

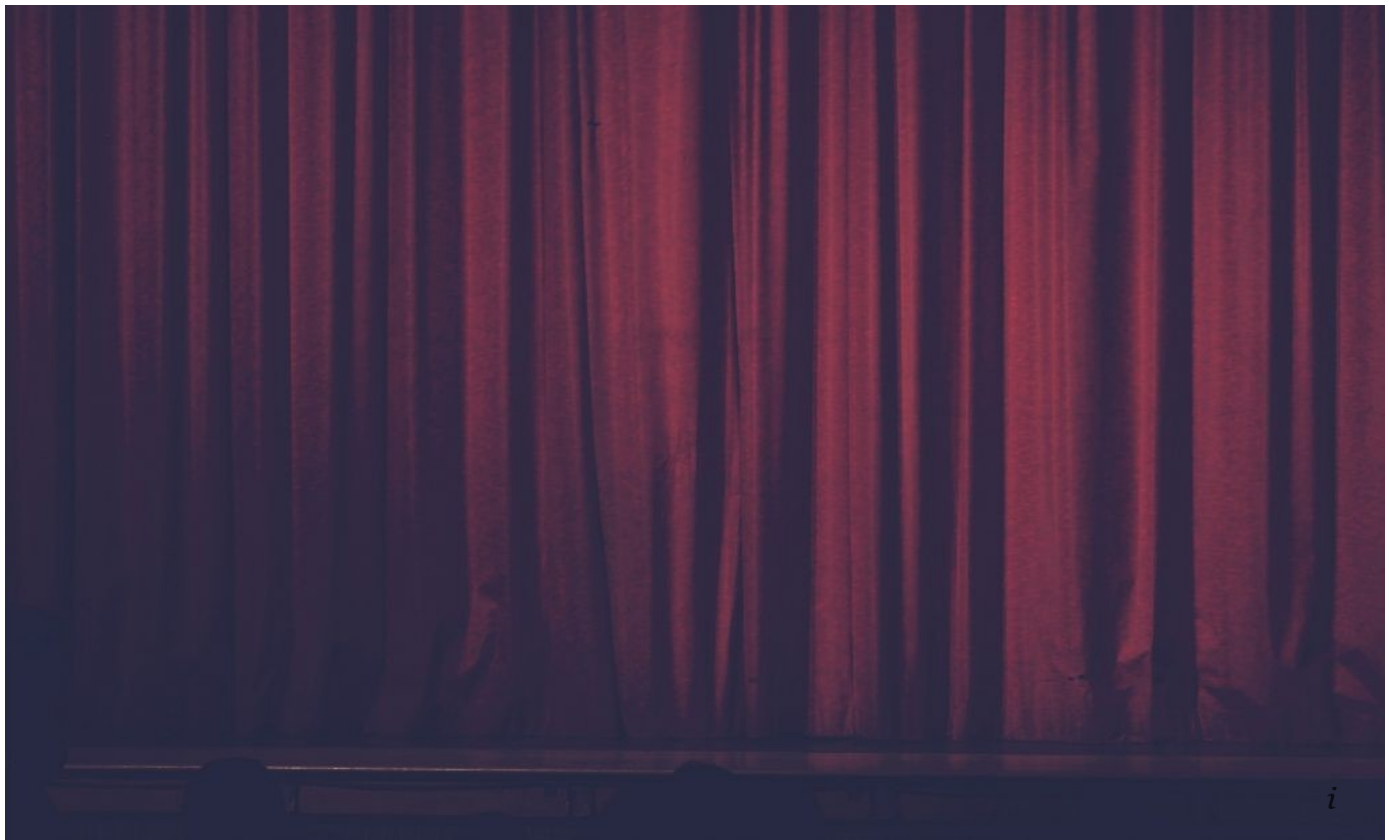


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Artist Perspective, In Case You Missed It / June 19, 2018

Actor Training in Canada: An Appeal for Change

By Christine Brubaker By Jennifer Wigmore



Jennifer Wigmore and Christine Brubaker have collectively taught in ten different acting training programs in Canada and, despite variations in culture from school to school, have identified shared pervasive patterns. This article identifies two of the largest obstacles preventing change and growth within acting training programs in

Canada. Jennifer and Christine hope that this article can help to open a dialogue for real change.

In the wake of #MeToo and #TimesUp, harassment has become daily headline news, and we find ourselves in uncharted waters. Allegations of misconduct and abuse of power in the entertainment industry, and more specifically [in theatre schools](#), have put focus on the need for seismic change. Power dynamics are shifting, making this an opportune moment to examine the environment in which we train actors.

