

Back when my children were toddlers, one of them told me I was being mean and said, "I'm going to tell Cecile on you!" Cecile was her pre-school teacher. I don't recall what prompted my daughter's accusation – maybe I was insisting she finish her broccoli. Maybe I had lost my temper. But I do remember my reply: "You should tell on me." Tell Cecile. Tell your babysitter, tell your aunt, I said. "You should always tell."

I believe Diana Bentley, Kristin Booth, Patricia Fagan, and Hannah Miller. They have told on Albert Schultz and Soulpepper. Since the allegations, which have yet to be proven in court, surfaced last week, I have been thinking about a trope that is used repeatedly in the media and in conversation: "breaking the silence". I believe that what these women are doing now is not breaking the silence, because when it comes to abuse, there is never silence, there is only secrecy. And to break secrecy is far harder than to break silence. Secrecy – and the whispers, jokes, fear, denial and good intentions that sustain it – exudes a gummy, nightmarish layer of distortion that builds up over time and threatens to choke those who dare fight their way through it.

Here's another trope: "breaking the story". Why does it so often fall to the most vulnerable to break a story? Women who break a story like this one, do so at the risk of having the story break them. The real question is, are we listening?

People have been publicly questioning Soulpepper's policies and practices for years. Last Monday, former Soulpepper Associate Artistic Director Ravi Jain, described on CBC radio how when he attempted to do the job he was hired to do at Soulpepper – make positive, creative change – he met with such resistance he chose to quit. I am the wife of Alisa Palmer, who directed both the first production and the remount of *Top Girls*, along with *Night Mother* (2008) for Soulpepper. She has been part of the conversation about Soulpepper's practices for many years and has publicly directed attention to the conflict of interest relating to the fact that then Artistic Director Albert Schultz and Executive Director Leslie Lester were not only a professional team but a personal couple. After directing three productions for

Soulpepper, Palmer turned down a fourth and declined to work further with the company.

She is also on record criticizing the double standard which, among some media and funders, has operated in Soulpepper's favour when it comes to diversity. Here I'll stress that gender equity is integral to diversity – in fact, it's the canary in the coalmine. *Top Girls* itself was the company's first production of a play by a woman playwright in its then eleven-year history. In this domain, I believe Soulpepper has underachieved but been overpraised. When the company was founded, and when Schultz emerged as its driving force in the late '90s, issues of diversity were already on the radar of funding bodies, audiences, and theatres across the country. Schultz did not inherit Soulpepper's mandate, he helped to establish it with its emphasis on "the canon" – the canon being mostly classic works by dead white males from the western world. Lots of my favourite plays are by these men, but they are only one rich vein of an even richer heritage, and the great plays lend themselves to diversity and re-interpretation: that's what makes them classics. Larger, much older theatre companies like Stratford and Shaw whose mandates also centre on "the canon", have moved more quickly than Soulpepper to make real strides with diversity – and the art, and the canon, are better for it.

I have my own history with Soulpepper. In 2008 I rejoined the all-female cast for the remount of its hit, *Top Girls*. In January we received an email from Schultz announcing he had auctioned off a series of dinners with us as a "girls' night out package". Trouble was, none of us had been informed or asked in advance. I declined and thought I'd heard the last of it. Fast forward to October: day one of rehearsal, when every professional cast elects an Equity Deputy whose job it is to file paperwork and make sure Canadian Actors' Equity rules are followed. I am seldom on stage, so I volunteered to do what is usually just a chore. Later that day, the stage manager noticed a series of dinners on the schedule, to which the cast objected strongly. As Deputy my job was to speak up to management, and if necessary bring a formal complaint to Equity. I spoke up. Soulpepper management refused to cancel the dinners, blocked my attempts to contact

either the donors who'd bought them or then board chair, Roger Garland, and pressured me not to inform Equity. Still, I brought a formal complaint to Equity. Equity instructed Schultz to apologize, but the dinners went ahead. I did not attend. Soulpepper had helped itself to our brands and pocketed \$30,000. I bumped into a board member in the lobby during that time and told her the dinners had been sold under false pretences and exploited the supposed guests of honour. She literally laughed off my concerns.

I don't know to what degree the cast members who attended the dinners did so out of a sense of undue pressure, but I do know actors are by nature generous. They have to be; they put their whole self at the service of creating a life onstage. It's this same generosity that often prompts them to put a theatre's needs ahead of their own; a generosity all too easily abused.

Last October, Soulpepper announced it had cut ties with director Laszlo Marton and touted its sexual harassment policy. I sent a letter to Equity and ACTRA, and copied Soulpepper's Board Chair saying I was happy the board had taken the complaints against Mr Marton seriously, and hoped they saw "the connection between sexual harassment and a context of intimidation" and that their response was "a sign that the unhealthy context I worked in is also a thing of the past..."

