

# Drama Studio London

Inspection of colleges participating in the Dance and Drama Award scheme

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**Unique reference number:** 58352

**Name of lead inspector:** Alan Marsh HMI

**Last day of inspection:** 9 February 2011

**Address:** Grange Court  
1, Grange Road  
London  
W5 5QN

**Telephone number:** 0208 579 3897

**Website:** [www.dramastudiolondon.co.uk](http://www.dramastudiolondon.co.uk)

## Information about the college

1. Drama Studio London is a private performing arts college that trains students for employment as actors. It runs both a one-year course and a two-year course in acting for students aged 21 or over. The one-year course is accredited by the National Council for Drama Training. A minority of students take the national certificate in professional acting awarded by Trinity College, London. The college is a member of the Conference of Drama Schools.
2. The college is based on two sites in Ealing, west London, but attracts students from across the country and abroad. There are currently 109 adult students enrolled at the college, of whom six are in receipt of dance and drama awards (DaDA) funded by the Young People's Learning Agency. Most students are post-graduates. Sixty students are on the one-year course and 49 are on the two-year course.

## Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

<b>Overall effectiveness of provision</b>
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<b>Grade 2</b>
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<b>Capacity to improve</b>
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<b>Grade 2</b>
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## Overall effectiveness

3. Drama Studio London is a good college, with good capacity to improve. Students and staff share a passion for acting, and students thrive in a vibrant, diverse learning community. Over the last three years, all students who have stayed to the end of their course have successfully completed their training and gained their professional certificate. Most students secure work as actors within six months of completing their training, and many quickly build a good portfolio of contracts.
4. Students are taught well. Teachers create an excellent working environment for students, which is collaborative and friendly yet relentlessly focused on students' fierce ambitions to become working actors. Lessons are stimulating and demanding, with excellent exposition of underlying theory and a constant reference to how the work may be applied in a professional context. Too few teachers, however, use students as fully as they might to explore ideas or illustrate learning points, relying instead on their own knowledge and experience to provide answers and examples. Occasionally, teachers do not give specific corrections to students when most needed. The assessment of work is a very well integrated process between each student, all their teachers and their tutor, although the setting of discipline-specific targets is inconsistent.

5. The course is outstandingly well designed and fully equips the aspiring actor in all their essential disciplines. Throughout the course, what is learned in discipline lessons is applied in assessed rehearsal blocks of text-based work, directed in different ways so that students develop flexibility and adaptability in how they apply their skills. The integration of these activities is a highly effective feature of the course. Support and guidance are outstanding, with students' welfare and learning needs being catered for expertly at an individual level.
6. The college is led and managed well. Students achieve good and improving outcomes, and the college now tracks destinations much more successfully than previously. The recent restructuring has led to a better distribution of management and quality assurance responsibilities, although it is too early to judge the full impact of these changes. The evaluation of lessons is insightful and largely accurate as far as it goes, but this programme is behind schedule, as it was in 2009/10. Consequently, the college lacks a comprehensive evaluative account of what happens in lessons and rehearsals. Other aspects of self-assessment and action planning are incisive and detailed; they identify relative strengths and weaknesses effectively and set realistic goals for improvement.

### **Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors**

#### **What students like:**

- the professional background of teachers and the way that their current professional experience is made available to students
- the lack of dogma amongst teachers about how you become an actor
- the breadth, depth and intensity of their training
- the integration in their working week of discipline-specific lessons with rehearsals for particular pieces of text-related performance, so that what they learn is continuously being applied and evaluated in rehearsal and performance
- the regular use of professional directors who bring different approaches and styles to the way students are asked to work in rehearsal and performance
- the emphasis throughout the course on matching newly-trained actors to the most appropriate job opportunities in the industry
- the close attention that is paid to their individual skills, aptitude, training needs and professional development within the environment of a close-knit working community
- the fairness and transparency with which they are cast and assessed
- the highly efficient organisation that underpins all aspects of how the college is run.

#### **What students would like to see improved:**

- the practice of not giving students a full copy of the written feedback that each discipline teacher produces after an assessment
- the relative lack of challenge for those students who are already good singers
- the limited facilities for showering
- the fact that some of the floors in the studios in Questors theatre are not always clean.