Before we talk about our personal experience as sessional/guest artist instructors, let's take a quick look at where we are and how theatre training evolved in this country. Beginning in the sixties and seventies, Canada's theatre training programs were developed almost exclusively from the traditional British text-based classical training pedagogy with teacher as master. Acting, movement, and voice classes serve as foundation. Acting fundamentals are followed by scene studies, including classical and contemporary work, and fully realized productions by the last year of study. These programs are as compressed as two years, or as long as four.

The growth of theatre training programs was indiscriminate through the 1980s. They were cheap, easy to set up, subject to little regulation in curriculum, and instantly funded by government. According to Theatre Ontario, there are now forty-five publicly funded [Canadian colleges and universities that offer drama or theatre programs](#). We recognize that there are many acting training programs that function as disruptions to this model, but these tend to be marginalized, community-specific, and often housed within smaller private organizations. Because they are not acknowledged as part of the institutionalized education system, they also don't have access to the same government funding.

The prevalent institutionalized training model is seated squarely within an [industry built and dominated by middle-aged white men](#) who run most of our national arts organizations, are the artistic directors of most of our theatres, and hold most of the [directing, writing, and acting jobs](#). Despite improvement in the gender ratio of teachers in training institutions, the diversity ratio is still woefully imbalanced. We acknowledge that our perspective comes from a place of privilege as white women and benefactors of a colonial system. We know that many artists and teachers have never taught in these institutions because of systemic racism, and that this [fundamental imbalance](#) must be

corrected as a point of urgent action. Our current massive industry shakedown presents an opportunity—and a responsibility—to revisit and challenge the practices and bedrock values of professional training in this country.

Our combined experience has mainly been at larger schools, which typically have a small stable of full-time faculty, augmented heavily by a sessional/part-time/guest artist workforce. A hallmark of serious acting training programs is the recruitment of industry professionals to teach and direct the students. This model has merit, of course—bringing in working professional artists keeps a program connected to the current industry—but these sessional/guest artists who make up the bulk of any school’s workforce are cheap labour (especially if they are on Canadian Actors Equity contracts) and have no role in shaping the vision, curriculum, or pedagogy. They simply are not part of the conversation about the direction of training in this country.

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the Black Report, a 1978 government-commissioned inquiry into Canadian theatre training headed by Malcolm Black (not available online). Forty years since it was published, some of the report’s findings are still alarmingly current. Black expressed concern that full-time faculty do not “undergo periodic retraining” and highlights a lack of national conversation by saying: “Schools live in a vacuum and maintain within themselves divisions and hierarchies dangerous to the practice of a collective art such as the theatre.” He also states: “It is the feeling of this committee that theatre training has become an industry in our country—an industry that has grown without any realistic appraisal of the actual needs within the profession.”

Currently, there is no national association of acting teachers in Canada to discuss, critique, or evaluate acting training. Indeed, most institutional training programs remain siloed, preoccupied by restrictive budgets, class size expansions, and administrative corporate ideals (the “student-as-client” model). There are efforts from the highly engaged members of the [Council of Ontario University and College Theatre Programs](#) (COUCTP), an Ontario-based association who have held a couple of small conferences, but unfortunately, membership in COUCTP is limited to full-time faculty, so the largest group of educators—sessionals and part-time guest artists—are left out of the conversation.

[The Canadian Association of Theatre Research](#) is another annual conference, but attracts mainly scholars and academics with a focus on research rather than frontline conservatory teachers. Conferences are regular events in the post-secondary ecology;

opportunities for educators to share knowledge, take a holistic look at their field, and update their practice. Conferences also help schools to understand themselves in relationship to each other. They play a vital role in creating standards, problematizing, and creating joint defence against bureaucratic interests. Without a national conference specifically speaking the challenges of the acting teacher, how are we to update our practice?

Many of us became acting teachers in Canada's post-secondary strata by luck more than design. We may have been a teacher's assistant during graduate studies, but it's more likely we got the gig because of our artistic experience or because we knew someone in a hiring position. As a professional actor or director we gave teaching a shot, found we loved it, and happily used it to fill in the gaps between gigs. Most institutions offer short-term contracts, which gives the school a huge savings on full-time salaries and benefits, and also offers artists stability with flexibility. Win/win, right?

