

# Mega dance company based in LA bred culture of sex, silence, dancers say

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**LOS ANGELES** - Every year, one of the world's leading dance competition companies sells the dream of [Hollywood](#) fame to hundreds of thousands of ambitious young dancers hoping to launch careers on [television, in movies and on stage](#).

But behind the bright lights and pulsing music, some dancers say they were sexually assaulted, harassed and manipulated by the company's powerful founder and famous teachers and choreographers, according to a joint investigation by The Associated Press and the Toronto Star.

The problems date back to the founding of [Los Angeles](#)-based Break The Floor Productions; as the company has grown into an industry powerhouse, its leaders perpetuated a culture of sex and silence, according to interviews with dozens of former and current staff and students.

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Break the Floor's reach extends across the entertainment industry to some of the biggest names in music, television and social media. Alumni and faculty have danced on stage with Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift, at the Oscars and the Super Bowl. Company instructors have appeared on "Dancing with the Stars," "Dance Moms" and "So You Think You Can Dance." When COVID-19 lockdowns suspended in-person workshops, Break the Floor enlisted social media superstar Charli D'Amelio, whose TikTok account has around 10.5 billion likes, to record instructional videos.

The company was launched 22 years ago by a charismatic dancer, Gil Stroming, who came to fame in the 1990s, performing in the off-Broadway show "Tap Dogs," described in The New York Times as a "beefcake tap-a-thon."

Break The Floor now draws around 300,000 dance students, some as young as 5, to packed hotel ballrooms across the U.S. and Canada for weekend workshops and competitions.

But in January, as the AP and the Star were investigating allegations of sexual misconduct against him and others involved in the company, Stroming announced that he had sold Break the Floor and stepped down as CEO.

The new owner, Russell Geyser, said the allegations have nothing to do with the current company, and that people involved with purported misconduct no longer work for Break The Floor. In his first 10 days as CEO, he said four people were "let go."

Allegations of sexual misconduct first hit the dance company in October, when the Toronto Star revealed allegations of widespread sexual harassment and predatory behavior by Break the Floor instructors.

A Toronto-born teen alleged a famous choreographer propositioned her for sex just hours after judging her at a 2012 Break the Floor convention. An Ottawa dancer working as an assistant for the company said the same choreographer groped him in public.

An ongoing investigation by the Star in partnership with the AP now has uncovered alleged sexual misconduct that stretches back to the dance company's early years, and involves Stroming himself.

Stroming was allegedly involved in a series of inappropriate relationships with students of the dance program he was running, according to more than a dozen former staff and students.

Of these sources, four say he sometimes brought young Break the Floor participants to parties or company events, where they were introduced as his girlfriend. Seven sources say they saw Stroming interact with students in ways that appeared intimate and inappropriate. One staff member said Stroming showed him a nude photo of one of the students.

All of these sources spoke on the condition of anonymity in fear of retaliation and damage to their careers in the tight-knit professional dance community.

One dancer said she met Stroming when she was a 16-year-old high school junior attending one of Break the Floor's first events with her parents. Stroming was three years older, she said, a magnetic 19-year-old running the whole show. At her first company event, when she was 17, she and Stroming had oral sex, she said.

A year or so later, shortly after her 18th birthday, Stroming flew the dancer to New York, where he told her he had lined up potentially career-launching dance auditions, she says. That night, they had sex in his apartment. The next morning, Stroming left abruptly for Las Vegas and handed her \$40 for a cab ride back to

the airport. She says she didn't attend any auditions, and returned home devastated.

The AP and the Star spoke to the dancer's father, who said that in the years following, she told him about these sexual interactions with Stroming, which left her deeply upset.

Stroming declined repeated interview requests. But during a 2020 in-house training, a recording of which was reviewed by the AP and Star, Stroming addressed his own past misconduct.

"I was definitely inappropriate myself in a lot of ways," he told his staff. "As a student I was in inappropriate relationships with teachers, and vice versa, and just looking back I was like, oh wow, I think a lot of us don't even realize at first the power that we have in the dance world."

In a written statement, he told the AP and Star, "I have been very upfront that when I first started the company at 19, over 20 years ago, there were issues of inappropriateness." He didn't respond to the specific allegations.

While not all of the complainants in this story were involved with Break the Floor at the time of the alleged incidents, the instructors and executives accused of wrongdoing have played key roles in growing the company's revenue and popularity.

