never been about any single individual – it is about all of us. I will do my best to remain brief in my responses – something I have regrettably not always excelled at in the past.

Jordan: Miles' comment does corroborate numerous previously presented allegations of widespread mark-rigging at the theatre school. I do not know why he was not asked back, but I can verify that your description is an accurate summary of my personal experience with this director.

Patricia: I passionately support non-violent protest and I believe it is vital in times like these. I also know, however, that this college has had over a decade to respond. I know that it has heaped betrayal upon betrayal upon betrayal against us.

I know that the final communication I received from the college was in May 2008 when the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Business and Design encouraged me under threat of a lawsuit to “withdraw from the debate and pursue other interests.”

Deducing the timelines, Megan's experiences would have begun the very next year, just when public scrutiny of the theatre school had faded.

I do not perceive this institution as being interested in doing the right thing. It has routinely placed its own reputation before the fundamental safety of its students. The tragic and obviously foreseeable result is that in doing so it has inevitably destroyed both.

The greatest weapon they have always had on their side is secrecy. Circumstances have provided all of us with this rare opportunity to shine new light together, bravely and brightly. I encourage anyone whose life has fallen under the dark shadow cast by this institution to share their stories here. To my mind, speaking and hearing our truths together is the most powerful form of protest there is.

I will be following these posts closely. At the same time, I will exercise restraint to ensure new voices have the space to be heard. When they inevitably arrive, I will do my best to avoid feeding the trolls. I encourage everyone to frequently save the contents of this page to their personal devices.

I also respectfully invite readers to spare a moment to remember the original caretakers of these lands whose experiences of truly extreme violence and abuse within the residential school system left far deeper wounds than many of us can ever imagine.

My voice is only one of thousands. Please share yours. Many thanks to Intermission Magazine for the courage to host and moderate this discussion.



Nicholas. M says:

February 20, 2017 at 7:43 pm

I attended this school in 2013. I remember the audition room where they preached to me that this is the best training in Canada. At 18, I was easily convinced and made the decision to attend their program after being accepted. At the time, being openly Christian, I was caught in the middle of many personal attacks from the mentioned acting instructor. “You seem to be an awkward alter boy who never got out of the church, or been with a girl.” When I asked how to do better, all I was given was “I don’t know, stop being awkward.” When I knew there was no hope in continuing onto my second semester, I had some strong questions for my former acting instructor in my final interview. I asked him for solid answers on what his rationale was for failing me. He had no solid answer for me. The artistic director pulled the heat away from the instructor and tried his best to calm me down. From the start, they tell you that comments towards you are about the “work.” I’ve gone onto another theatre school and I know the difference between comment on the work and comment on the person. There was no comment on the work at George Brown, it was strictly personal. Thank you Megan for the strength to speak out against this institution. I hope that the proper action is taken so that no more young artist are taken advantage of. Best Regard, Nicholas.



**Bronwyn Szabo says:**

February 20, 2017 at 7:57 pm

Such a thoughtful, brave, and well-written account of your experience. Thank you, Megan.

I too attended this school fresh out of high school, and right away felt categorized in acting class by this same teacher by my sexuality, or lack thereof. I noticed on the first day, in that same “acting exercise”, that several of the women in the class were questioned for their (deeply implied sexual) maturity, in a way that the men were not, though no one was guaranteed safety from emotional or psychological abuse.

It took me years to understand that this was insidious misogyny, and not just “tough love” as I convinced myself, at 18, it was. This isn’t to minimize the many other ways students were abused, or to imply that men weren’t sometimes also the victims of undue sexualization.

Grateful this conversation is being opened again. Thank you Megan!



**Brett Haynes says:**

February 20, 2017 at 8:21 pm

Thank you to all that shared their stories and experiences. It is not easy – I too, have been mulling over what I should say for a few days now.

As many of you, I too have had moments, that – now looking back – I can identify as being absolutely inappropriate behaviour: such as not being provided adequate time off to attend my grandmothers funeral or the inappropriate one-on-four end of term interviews while the teachers debated, in front of me, whether I was memorable. I have also had other interactions with the teacher mentioned above regard my sexuality and weight – that now, as a working adult, understand were completely inappropriate. These experiences, though questionable – do not compare to the absolutely inexcusable atmosphere of fear and anxiety the program puts their students through.

I remember the first day – the head of the program explained to us that we are about to go through an extremely rigorous program but if we work hard, we will come out ready to face the entertainment industry. This is lie. If any professional treated actors the way in which the head of acting treated their students – they would be immediately fired. By allowing this behaviour to continue, the school is condoning this sort of behaviour and treatment telling students that this is sort of behaviour is acceptable. This sort of behaviour is both inexcusable in the professional world as it is in a school setting.

My greatest concern is that nothing has changed. Working as a producer and General Manager, I have had the pleasure of meeting several young, emerging artists who have attended programs across this country. What is concerning is that I continue to hear horror stories from graduates of GB. It has been eight years since I walked out of that school and still I hear the same unacceptable treatment of students.

After reading this article and hearing the various stories from other artists about their own experiences, I find myself asking – When is this going to stop? What needs to happen in order for there to be change? At what point will the school, the college, the head of the program decide that this sort of behaviour cannot continue? Please, do the right thing – and until that moment comes – Know that I will continue to voice my concerns and deter other young emerging artists from making the same mistake I did in say yes to attending your program.



Juliana says:

February 20, 2017 at 11:53 pm

I attended George Brown Theatre School for nearly a year before I decided to bow out of the program. Not long before starting there, I came across a document (A Legacy of Trauma) that compiled the numerous allegations of abuse that had gone on, as witnessed and experienced by the graduating class of 2006. I was taken aback by what was described, and was naturally a bit apprehensive and skeptical of what I was about to get myself into. Why was it that, an institution which was lauded for producing such fine actors, had so many people sharing experiences that would insinuate the opposite? Despite my growing concern, I decided to give the program a shot. I was 19 years old and of the mindset that it was an extraordinary privilege to be accepted into a well known school.

While attending the program, I became increasingly more aware of the climate of fear and intimidation being generated, specifically by the head of acting. While I don't recall being on the receiving end of manipulative comments and questions, I witnessed my classmates being subjected to such things. I remember around the time when the first semester was winding down, we were doing scenes from *The Shape of Things*, and a student was lambasted after presenting his scene. It was unsettling to watch and I could sense the discomfort of my fellow classmates. At the semester's end, this student ended up being cut. There was never a day I went into acting class where I wasn't afraid of doing something wrong, of doing something that could lead to me being kicked out of the program. As my anxieties built up over the following months, the catalyst for deciding to leave was due to being on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

It is without saying that theatre school is not a walk in the park, and nor should it be. No one goes

through training executing perfection at every turn. Students experience triumphs and failures alike, as these things are only a natural part of the learning process. But how can students be encouraged to take risks in an environment that is controlled by fear when it is supposed to foster learning and growth?



**Shawn Hitchins says:**

February 21, 2017 at 11:33 am

I left this school after one semester. The same acting head pulled me into his dank office and drew an imaginary circle around my body, pinpointing an issue. “You have to get rid of the gay” he said. When I asked him, how? He explained. “I don’t know. I don’t care. It’s not my problem. Thankfully, I’m not gay.” I tried to have him fired then (his first year – 2001), and he’s still destroying talent.



**Bronwyn Szabo says:**

February 21, 2017 at 1:35 pm

Holy. Shit.



**Jessica Van der Veen says:**

February 22, 2017 at 11:31 am

That’s rotten Shawn. As a teacher of 25 years, the best term I’ve come to for this is “code switching”. Helping actors “code switch” -from gay to straight; from street to upper class; from female to male; etc. requires them to “get rid of” nothing. It’s another physical, vocal and perceptual skill in the toolbox. I hope this is helpful.



**Patrick Cieslar says:**

February 25, 2017 at 1:47 pm

I still want to continue making space for others because, as many know, I have already spilled gallons of ink on exactly these issues. But this one is just really getting under my skin. Shawn is very brave and very intelligent and I acknowledge that he is more than capable of defending himself. I do not presume to know what he is feeling right now. But I sure know what I’m feeling right now.

What Shawn described was a malicious homophobic attack. It was an attack perpetrated by someone who draws an enormous salary from the taxpayers of this province and from unwitting young students who fork over tens of thousands of dollars in pursuit of their dreams. It was an attack that the policies of the college and the province clearly forbid. I can’t imagine anyone who has ever interacted with this instructor has any doubts about the veracity of Shawn’s claim.

