

The Telegraph

Exclusive: Drama schools that launched some of Britain's national treasures accused of sexual harassment

A Telegraph investigation has revealed the extent of 'abuse' at some of the UK's most prestigious drama schools

By [Investigations team](#) ; [Dominic Cavendish](#), THEATRE CRITIC and [Susannah Goldsbrough](#) 31 May 2021 • 7:30pm



The Guildford School of Acting is one drama school that has been accused of serious sexual assault CREDIT: Dean Whiting

Students from some of the UK's most prestigious drama schools say they have been pressured into nudity and were allegedly subjected to "inappropriate" behaviour by teachers, a Telegraph investigation can disclose.

Former pupils have raised allegations including how tutors have "grabbed" female students' breasts, made sexual comments about their bodies and pressurised them to remove clothes during rehearsals or performances.

Other students said that they were bullied, with offensive language being used.

One of the most serious allegations was reported by students to officials at the Guildford School of Acting (GSA), whose alumni include Best Exotic Marigold Hotel actress [Celia Imrie](#), when a female student complained that a visiting teacher had sexually assaulted her at home.

The alleged incident took place in 2018, but former students who attended the organisation over the last 20 years also said that they were pressurised to appear naked or in underwear for performances and rehearsals. In some cases, they were made to do so even though they had specified that they were unwilling, they said.

Another school – The Academy of Live and Recorded Arts (Alra) – said that it had launched an investigation into allegations that a former teacher had sexually harassed students and asked pupils to contact them with information.

The school, which counts actress [Miranda Hart](#) among its alumni, is understood to have received allegations about sexual harassment by a former teacher.

Details of the allegations are likely to fuel calls for reform in the industry, after [concerns were raised against actor Noel Clarke](#) who was accused of bullying and sexually harassing women.

Mr Clarke, whose BAFTA award for “outstanding contribution” was suspended after accusations surfaced, apologised “deeply” for his actions and “vehemently” denied sexual misconduct or criminal behaviour



Noel Clarke, whose BAFTA award for “outstanding contribution” was suspended after he was accused of bullying and sexually harassing women CREDIT: Joel Ryan

Students pressured to appear naked on stage

The Telegraph investigation has uncovered allegations at some of England's most respected drama schools where high profile actors and directors have been taught. The incident at GSA in 2018 involved a student allegedly witnessing a "visiting teacher" as he "sexually assaulted" her 20-year-old friend.

However, when the pair complained to the school, the teacher they spoke to allegedly said he could not do anything about it unless the victim told them what response she required.

Another teacher they complained to subsequently took action and the "visiting teacher" who had allegedly assaulted the student was dismissed.

He has denied that the alleged assault took place and does not recognise that his sudden departure had to do with the allegations.

Former students who attended the school in the late 90s and 2015 have also described how teachers pressured them to appear naked on stage and in acting exercises, and topless in rehearsals.

A former student said that actors were asked whether they would be willing to remove their clothes for a play, and then asked to do so even though they were unwilling.

Students from East 15 drama school, which is part of Essex University, also told *the Telegraph* that teachers had made sexual comments to them during classes and one woman said she and others felt they had to agree to perform naked or in their underwear.

A 'chilling' picture

Students have also raised concerns about how sexual harassment allegations against other pupils have been handled.

Helen Raw, of the British Actors Network, has received more than 300 testimonies from actors who have been bullied, assaulted or sexually harassed at drama school or in the industry, as part of a major survey.

She said she is “not surprised” that complaints are being poorly dealt with, and that collectively the stories paint a “chilling” picture.

“They vary in seriousness, from bullying and gaslighting...all the way up to stories of people putting hidden cameras in dressing rooms and in digs, sexual assault, stalking, harassment and rape.

Students who attended The Poor School in London, which shut in 2018, also said that they were treated inappropriately by the man who ran the organisation.

Danielle Lautier, who studied there between October 2011 and May 2013, said that Paul Caister had “grabbed my breasts when “showing” Anthony how to be my “Cleopatra”. Other students alleged that Mr Caister had bullied them and called them “c***s”.

Emma Happsburgh, who attended the school in the late 90s and now works as an actor, said the students “lived in fear” of the teacher’s temper.

In response to the allegations Mr Caister said: “I am ‘cried out’ for ‘grabbing’ the breasts of a student in rehearsal. I have the choice of ignoring it or proclaiming myself a non-breast grabber.

