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GTA

George Brown Theatre School teacher left job after ex-student alleged inappropriate sexual comments

By **Michele Henry** Staff Reporter

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A professor at one of the country's premier theatre schools left his post last year less than a month after a former student alleged that her acting teacher called her "a funny fat girl" and made inappropriate sexual comments.

That allegation initially appeared in a theatre magazine in February 2017 and although the first person article didn't name the teacher, the author, Megan Robinson, told the Star that the teacher in question was Todd Hammond.

Hammond, who taught acting at George Brown Theatre School, told the Star "no comment" when reached at his home last night. Although the college refused to discuss any personnel matters, a spokesperson said that after Robinson's article came out, they met with students and made changes to school policies.

"I can't discuss the status of an individual staff member," said Brian Stock, George Brown College's director of communications.

"We are absolutely aware of the concerns raised in that article and we believe decisive action has been taken to address those issues."

On Wednesday, Hammond's voicemail said: "I'm currently away from the college until further notice." His colleague, James Simon, who teaches the business of acting course at the theatre school, said Hammond left in March.

A March 12, 2017, email, written to a George Brown College executive and obtained by the Star through a Freedom of Information request, references the absence of the school's "head of acting" who was either "taking a leave of absence" or was put on "administrative leave."

Robinson's piece, titled "[Confessions from Theatre School](#)," appeared in *Intermission Magazine* on Feb. 17, 2017. Robinson, who graduated from George Brown College's program in 2012, alleged that Hammond, her former acting teacher, got very personal in his criticisms of her and other students.

"There was a way that he speaks to people that purposely tries to shake them up," she said. "But it had a psychological impact. He didn't have the right to go there."

However, one student felt that despite Hammond's sometimes "harsh" comments, he was an "incredible teacher."

In the article Robinson wrote as a 19-year-old who had only recently graduated high school, the comment about her being fat was the "worst insult" and something that affected her self confidence at its core.

In another instance, Robinson, now 27, writes that the acting teacher approached her and her scene partner as they navigated a complicated vignette about a married couple. Robinson said that after questioning the male partner if he had ever been with a

woman, Hammond turned to her asking: "Have you ever been naked with a man before?" When she "spluttered" a no, he responded: "Don't worry, it will happen."

George Brown College never contacted Robinson about the article she wrote, she said, but Robinson is happy as long as the school is discussing it with students.

In an email, dated March 12, 2017, and obtained by the Star through a Freedom of Information request, a student — whose identity has been redacted — wrote to a college executive to praise Hammond's teaching.

"I realize that his methods are difficult to both explain and understand," the student wrote. "But Todd has immensely helped me in my acting. His comments, to some, can be very harsh and I was devastated to learn the harm they have caused fellow students.

"But many of whom I have spoken to feel strongly that he was a teacher we needed and the toughness of his method set high demands for us to improve"

Recent allegations of sexual harassment against [Albert Schultz](#), who resigned earlier this month as Soulpepper Theatre's artistic director, have shone a spotlight on the theatre industry — including theatre schools.

Last month, [George Randolph](#), founder of the Randolph College for the Performing Arts, resigned amid allegations of unwelcome comments and physical gestures to adult staff and students.

However, Randolph announced his plans to step down as president at a college gala on Oct. 23, explaining he wanted to focus on other interests. His departure was slated for spring of 2018.

Robinson's article created quite a buzz in the local theatre community, garnering dozens of detailed comments from actors and others commiserating with Robinson's experience.

Former George Brown Theatre School students have come out saying they, too, were traumatized by their time in the program that is housed in the Young Centre in the city's Distillery District.

Rachel Fernandes, 26, who left the school in 2010, said she was demeaned and humiliated by Hammond. She said he often commented in sexual terms when bringing that tone wasn't warranted. Fernandes, who has just completed a master's degree in English literature from the University of Ottawa, described instances where she was simply asked to stand and introduce herself before being told that she came off as a "theatrical tease" or a "coitus interruptus."