Well... sort of. We know our [institutions rely more and more on sessional and part-time instructors](#), and while this arrangement suits the artist [gig economy](#), the limited commitment to the artist-turned-teacher means a lack of training and support. The ugly truth about sessional/guest artist teachers is that, though they may be one of the frontline deliverers of acting training, there is no real teacher training provided to them. They may be obligated to take a few standard online HR "training" quizzes and read about harassment and faculty protocols in a handbook, but otherwise there is very little critique or support offered to them. Their teaching practice is more often than not a cobbled-together methodology based on their own professional experience and their

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Indeed, some artists-turned-teachers may even have an anti-academic stance in learning practical education tools. But pedagogy isn't a dirty word. The creation of a teaching philosophy, a course design, and grading rubrics are considered baseline tools in all other educational settings. When instructors lack these basics it can lead to inconsistent training and murky student evaluations via "mystery" teaching, in which the instructor's subjective judgement is privileged over quantifiable grading schemes. If acting educators don't have a clearly articulated and logical process for grading in keeping with the philosophy of the program in which they are working, the educator and the institution are left open to challenges not only from the students, but from their parents, and, yup, potentially their lawyers.

More troubling is the lack of training and standards in the areas of bullying, manipulation, infantilizing, harassment, nepotism, racism, bias, and assault. If artists-turned-teachers must scramble to create a teaching practice without training, they may rely on their learned industry patterns of behaviour. As is becoming painfully apparent, much of this behaviour is not only outdated, but in violation of the law. Even terrific creators may not know how to express or articulate the elements of their practice in a way that is free from abuse. Or they may treat their students like colleagues rather than charges. As long-time sessionals ourselves, we both recognize that there are excellent sessional instructors out there who are dedicated to their students and eager to improve their teaching skills. But where is the support to help them do that?

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We also know teachers who have extensive professional credentials, but who should not

be allowed near young people. Some of these “teachers” have never been questioned about their teaching practices, have never been properly evaluated by those who hire them, and, in some cases, have been [protected by their institutions](#) to the peril of their students. Teachers should be modelling ethical best practices and receive current training in anti-harassment, intersectionality, consent, mental health, and intimacy. Why don’t institutions care that most of their workforce doesn’t have any training in these areas? How is it acceptable that a teacher’s IMDb page is more important than their education in teaching?

The landscape of acting education is complex. Acting is a practice that requires investigation in a very personal way into the behaviour and psychology of human nature. The actor’s work requires a profound level of risk-taking and trust of others; the art crosses boundaries and challenges fundamental assumptions. The simplest of tasks takes actors well beyond the comfort zones of most other professions. While good training will prepare students for the demands of the industry, it also feels important, now more than ever, to remind ourselves that the classroom is not a professional rehearsal hall, nor should it be. There are issues specific to learning, education, and the youth population today that have nothing to do with the needs of the “industry.” Most of our students will never become professional actors. As a baseline value, getting students “industry-ready” can at its best be inspiring, but at its worst be out of touch, reductive, and destructive.

As acting teachers, we need to be on the forefront of this learning. Mental health accommodations are an increasing reality in our programs. As teachers, we know we all have a lot of work to do confronting our biases and privilege when dealing with race, gender, power, and inclusion. In 2018, knowledge, skill, and technique are required to work with these young artists, but so too is understanding that success and experience as a professional performer can no longer be the only measure for teaching a vulnerable practice.

At a bare minimum, institutions should begin the school year with a mandatory teacher meeting to ensure that all full-time and sessional/guest artist teachers have the same understanding of harassment policies, codes of conduct, mental health accommodations, intimacy rules, and grading policies. This will help prevent miscommunication and potential abuse. Additionally, the time has come to create a national dialogue where all educators, including the frontline sessional/guest artist teacher, can come together. Without a national conversation, institutions will remain autonomous, siloed, and left to

problem-solve in a vacuum. A national conversation will help our actor training culture evolve so that it will reflect the necessary and exciting changes happening in our industry.

As educators, it is important to continually examine new ethical boundaries, in relation to our practice, as they are drawn. We want to point to actions that any educator must address in their teaching practice. While these may seem obvious, experience tells us that they bear articulating again. Here is a list of things to stop doing right now:

Demeaning comments. Anything that humiliates, sexualizes, or stigmatizes someone because of their race, gender, looks, or ability. Humour is never an excuse for these types of comments.

Yelling. Losing one's temper is not acceptable in the industry, or in the classroom. Ever.

Fraternization. We work in a very social business and a very small community. It is not uncommon for the teacher to at some point become the colleague or cast member. However, in this post #MeToo era, while you are teaching, it is never acceptable to get drunk with or do drugs with your students.