One dance instructor said she warns the children and teens she brings to conventions today to be watchful and aware of the potential for abuse of power. About two decades ago, when she was a dance teacher accompanying her students to a Break the Floor event, she said she refused Stroming's \$500 offer to join him in his hotel room.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT, 'CONVENTION BOYFRIEND'

Break The Floor hosts conventions in cities across North America, putting on events in hotel ballrooms every weekend over the course of a six-month season. Hundreds of studios and schools from smaller communities bring teams of dancers to the events, branded by Stroming as JUMP, NUVO, 24seven, RADIX and DancerPalooza. The ultimate goal is winning first place under the spotlight at the annual Dance Awards.

In addition to competitions with cash prizes, Break The Floor conventions — which cost between around \$200 to \$350 per student — offer dozens of workshops, under strobing lights and thumping music. They typically end with parents on the sidelines shooting photos of their beaming children in leotards and makeup, striking poses alongside famous choreographers and dancers.

Jeremy Hudson, now a professional dancer, came of age on the convention circuit and won Outstanding Dancer of the Year at the first JUMP Nationals in 2004. Break the Floor helped launch his career, but an alleged assault by one of its star dancers continues to haunt him.

At 16, Hudson looked forward to the festive weekend gatherings. But he was uncomfortable when a dance teacher, Mark Meismer, in his early 30s, repeatedly told him how attractive he was. Still, he accepted a sought-after opportunity to assist Meismer as they toured various studios and conventions together. A year later, Hudson stayed with Meismer when he joined Break The Floor's fledgling NUVO convention as part of its original lineup of instructors.

"He called me his convention boyfriend," recalled Hudson. "I didn't know how inappropriate that was."

Meismer asked the young dancer, then 17, to come to his home.

Hudson said he was optimistic. This might just be his lucky break into professional dance. After all, Meismer was already an icon; he had toured with Britney Spears, Madonna and Paula Abdul.

But at Meisner's house, they didn't discuss work. Hudson alleges Meisner pushed him against a wall and performed oral sex on him. Meisner shushed him, he remembers, warning that someone was asleep in a nearby room.

In the years that followed, Hudson said Meisner continued to pursue him for sex. In dance studios, Hudson says Meisner would guide him into bathroom stalls for oral sex. On planes, Meisner would grope him in his seat, Hudson alleges. To surprise him, Hudson said Meisner would buy them matching outfits.

"I just didn't know myself enough to understand how harmful it was," Hudson said.

Hudson is now a famous dancer, with a resume that spans mega tours with Pink, Lady Gaga and Kylie Minogue, and appearances in more than a dozen films including "La La Land" and "FAME." For 17 years, he kept to himself about what happened with Meisner. But after speaking with the AP and the Star in February, Hudson went public and shared his experience in an emotional Instagram video, without naming Meisner.

"I took the word of this choreographer, and thought he was helping me build a dance career. Which in fact, he wasn't," Hudson said in his video, viewed over 6,300 times.

The next day Meisner was removed from NUVO's website and abruptly left the tour. He is no longer with the company, according to Break The Floor. Meisner didn't respond to repeated requests for comment. His representatives at the MSA Agency also said they had no comment on his behalf.

Marci A. Hamilton, a University of Pennsylvania professor who founded CHILD USA and is the author of "Justice Denied: What America Must Do to Protect its Children," said dance is one of the last forums where adults have unsupervised access to younger students.

"Dance organizations create wide opportunities for adults to single out a child, groom them and then get them alone to sexually abuse them," she said. "The dance world, it's not like it's different than any other world, it's just that they've been able to keep their secrets longer."

Hamilton also said perpetrators in many youth-focused organizations use hotel rooms — away from home — to exploit the power imbalance between teachers and students.

That's what Gary Schaufeld says happened to him. He was a teen in 2004, assisting a successful tap dancer named Danny Wallace, who wasn't with Break the Floor at the time, but would go on to run one of its subsidiary conventions. Schaufeld had fallen in love with tap at 7 years old, and assisting Wallace offered a chance to raise his profile and learn from one of the best.

One night, Schaufeld said, Wallace pushed him up against the wall of a hotel room they shared with a female assistant and forced oral sex on him.

"I was frozen in my own skin, I didn't know what to do," Schaufeld said.

Afterwards, Schaufeld said Wallace told him never to say anything; it would be bad for both of their careers. And so Schaufeld stayed quiet. But the secret ate away at him. His mental health deteriorated. He stopped eating and sleeping, and suffered from panic attacks, he said. In 2018, 14 years later, he decided to tell his family, and confront Wallace directly.

In a series of text messages between Schaufeld and Wallace, reviewed by the AP and the Star, Schaufeld laid out his accusations and Wallace said that although he couldn't remember anything, he "couldn't be more sorry."