"(His) comments weren't about our performances or our delivery, it was all very personal," she said. "There are constructive ways to get your point across or to educate or to inspire the kind of performance you want to see, but I don't think those comments were appropriate ways to do that."

Fernandes, and other former students interviewed by the Star said that the theatre school was a toxic place because of its system of eliminating students before they could graduate.

Fernandes, who said she was "cut" after a year and a half, told the Star she and her colleagues lived in fear of being put on the chopping block.

She recalls wanting to take a day off in 2010 to visit a family member who had been diagnosed with an illness but decided against it because she didn't want to risk missing a day.

"I was that scared," she said.

Gabrielle Lazarovitz, 31, who attended the theatre school in 2005, said that from Day 1 she and her peers had "paranoia and fear" about not being able to graduate. She remembers the moment she found out she wouldn't be attending the next year. She got her final report card at the end of her first year and, along with several other students, ripped it open outside an administrative office.

"In that moment, I fell completely apart," Lazarovitz, who is still in theatre, said.

Patrick Cieslar, a former student who graduated from the theatre school in 2006, became determined shortly after to change the culture at his alma mater.

In email correspondence obtained by the Star through a Freedom of Information request, Cieslar told a former human rights adviser at the school that there are a few instructors at the school "whose tone, words and actions indicate a deliberate attempt to undermine the self esteem and general well being of its students, thereby creating a poisoned environment in which learning is impossible."

He also told them that the fear of being cut engenders “a pervasive climate of paranoia, suspicion, jealousy and uncertainty.”

In a document titled “A Legacy of Trauma,” and subsequently posted on his website George Brown Theatre School Survivors, Cieslar included quotes allegedly given to him by students, describing how they felt about the school’s “cutting system.”

“I showed up at school every morning feeling bitter, angry and scared,” an unnamed student is quoted as saying. “It made for a miserable environment.”

In the documents, Cieslar gave the school’s human rights adviser suggestions for changes. They included developing guidelines for delivering criticism to its students, putting anti-harassment policies and strategies in place and fostering in-class discussion with students about how to handle harassment in the professional world.

James Simon, who teaches a course about the business of acting, wrote to the Star in an email saying he is “deeply saddened by the conflicted feelings some students have expressed on social media and online. Fear and intimidation are not teaching tools.”

Simon said that while he does not want to invalidate the experiences of the students who have come forward, he points out that the school has, in the past, received a “98-100% student satisfaction based on annual anonymous Key Performance Indicator surveys administered by the government.”

He said that after the Intermission article came out, the school was “once more put under a microscope” and that the author of the article never came forward with any complaints while she was at the school.

Stock, the college’s director of communications, said “it’s completely unacceptable for faculty to comment on a student’s appearance relative to their performance.”

“We would never accept this today and we shouldn’t have accepted it in the past,” Stock said.

He also said there is no system of cutting, but when students are asked to leave the program they have been given ample indications, including being put on probation, and warned that they were not meeting requirements to continue with the program.

Within a week of Robinson’s article, Stock said the school’s chair, Trent Scherer, and its current human rights adviser, Olga Dosis, called a meeting with students “to first of all assure them that we don’t condone the behaviour that is being discussed in the article, or in the comments to the article and that their safety and support in the program is paramount to us.”

Stock said that as a result, the theatre school has updated its policies related to faculty behaviour, added courses on consent both on stage and in life and on how to manage acting challenges related to scenes of intimacy on stage.

Clarification – January 17, 2018: This article was edited from a previous version to make clear George Randolph formally resigned as president of the Randolph College for the Performing Arts in December amid an investigation into his conduct. As well, Randolph had announced his plans to step down as president at a college gala on Oct. 23, explaining he wanted to focus on other interests and his departure was slated for spring 2018. However, nine days after his announcement, formal complaint about his conduct was brought to the college’s board of directors, leading to his earlier departure from the school.

With files from Bruce DeMara

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