**William B says:**

February 21, 2017 at 12:29 pm

Thanks for the comments everyone, keep them coming. This is not the only Theatre school engaging in these behaviors. In essence there is a harmful tradition in many theatre schools where the teachers essentially conduct Group Therapy, without a license, and try to trigger and open up people's trauma's, which they think will make them a better actor. But here is the problem. Some people have serious traumas in their lives, and yes they should consider some therapy with a trained and licensed professional mental health counselor in PRIVATE. They should NOT have their psyche cracked open from some acting teacher who considers themselves an amateur unlicensed Jungian analyst. On top of this, as others have mentioned, many of them are doing things related to EST, which was/is a terrible "cultish group" which also breaks down peoples psyches. Its bad this is still happening to young people. As once people are older is much more difficult to manipulate people in this way. On top of this, Power Corrupts and these acting coaches have the power go to their heads, and get even more carried away. There needs to be a code of ethics to work to put a stop to these psychological abuses by acting teachers. But its not just one place, many many other big-name acting coaches have done almost the exact same thing....D.S. for one.

**Lauren says:**

February 21, 2017 at 12:31 pm

Thank you all for sharing. I attended a theatre school in Western Canada and did not have experiences like this- but I did have similar ones.

I attended the school during a period of transition and having since revisited the school I am under the impression that all of the issues I am about to mention are no longer issues.

When I was doing a scene and my director wanted a specific reaction from me, he asked my scene partner to walk up to me and pinch my butt. I was told to cover my ears and hum to myself so that I would be unable to hear this instruction. I was therefore not able to say to either my scene partner or director that I was tremendously afraid of people touching my butt, and when this thing that I had not consented to happened, I had a full on panic attack, but tried to get through the scene to my director saying "Yes! That!" When the scene was over I tried, through my tears, to explain to him that I was not okay, and to his credit he did speak to me after rehearsal and apologize, but it just demonstrates a lack of awareness that we students are not just puppets to play with for the sake of art (or in some cases, ego), but real people who need the same amount of respect that we would afford to anyone.

In addition, at this school, my grade was affected by whether or not I wore a skirt/dress and heels for any mock audition/performance test. I was not allowed to wear dress pants and receive full marks.

None of the faculty members responsible for the above are still employed at this institution, though not as a direct result of these behaviours from what I understand. I think it is a very old way of thinking, and a very unhelpful one. How much was I willing to then risk in a rehearsal room after suffering a panic attack in front of all of my classmates? How much will I be able to trust my fellow actors when we are taking secret instructions from the director that the person it affects is not allowed

to listen?

I am really encouraged by all of this sharing, and I do not wish to compare my situation to anyone else's. I do not know the particulars of this school, but I have not had a place to voice these experiences before and this felt like an appropriate opportunity. The only solution to these issues at my school was honestly because someone new came in and disagreed with those people for whatever reason. I do not know how George Brown can be helped if the people in charge haven't listened for decades- it just needs new people in charge.



**Michael Ripley (Anderson) says:**

February 21, 2017 at 12:53 pm

As an alumni of George Brown Theatre School from back in the 90s I don't look back at my experience fondly — though my reasons have more to do with who I was than who taught me. Megan's story is heartbreaking but it's important to note the malicious tactics employed by some instructors and directors isn't confined to GBTS. The power a teacher wields in a theatre school attracts individuals who enjoy controlling and (sometimes) humiliating their charges.

Though there are many possible solutions, I'd like to put forth the following as a good place to start:

- Mandatory sensitivity training for permanent instructors — something that clearly maps-out what is and isn't acceptable. In the case of guest directors/teachers a contract rider that details what the school's expectations are and what the consequences will be if they break the rules of conduct
- Random class and rehearsal auditing (by the school or a neutral third party)
- Regular audio taping of classes should also be considered — especially with teachers with a history of bad behaviour. Tapes would only be referred to when proof is required
- Schools need to actively empower students to speak up and offer them a safe and, if need be, anonymous process that is fair (to them and the teacher) and dependable.
- Classes should elect a deputy whose job it is to report abuse and harassment. It would be a nice primer for professional life where an Equity Deputy is standard practice



**Jackie says:**

February 21, 2017 at 1:42 pm

I can certainly say that while this phenomenally brave post and many of the comments here have been directed toward a particular institution, this type of treatment is in no way isolated to that conservatory program.

I did not attend this school but sadly none of the comments that Megan experienced surprised me considering experiences and stories from alumni of my former program and friends and colleagues from others. This is simply how many people who are entrusted to teach young people the craft of acting feel it is appropriate and necessary to mould young minds.

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**Cherry says:**

February 21, 2017 at 2:36 pm

I've never read anything that so perfectly hits the nail on the head about how I felt about theatre school also. It's been 5 years since I graduated, 5 years of carefully forgetting all the pain and confusion and helplessness that I experienced. I just wanted to be good. I just wanted to be liked. I tried speaking to teachers, and then getting laughed at for my insecurities. I tried speaking to the school councillors, who also told me it "was no big deal". I couldn't even explain to my parents what was fully happening for fear they would take me out of the program, or worse, blame it on me. I didn't know who I was, barely 19 years old when I began, still discovering my sexuality and I just couldn't fit into that school's cookie cutter ideas. I'm so happy people are finally taking the experiences of these students seriously, because I was truly so close to suicide many times during this awful experience. I kept thinking, "Is that what it would take to change people's minds? Does someone have to kill themselves for things to change?" I'm glad it hasn't come to that. Thank you so much for your bravery in writing this piece, you are stronger than I am.

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**M says:**

February 21, 2017 at 3:19 pm

It's painful to see faculty, guest instructors, guests artists and staff who neither participate, nor (can we assume) choose complicity in the issue that provoked this article, seemingly disappearing behind it as an indictment of an entire program and methodology.

Nor do I feel it's right for current students, former students and graduates to be left dangling out in front of this. Advocacy is demanded. Our ability to stand backed by our training impacts our livelihoods. We deserve that.

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**Jocelyn says:**

February 21, 2017 at 3:40 pm

At my school (different from the program that has been spoken about a lot in these comments) in some classes there was a practice of students "taking their hits", referring to how you will read to a casting director. Students would stand in front of the class one at a time while teachers told them what the "real world" would think of them. While some teachers were more kind while giving students their hits, others told students horrible things. I remember one student who was told his hit was a pedophile or a child molester.

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**A says:**

February 21, 2017 at 3:48 pm

Thank you Megan Robinson for sharing your story. It has been so many years since I have graduated

from the university theatre program I attended. Almost daily, I think of what happened to me in those years. While most of my instructors were quite good, there was one instructor that cut me down to the point where I literally believed my life was worth nothing. He told me, “you can’t change skin, bones, and hair. And you don’t have the skin, bones, and hair to make it in this business.” I blamed myself for not being strong enough, for not having the resilience the other actors seemed to have. I have often fantasized about speaking out publicly against the person who stole my joy away, but I’ve never done it. The main reason is that this person is still, as far as I know, a respected acting teacher. It boggles my mind, but it’s true.

I think there is an incorrect perception that this kind of thing does not happen in University-based acting programs. In my experience, this was not the case. It did happen, but it happened in a more insidious way. And as we had to re-audition at the end of every year to remain in the program, the teachers held a power over us that added to the stress and anxiety some of us felt. From what I saw it mostly happened to women and minorities, and it all came from the same instructor. But we were all too hungry for work upon graduating, so no one said a thing.



Sarah Kitz says:

February 21, 2017 at 4:39 pm

This experience is enraging and heartbreakingly common and must die out by our collective insisting that it is not ok, not permissible, not tough love. That it is abuse and manipulation. It happens outside of schools and training programs too, as young actors want to get along and be liked and be (re)hired, and so are open to being abused and manipulated by directors and coaches who engage in that behaviour.

I attend Theatre Ontario Grad Showcase (or whatever it’s called now) as a director and the number of young women who get up and showcase emotional damage is simply astonishing. They’ve obviously been led to believe that damage is what’s wanted from them as female artists (but it better be pretty).

Guest artists in the schools, artists in schools and at jobs, directors and coaches, continue to call this behaviour out and refuse to work in these conditions. If we coddle it through silence for fear or not working we help its continuance. Great thanks for those who’ve already paved the way. Massive thanks and heart to Megan for writing this, for all the contributions in this thread, and for the space to have this conversation. May it not stay online only.