My letter was calm, but the experience was gut-wrenching. I wondered: if I, a middle-aged married lesbian, mother of two, veteran of the civil-rights barricades, established actor, playwright, author and broadcaster, erstwhile friend of Leslie Lester, could be treated this way, how might someone more vulnerable be treated? The four brave women who have come forward are daring to answer that question.

If a culture of abuse thrives despite professional rules, stage managers and colleagues, we need look at the organization as a whole. And that includes the Board of Directors. Here again, silence was not the problem, in fact neither was secrecy. Arts boards are largely made up of generous individuals who give of their time and often their money, in exchange for the

satisfaction of helping the arts while enjoying the milieu. No doubt Soulpepper's board is the same, but it differs from many theatre boards in that it includes numerous wealthy individuals and highly placed corporate executives; people most theatre companies would be grateful to have on side. Given their collective level of expertise, how is it that the Soulpepper Board of Directors allowed the jobs of Artistic Director and Executive Director to be filled by a life-partnered couple? And while I know it is not unheard of, it seems unwise that the Director of Human Resources should also be a lawyer who doubles as Soulpepper Theatre's General Counsel. I do not have an MBA. I don't even have a BA. But this management structure strikes me as a disaster waiting to happen.

Where were the high-powered management-savvy heads on the Soulpepper Board? Or do we as professionals in the arts not merit the due diligence and basic respect that these individuals bring to their own professional milieus? What are we? An arts booty call?

So now the Soulpepper board has "severed ties" with Leslie Lester. No doubt there is a legal reason for this wording that escapes me. But at a human level, I find it disgraceful. For years, the board supported and enjoyed the fruits of Leslie's extraordinary energy, dedication and labour. Now they cut her off. Whereas Albert Schultz gets to resign.

Transformation is possible and essential, but it will not be achieved by removing the two people at the top. They did not make this alleged mess alone, and the alleged diseased culture will not heal itself just because they are no longer in charge. Positive change in such cases ought not to be led from within. Acting AD Alan Dilworth is a well-respected theatre professional and a judicious choice in the short-term, but as a Drummond-Dorrance Fellow and thus a beneficiary of a "transformational gift" by a board member, and as former Associate Artistic Director, he is not in a position to lead the necessary changes, nor would I wish it on him. Still, I am optimistic. The alleged toxic culture at Soulpepper does not change the fact that our theatre community, including many Soulpepper company members and employees, are immensely talented and hard-working.

Through my twenties and thirties I dealt with my share of sexism and harassment; one Artistic Director took me for dinner, ostensibly to discuss my play, but instead wanted to talk about "what lesbians do in bed." As I rushed through the meal and evaded his questions, I thought, "And for this, I'm missing the lunar eclipse." The same AD went on to reject my choice of director – a woman – arguing the Bluma Appel theatre was too big for her, but that she could be his assistant director instead. I took my play, and my director, elsewhere. During rehearsals for that same play, a prominent theatre critic asked me out. He wanted to discuss my script, an early draft of which he had somehow gotten hold of. I declined his invitation. His subsequent review stands as the most savage I have ever received for any work. It goes on...my garden-variety anecdotes of sexism. But I worked a lot in feminist and queer environments, so I came in for less sexist treatment, nevermind outright abuse, than many of my peers.

I, too, am tired of what Kristin Booth so aptly called "the veil of art" being used as an excuse for abusive behaviour. Only last week, an unnamed director at Soulpepper was quoted referring to Schultz as a "maverick" who was only trying to "get the best" out of his actors. Abusive behaviour on the part of a charismatic figure is all too often excused with this kind of – there are other terms for it, but there is no better term – *bullshit*.

If we fail to make the connections among different types of abuse and insist on seeing sexual abuse as a separate issue, we perpetuate the conditions that give rise to it in the first place. Aided and abetted by fear and good intentions, secrecy depends on the creeping complicity of a lot of us mostly good people. It's the old frog-in-the-pot analogy: we know something is wrong, but we don't think it's that bad until we're boiling. The analogy breaks down, however, when it comes to a twenty-four year old woman, fresh out of acting school, who finds herself subjected to what these four women are alleging they experienced at the hands of Albert Schultz and Soulpepper Theatre; in a case like that, a young woman doesn't have the luxury of a slow-boiling pot. She is thrown straight into the fire.

When the rules, when our tools, our professional training, our colleagues,  
our leaders and our courage fail us; when you feel like you can't tell  
anyone... Tell everyone.