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CBC's new Q has tough assignments, including erasing Ghomeshi memories

By KATE TAYLOR

CBC arts show must shake Jian Ghomeshi scandal while maintaining reputation for engaging content solidified by ex-host

More than a million Canadians are expected to be listening Monday as the CBC tries to turn the page on the Jian Ghomeshi scandal and launches the new Q.

Host and rapper Shadrach Kabango, known to the world as Shad, will make his debut as the new host of the arts magazine and music show in a live broadcast from the Glenn Gould Studio in the CBC's Toronto headquarters starting at 10 a.m. The personable Vancouver hip hop artist, who has moved to Toronto to take up the job, may provide a welcome distraction from the public broadcaster's many problems, including a recent report that showed CBC managers condoned Mr. Ghomeshi's bad behaviour at work, and the announcement of another round of redundancies. Still, Shad has the difficult assignment of erasing memories of the smooth-talking Mr. Ghomeshi while maintaining the radio show's reputation for engaging interviews and high-level conversation about the arts.

"We certainly feel some pressure. People set a high standard and we really want to live up to that," said Q interim executive producer Jamie Purdon on Friday. He added: "People really like Q and feel passionate about it. It's not a question of changing the whole program because of a problem with the host."

Mr. Ghomeshi was fired from the job last October after allegations of sexual misconduct outside the workplace emerged. The disgraced radio personality will return to court April 28 to face seven counts of sexual assault and one of overcoming resistance by choking.

An independent investigator, whose report the CBC released Thursday, revealed that CBC managers knew Mr. Ghomeshi was abusive towards co-workers – yelling, belittling them and, in a few instances, engaging in sexual harassment. In the wake of that damning report, the public broadcaster parted company with Chris Boyce, the executive director of radio and audio, and Todd Spencer, the executive director of human resources and industrial relations, who had both been on leaves of absence since early January. The same day, the broadcaster also told about 240 people, most of them editorial and technical workers, including many videographers, that their jobs were being eliminated as part of continuing downsizing at the CBC.

The Ghomeshi report, by employment lawyer Janice Rubin, identified a problem with "host culture" at the CBC, where a show's brand is intimately linked to the host's public image, and where hosts were to be kept happy however difficult they might be. Ms. Rubin found Mr. Ghomeshi repeatedly failed to live up to the behavioural standard established by the CBC's code of conduct and that managers missed several opportunities to do something about it.

Reacting to her report Friday, experts in employment law said that, while the Ghomeshi case sounded extreme, it is not unusual to find workplaces where a double standard exists for a star employee, especially if he or she is a top financial performer.

"I have seen it before, where the rainmaker in the organization is held in higher regard and therefore antics or behaviour that is displayed is tolerated," said employment lawyer Natalie MacDonald. "That's a big problem because it enables someone who is a bully to harass employees."

Tolerating bad behaviour from stars does the organization no good in the long run, added employment lawyer Erin Kuzz: "Allowing someone like that to remain in place can not only damage internal workings, it can have public repercussions. The brand damage something like this can do is often not worth what the person offers."

Ms. Kuzz pointed out that the CBC had respectful workplace policies that went beyond the legal requirement to provide a safe environment free of harassment, but that managers were not following them: "If you set yourself up as going above and beyond, that is the standard you are going to be held to."

Back at Q, Mr. Purdon says the show will feature new contributors talking about music, movies and digital media, while maintaining an emphasis on the host's interviews with big-name guests. "It's built around intimate conversations and access to interesting people," Mr. Purdon said. "[Shad] feels quite passionate about Q being the centre of a national conversation about culture; he sees his job as a continuation of what he has done in music, informing and enlightening people on important issues."

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