For young people leaving schools (for all artists) whose imaginations/spirits/histories/bodies have been harmed, whose wild and intricate capacities brought them to the theatre in the first place, we need your voices. Don’t be afraid to say no to things (or be afraid; it can be scary – but do it anyway). There are artists out here who don’t work through shame and power abuse and who want you strongly in the room.



joel says:

February 21, 2017 at 5:13 pm

this is all pretty chilling – i have taught at both conservatory and liberal arts theatre programmes – in fact, i left the former because i believed that at the undergraduate level only a liberal arts setting would be a positive environment in which to work with students of varying commitments.

i've found that, with very few exceptions, theatre training isn't ideally suited to people just out of high school. it is often a time of emotional chaos and a struggle for one's identity – when that is mixed into psychological exploration of oneself and characters that draw upon one's life experience, the results can be harrowing. add to this the competitive nature of excelling, of being praised, of feeling worthy and it's not at all surprising that there are many casualties.

and if, added to this, teachers are using their positions to assert themselves, to play power and mind games, well, chaos becomes insanity of a kind.



Kristan says:

February 21, 2017 at 7:15 pm

When people ask me what my experience at theatre school was like, even though it's been more than 10 years since I've graduated, I still have a difficult time answering that question. It was hard. It was extremely emotional (pretty sure I cried at least once a week for three years) & physically challenging (I lost 15 pounds in the first two months of my first year). But (and this is a HUGE "but"), I'd like to think that even though I'm not using my training towards an acting career, those 3 years made me a better person. They mostly made me a better person because I met the best people – who I'm still very, very close with. Sure, I'm a little bit braver, but the best thing that came out of theatre school (FOR ME), was my friends. Not everything at theatre school was terrible. I had some really nurturing teachers who legitimately cared about my success as an actor & as a person. Guest teachers came in & blew my mind at how fun & passionate they were about a 5 minute scene or 1.5 mins. monologue from a play written hundreds of years ago (and made me really love classical text). Some guest instructors came in & made me not want to work in the business because of how verbally abusive they were to my friends. And some faculty members played mind games with me (and my friends) that made me desperate to find approval from them, rather than stand up for myself.

Even though people have different experiences of this program, there's clearly a similar thread here. When Patrick, my friend, brought abuse issues up shortly after we graduated he was aggressively, swept under the rug (even though he had gathered dozens upon dozens of stories from others who experienced similar abuse). After a while, I kind of tried to purposely forget about how traumatic some of my days were at school. But reading this article & the comments brought a lot of those nasty feelings back. I've lost a bit of sleep over it as I wasn't really sure what to do. Do I stand by watching the train wreck? (Which I admit has been infuriating & empowering all at the same time) Or do I say something? And if I say something, what do I even say? Would what I say even matter? Would it make a difference? Because when I spoke up & supported my friend, it did not make a difference.

I applaud Megan & everyone above who has shared their experiences for their bravery. It's not easy to be vulnerable, even on the internet.

**Kasey says:**

February 21, 2017 at 7:20 pm

I went through the same program and have to say that lack of integrity in that place was shocking to me. It took me years to get over the toxic build up in my system, to move on, to even be able to imagine creating again. It was years before I felt like I could think about it, or talk to the classmates I had gone through it with. Labour laws do not allow people to work under these conditions while being PAID – and yet we were paying for the privilege to be there. We would work 12 hour days, and often by the time I was home at night, I knew I would be leaving again in less than 8 hours. I remember on Thursdays, we only got a 20 minute lunch break. When we complained to administration, we were told to suck it up. The constant fear and threat of “being kicked out” kept us from fighting for basic human rights. That was before they added an 8am cardio class, because they noticed we were getting tubby. Any attempt to improve our situation was taken as a threat, and resisted against.

Most mornings I truly felt like I would rather die than go to school. My fear of dropping out, of failing and looking weak was the only thing I was more afraid of.

The magic of the place is in the illusion, the bubble that is created. Everyone wants in, and so very few make it in. You are told it is the best of the best. You are privileged to be there. Only the really strong and talented will make it. And you want to be that. Even if it means being told “it’s hard to remember you are a woman,” or “were you that weird girl growing up who had to make people laugh so that they would like you?” or “I think you would be better suited to working on a fourth floor somewhere, filling out forms from 9 to 5.”

Or, one of my favourites, “it’s a shame she isn’t more interesting to watch since she is so “statuesque. Like a greek statue.”

They make you believe that the school is everything, so you live to learn, to get better so that you will please them. To be the best you can be. Most of the time with no idea how to get better, or what the actual goal is. We would desperately ask ourselves and each other, what is it they want? We would watch each other get praised or destroyed, most of the time unable to understand why.

Most importantly, you have to believe in the magic. You have to believe that the place is everything, the answer to your future and your career. Because if you don’t believe it? Well – the minute the bubble pops, and you see it for what it is, you realize that you have put yourself through hell for nothing. For worse than nothing.

**Sharron Matthews says:**

February 21, 2017 at 7:48 pm

All these comments make me mad and sad.

I had truly hoped it was different now.

I feel like the comments and judgements put upon me, my size and looks during my three years at theatre school took me so far from happiness, self confidence and success.

The journey to that place was long...and I wonder what it would have been like if my total self had

been encouraged and celebrated

I was taken aside my second year (after being continually harassed about my weight in front of many class members) and told by the AD of the program that “I wasn’t pretty, I was too big, I couldn’t sing and I wasn’t the best dancer but that I was funny and should focus on that.”

That moment stayed in my mind and on my spirit like a stain for many years.

I think it is a total travesty that I EVER believed that it was okay to have my body be a topic of discussion.

Whilst I was teaching at a theatre summer school in Hamilton a number of years ago I remember watching the person in charge of the program tell a young man that he would have a huge career if he wasn’t so fat...and then he poked him in the stomach and clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

That young man has a wonderful career, by the way.

And all this “it made you strong” bullshit is just that...bullshit.

I DO wonder how many wonderful people left the business because they were emotionally terrorized.



**FD says:**

February 21, 2017 at 8:14 pm

I didn’t need to read anything other than the article to know what theatre school and ‘teacher’ was being talked about...sad really, and very telling. Thank you for your bravery to confront and share your story which so many of us identify with.



**James says:**

February 21, 2017 at 9:10 pm

As someone who is both nearing the end of highschool and researching theatre programs, this article was incredibly enlightening. Thank you for your bravery, Megan.



**Barbara says:**

February 21, 2017 at 10:50 pm

Thank you for writing this. It is well-written and an extremely accurate representation of what theatre school was for so many of us.



**JW says:**

February 21, 2017 at 11:51 pm

The above comment mentioned a decade-old document chronicling the abuse of the class of 2006 “A Legacy of Trauma”. Here it is, for anybody who wants to do more research into the long history of abuse at George Brown.

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/oBx3JheMxEMXmczBMdUpMbXpSYko/edit>



Antonio says:

February 22, 2017 at 10:31 am

I went to another of the conservatories in Toronto a few years before this period, and found a pretty similar attitude in the instructors there. And while I witnessed some really bad behaviour from faculty, I think all of it orients around more of a culture of pedagogy in acting training, than in any particular instructor's innate problem. Let me point out that our class (an MFA co-hort) got tagged as a "problem class" very soon into the first year – and the faculty let us know this repeatedly. Faculty hinted that our class first was compromised by letting less talented people into it in order to give us some form of racial balance (our class had both Asian-Canadian and African-Canadian members – apparently a first for both in the masters). Furthermore, when one of the lead acting instructors learned that 4 of the 6 men in the class were gay, he turned red, and was speechless for at least five minutes. He had confided in myself and another member of the class, in his office, that he thought the following years might be troubling because he believed that possibly two of the cohort were gay. When we corrected him that four of us were, including us two, he didn't know how to act. When a racial incident happened in our class, the same instructor failed to respond in any way to keep people safe, or to air the issues at hand in a safe and healthy way. He instead withdrew to a corner and allowed frightening arguments and accusations to escalate in the class. This same instructor told a woman (in her 30s, with an established resume) in the co-hort that she was untalented and made a comment about her face not being appropriate for the stage in our very first week – before she'd even had a chance to show what she could do. She was massively humiliated and left the program shortly thereafter. What was interesting was that all these behaviours were clearly done in order to infantilise and disempower us. We were forced to know continually that we were powerless in the situation. And that the culture of the department existed in such a way that allowed the instructors such a leeway in "pedagogy" that it included what was clearly abuse. There were numerous other incidents that we experienced throughout our time that are extremely similar to those mentioned by the author. The idea that only a certain physical model for women, and a vocal model for men (Ie. not a hint of gay) were dropped as punishment bombs on various students regularly. And yet, these would be then followed up by promises of great things if only one would – in essence – do as one was told. That is, be thin enough, be macho enough. And it is from this ethos, to humiliate and reward, that most bad behaviour seemed to come out of. I was lucky, I had an advisor my first year who treated me like a colleague and is today a good friend. I could escape to his office for various amounts of support and reflection. Plus I was a fighter. When persons tried to give me marks that were clearly unfair, I appealed them – so that they went out of the closed circle of infantilisation, and up the chain of the university to where they could be adjudicated fairly. But I'd fear for any student for whom such refuges were not available.