## **Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors**

### **What employers like:**

- the highly disciplined, technically aware students who are very well prepared for working in the industry
- the well-developed ability of students to take notes and direction
- the committed team players that the college produces.

### **What employers would like to see improved:**

- no areas for specific improvement were identified by employers.

## **Main inspection report**

### **Capacity to make and sustain improvement**

**Grade 2**

7. Outcomes for students are good and improving and the standard of work in lessons and rehearsals is high. Students make good progress, although the college can only evaluate this at individual student level through the personal feedback each student gets on their assessed work. Teaching and learning are good, as are leadership and management. The design of the curriculum is outstanding, as are the guidance and support from which students benefit significantly. Self-assessment and planning for improvement are mostly insightful, detailed and effective. The college observes and evaluates some lessons effectively but this programme is not comprehensive nor does it lead to a reflective analysis of the characteristics or quality of teaching and learning across the college. Communications across the college are excellent and staff operate very effectively as a team. Students are fully engaged in the life of their college and wholeheartedly enjoy their training.

### **Outcomes for students**

**Grade 2**

8. Most students who complete the course secure related employment as actors within six months of leaving, and within that time a large majority secure more than one contract. Over 80% of students have achieved this ambition in each of the last three years to 2010. Over this period, the proportion of students who acquire an agent to represent them within six months of leaving has risen steadily to nearly 60%. Typical professional jobs taken by students include a wide range of small-scale, site-specific and fringe theatre roles; regional and national touring shows; pantomime; theatre cabaret, café and revue work; and radio, short and feature film and television roles and voice-overs. A growing number secure lucrative work in corporate drama and role-play. Students also quickly build a portfolio of experience and exposure by taking work with cooperative and profit-share companies, or contracts that are unpaid but nevertheless hone their skills as working actors and publicise them effectively in the market for paid work.
9. Applications to the courses rose by one third in 2009/10, raising the quality of the pool from which the college is able to select its students. The number of students who complete their training is very high, and has been consistently so since the last inspection. Of the two course cohorts who completed in 2010, only one student from either course failed to complete it successfully. Attendance is very high at 98%. Students' commitment is outstanding, and the college sustains this by its unwavering attention to their personal welfare. Students thrive in a vibrantly creative, highly diverse and harmonious community.
10. A minority of students take the certificate in professional acting awarded by Trinity College, London. Over the last three years, all students who took it have passed this qualification. Recent reports produced by Trinity College, London show that the standard of performance is good, with students making very bold, clear physical and vocal choices in their playing. Ensemble work is highly disciplined, with sharply focused interaction on stage. The energy of a few students is not sufficiently heightened or channelled and occasionally some diction is poor. All students are hungry to become working actors, and they apply themselves with gusto and sustained technical endeavour to reach the high standards that the college has of them. In lessons, inspectors found that students were working at a high level in an intense and concentrated way. They showed a wide range of technical skills and a keen capacity to assimilate critical advice.
11. Students are selected on the basis of competitive auditions and comprehensive interviews, and most make very good progress from their different starting points. They are particularly well prepared for the rigours and quirks of seeking and sustaining work in the industry and managing their own careers as actors. The story of their personal progress towards training goals and targets is told in discipline-specific terms through the assessment and monitoring records that teachers, directors, tutors and students themselves compile and discuss. The college does not, however, make the rate or extent of each student's progress in relation to aptitude or expectations an explicit feature of this dialogue. Consequently, this aspect of how well students do, compared with how well

they might do, is not evaluated in a methodical way, either for each individual student or for each discipline.

12. Very safe practices are learned and applied in studios and performance spaces, and students feel completely safe in the college and the local surroundings. The training is supported very well by yoga, movement and voice lessons and by advice and guidance on food, drink and drugs that provide students with the wherewithal to look after their own bodies and voices and minimise the risk of injury or illness.