Neither are great options. However, I don’t grab breasts. Our cultural wind is such that individuals now feel free to invent (not exaggerate or misrepresent, but invent) incidents. Making a false sexual allegation should be a crime.”

He also said he had not bullied any students and offensive language was not used aggressively.

A spokesperson for Alra said that they had a “zero -tolerance policy towards sexual harassment and bullying” and took all complaints “seriously”.

They said that “where there has been “informal/anonymous complaints and off the record conversations, steps were taken to strengthen procedures” and there had been extra training in the last 12 months.

GSA is part of the University of Surrey. A spokesman said that they were “concerned to hear these reports” and that they would look into the issues raised.

They said that serious allegations will always be met with an equally serious response.

A spokesperson for E15 said they were “sorry for any distress experienced by students in the past” and that they “do not tolerate harassment and bullying of any kind”.

They said that “in May 2020 we reviewed and updated all our guidance on consent and behaviour in rehearsals and performance to ensure we create a learning environment which respects individuals, is based around ongoing consent and enables students to make choices for themselves”.

Anonymous first person: Incidents became 'bar fodder'

Sitting in the drama studio in east London, I watched one of the other pupils kneel on the floor.

My eyes darted around, looking at my colleagues, trying to gauge their reaction.

As we watched, the girl acted out oral sex on another student. We were in our late teens or early 20s and many of us felt awkward.

It was a gratuitous scene and it was clear to me she didn't have a choice.

The incident became “bar fodder” and was discussed at length, but I could see that the girl was humiliated, even though she tried to laugh it off. But it wasn't a one off, it was just one of many examples where lines were crossed as we trained to become actors.

As an 18 year old, I was excited to win a place at a prestigious drama school in London. East 15 where I went – which counts Alison Steadman and director Stephen Daldry among its alumni – had a great reputation.

But whilst there, I was bullied and subject to various inappropriate comments and behaviour.

From teachers making sexualised comments to bullying, it was a tough time for many of the students, including me.

Looking back, I can see that the boundaries were trained out of us.

One teacher in particular used to say that we shouldn't tell people what we did because "they wouldn't understand".

I was so indoctrinated that I ended up looking down on students who said they didn't want to do something because it made them uncomfortable. And ultimately, even if someone did object, they usually ended up doing it because of "professionalism".

I was totally naked for an improvisation during my course and we were in our underwear multiple times.

'There was no option to say no'

When the Noel Clarke allegations came out, I was surprised that the drama school where he had allegedly asked students to do naked rehearsals said they were "shocked", because this seemed to be common practise in drama schools.

There was no option to say no when I was studying. Being naked was normalised. I don't think any of us realised how odd it was.

They told us, 'this is what the industry is like and this is what you are expected to do because otherwise you are not hireable'. So we all did a lot of things we weren't comfortable with because we were told that the answer 'should be yes'.

On the drama school grapevine stories circulated of people who had failed their degrees after saying they didn't want to do something in a class or of people who were blacklisted for complaining about the way a casting director behaved.

'There was nowhere to take the allegations'

But this attitude had ramifications. None of us felt like we could complain. During my course, I was raped by an older male student after a party. It's an incident that greatly affected me, but I had become desensitised to sexualised situations and had so mentally normalised unwanted touching that I didn't even let myself acknowledge the full severity of the incident until many years later.

I feel it would've been pointless informing the school in any case. I feel there was nowhere to take the allegations and I feared at the time that complaining about something like that might ruin my career. I had heard that another pupil had been raped and when she reported it, the narrative in the school among students was that she was lying. So I couldn't have told anyone what happened to me.

The culture of a drama school can have far reaching consequences. After I graduated, I worked as an actor. One day I was sexually assaulted by a colleague whilst filming.

I did things that made me uncomfortable on sets because I was told it was something I should do. I had been told that my answer should be yes. If there had been an environment of saying no and that being ok, maybe that wouldn't have happened.

I've now left acting, but my friends who still work in the industry tell me their experiences. A lot needs to change and it needs to start in drama schools. If inappropriate behaviour starts there, there's a good chance it will continue through someone's career. It's the only way to stamp it out.

E15 is part of Essex University, a spokesperson said, "We will always investigate fully if a student makes an allegation of serious sexual assault against a fellow student. We introduced our Report and Support system to make it as easy as possible for students to record incidents and receive our help. We also advise and support students to report criminal offences to the police."