Lara Cotnam Pagano says:

February 22, 2017 at 10:33 am



I am horrified that this is still happening. I attended the same program from 2000-2003 and am sickened and in shock that this abuse is still going on. We were the first class with the teacher you mentioned, and I was so taken aback at his methods, having graduated from Queen's where we were encouraged to think critically, discuss and debate freely with our professors. I spent my three years of theatre school trying to hold on to my self-confidence while my acting teacher was trying to rip me to shreds. Several of my classmates went on to have successful careers (on and off stage) and I can honestly say that our success is not because of the school but in spite of it.

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**Christine G Willes says:**

February 22, 2017 at 10:42 am

When I trained, back before the flood, the Report of the Committee of Enquiry into Theatre training in Canada (Black Report 1977) was published. It began with a full page quote of all the lyrics to Noel Coward's 1935 song "Don't Put your Daughter on the Stage Mrs. Worthington'. The reported lamented the fact that so many young women were training for careers as actors, with an unspoken bias that many, like Mrs. Worthington's Daughter, were unsuitable due to the 'width of their seat' and other charmless attributes. Needless to say there was no such cautionary lyric for young men training to be actors. It was part of what made me a life long feminist committed to change the sexism and lack of gender equality in theatre and screen-based media. Far too often the gender bias has gone underground, but still exerts its malice. It's not just that former teacher, it's the theatres and film companies that continue to produce, and normalize, stories where women are under-represented or stereo-typed. I hope the writer of this article makes her own work, and challenges the system that perpetuates the undermining of young women artists. I did.

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**Jessica Van der Veen says:**

February 22, 2017 at 12:06 pm

You sure did Christine – and we are lucky to have such a strong, honourable woman in Canada's acting community! HUGS! J

(Full disclosure – Christine is my business partner and friend, and a badass actress. She has also spent countless hours volunteering with ACTRA to improve women's destinies in the business. We owe her big time.)

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**Salvatore Antonio says:**

February 22, 2017 at 10:53 am

I was asked to share my private FB post from yesterday in this public forum (forgive the long post): 'This article is such a tough one to read— but so important to consider. Kudos to Megan Robinson for having the courage to write it, and to Intermission for posting it. As a graduate of a well-respected conservatory (NTSC) we had our own versions of these

trespasses/ers. As a class, we took action with some (to the voiced judgement of some older students and alumni), and others we accepted as just being ‘part of the program’.

I ended up teaching at my school (years after graduating) and I now run a program here in Toronto. It’s tough to be a tough teacher and not cross over into bullying. Theatre training is riddled with grey areas. There is a certain amount of criticism that is absolutely crucial to coaching— the artist grows by either defending, galvanizing, or adjusting. What is NOT acceptable is couching these observations/opinions in personal attacks in order to destabilize the person. Tough notes can be very helpful in stretching an artist— attacks on an artist’s own character are not only not helpful, but damaging— it’s bad teaching: it reveals the lack of skill in the ‘teacher’.

We ALL have opinions— but those aren’t the same as lessons.

I consider my self to be somewhat of a tough teacher. I speak to my students as I would like to be spoken to: straight up and specific— all the while remembering that I needn’t take down the PERSON, in order to strengthen the ARTIST.

As a teacher, sometimes you do push a bit too hard, and then you have to counter or adjust or apologize. It’s not easy— but it’s where your skill comes in to play. It’s also important to never forget what it was like to be on the other side. Who are we kidding— we should always keep one foot on the other side.

Stanislavski wrote something which I’ve held on to as a good reminder:

“To arouse a desire to create is difficult, to kill a desire is extremely easy.”



**Salvatore Antonio says:**

February 22, 2017 at 10:55 am

This article is such a tough one to read— but so important to consider. Kudos to Megan Robinson for having the courage to write it, and to Intermission for posting it.

As a graduate of a well-respected conservatory (NTSC) we had our own versions of these trespasses/ers. As a class, we took action with some (to the voiced judgement of some older students and alumni), and others we accepted as just being ‘part of the program’.

I ended up teaching at my school (years after graduating) and I now run a program here in Toronto. It’s tough to be a tough teacher and not cross over into bullying. Theatre training is riddled with grey areas. There is a certain amount of criticism that is absolutely crucial to coaching— the artist grows by either defending, galvanizing, or adjusting. What is NOT acceptable is couching these observations/opinions in personal attacks in order to destabilize the person. Tough notes can be very helpful in stretching an artist— attacks on an artist’s own character are not only not helpful, but damaging— it’s bad teaching: it reveals the lack of skill in the ‘teacher’.

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other side.

Stanislavski wrote something which I've held on to as a good reminder:

"To arouse a desire to create is difficult, to kill a desire is extremely easy."



Ed Gass-Donnelly says:

February 22, 2017 at 11:47 am

Another small man making himself feel bigger by diminishing the light of others.



Jessica Van der Veen says:

February 22, 2017 at 11:56 am

Oh my this reminds me of my training all those years ago. It has made me (I hope) a compassionate and creative teacher. The problem with manipulative acting teachers is that they get results but they don't teach students how to get the results by themselves when the teacher isn't there. They are also generally cruel, careless, and unkind, which is not what the business is.

In my experience, the actual professional work culture is characterized by generosity and excellent manners. Sometimes people will create a drama in production – which is very easy to spot as a manifestation of fear. Best thing to do is watch the movie and not be in it.

Bad training is terrible for a creative young person. Some people do it to "prepare students for the hardship of the theatre career". That's stoopid. Like parenting, the best preparation you can give someone for hardship is a few conscious strategies and massive amounts of unconditional love and support. It's the good times that get you through the bad times.

Lastly – In general, not always, studying with someone who hasn't worked in years is a bad idea. Many of the incidents described above are just plain jealousy and bitterness on the part of the teacher. Mainly though, on a positive note, there is nothing more reassuring than roaring with laughter in a classroom with a teacher describing what they learned by screwing up themselves. Oh the agony and the ecstasy of life as a performer!

I very much appreciated the main contention of the article – that learning to dance in the unknown is essential to the life of any artist. Only the unknown is creative, or as one of my finest students once said: "You do all the homework and all the techniques as much as you can and more; and then finally...you surrender the result."

Best wishes, J



Jeff Andrews says:

February 22, 2017 at 12:53 pm

As an agent of thirty years, and a friend to some who have shared comments in this section, I am disgusted, pissed off and ashamed to have been a willing participant in a system that would equate abuse with "the reality" of the entertainment business. As so many have pointed out, mental abuse,

sexual harassment or intimidation of any kind would not be allowed in a professional workplace. There are systems in place, recourse, consequences. I feel nauseous. Wtf is wrong with that school?? that man??



Caitlin says:

February 22, 2017 at 3:11 pm

I honestly did not know this kind of behavior was this wide-spread. I thought I was in part of a small group that encountered it. I hope as a community we can continue to talk about these issues. Comforting to know I'm not alone. Sad to know that this is so damn rampant. Thank you for sharing your story and enlightening others.

Theatre school for me is a distant memory, but with that distance I now feel like I can walk into auditions without anxiety anymore. I don't see myself as boxed into one category anymore (even when I get rejected). I do much better work then I did all those years ago. The crippling fear to create is gone. The ruling voices we were told to consistently never challenge don't plague my mind anymore. My understanding of those voices read more as not reflections of me, but reflections of people who'd lost their creative mojo, who were bored, and were now taking out some anger on me. The peers who bought into that mindset either are no longer apart of my life or gave up acting altogether.

I wasted so much time on that fear, but I'm out the other side more determined than ever. I felt newfound pride in turning my attention over to directing, writing, and producing after the fact. There's a certain happiness I find in working with actors who can look within themselves to make a character theirs. As a leader, I know I don't own it, they do. I look at it as my way of slapping these destructive patterns in the face and empowering others. I've been in the pit and I don't want anyone else there as well.



