equity MAGAZINE

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SUMMER 2018

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SPEAKING OUT AGAINST SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Helen Vine describes how Equity helped win her harassment case

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Standing up to sexual harassment

Helen Vine was looking forward to a fun tour bringing classical theatre to primary schools, but instead she was forced to endure a sustained period of bullying and sexual harassment

WORDS **LAURA GILBERT** PHOTOGRAPHY **PAUL STUART**

"The producer of the company was not involved in anything after the initial day, where he handed out a contract. There was no kind of protection in place for any behaviour that I underwent. But I wasn't expecting anything to happen, as you wouldn't."

When Helen Vine accepted her role with Rainbow Theatre Productions' touring show, she did not expect to be subjected to sustained bullying and sexual harassment at the hands of her co-performers.

Raised by a musical director mother, Helen performed in her local theatre company from a young age and found that "rehearsing, being backstage, trying on costumes, being under the lights and feeling the adrenalin of a live audience soon became my happy place and I felt at home in that environment." She graduated from drama school in 2014 and dived straight into her acting work, accepting roles in Theatre in Education (TIE), fringe productions and student films. In 2015, she gained a place training with the Royal Shakespeare Company and starred in a one-woman show at the Leicester Square Arts Theatre. In 2016 she acted in the Medieval Mystery Plays at Norwich Castle and was nominated for an award for her performance as the Princess of France in Love's Labour's Lost.

"I took the job at Rainbow Theatre as they were a well-known company local to where I grew up," she explained, "and I envisioned it to be a light-hearted and enjoyable few months touring near to my hometown bringing classical theatre to primary schools. With Judi Dench as their patron I respected and admired them."

Yet she found herself in an "escalating situation" where she "felt daily humiliation and intimidation within the workplace – which was a primary school because we were doing a TIE tour – in the rehearsal room, and in the van which was used for transport. There was just no way to escape the really offensive, really aggressive environment that was created."

"One of the men talked about my vagina, my breasts. They asked me for a threesome, asked me to have sex on a daily basis. They took pictures of me when I was >

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asleep and drew an ejaculating penis on it and put it on social media."

She found herself feeling isolated, as even her female colleague sided with her male bullies and joined in with the harassment. Although she knew that this was not right, Helen said she felt "almost desensitised to what was happening because I was trying to get through the contract. I just didn't know how bad it was. I think that's the whole issue with what is happening at the moment: people don't know that the behaviour is worth mentioning.

"I decided to quit after the social media incident. It just got to a point where I was so damaged by it all that I couldn't go back into work. When I approached the producer of the company, he responded by telling me I was going to let down the children if I left, and that I simply had a different sense of humour to the people who were treating me like this."

After ending her contract, Helen came to her union for help. "I was really pleased that Equity was so supportive and I was actually quite surprised that it was taken so seriously. I wasn't sure that there would be any comeback to the people that did it, let alone it be treated with the gravity it was.

"It was Equity that flagged the severity of what had happened to me and made me realise it was worth fighting. Originally, I wrote to them with about 50 points about the company, such as the cleanliness of the rehearsal room and the van, the fact that not all company members were DBS checked, and the sexual discrimination and harassment was just amongst those points. I thought Equity might respond and say 'that is terrible and we'll try to maybe advise people not to work with that company.' But I was immediately told the case could be taken to the legal team, which then made me think 'these people have got my back.'"

Helen went to court, won her hearing against the company, and was awarded £10,524. Her experience in court was traumatic; "The way I was aggressively cross-examined by Rainbow's representative made me feel yet again vicitimised and intimidated. He raised his voice to me at points, accused me of manipulating events for my own gain and interrupted while I was answering questions, amongst other things. This was in stark contrast to the kind and gentle manner my barrister questioned those who had committed the harassment. However, this treatment just made me more determined to see it through and stand up for myself, which I knew was the right thing to do. When someone resorts to such aggressive tactics you know you're in the right. After winning I feel like I have justice, but the company is still running."

Helen believes her industry is susceptible to these hostile situations due to attitudes being "ingrained in the culture", but also because of unclear boundaries and a lack of professionalism. "With Rainbow, it was like every day was a social event. I've experienced that with other companies as well. When I've spoken to other people in completely different professions they've said there's just no way in their environment that anyone would ever say the sorts of things which were said to me."

She welcomes the new industry guidelines that are being introduced by organisations such as the BFI and Equity's own Agenda for Change, which is "very clear, and covers all the bases".

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Helen also urges others to come forward and make contact with the union about their own experiences. "There's a three-month time period for employment complaints to be made, so my first bit of advice would be to act immediately.

"People have said to me 'are you worried you'll be blacklisted?' But really you wouldn't want to work with anyone that would blacklist somebody for speaking out against something that was wrong, and something that has been proven in court was wrong. I think it is very important for people to say something and not to worry that they're going to come across as a whinger or troublemaker.

"I've told people recently who aren't members, who have experienced things, to join the union because I don't think

If you are feeling bullied you should:

As soon as you feel bullied or harassed – or witness someone else being bullied or harassed – in your workplace:

- **Call Equity's Harassment Helpline to lodge complaints: 020 7670 0268**
- **Raise your concerns, whether you do this with your employer or Equity. This can later be used as evidence that you found this behaviour inappropriate in a harassment case.**
- **Contact the union even if you wish to remain anonymous. We can still take some action without sharing your name.**
- **Keep an accurate diary of events, and their effect on you, as they occur.**

We advise you to get in touch with the union as soon as possible as there is a three month limit to bring up a harassment case. However, we urge you to still contact us about your experiences, even if this window of time has passed.
www.equity.org.uk/bullying

they realise what Equity can do," she says. "If it wasn't for the union, I wouldn't have been able to take Rainbow to court. I wouldn't have been able to afford the solicitor fee, and I got a lot of emotional support. Joining Equity makes you part of a strong community, and gives you access to a great support network."

Her experiences with Rainbow Theatre have by no means put her off the industry, but instead galvanised her to publicly speak out about these issues. "In the last year I have worked in theatre, on a blockbuster movie as a voiceover artist and featured in several TV commercials. I have just been cast in an all-female production of The Hound of the Baskervilles. I plan to have a long and fulfilling career as an actress on stage and screen and work with artists I admire such as Rebecca O'Brien, Gregory Doran and Denise Gough.

"It's reassuring to see that the tide is turning with the pay parity campaign and an increased number of female roles being made available. With the combined efforts of organisations such as Equity and the BFI and others to stamp out harassment and create safe, equal spaces I don't feel intimidated or disadvantaged by my gender, nor am I concerned that by continuing to be honest and open as a person and actress my career will be negatively affected; the overwhelmingly positive reactions that I have had through doing so have made me feel respected and valued."