## **The quality of provision**

## **Grade 2**

13. Teaching and learning are good. Teachers establish excellent rapport with students and learning is always highly focused and purposeful. Students enjoy a rich variety of teaching styles, techniques and personalities which prepares them very well for working under different professional directors and conditions. All teachers employ in their lessons a good balance between the exposition of a technique or approach and its implementation or exploration in performance. Teachers have excellent knowledge not only of their discipline but also of current practices and trends in the industry, and make constant reference to how students may apply what they learn in a professional setting. Students expect a lot from their lessons and the best teachers respond amply, often using what individual students say or do to draw out a learning point that is of relevance to the group as a whole. This runs the risk of exposing individual students, but the trusting, collaborative nature of the group and the sensitive skill of most teachers are such that this strategy is highly effective in exemplifying a learning point in a memorable way, and students relish it. For example, in one singing lesson the teacher asked a particularly strong technical singer to speak more naturally the words of a song she had just sung in an excessively lyrical way, in order to demonstrate how music can sometimes detract from the natural rhythms or meaning of a text. This approach is often used by teachers of singing, but on this occasion was done with particular skill: in making this student undo some of her learned technique and change the mode of expression, the teacher illuminated the dangers of overworking a dramatic song in purely musical terms and clarified to the whole group the need to "hear and use the shape and meaning of a song to guide the musical tone".
14. In a minority of lessons, however, teachers could elicit more from students and provide correspondingly less explanation or direct tuition themselves. Too much questioning is open and offered to the group as a whole, rather than directed to engage or check the learning of particular students. Secondary or tertiary levels of questioning are too infrequent, with teachers opting instead to provide the answers or insights they wish students to unveil. A minority of teachers fail to give clear, specific corrections to students when they are most needed, which slows their progress. Although teaching in discipline-specific lessons is very well integrated through the week with directed blocks of text-based performance work, the degree to which directors (many of whom are also discipline teachers) approach this latter activity primarily as a learning opportunity for students is not always clearly defined.

15. Assessment and feedback are regular and detailed. Following the performance of each block of text-based work, the qualitative characteristics of each student's performance are discussed by all contributing teachers in a comprehensive way. The subsequent evaluative review between student and tutor helps students know in which aspects of their work they are making the most and least progress. The college eschews any form of grading, and most students find the wholly developmental focus of the assessment system liberating. A few would prefer the unequivocal clarity that comes from the allocation of a final mark at the end of an assessment. Not all teachers write technical targets or discipline-specific goals in enough detail or precision fully to inform the tutorial.
16. The course comprises an outstanding combination of the several disciplines required for the professional training of actors in theatre, television, radio, film and corporate drama. Everything students learn is geared to the multiple demands of the industry in which they wish to work. The integration within each working week of discipline-specific lessons and blocks of directed text-based work is highly effective. The balance of the time allotted to different work is continuously reviewed in the light of the changing demands of employers and the pattern of the industry at large. Students are fully engaged in discussion about the changing balance of the curriculum. The college listens and responds carefully to students' comments about this aspect of their training.
17. The college has very good connections with a wide range of industry professionals, and it uses these to give students good exposure and plentiful opportunities to be seen. Since the last inspection, it has increased to three the formal showcase opportunities whereby agents and casting directors may see students in performance, and all students leaving in 2011 will have a show reel and vocal disc to use in marketing their talents. Despite the steadily increasing numbers of students who do secure the services of a professional agent on leaving, the college still aspires to attract the more influential agents and casting directors in greater numbers to see final showcases.
18. Support and guidance, both personal and professional, are outstanding. Students feel able to discuss any issue in an environment of mutual trust. The all-round welfare of adult students is overseen through the tutorial system with a fine sensitivity and an excellent capacity to respond supportively to any circumstances that might arise. The college is justly proud of the fact that, despite the emotional, social and physical intensity of the training, the web of support and advice is so good that hardly any student ever fails to complete the course successfully. A qualified specialist gives direct support to any students with additional literacy needs, and further specialist support is available as needed.