Ethan O says:

February 22, 2017 at 6:01 pm

Hi,

Thank you for beautifully articulating what is fundamentally toxic about theatre schools. I was a student who was dismissed from a theatre school in Toronto in 2007. I was simply told that 'I was not ready' for this 'work.' In reality, the faculty had made up their mind about me months earlier. I was ostracized from by the program mid-year. The professors would not work with me, give me notes on my performance or interact with me outside of class. The other students – who were hungry for approval from the faculty as well – followed suit. I was told I did not have the 'look' for TV/film, unless I wanted to play 'character roles.' As a 18 year old, that type of news was redefining. I don't tell friends and family much about my year at theatre school because it was a nightmare. Truly an absolute nightmare.

Thankfully, a decade later, I perused a different professional path, obtained a graduate degree and now I'm working in my chosen field. I have an excellent career in the city I love. As for the theatre, I

perform stand-up comedy around town too, which keeps me connected to my roots on the stage. Being 'dismissed' from theatre school was a difficult journey, but ultimately, it gave me the freedom to choose a different life for myself.

I can't imagine what four years in that environment would have done to my mental well-being. I hope this article echoes to all future students who dream of a life on the stage or in television and think a theatre school will propel them there.

Well said and thank you again.



**Geoff Scovell says:**

February 22, 2017 at 6:20 pm

Thank you for this.

I went to school to learn technique and hone my craft. I was told I would never be an actor of quality until I had experienced, what my teacher considered to be, a devastating loss in my life with which to draw experience. That I would never understand true love, loss or tragedy until I had truly experienced it. One teacher told me I should only play gay roles because I was too pretty to do anything else, and another told me that proper training should include how to work retail and service jobs since that's what I would be doing most of the time. I remember thinking 'then why am I here'

I enjoyed my time at school and I wouldn't trade it for anything. It shaped my career, but I sometimes wonder, especially after reading stories like this, that maybe who I am professionally is in spite of that training, not because of it.

How does a training institution properly reconcile the dichotomy of technique vs experience in such a vulnerable environment with such obvious power dynamics?

Despite the obvious difference in experiences I had with you, this piece really spoke to me. Good for you and thank you for speaking up. Continue to do so. You have support



**Matthew Hines says:**

February 23, 2017 at 1:04 am

For the record, the guy in his mid twenties who the teacher said nobody would have sex with... was in his early twenties. 😊



**Natalie Sanborn says:**

February 23, 2017 at 2:24 am

Most people in my life today don't know I attended theatre school. I attended this theatre school. I don't talk about it because it's a part of my life I've tried hard to forget. I too felt that acceptance to this school (even though it was off the waiting list) was proof that I did in fact have what it takes. I was a naive 18 year old who had excelled in my performing arts high school's drama department. I brought with me a typical, non-eventful upbringing and did not bring a lifetime of experience, particularly

trauma, to theatre school, I didn't know it was expected of me. I too tried over and over to impress this acting teacher. Putting myself in front of people I had come to love and respect, trying desperately to get it right, and being told over and over that I was boring, lacked depth, was plain, just didn't have what it takes, never got it right. These acting classes were hours long, and filled with fear. Sitting on the floor, watching him rip apart my friends and dreading my eventual "turn". I too watched this acting teacher praise a select group of students, usually over their beauty or ability to cry during even the most mundane of scenes (even back then I remember thinking, is acting just crying then?). I watched him continuously praise a male student who engaged in abusive and misogynistic behaviour towards the female students. Everyone else in my class was creeped out by this man, and even felt threatened by him, this was exactly why the acting teacher loved him. This student once, during an acting exercise raised his hand towards a woman, as if to hit her, so violently that the girl had to stop the scene out of fear, while other men in the class readied themselves to jump up and restrain him. She was shaking and crying. The teacher commended his acting choice and commitment. Oh ya, he also poked people with a long stick while they were trying to do a scene. Some BS about waking them up. Imagine trying to do your best in a scene while fearing that any mistake could lead to physical abuse. We didn't know any better. He was, after all, the teacher.

Every moment was spent in fear. You had to do everything they said and take all of their abuse, and if not you'd be sent home, along with your dreams. I too was told I could not attend my own grandmother's funeral because my presence as the silent servant no.2 was absolutely vital to the particular performance. Of course I had a choice, but if I chose to attend the funeral, I would be removed from the program. I missed the funeral. A similar threat was waged when I had a flu so bad I could not stop throwing up. In between scenes I hugged the toilet bowl in the green room, trying to keep my costume clean. This was the theatre I was told.

Just like the author, I sat in front of the "panel" at the end of each term. I would sit on the stool fighting back tears as each teacher, outlined all of my faults and downfalls. All the reasons I was not a good actor. At 19 years old I was keenly aware of everything wrong with me. I wasn't pretty enough, didn't stand out enough, couldn't sing well enough, did not have enough life experience to draw from, did not express enough emotion, did not show enough dedication. Unlike the author, the end of my second year my "panel" assessment culminated in the information that I would not be invited back for my 3rd and final year. The acting teacher cross legged, hand in his chin, with the smallest of insidious smirks on his face. He said he was sure I'd find some success doing something else. He clearly loved ejecting me.

And with that, the only thing I had ever felt passion for up to that point was over. I haven't acted since that meeting in 2003. My age, lack of experience and the brainwashing I had experienced at the school did not allow me to see the abusive situation I had just experienced for 2 years. I simply accepted that I was not a good actor (In fact I believed I was a terrible one), and tried to move on in my life. Being ejected from the program was a huge relief, but being rejected from the entire world of acting (which is how I saw it) was devastating.

Considering how horrible this experience was, I don't actually think about it often. I have found success elsewhere, but continue to believe that I am a terrible actor. I miss the theatre, and the thrill of performing for an audience, but the trauma of my school experience and this acting teacher particularly has kept me away. This post made all those feelings come flooding back. Thank you for



writing it. It is comforting to know that I am not the only one. But it's heartbreaking to know that this is still happening 12 years later. The cavalier way that they critique and control people's bodies, condone sexual abuse on behalf of students, and allow sexual and physical abuse at the hands of teachers should have shut them down long ago. These poor kids are not afforded the luxury of questioning what is happening to them, because the threat of ejection is ever present. I wish I had the knowledge and tools that I have now when I was there. I feel like I could have, should have, done something. But I guess this is why they bring them in young. It's much easier to educate through fear when your students don't yet understand that this isn't how the world should work. I wonder how many other people have abandoned something that truly made them happy because of this school and this teacher.



**Tanisha Taitt says:**

February 23, 2017 at 2:35 am

After I read this article I didn't know quite what to do, so I did this (below) and immediately reached out to the people I know who might be in this situation as we speak — at this school or anywhere else — or are about to head to theatre school and need to be able to discern between what does and doesn't cross the line. It's so important to compile these disturbing stories of experiences past, as long as we remember also that there are students going through this RIGHT NOW who need to know that we are here and that we will be their voice today and tomorrow.

[https://www.facebook.com/notes/tanisha-taitt/to-the-beautiful-teens-whom-i-have-mentored-directed/10154985233177317/?comment\\_id=10154991086692317&reply\\_comment\\_id=10154991143907317&notif\\_t=feed\\_comment&notif\\_id=1487805414744844](https://www.facebook.com/notes/tanisha-taitt/to-the-beautiful-teens-whom-i-have-mentored-directed/10154985233177317/?comment_id=10154991086692317&reply_comment_id=10154991143907317&notif_t=feed_comment&notif_id=1487805414744844)



**Jake Deeth says:**

February 23, 2017 at 6:02 pm

I just graduated this school last April. I do not feel it is my place to comment on the state of any administration, be it past or future, solely because I am not educated in said field. But I would like to throw my comment into this thread, not to counteract anyone's valid opinions, just to write my own. I would not give up anything for the last three years of my life back. Every late night strengthened me, every comment drove me, every opportunity terrified and excited. At the end of my three years, I was sad to leave. I have a learning disability. It is a selective form of dyslexia, which makes it impossible for me to cold read a script. I had told my acting teacher about my disability, being quite vague of what the disability actually entailed. The teacher acknowledged it, and moved on. During an acting class we were put in a circle and given a script to cold read. Being terrified to read, but not wanting to make a fuss, I read. As expected, my reading went horribly. That day I was asked to stay back after class by the teacher. In the place of what I thought would be a lecture, was a truly honest and respectful apology, and a promise that something like this would never happen again in the class. The greatest acting lesson I have ever received was from that same teacher while directing my class in our third year test piece. My first rehearsal was a solo rehearsal with just the teacher and I for forty five minutes

in the mid afternoon. As I expected, I was stopped within three line of my monologue. The teacher told me that we should step away from the play for a moment and just talk. The teacher proceeded to complement me on the person that I had held on to during my years at the school, and the person that I have become. He then told me everything that I needed to do to become an actor. After reading off a list of everything I needed to do if I ever wanted to be an honest actor, I responded with, "I don't think I can do that." In my head I started to make a plan of what I should do next; finish the show, drop out of school, and move back home. But before I could fall deeper into a hole, he responded with, "Jake, I wouldn't ask this of you, if I didn't think you could do it." Needless to say, my "Plan B" flew out the window. Everyone's experience at theatre school is vastly different, this was just a small exert of mine. Thank for reading.



