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FORMER STUDENTS CALL ON THEATRE SCHOOL TO CHANGE ITS ACT



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Several former students George Brown's theatre school, located at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, have come forward with allegations about faculty at the school. Photo: George Brown College

# Former students call on theatre school to change its act

Arts & Life

Features



Steve Cornwell, Editor-in-Chief

January 27, 2018

## George Brown spokesperson says the college believes the students, and it's unacceptable to rely on complaints as "only means of taking action"

The year is still young, but for George Brown College's (GBC) theatre school it's already been a long one.

First, four female actors filed civil lawsuits against Albert Schultz, the artistic director of Soulpepper Theatre, which is also being sued. In the Jan. 2 statements of claim, each of the actors allege that Schultz groped and made sexual comments towards them and Soulpepper knew or ought to have known about it.

Two of the claimants said that they met Schultz while still GBC theatre

school students. Soulepper is a longtime partner with the GBC theatre school.

None of the allegations have been proven in court and Schultz has said he will “vigorously defend” himself.

Ten days later, controversy moved a little closer to the school. In stories by the CBC and *Toronto Star*, several former students alleged inappropriate conduct by theatre school faculty, including harassment and sexual comments during class.

Brian Stock, GBC’s director of communications, said that the reputation of the theatre school has been solid over the years, and the stories of students facing harassment in classes “doesn’t do that any good.”

“We accept that there is going to be some impact to that and we have to work especially hard to counter those past experiences by making sure our theatre school is among the safest and most supportive in the country,” he said.

If the stories of harassment surprised some, for Patrick Cieslar, who graduated from GBC’s theatre school in 2006, they were all too familiar.

In January 2007, Cieslar wrote a letter of complaint to Dale Hall, George Brown’s human rights advisor at the time, saying that some theatre school professors acted in ways that showed “a deliberate attempt to undermine the self-esteem and general well-being of its students,” among other allegations.

According to Freedom of Information (FOI) documents obtained by *The Dialog*, the college also received at least 21 letters of concern from former

theatre school students that February.

In March 2007, Hall met with the co-ordinating director of the theatre school and the director of business and creative arts at GBC and outlined several initiatives the college would undertake at the theatre school, including examining the audition process and providing faculty with development opportunities focusing on giving and receiving feedback.

After hearing of the school's plans to address the issues raised, Cieslar wrote to Hall saying he was "very impressed and very delighted" by the steps taken. But by 2008, Cieslar said he believed that there was no progress in improvements to the program and no one was taking the matter seriously.

In April 2008, Cieslar sent a document that he said contained excerpts from the complaints of 21 other former students to theatre school faculty, GBC senior administration, talent agencies and other theatre schools. He said distributing the document was a difficult decision.

"I knew if I hadn't already ended my career, I was definitely about to then," Cieslar said. "I was opening myself up to all kinds of potential dangers."

A few days after Cieslar sent the document, he said that he was "withdrawing from the debate" in a letter to the college.

Reflecting on that time, he said he stopped his efforts to change the theatre school in 2008 because he received negative feedback from students in the program. Cieslar said he was also concerned about legal action, which the FOI documents show was being considered by the college.

"I had backed down with the understanding that none of the abuse was

continuing,” said Cieslar.



Patrick Cieslar filed a complaint about the theatre school in 2007, alleging that some faculty acted in ways to “undermine the self-esteem and general well-being of its students.” Photo provided.

“I would like to think that the experience that students have at George Brown today in the theatre school is quite different from the experience that students had back at the time of the original (2007) allegations,” Stock said. “And I actually hesitate to use the word allegations because, we believe them.”

The more recent spike in stories from the theatre school kicked off

following the publication of Megan Robinson's 2017 article, *Confessions from Theatre School*, which Stock called a "fairly thinly veiled resurfacing" of the experiences of the 2007 complaints.

In the article, Robinson describes an exercise where students each go to the front of the room to tell a personal story, which the teacher would respond to. Robinson wrote that the teacher "stared me down" and said "So you're, like, the funny fat girl?"

Stock said this exercise was completely unacceptable, and will not be continuing going forward.

As recently as 2015, former theatre school student Jessica Hunt said she experienced the same exercise. In a story she wrote on the website George Brown Theatre School Survivors, which was started by Cieslar, Hunt said that she got through unscathed but was disturbed by the teacher's comments towards others.

"Many of his comments horrified me, and I watched my beautiful and vibrant classmates swallow these comments bitterly before sitting down and waiting for the next person to take that solitary spot in the middle of the room," she wrote.

Hunt left the program in less than a year, and said she mostly avoided the "crosshairs" of faculty in the program but she said she wanted to come forward for her former classmates who can't.

"The criticism that (faculty) would give you wasn't criticism, it was like bullying," Hunt said. "But it was the faculty so there was nothing that we could really do about it. So we just dealt with it."





Jessica Hunt, a GBC Theatre School student between 2015 and 2016, said that the criticism faculty would give students “was like bullying.” Photo provided.

Rachel Fernandes, a GBC theatre student from September 2009 to December 2010, said she recalls feeling intimidated, scared and on edge about being let go from the program.

“(I was) afraid that I would get cut from the program and then being told by the faculty that doesn’t really happen,” she said. “I felt kind of gaslit the entire time.”

Fernandes, who also posted a story on the website, said she came forward because she was inspired by other students sharing their stories, which were similar to hers.

“It was something that I felt really strongly about, and that there was something wrong with the way that they do things at the theatre school,” Fernandes said.

Cieslar, who is now an outreach worker for people experiencing homelessness, said that the college “should be taking responsibility for its failures and apologizing.”

He would also like a change in how the students in the theatre school are taught.

“I’ve had some really amazing insightful acting teachers, especially in the improv community, who possess incredible insight, skill and ability to tailor their feedback to get the best performances out of their students,” said Cieslar. “This concept of humiliating, berating and embarrassing students in front of their colleagues is junk science.”

For Fernandes, part of changing the dynamic at the theatre school means having the college get more involved in the day-to-day running of the program.

“The theatre school itself is so far removed from anything else college affiliated,” she said. “We never saw anybody really from the actual college, there was nobody who came in and audited classes or checked up on any of the teachers that I know of. We were really isolated from all kinds of college life.”



Stock said that there has been a strong effort to create an open dialogue with theatre school students over the past two to three years, and the college has learned to be proactive rather than waiting for formal complaints.

“I think the learning that we all have, any organization these days, is that just because you don’t have any complaints doesn’t mean that you don’t have a problem,” he said. “It’s not acceptable anymore to do it that way, to rely on complaints as your only means of taking action.”

Stock added that George Brown is obliged to ensure that students can be heard in ways that are not threatening, intimidating and that doesn’t “put all the onus on them.”

“I can never say that we’ve absolutely solved all problems but I do believe that we’re in a position where the experiences of students are not the way they were,” said Stock.



George Brown Theatre School

Patrick Cieslar



## STEVE CORNWELL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

I am the editor-in-chief of The Dialog, but I also drink too much coffee and play hockey like it's my job. Please send story tips, corrections, and sarcastic remarks to [dialogeic@sagbc.ca](mailto:dialogeic@sagbc.ca) Tweets: [@steve\\_cornwell](https://twitter.com/steve_cornwell)

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