"I'm not a monster but I feel like one," Wallace wrote, adding that he has "a lot of hazy memories and a huge list of regrets/mistakes" from that time period.

In an interview earlier this year with the AP and the Star, Wallace denied Schaufeld's allegations and said nothing sexual or physical ever transpired between them. He referred reporters to his lawyer, who didn't respond.

Schaufeld stopped dancing years ago and has no plans to return to the studio.

"It was my church," he said, but now "the whole dance scene feels dirty and tainted."

## CODE OF CONDUCT

By the mid-2000s, dance exploded into the mainstream with the debuts of popular television shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing With The Stars*.

Gil Stroming's company capitalized on all of that studio growth, an industry that reached about \$4 billion in value by 2021, employing more than 120,000 people, according to market research from analysts at IbisWorld. He added new conventions, and new locations, branching into Mexico, Costa Rica and Canada.

The televised dance shows brought fame to dancers Nick Lazzarini, Travis Wall and Misha Gabriel, who became big name attractions as *Break The Floor* instructors. Each of them has since left the company amid allegations of sexual misconduct.

Stroming picked up Lazzarini at the height of his fame to join the convention circuit, teaching hundreds of thousands of aspiring young dancers. In 2019, Stroming quietly fired him after he posted, then quickly removed, a video of himself masturbating on Instagram, as the Star previously reported.

The Star's prior investigation uncovered allegations that Lazzarini had subjected at least six dancers to unwanted sexual advances at *Break The Floor* events.



Three of these dancers were under 18. One said Lazzarini groped him through a hole in his pants. Another said Lazzarini texted her a nude selfie when she was 16. A third said he and Lazzarini exchanged nude photos when he was 17.

Gabriel, another famous dancer and choreographer, allegedly sent a nude photo on Snapchat to a 16-year-old dancer who says she was so horrified she threw her phone across the room. Gabriel — who has performed with Mariah Carey, Christina Aguilera, Beyoncé and more — was recently removed from the JUMP faculty. His picture and profile disappeared from the website, though there was no formal announcement of his departure.

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Lilli Maples had taken classes with Gabriel since she was 10 years old. She said once she turned 18, Gabriel, 29 at that time in 2017, invited her to his hotel room in a text message with a shirtless photo. After Maples showed the screenshots to friends who shared them on social media, Gabriel sent her a message threatening to ruin her career, she said.

Gabriel, when asked about Maples' accusation, said in a written statement that he had been drinking heavily that night to control fears about serious health problems in his family. He said he must have passed out and has no recollection of sending the text. He apologized and said he himself was a victim of abuse as a teen, and that his texts to Maples were a "one time ever brief exchange."

The AP and the Star haven't seen these messages because Maples said they'd been deleted. Maples' mother, however, told the news organizations that she saw the photos when they appeared on shared photo albums on their family's home computer.

"My heart dropped," she said.

As for the other allegation from the then 16-year-old, Gabriel denied sending the photo, saying he would never engage in "inappropriate behavior that would ever lead to sending something like this" to a teen.

Sexual abuse pervades the dance world, according to child advocates and industry leaders.

The combination of hyper-sexual dance content and the close contact between adult teachers and the young dancers creates an atmosphere ripe for abuse, said Jamal Story, a professional dancer who is co-chair of the National Dance Committee for The Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA).

"Professional dancers suffer a wide swath of sexual predation from irritating flirtation to full-out devastating attacks. And what's egregious about seeing it in the context of conventions is that it happens to kids. Nowhere in the world of education should students feel they are underneath the predators," he said.

Former Break The Floor instructors have been accused of abusing young dancers in other settings. Former DancerPalooza instructor, Eric Saradpon, has been charged by the Riverside County District Attorney with perpetrating lewd acts on minors in a private dance studio, and is awaiting trial. And five dancers are suing former Boston Ballet star Dusty Button and her husband, alleging sexual abuse and assault. Button taught at Radix conventions. Lawyers for Saradpon and the Buttons didn't respond to requests for comment.

At least four people removed from Break The Floor for alleged misconduct have continued to work around kids in other settings.

Earlier this year, after Geyser took the helm as CEO, Break The Floor published a new code of conduct. It banned inviting students to hotel rooms and said instructors shouldn't call students their "daughter" or "son." And it encourages

discretion online regarding "Religion, Social Justice, Discrimination, Politics, Love and Romance, Abuse, Mental Health, Bullying, and Terrorism."

The new code of conduct also says educators are considered mandated reporters regarding suspected child abuse: "If you witness anything concerning, it is your duty to report it to the appropriate authorities."

*This story was reported in partnership with the Toronto Star.*

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