A.A. says:

February 24, 2017 at 5:13 pm

It's not just in the schools, it's in the audition rooms. I survived theatre school, but I didn't survive being harassed in auditions. The most notably traumatic being the auditions held by a well-known theatre company headed by a well-known shyster of a man. When I've told my story to fellow young women, they are never surprised. They have a story of their own. It seems they despise the same once-loved, once-idealised company for similar reasons.



M.W. says:

March 7, 2017 at 9:20 pm

No question in my mind who is being referred to here. Did this well-known shyster of a man ask you to make your performance sexual in some way and then insert himself into the scene, by any chance? As a "senior" member of this community, I am aware of decades worth of these stories about this person.



LAUREN SPRING says:

February 25, 2017 at 2:34 pm

Brave and beautifully written piece. Tragic so many of us can relate. Not knowing what to do with the anger, sadness, disappointment and confusion I was feeling after years of harassment by theatre teachers, directors, and other power-holders in the industry, Thomas and I made this short video a few years ago:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ONI4jvjcE8>

We hoped it would reflect the conflicting emotions many young women endure in conservatory programs; simultaneously knowing that those directing us are taking advantage of our vulnerability and openness, while also trying to please/ impress them. I think the fact that most of the comments on this video reflect uncertainty as to whether the clip is real or fiction, says a lot about theatre

school/ the industry today.



Kelly Whitehorse says:

February 28, 2017 at 4:00 am

Call me a troll if you want, but there's another side to this coin. From my experience at GBTS, I found the head of acting was a great teacher, though not perfect. I feel the people who run that program could most certainly afford to make some adjustments to improve the learning experience there, which could help them & the students achieve more success. If they ever asked me, I'd gladly share my thoughts with them. For example, the "cuts factor" definitely played games with my head & hindered learning to a degree. However, it also kept me sharp & calculated & created a strong confidence in my capabilities as a professional, after I made it. Cuts should remain, but 3rd years should be treated as if it were a pro company, which since they can boot you out at any time if they so much as feel like it, is not indicative of a pro environment. I think the approach they're going for is a "if you can make it here you can make it anywhere" one, which, in my opinion has both advantages & disadvantages.

Personally I find the mention of Aboriginal School Children, as if what theater students go through is anywhere in the realm of that horror, is not only tacky, but utterly tasteless. Frankly i'm offended by it... but don't worry, I wont alert the "Thought Police". Nothing, not one thing said in the article or comments sais that the head of acting at GBTS has committed harassment. Did he call you a derogatory word? Slap someone's ass? Yank anyone's crank? No? He didn't? Ok, well then sorry to brake it to you but its not abuse. Word's, with the exception of ones that directly threaten someones well being, are not (or at least shouldn't be) crimes. If you think they are, then I believe you shouldn't be an artist or intellectual because the very freedoms you seek to destroy, make up the fabric of what you claim to love. To lump this teacher in with people who ACTUALLY commit abuse, is not right. Anyone with the slightest shred of intelligence can see what you're doing here. At no time in my experience with this teacher did he commit, or strike me as someone who would commit verbal, sexual, or physical harassment. & again, nothing mentioned here sais he did either.

As far as how Universities do things, I'd recommend that any school does the exact opposite of what they're doing in this country right now; what with their gagging of free speech, untruths & all out institutionalized Marxism... if you ask me, some University are a bit of a laughing stalk at the moment. & GB simply produces better actors than most of them, I've seen it. Love them or hate them, no acting school in this country is better than GBTS, maybe as good, but not better. The head of acting taught me lots of great tools, & I was no golden boy, got carved up like TG turkey on a number of occasions. Sometimes he missed & his words weren't necessary, but mostly it helped. In fact allot of the teachers helped me very much.

This all obviously all ties in to a bigger political agenda here, & one that I do not approve of. To smear him as abusive & say he deserves to be fired is not fair. To anyone considering a career in show bizz or art, if words offend you easily, this is not the profession for you. This is a liberal study, save your security cameras, onsite auditors, class deputy's & free speech cops for a more bland profession please. This profession is where ideas & culture come from.

Peace & love.

Proud 2009 graduate of GBTS,  
Kelly Whitehorse

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**Michael Kras says:**

March 1, 2017 at 9:08 am

Kelly, saying that verbal and emotional abuse isn't "real" abuse is not only reductive, but dangerous. You are discrediting an entire population of people, in theatre or not, who have been victim to this kind of treatment, and it has wreaked havoc on their mental health (and sometimes by extension, physical health).

I'm kind of taken aback that you only call it abuse if it leaves superficial, visible scars or is an explicit threat to someone's physical well being. Something you as an outsider of someone's experience can point at and say "See? THAT's abuse." You don't know what's going on that you can't see on someone's exterior.

Through theatre school, though my conservatory was an overall productive environment for me, I developed an eating disorder because of the stress and, well, the nature of acting training itself can be emotionally challenging as we know. This is something no one explicitly knew (and this is the first time I've ever admitted it). I was able to work past this after graduation and readjusted to life, but now as I work in the industry, I've begun having sporadic panic attacks that feel as visceral and scary as anything. One attack convinced me I was having a heart attack. If you met me in person, you'd see that I'm pretty high functioning for someone who carries a LOT of anxiety. The same goes for many, many people. I'm pretty sad that you diminish that.

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**Anonymous says:**

March 5, 2017 at 10:39 am

Kelly, as someone who never attended theatre school, I can't speak to anyone's experience, but I can say, as an agent, that your comment about GB producing the best actors is just not accurate. In the past 10 years, I have been to too many shows to count, at least two per year, and every Theatre Showcase, and I can tell you that faculty is letting the graduates down. I find the productions, especially in the last six years, do not put the grads in the best light, and many agents agree with me. It's time for a huge overhaul in staff.

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**Patrick Cieslar says:**

March 1, 2017 at 11:25 am

Kelly: Obviously, we share little to no common ground on these matters. I would hazard to say that your beliefs expressed here also share little to no common ground either with any official policies, broader community standards, decades of legal precedent or indeed the Criminal Code of Canada. Our views are so vastly divergent that I don't imagine anything I could say here would change your

mind.

I do wish to address, however, my mention of residential schools. I think my statement makes clear that the experiences arising from that horrific chapter in Canadian history are, as I say: "truly extreme" and "left far deeper wounds than many of us can ever imagine." I only included that acknowledgement in my earlier post because I think it is the responsibility of all Canadians to pay tribute to those survivors whenever and wherever the occasion presents itself. I wrestled with whether this was an appropriate forum, but in the end decided to err on the side of solidarity. I am happy to continue the conversation about that in another forum at another time.



AD says:

March 1, 2017 at 2:49 pm

Hello. So – I have a bad habit of insinuating myself into conversations that I am not involved in. Say what you want I am a SJW who does her main work in online comment sections (we all gotta start somewhere). I should say that I never went to GB, am not an actor or even involved in theatre (not saying I didn't dabble here and there for fun). I'm not here to comment on the school, or the veracity or nuances of anyone's comments or experiences. I am here to offer a little bit of my own expertise – which is that of a trauma counsellor – particularly one specializing in sexual trauma. I think when discussing in online forums we face pros and cons in terms of our safety and vulnerability. On one hand it is a place where we can speak up and have a voice that otherwise may not be heard/ or it is a way of speaking our narrative carefully and clearly, that in person may be more difficult as emotions sometimes make our stories difficult to articulate. That being said, the written word can also lead to misunderstandings due to lack of tonality, to say the least. And mainly the drawback is that we open ourselves up to criticism that is generally harsher than just sharing with a trusted friend.

