

Toronto

Former George Brown theatre students allege they were humiliated, abused by faculty

School's spokesperson says Toronto college has been 'very proactive' in making changes in recent years

[Ieva Lucs](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jan 12, 2018 5:00 AM ET | Last Updated: January 12, 2018



Jenn Franchuk, who graduated from the George Brown performing arts school in 2003, is among former students alleging they were humiliated and harassed at the Toronto school. (Oliver Walters/CBC)

Former students of the acting program at George Brown College allege they suffered abuse, humiliation and harassment from faculty at the Toronto

school.

The allegations, some dating back more than a decade, describe an environment in which students were bullied by teachers, and feared being kicked out of the program if they spoke up.

"I think that the belittling, I think that the humiliation was just something that you expected," 2003 graduate Jenn Franchuk told CBC Toronto. "The faculty made it seem like it was part of the process."

Franchuk and others were inspired to come forward by the [allegations of sexual misconduct at Soulpepper Theatre Company last week](#). The school, in collaboration with Soulpepper, opened the Young Centre for the Performing Arts in 2006 — a space where both the professional company and George Brown's third-year acting students perform.

- [Theatre star Albert Schultz steps down amid sexual harassment allegations](#)
- [Actresses accusing Albert Schultz of sexual misconduct had to 'suffer in silence,' lawyer says](#)

George Brown is widely known as one of the top theatre schools in the country. Hundreds audition every year to get in, but only 30 or so are accepted.

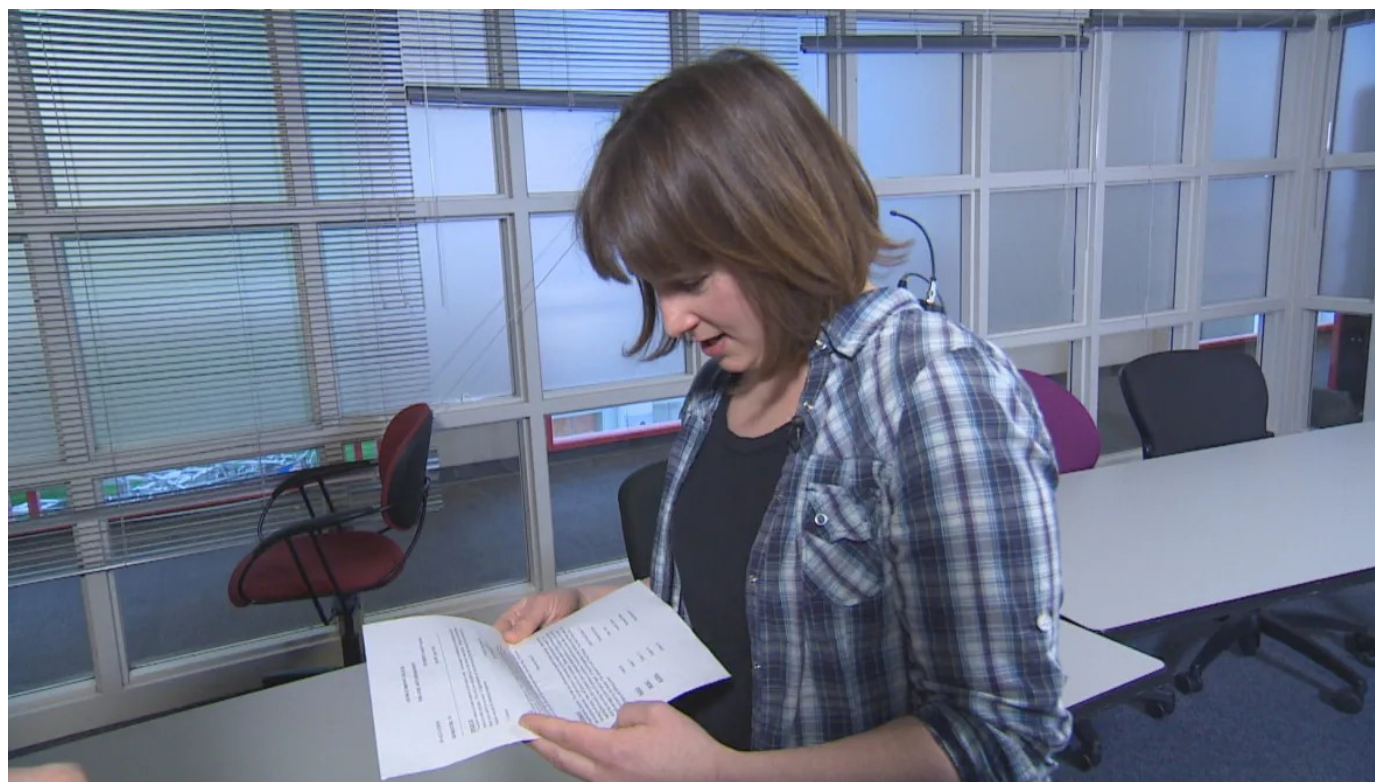
According to the students who spoke to CBC Toronto, that number is then whittled down over the first two years, leaving approximately a dozen actors in the final year, leaving the students worried that any misstep could get them thrown out.

"What we've accepted as a norm is not normal and it's not OK, and if we couldn't say it then, we're saying it now," said Franchuk, who described her time at the school as "abusive."

Told to lose weight

Franchuk said she was left reeling at the end of her first semester when a teacher wrote, "I suggest you try to lose some weight" in her report card.

However, she said she followed her teacher's advice and dropped 35 pounds, and developed an eating disorder in her time at the school.



Franchuk reads her reviews from over a decade ago. (Oliver Walters/CBC)

"I felt lonely," she said. "It was hard to manoeuvre my way through this, and my self-worth was really caught up in what I looked like."