## **Leadership and management**

## **Grade 2**

19. Leadership and management are good. Students' professional outcomes are good, and many are building a more sustained profile of work over time. Their

destinations are recorded much more completely than was the case at the time of the last inspection. The college is steadily fulfilling its high ambitions for an increasingly prominent profile in the sector as it helps students to secure better and more regular jobs. There are now more opportunities for students to show their work to prospective employers. As part of a recent restructuring of the college, responsibility for leading the development of each discipline has been devolved to heads of department, who are beginning to develop a qualitative oversight of their part of the curriculum. The impact of this new structure and associated systems has yet to be evaluated. Leadership by the three most senior managers is strong and clear. They foster amongst the college community as a whole an environment of trust and respect within which personal development, critical reflection and creative risk may thrive.

20. The college's self-assessment process is scrupulous in many respects, but the final report has little to say about the quality or characteristics of teaching or learning. The plan to observe every teacher during the course of an academic year was not completed in 2009/10 and is running behind schedule in 2010/11. Nonetheless, lessons that are observed are done so with astute insight and lead to productive critical reflection by both parties. Inspectors agreed with the judgements made by college observers during a number of lessons that were jointly observed during the inspection.
21. Communications throughout the college are very good, and teachers and tutors spend a great deal of productive time exchanging ideas and discussing the work of their students. Teachers bring a wealth of professional 'savoir faire' to their teaching, and students benefit significantly from the shared emphasis on preparing them to seek and secure the type of work for which they are best suited. However, the good progress that most students make is not captured or evaluated at the level of each discipline or cohort.
22. Arrangements to keep students safe and secure are good. The college expects high standards of respect, tolerance and collaboration and these are met. Students play a full role in the life of their college, and are consulted on all aspects of their course. Their voice is listened to and what they say substantially shapes the operational management of the college. Equality and diversity are promoted well. Over the last two years the college has successfully increased the proportion of its students who come from minority ethnic groups and has achieved better gender balance. It collects a wide range of data, but the relative destinations of different categories of student are not currently analysed.
23. The college has expanded its facilities and available premises to accommodate its new, two-year course. Resources are now excellent. The college provides good value for money.

### **What does Drama Studio London need to do to improve further?**

- Complete the full schedule of annual lesson observations for all core teachers and include the summary evaluation as part of the self-assessment process, so

that the college is able to refine staff development activities in the light of what it knows about its own teaching.

- Ensure that all teachers and tutors compose discipline-specific targets and goals for students in a consistently precise way so that students can see how they need to develop to make further progress.
- Find a way of evaluating the progress that is made by students in each assessment against their aptitudes and expectations, and engage discipline teachers in a reflective dialogue about the extent and rate of progress made by students at various points through the course.
- Make more frequent use of what students themselves might offer in lessons and rehearsals by more effective questioning and invitation, so that students consolidate what they learn and apply in even more regularly direct ways.

## **Information about the inspection**

25. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the college's managing director, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the qualification awarding body, the previous inspection report, and data on students and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
26. Inspectors observed lessons. They used group and individual interviews and emails to gain the views of students and employers. They considered questionnaires students had recently completed for the college.

Record of main findings			
<b>Provider name</b>	<b>Drama Studio London</b>	<b>Inspection number</b>	<b>367181</b>
<b>Learning types:16-18 learner responsive:</b> FE full-time courses			

Grades <b>using the 4 point scale</b> 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	<b>Overall</b>
<b>Approximate number of enrolled students at the time of inspection</b>	109
Full-time students	
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Capacity to improve</b>	2
<b>Outcomes for students</b>	<b>2</b>
How well do students achieve and enjoy their learning?	2
How well do students attain their learning goals?	2
How well do students progress?	2
How well do students improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	1
How safe do students feel?	2
<i>Are students able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	2
<i>How well do students make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	-
<b>Quality of provision</b>	<b>2</b>
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	1
How well partnerships with schools, colleges, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for students?	2
How effective are the care, guidance and support students receive in helping them to achieve?	1
<b>Leadership and management</b>	<b>2</b>
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	-
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of students?	2
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	1
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for students?	2
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2

\*where applicable to the type of provision

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Royal Exchange Buildings  
St Ann's Square  
Manchester  
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231

Textphone: 0161 618 8524

E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)

W: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

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