

# Liverpool Theatre School

Inspection of colleges participating in the Dance and Drama Award scheme

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**Unique reference number:** 50010

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## Information about the college

1. Liverpool Theatre School is a private school training students for employment in the musical theatre industry. The school runs the three-year national diploma in professional musical theatre awarded by Trinity College, London. The school is accredited by the National Council for Dance Education and Training.
2. The school is located in Liverpool and mostly attracts students from the north west of England. There are currently 50 students enrolled on the course, of whom 43 are in receipt of dance and drama awards (DaDA) funded by the Young People's Learning Agency.

## Summary report

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

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

## Overall effectiveness

3. Liverpool Theatre School is a good school with good capacity for further sustained improvement. The school consistently enables the large majority of students to complete their course and for the last three years the pass rate has been 100%. The school produces outstanding musical theatre performers and in 2008 and 2009 all graduates gained employment in the industry within six months of graduating from the programme. Students say they enjoy the course and feel stretched to achieve their best during three years of what they feel is a demanding training in a small and caring school.
4. The majority of teaching is good and lessons provide challenging work that supports the outstanding progress that most students make from year one to year three. Students appreciate the weekly individual pastoral tutorials and are confident they can approach most staff for additional guidance to develop specialist technical or artistic skills.
5. Staff set high expectations of students which are mostly upheld and are conducive to the high standards students need to be prepared for when joining the musical theatre profession. Students respect the expertise of the teaching staff and find input from guest speakers and leading performers a stimulating complement to their course. The school makes very effective use of former graduates who return to give workshops and talk to students about current audition trends and changes in the industry.

6. Feedback to students is regular and managed well, with diligently marked practical assessments and written assignments; but students' capacity to appraise their own work and that of others in lessons and rehearsals is limited. Feedback from some staff is too generic and does not help students know how to improve fundamental technical or interpretative skills. Leaders are responsive to students' ideas for improving the course and the new 'acting through song' module is a direct response to student feedback and staff evaluations of the need to better integrate acting and singing.
7. The school is well led and managed. Since the last inspection the vision to strive for excellence in teaching and outstanding outcomes for students has been maintained. The impact of new roles and responsibilities at senior level is still emerging in a newly-devised management structure for this year. The cycle of monitoring, evaluation and action planning is not always sufficiently or effectively targeted at making sure all leaders can analyse outcomes for students and set strategic priorities for the school, as well as for individual subject areas.

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

#### **What learners like:**

- teachers who draw upon their expertise and professional experience to share both artistic and technical skills as well as giving valuable insight about approaches to audition techniques and the challenges of becoming a musical theatre artist
- outstanding levels of care and pastoral support that help students feel looked after
- many opportunities for performing through termly class work, end-of-year productions and, by agreement with senior leaders, the chance to audition for locally-based, reputable work that complements the course
- the very good dietary and nutritional advice in the first year with access to a nutritionist for additional support in years two and three
- the very good careers guidance and audition preparation for third-year students
- the responsiveness of leaders to feedback from students to secure improvement to the course.

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

- upgrading of information and communication technology (ICT) so that software and hardware are more efficient and better support the students' own abilities when using ICT for assignment work
- the uneven allocation of time given to the three disciplines in the curriculum, so that opportunities for combining the triple strand work and constantly refining work as a musical theatre artist become integral to the entire course
- many more opportunities to learn in creative ways that encourage independent and peer learning, giving increased ownership to students to appraise their work and that of their peers.

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

**What employers like:**

- regular and effective communication between the school and employers
- excellent standards of training which equip students with the knowledge and skills so they are 'industry-ready' by the time they graduate
- the training by experienced professionals who have relevant and well-honed industry experience.

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

- no recommendations for improvement were received from employers.

# **Main inspection report**

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

## **Grade 2**

8. The school produces outstanding musical theatre performers, all of whom gain employment in the industry within six months of graduating from the programme. This pattern has been sustained since the last inspection and some students also secure their first performance contract before they graduate. The good work of leaders and managers coupled with good teaching and excellent care of students ensures that outcomes for students remain outstanding. The senior leadership team has recently expanded and is establishing more rigorous quality assurance processes to evaluate all aspects of the school's work. While the school has good systems in place for tracking student progress, leaders do not consistently analyse how outcomes for students determine strategic priorities for the school. Some teachers only use data as a summative assessment tool, limiting how progress data are used to plan lessons that always meet the needs of students. Occasionally some less-able students do not consistently receive the support they need in class and a small minority of more-able students say that they would like clearer guidance about how to stretch their technical ability to exceed the targets they receive.