'I felt horrified for them'

But the focus on her weight wasn't the only thing making school difficult.

In fact, every person CBC Toronto spoke to described an exercise that a specific acting instructor put them through in a first-year class.

"You are sat in a classroom in front of your peers, who you just met ... and [the instructor] reads you ... what your type is," said Shawn Hitchins, a comedian and author who left the school in 2000, just two weeks into the second semester, after he said he was discriminated against for being gay.

After that initial "read," Hitchins said, he was purposely paired opposite women in the role of a lover only to be "berated" for not being believable as a straight man.

Hitchins came to the school with a Canadian Actor's Equity union card, having already acted professionally. But he received a D in acting on his first-semester report card.



George Brown College is widely known as one of the top theatre schools in the country. Hundreds audition every year to get, but only 30 or so are accepted. (Colin Perkel/Canadian Press)

Eventually, Hitchens said, the instructor told him he needed to "'get rid of the gay.'"

"I said, 'How do I do that?' And he said, 'I don't know, I'm not gay, it's not my problem.'"

Hitchens said he left the school shortly thereafter.

CBC Toronto reached out to the acting instructor, but had not received a response by the time of publication.

The school would not say what the instructor's current status is with the college. He is still listed on the college's staff directory.

Kaitlin Morrow, a 2008 graduate, wrote an essay published this week on the blog "She Does The City" in which she criticizes the school's alleged "complicity" in the Soulepper allegations, and charged that "both organizations accepted ... the same type of systematic, abusive behaviour that harms everyone."

“What we've accepted as a norm is not normal and it's not OK, and if we couldn't say it then we're saying it now.”

- Jenn Franchuk, graduate of George Brown acting program

Morrow told CBC Toronto that during one of those classes, she "got red in

the face" in response to how the same acting teacher was talking about another student's physical appearance.

"I felt horrified for them," she said. A few weeks later, she said, the same teacher called her a bitch in front of the class. "Because that's what he saw when he looked at me."

Rachel Fernandes, who was kicked out of the program in her second year in 2010, said she was told — again by the same instructor — to "channel her South Asian heritage and to think of the women who henpeck their husbands."



Rachel Fernandes was dropped from the performing arts program at George Brown in 2010. (Mike O'Shaughnessy/CBC)

Fernandes said the acting teacher proceeded to imitate an Indian accent.

"It was shocking," she told CBC Toronto.

Letters of complaint

Patrick Cieslar, a 2006 graduate, had a positive experience at George Brown, getting good marks and leading roles all through school.

But he saw what was happening to others, including in the acting class in which he said the instructor "humiliated people horribly in front of their peers."



Patrick Cieslar has launched a website called George Brown Theatre School Survivors. (Oliver Walters/CBC)

During his three years in the program, Cieslar said he witnessed racism, bullying and harassment by faculty members, but that he did nothing for fear of being kicked out.

"To criticize, to talk back to any of the faculty was to sign your own death warrant."

Nine months after Cieslar graduated, he wrote a letter to the school's human rights adviser. Twenty-two other former and current students followed suit.

College says it has been 'proactive'

On Wednesday, Brian Stock, George Brown's director of communications, told CBC Toronto the letters led to changes in 2008, including the creation of a student and faculty handbook and counselling for students.

Stock said the most recent allegations are "terribly upsetting," but he said "a lot of progress" had been made over the last decade and that the college has "addressed a lot of those concerns."



'I feel like our theatre school has been very proactive in recent years to make sure that some of the stories that we're hearing aren't happening again,' said Stock. Brian Stock, George Brown's director of communications. (CBC)

In February, an article by Megan Robinson in Intermission Magazine, a website created by Toronto theatre artists, detailed her unsettling experience

at an unnamed theatre school, which was later revealed to be George Brown.

The article prompted Cieslar to start a website called George Brown Theatre School Survivors. He reached out to the dozens of people who were commenting, and he began to chronicle their stories.

Stock said the article instigated more changes, including immediately calling a meeting with the students, updating the school's policies and providing intimacy training to students who "are learning to act in an intimate situation, [so] they learn what is acceptable and not acceptable.

"I feel like our theatre school has been very proactive in recent years to make sure that some of the stories that we're hearing aren't happening again," said Stock.

Teacher was only 'part of the problem,' says Morrow

Morrow, the 2008 graduate, said it's important that not all of the blame is put on one teacher, who was "part of the problem, but wasn't the problem."

She said fixing the situation was the responsibility of former artistic director James Simon.

"Jimmy had the opportunity to make changes and he never did," Morrow said.

But Simon, whose position as co-ordinator had its title changed to artistic director, said no complaints were received until the letters in 2007 and 2008, at which time action was taken by the college.

"The co-ordinator is a faculty position, not a management one. I was not a

supervisor of my fellow faculty. Like all faculty, I report to the Chair," Simon explained in a statement to CBC Toronto."

Simon, who is now listed as a director and scene-study instructor on George Brown's theatre faculty directory, said he was "deeply saddened" by the "conflicted feelings" of the students.

'Fear and intimidation are not teaching tools'

"Fear and intimidation are not teaching tools," he said.

He added that without trying to "invalidate the experience of these students," the theatre school has a 98 to 100 per cent student satisfaction rate based on an anonymous government survey.

Simon said the idea that students who complain will get cut from the program is a "myth" and he regrets none of the former students ever utilized the "options for safe and anonymous feedback while at the school."

Simon concluded: "My feelings about actor training have evolved. I used to feel we needed to prepare them for the realities of a demanding profession. I now feel it is incumbent upon us to prepare them to go forth and change it."

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