SO I guess what I wanted to say was thank you for having this discussion on a public forum so that people like me could stumble upon it and partake. It is brave to share your stories. And I would also request (I am not a moderator I am just requesting out of pure humanity) that we respect the narratives shared here. You may or may not have had the same experience. You may know the person who left the message and have a beef with them. You may feel you have reason to question another's story. And that is all fair. However, in general – really as a rule – people do not make up stories of trauma. And – this is really important – what you consider trauma may not be the same as someone else. By sharing your story you are revealing to others what has harmed you. **AND THAT IS VALID.** It deserves to be shared. Lets not get caught up in a SJW versus Troll mentality. A dissenting opinion is not trolling, nor is being a SJW being over the top. We can coexist and share all our stories to create rich and meaningful dialogue.

If you want to share a story that says you had a great experience at GB and were never harmed, that is great – it contributes to a well rounded conversation, but PLEASE be careful not to write in such a way that it attempts to dismiss or silence the other voices here who have struggled. I have not been sexually assaulted by Bill Cosby. That does not mean other women have not been traumatized by him. Please be mindful that MULTIPLE narratives/experiences can exist simultaneously.

Yes it is very difficult when we hear people say negative things about someone or an institution we are

proud of. It is natural to want to come to the defence. But please realize the impact of that. If an institution, or an instructor truly has not caused harm, than the truth will be revealed as such. You can share your story alongside others, but not over top of. Let the institution speak for itself. And when this many people step foreword, it means many many more are waiting silently in the wings. What does that say? Just food for thought.

Also – since I work with trauma day in and day out I want to remind people that trauma is subjective. Trauma needn't be an overt physical altercation. Trauma – even severe trauma that can lead to PTSD – isn't always the result of a significant event either. Sometimes it is the result of lots of small infractions that add up. It's the small silences that oppress, not always the huge displays. So while you may feel the urge to look at an isolated incident (say, for example, about grade curving) and say “that's not traumatic” – what you are actually demonstrating is your privilege. Your ignorance to the fact that those grade curves happened in a context that was seemingly unsafe for many, that added additional burden, and that you were lucky to have not experienced any of the other incidents. Thats good, I am glad you were not traumatized. (That is genuine – i would never wish harm on anyone). I just am hoping as this comment section starts to explode and more voices are added that we all stay mindful of our fellow human beings on the other end of the screen.

To dismiss trauma not only silences those who were brave to share their story, it silences those waiting in the wings, and tells other people – even younger generations – that they should not have a voice, or that abuse is only valid if it is objectively traumatic to others (who haven't gone through it).

We are not here to compare. We are here to acknowledge. Much like acknowledging those who suffered in residential schools (as one of the commentators mentioned). By sharing “our” trauma here, it may not seem like it “compares”, but it is still valid. That being said, when oppression takes place in a culture where other peoples oppression is worsening or has not been resolved, then I agree that we need to also highlight it – thus acknowledging residential school systems. After all we are talking about trauma at the hands of an educational institution.

Anyway not sure how coherent this message was. Just wanted to share my support for those who have spoken up. To thank you for sharing your voices and to help you know that your feelings are valid, no matter what side of the spectrum they lay on. Yet, while all FEELINGS are valid, if there is systemic abuse happening (whether to you or just others like you (GB grads)), we need to make space to stand up and talk about it. Thoroughly. Respectfully. With nuance. And you know what – lets say all these people are telling the truth (which as a trauma counsellor I suspect they are) – and GB comes under fire....that doesn't change your degree, or your success. So please ask the purpose of sharing your story if it is only to discount or diminish others. Who/what are you trying to protect? And what does that say?

Finally, for those who have experienced trauma, please know there are resources and supports available. A quick google will find a counselling centre or distress line close to you. It's worth it. You don't have to worry if your pain is “valid enough”. As a therapist who works with all types of people and pain, I can say I have NEVER met anyone and thought “oh, your pain isn't as bad you're wasting my time”. NEVER. Its ALL valid. Please take care and practice self care.

**AD says:**

March 1, 2017 at 2:53 pm

Probably should have put a disclaimer: I am not offering professional support or therapy. The opinions expressed are my own. They simply represent my experience and training in trauma and the impacts of trauma, and then also my own personal experiences as a human being communicating online with strangers talking about difficult things. I value respect and I value personal welfare. That is all. I am NOT affiliated with the school, the program, or the people. So I thank you for allowing my participation as a curious bystander. I am also not referring to anyone in particular when I say “you” “they” “we” “our”. These are just generalities in language. Not singling anyone out or taking sides. Just validating my understanding of trauma, and how we need to create safe and respectful online spaces.

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**Patrick Cieslar says:**

March 2, 2017 at 6:21 pm

I cannot thank you enough AD for your deeply insightful and thorough comments. You have provided a new frame of reference and level of expertise in these matters that has been so badly needed for so many years.

I suspect our community has fallen short in carefully distinguishing between life onstage and life offstage. There is no doubt that a wondrous permeability exists between the two worlds. Both seem to influence each other in often magical and mysterious ways. But it is so vital for actors and acting instructors alike to develop and maintain a well-defined and ethical home base from which to operate.

An actor's job is to traverse the thresholds of multiple moral universes. We are called to inhabit viewpoints that differ wildly from our ordinary conceptions of fairness and justice. Great actors can cross over into these other realms at will and can find their way back home each time.

So many great Canadian plays by our most revered playwrights call upon us to descend into darkly disturbing underworlds: of abuse, of domestic violence, of racism, of homophobia, of misogyny, of colonization, of cruelty. When many of us step offstage, we do so with the privilege of stepping away from an illusion. We can heed the call to combat these very real forces in the real world.

I believe the greatest actors among us are the women and men, girls and boys who are fiercely committed to the respect and dignity of their colleagues. Offstage, they are beacons of peace and compassion and fairness in the world. Onstage, they can shape-shift at will into manipulative, cruel psychopaths. They can plot the murder of their own relatives in a quest for some archaic peerage. Their lust for wealth and power can motivate them to rape, to steal, to blind.

And when the truly great actors step offstage, they return to an intelligent and ethical centre. They return to active engagement in the welfare of the theatre community and humanity at large. They recognize that the human propensities toward greed, narcissism, malice, pretension and insularity make for extraordinary theatre onstage. Offstage, great actors know that these human flaws spell the death of their art and the poisoning of their community. Great actors exercise great compassion

offstage. They exercise humility. They view themselves as acting in the service of the public, not the other way around. Great actors are on the side of the vulnerable.

Great actors understand human psychology and the complexities of human relationships. They understand the power of words to exalt, to destroy, to empower, and to comfort. They do not use their understanding of the human condition as a weapon to manipulate, confuse and abuse others.

The truly great acting teachers are those who freely share their insights with the next generation. They offer rigorous, nuanced, clear-headed, and carefully tailored analysis. They openly acknowledge their own shortcomings. They provide a seemingly inexhaustible supply of support and encouragement and understanding and care. They are patient and peaceful. They recognize the privilege and the honour of the service with which they have been entrusted. They lead by serving.

What unites great actors and great acting teachers is empathy: the ability to see the world through another's eyes. We owe it to our communities and our country to foster and celebrate more great actors and more great teachers.

It has been a privilege and an honour to share this conversation with you all. I hope it never stops. Please take care of one another.



**Rachel says:**

March 15, 2017 at 3:00 am

I cannot express how strongly I identify with both Megan's initial article, and the comment by Nathalie Sanborn as well. I struggle to write this comment, actually as I try not to think about my experience at GBTS. Reading the article gave me a physical reaction: I am shaky and sick to my stomach and yet I feel compelled to join the conversation. I too, do not tell many people that I attended theatre school at all in my current life. It is a part of my early adulthood that I want to forget.

At 18 years old, I was impressionable and idealistic and I wanted to be an actor. I thought I'd excelled in high school and I was told that GBTS was one of the most prestigious places I could go if I wanted to have a career in the performing arts. I was young and desperate for approval and I thought if I just toughed it out, I would emerge with a diploma, a stack of 8x10s and an excellent reputation.

What I left with was a traumatic experience and a very low sense of self-esteem.

I remember being in the room with Megan, listening to one teacher tell a student "it's ok to be this beautiful". The same student was told by a different teacher that "wearing a skirt is helping [her] acting" and that she should wear dresses and skirts more often. I was told that I was "too nice", that I needed to take a lunch hour where I was rude to everyone around me to shake me from the habit of being too nice.

The teacher Megan references called me a "theatrical tease", a "coitus interruptus" on more than one occasion. He humiliated a male colleague of mine after watching him perform a scene from "The Shape of Things". After watching the scene, the constructive commentary he offered was one sentence: "You don't like foreplay". The same teacher told me to play my "South Asian side", encouraging me to be like the women in my community "the ones who henpeck their husbands". He also told a classmate, an Indigenous woman, that she came across as "ghetto" when she spoke.