## **Outcomes for learners**

## **Grade 1**

9. The outstanding achievement of the large majority of students by the end of the course is attributable to outstanding pastoral care, good teaching, and a gritty determination to succeed nurtured by staff who instil a passion for success in the industry. Students approach their course with high levels of commitment and a strong work ethic. Over the last three years around 75% have completed their training and those who complete all attain the national diploma in professional musical theatre.
10. Reports by Trinity College London describe highly confident performers whose singing skills show good breath control, good articulation, appropriate tuning and accomplished projection. Interpretation and execution of character for most students are outstanding; they demonstrate a secure awareness of the interplay between movement and speech. Students annotate scores successfully and the high emphasis placed on music theory combined with individual singing tuition enhances students' sight-reading skills. For some students the demands of different dance genres proves more of a challenge, but overall students possess a sound range of dance skills for the demands of musical theatre roles. Inspectors observed many lessons where students' attainment was high and they were quick to absorb and apply corrective feedback to their work.
11. In 2008 and 2009 all students gained related employment within six months of graduating from the course. Of the graduating cohort from 2010, 66% secured performance work within six months of leaving the course and three-year trends show a good range of jobs including various cruise ship tours, musical productions in London's West End, national touring shows and contracts for Disneyland in Paris and Japan.

12. The quality of teaching and learning is good, characterised by good relationships between staff and students, good pace and energy in lessons to inspire students, respect for teachers' breadth of knowledge and a willingness to commit to discipline and rigour in training sessions. Students are under no illusion of what is expected of them in preparing for lessons, being punctual, and being appropriately attired for classes; they know that this stands them in good stead for high levels of competition in auditions.
13. Systems in place for tracking student progress from audition to graduation are managed carefully and use termly and end-of-year assessments to monitor progress very effectively. This is a key strength of the school and the personal files for each student collate data successfully in a way that is accessible for staff. The discussion of student marks and their progress each term forms part of the fortnightly subject coordinator meetings, but the way that teachers use progress data to plan lessons requires more rigour and better understanding of how to differentiate the learning so that every student has work that develops their ability. Too much teacher-led work in some lessons inhibits learning because there is limited opportunity for students to work at their own pace and consolidate what they are learning.
14. Assignments have clear assessment criteria and students understand how their work is marked. They appreciate reports for practical exams and written work and in most subjects they receive targets for improvement. Even so the quality of feedback is very variable and in some instances is far too generic, failing to provide targets that support refinement or advancement of performance skills. In lessons students often receive purposeful oral feedback from teachers but rarely from each other. Allowing students opportunity to assess their own work or requiring students to watch and evaluate each others' work is very rare. Students say that they want more opportunity to work with each other and appraise their work to give them better ownership of their progress.
15. The curriculum provides good training in all three disciplines of singing, acting and dancing. However the overall balance of the timetable is too heavily weighted towards dance lessons. Students wish for more time to be devoted to acting and singing as well as lessons that integrate all three disciplines, not least so that they can acquire the stamina and breathing control to be able to dance well, sing and sustain a character. Students particularly value and benefit from weekly one-to-one tuition for singing, and reports by Trinity assessors recognise that the vocal work of students is the major strength of the school's training.
16. The course handbook provides students with a good overview of the course structure but lacks detail about specific practitioners, genres and styles that will be studied. Students enjoy the contextual study of the history of musical theatre, developing a good chronological understanding of key trends and master works from different periods. Lessons about diet, nutrition and safe practice in the first year equip students with a good knowledge of how to look after their voices and their bodies. Pilates and body-conditioning work

complement dance classes and vocal training so that injury prevention and treatment are understood by students. Students receive good career and employment guidance in their third year, covering the writing of curriculum vitae, understanding employment contracts and knowing how to network in the industry and nurture the connections made. As one student eloquently noted 'learning about how to do risk assessments was a real eye-opener'.