Sex. While it seems impossible that this needs to be said in 2018, having sex with your students is a gross abuse of power, is tantamount to coercion, and can be illegal.

Touching. This is tricky to talk about and even trickier to navigate. The current thinking is that instructors do not touch students without explicit consent. How do you teach acting, let alone movement, dance, fight choreography, contact improv, etc., without violating students' rights? Different teachers are figuring out their own answers; perhaps one day there will be a new norm. But it wasn't that long ago that we could smoke in classrooms, so we think we can find ways to adjust. We must have a global conversation about this before we summarily ban touching in acting programs, but at this point each teacher must at least acknowledge it with their students and come to a mutually agreed upon understanding.

Inconsistent Grading. Most schools have moved beyond the pass/fail system but many teachers are still grading as if they haven't. A clearly described system with detailed notes for evaluation and calculation of a student's grade is now an essential. Not only is it important that marking be transparent, such a system also provides the student a rubric by which to measure their progress.

Intimacy Protocol. Directing scenes with any level of physical intimacy requires dedicated rehearsal and consensual choreography. Especially if those scenes involve any

level of nudity or violence.

Acting educators should know about two upcoming acting training conferences:

- [Canadian Theatre Educators Conference](#) – July 28 & 29, 2018, in Toronto at Artscape Youngplace
 - [Got Your Back](#) – May 27th, 2019 in Toronto at Tarragon Theatre
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3 Responses to “Actor Training in Canada: An Appeal for Change”

1.  N says:

June 20, 2018 at 12:51 am

I really enjoyed reading this article as it focused on issues that have been on my mind of late. Here's a thought I wanted to contribute. I really like the idea of sessional instructors and guest artists being given training and being invited to various conferences. Though I've never been invited any conferences, I have been invited to various Q & A sessions at a University . The problem is, I've never been offered payment for my time to go to these. I am about to become faculty so my situation is changing, but here is what my situation has been in the past. I have worked as a freelance artist and when I am not working as a sessional instructor, I'm doing a job somewhere else. So I am not willing to lose a paycheque elsewhere so that I can go to an unpaid Q & A. Even if I didn't have another work commitment, I feel resentful that a large academic institution is expecting me to attend unpaid. So yes, being included / invited to conferences and training would be very beneficial and necessary, but institutions need to stop expecting that we will do it for free.

2.  Martin Julien says:

June 29, 2018 at 10:53 pm

This is a very important article for our broad community, Christine and Jennifer. It is provocative and passionate, in the best sense, but also well-researched, well-thought-out, and balanced.

N's reply above is very salient. Since "becoming" a full-fledged academic a number of years ago — while making most of my 'nut' from gigging — I have been shocked by how attendance at conferences is completely about self/institution funding. My evaluation is that Canadians are not well-represented at international conferences on acting pedagogy. Other countries (England, Russia, Germany, Czech Republic, France) do this in a heart beat.

So, we are out of the loop; and out of the progressive discourse, at some fundamental level.

Let us work toward ethical boundaries, and pedagogical competence, in our field. But also know that Malcolm Black — who was a mentor to me, and hired me twice right out of theatre school — HATED any clamping down on individual expression and mentoring. And treasured the fact that there were unknowns in our process, and that not everything could be quantified when it came to actors working in the theatre.

As a teacher, and company member, I categorically repudiate hierarchical abuse of any kind. I support teacher professional development and training, sorely lacking in our industry. But, I am wary of institutionalization in our practice, which is unlike any other.

3.  **Tami Sutton says:**

March 10, 2021 at 8:02 am

I was trafficked by a city's theatre scene. Thanks for this read. I woke from a nightmare just now, where I was being humiliated again and again without my knowledge. Cast by people looking to parade me on the stage as a joke.

I hope theatres make amends with better training and care towards those they push out.



Written By

Christine Brubaker

Christine is a director, actor, and educator. She is an assistant professor at the University of Calgary and has taught at many institutions over a twenty-year period including Humber, Waterloo, Ryerson, National Theatre School, Fanshawe, and Sheridan. Her research includes rehearsal room culture and heterarchical leadership.





Written By

Jennifer Wigmore

Jennifer is an MFA visual artist, actor, and educator with a focus on first-year training and has taught in multiple institutions over the last fifteen years including Ryerson, George Brown, Fanshawe, Randolph, and OCAD. She is a member of Got Your Back, a group of artists who have come together to address systemic problems in the entertainment industry in Canada.



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