During this time, I experienced perhaps more than the average amount of personal difficulties: I left home for theatre school during a time when a close family member was dying of cancer. As I struggled to keep up with scene studies and Children's Theatre, another close family member was diagnosed with serious mental illness and attempted suicide. I remained at school because I was too afraid to leave: I told the director of the program that I was struggling and though he assured me that if I needed to take time to visit family, I should, I was too scared to risk losing my place in the program. For good reason: during my meeting with the faculty at the end of my first year, I was told by the head of acting that I really needed to think about whether this is the kind of theatre I should be doing, if I really wanted to come back. I knew that I did want to continue in the program, but from then on I knew that he didn't think I should be there. In spite of my time, effort, and tuition fees.

The toxicity of the environment spread among the year above me. There were many lunches and breaks spent in the student lounge in which the 3rd year students openly discussed who they thought would be cut from our year. One woman (who is now a successful actress) said with a smile, "the whole second year is going on a diet", implying that she hoped many of us would be cut from the program. Certain classmates absolutely swaggered with the confidence instilled in them by various teachers. Some classmates, it seemed, could do no wrong. I spent most of 2009-2010 in fear: fear that I wasn't good enough, fear that my chosen career path was all I was ever good at, and fear that it might rapidly come to an end.

Which it did. I was cut from the program halfway through my second year, with failing "grades" and comments on my progress report that included one from a guest instructor who said "I didn't believe a single thing you did this term". I somehow dragged myself to my "exit interview" to sit in front of the faculty members again. I couldn't speak. They asked me if I would be moving home. I didn't know. I was 19 and my dream was over. I thought I was worthless, unlovable, and untalented. They told me I would land on my feet.

I don't know if I really did, or if one can. I tried to appeal the faculty's decision with the administration of the college and even had a tearful meeting with a college administrator, who handed me a tissue and told me that I probably just "didn't have what they were looking for". I have not acted since that time, and have no interest in returning to a culture based on fear, competition, intimidation, and power. I refrain from seeing theatre, if possible because I find the environment anxiety-inducing. While I understand that some people have enjoyed their theatre school experiences and even, (miraculously) their experiences at GBTS, my experience was traumatic and is still painful to recall. I have found success in a different field, and have worked to build my self-esteem again.

I am deeply grateful to Megan Robinson for writing of her experiences, and saddened that so many have had similar ones. I am heartened, however, that there are people speaking out against a truly unhealthy and abusive system that is not isolated to GBTS, but can be found in many arts programs. As a student, as a young person, as a woman, as a person of colour, I was incredibly vulnerable. I so value the work you tried to do, Patrick Cieslar, and the work you continue to do. Though it is painful to write about my own experience, I hope that I can at least contribute to the conversation and help expose the reality of a program that somehow remains revered and cloistered.



Patrick Cieslar says:

March 24, 2017 at 9:30 am

I hope this article continues to be circulated and that others continue to post comments and share their stories here. I have created another website where we can also continue to share our stories and messages of support. Each story will have its own dedicated page. Stories can be in any format and told through any medium. Stories can be shared anonymously, under a pseudonym, or under your real name.

There is a page dedicated entirely to messages of support, for those who did not attend George Brown Theatre School but who wish to show their solidarity. Renowned actor and director Martha Henry was the first one to submit a message. More are coming.

Please visit and contribute to:

<http://www.gbsurvivors.org>



Patrick Cieslar says:

March 25, 2017 at 11:04 am

I sadly predict that as pressure against the College continues to increase, this comment board may become a target for astroturfing. I am hoping this comment will preemptively halt any such plans.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/08/what-is-astroturfing>



Brian O' Dea says:

April 3, 2017 at 8:26 am

I watched my son come home from GB every day demeaned by the acting teacher there. That guy never said one single encouraging word to my son, ran him down continually, and kept suggesting to him that he was in the wrong place doing the wrong thing. What a waste of humanity. When I was in university, acting was everything, and every moment was fantastic. In my son's entire year at GB, that never came to pass. They say those who can't do teach (not necessarily true), but obviously that guy cannot do, and whatsmore, cannot teach. It wasn't my son who was in the wrong place... and I understand that faux teacher is still in the wrong place, foisting his shortcomings on the backs of those he so undeservedly controls. I am certain GB has known about this guy's horrible demeanor for years but has chosen to do nothing about it. Perhaps they are as afraid of him as the students. I cannot enumerate the number of times I wanted to go down there and tune that guy up, however, thankfully, my son would not let me do that.



Robin Taylor Wright says:

June 8, 2017 at 5:21 pm

I'm a bit late commenting on this, as by the time I was made aware of this article, I became a father to a beautiful little boy. I had all this in my back pocket between sleepless nights and diaper changes. So

yeah, there is hope after GB 😊

First of all, thank you so much Megan for writing such a brave piece. Considering the socio-political climate we live in (cough cough President of the United States, cough cough Ghomeshi), a so-called liberal environment such as live theatre is not free of the shackles of misogyny and emotional abuse. This in turn most likely accounts for Kelly's brash refusal to believe the victims making themselves heard (although calling Universities 'laughing stalks (sic)' shows that he has issues with bringing decency and human compassion into learning institutes). Awesome that you had such a great time. This article isn't about you. Get over yourself and check your privilege, pal.

And speaking of privilege, I was just your average straight white male at GBC from 2002-2005. So I never received any abuse on a gender-driven level, and because of my tender age – coming straight outta high school – I wasn't aware of the concept of 'speaking out' and 'standing up'. Unfortunately, everything I saw came back to me in retrospect.

If you don't mind, some observations on my experience. I credit Patrick for waking this up in me – I fucking love you, man.

1. I suffered through a terrible depression at the beginning of second year. I lost a live-in relationship and self-medicated with food, thus gaining lots of weight. Things were bleak, but I found the gruelling second year schedule beneficial to my 'working through the pain'; in other words, it kept me too busy to remember how numb I am to everything else. During this time, I had some amazing classmates who stayed up at night with me on the phone. However, with the exception of a kind hearted voice teacher who was a Joy to be around. not one instructor reached out. I'm not expecting special treatment here, but seeing that the classes are so intimate, I was surprised that the core faculty didn't ask if everything was going smoothly. Only at my Christmas second year report card did the Artistic Director write "you seemed sad this year. Are you okay?" Very academic and helpful response (more on the report cards later).

On second thought, we went through so many of those bullshit 'therapy' exercises and circles that I should be entitled to some support.

2. One instructor... for slander purposes let's just call him, oh, I don't know, Tango Ted. Anyway, at the end of third year, I was on the mend for my depression thanks to some rigorous work in the summer and a clearer schedule during that semester. Tango Ted approaches me in the hallway and asks "Robin, have you lost weight"? I answered "yeah". He leans in and whispers playfully to me: "We LIKE that here at George Brown". After that, I went to the variety store and ate a bag of Smartfood to spite him. It made me wonder why some of our bigger (and brilliant) actors got Fs in classes like movement.

3. On the subject of useless report cards: our guest instructor – I can't remember what she did exactly – wrote that I should "get out of Stratford" (where I did most of my growing up) and insinuated that I was a bit white trash. It was until she found out that I came from a relatively famous theatre family that she was nice to me after. Yay! Nepotism!

4. My cousin was shot and killed randomly in Gastown, Vancouver. This came during Period Study. I was too scared to attend her memorial because I didn't want to fail.

5. A so-called famous and celebrated agent, who happened to be my aunt's agent, came into our class

and gave us a talk about the biz. We all came from movement class or something, wearing our sweats. She barked out from her throne “it would have been nice if you all wore some makeup” or something to that effect. Then, one of our students, a First Nations woman who is now a respected and damned talented playwright, asked about the future of major theatres and their hiring trends for POC; i.e. why is the Stratford Festival so white? She brushed off the comment and said “we can all be as politically correct as we want, but there’s no need to force minorities into classical theatre”. I was stunned and too chickenshit to say anything. I regret not speaking out to this day.

And yeah, our acting teacher was insecure and kind of a prick. Natalie was absolutely correct in assuming that good acting is just crying (HEY NATALIE!!!). He left the criers well enough alone. Whatever happened to being entertainers? My issue when I left theatre is that there isn’t enough critical thinking and activism. It’s places like George Brown that helped this problem.

Anyway, if anyone wants to talk to me, I’d love to help make sure that future students don’t deal with this ever again. I don’t work in theatre anymore, so I don’t give a shit about my reputation. All of you, especially the women here, please keep speaking out. Don’t let their intimidation get to you.

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