17. The quality of care, guidance and support is outstanding because staff know students well. Many students comment that a key factor in choosing to audition for and accept a place at the school is the small cohorts in each year and the very supportive environment during audition day. Students are confident that staff support their welfare needs both at school and in matters arising with accommodation or health care needs. The very few injuries are recorded centrally and the school has excellent relationships with external physiotherapists so that students quickly receive additional support. The annual audit of literacy and numeracy needs is well managed and whilst the school does its best to ensure the needs of students with statements for a specific learning difficulty and/or disability are met, more regular guidance to help with drafting and editing of students' written work is needed.

## **Leadership and management**

## **Grade 2**

18. Leaders and managers work in cohesive teams and have sustained outstanding outcomes for students over time, with high employment rates. The Principal is establishing a new vision for the school following a period of change during 2009 to 2010 when the previously joint principal roles were dissolved. The new structure of a senior business development team is starting to refocus how the impact of quality assurance processes such as lesson observations, course reviews, and analysis of data can better inform strategic planning. This is at an early stage and for this reason collation and analysis of trends in destinations and employment data have not moved on quickly enough since the last inspection. The staff voice is being heard more regularly through whole staff meetings, and subject coordinators say they feel valued in their roles in leading discipline teams.
19. The annual cycle of lesson observations is a feature of the school's work and most teachers are comfortable with being observed formally and informally. Observations by the course director are used appropriately for annual staff appraisals with the Principal, but some observation forms and appraisal records do not give staff specific measurable targets for development. Lesson observation records provide commentary about the strengths of the teaching observed but do not analyse the quality of student learning or how planning could be improved to accelerate the progress of students of different levels of ability. Leaders have rightly identified that the observation form needs refining if it is to lead to more succinct judgements against observation criteria.
20. The mid- and end-of-year course evaluation meetings consider feedback from staff and the student questionnaires. Minutes record discussions about strengths and areas for course development. These discussions are clearly insightful and give good consideration to ideas from student representatives. However, the annual course review is not sufficiently formalised in a document

that evaluates progress and summative assessment data, audition data, final graduate results, destinations or employment trend data. For this reason a course development plan and limited documentary evidence for subject development do not do justice to the thoughtful decisions being made in developing the course. The school's self-assessment report explains why changes have been made to the course and to leadership roles but there is less evaluation of how outcomes for students underpin these changes. Sections of the business development plan do not provide measurable success criteria that arise from student outcomes and quality assurance measures.

21. Communication between the business development team and the student and course development team is good because the course director plays a key role in both teams. The course director's regular meetings with the three subject coordinators lead to a good overview of developments and issues at operational and strategic level. However, minutes of meetings lack incisive analysis of the progress of students and often focus upon the students who are underachieving. Rarely do minutes record discussion about how to challenge more-able students or stretch those who may be working well but not meeting their potential.
22. Staff share their work informally but wish for more opportunities to observe each other so that best practice can be shared more widely. Staff training days provide good guidance about current legislation such as that for child protection, but are more limited in learning from best practice in education and training across the sector. This is partly because very few staff have nationally recognised teaching qualifications other than those awarded through specific professional bodies. The Principal is actively seeking opportunities for all staff to undertake formal teacher training qualifications. Most staff are willing to engage in further training to complement their already sound professional experience.
23. At present the lack of an advisory panel means leaders are heavily reliant upon their own professional contacts to keep abreast of changes in the industry. The school plans to relaunch the advisory panel next year to provide more systematic links with the industry.
24. Value for money is good and the deployment of human and practical resources is well planned, securing outstanding outcomes for students.

### **What does Liverpool Theatre School need to do to improve further?**

- Review the balance of the curriculum to establish a more equal division of time devoted to acting, singing and dancing and seek ways to help teachers to develop schemes of work that integrate musical theatre skills more effectively.
- Improve the ability of all teachers to use student progress data more effectively in lesson planning. Use formal and informal lesson observations to help teachers become familiar with assessing the quality of learning in lessons and how to vary teaching methods so that teaching has a less didactic approach.
- Provide significantly more opportunities for students to evaluate their learning in lessons by working independently of the teacher to rehearse and self-assess their work. Enable all teachers to incorporate more pair and group work in



lessons so that students can critique the work of their peers using criteria to guide their evaluative feedback.

- Maximise the capacity of middle leaders to evaluate subject developments and write clear subject action plans as a result of tighter strategic course targets and better use of the information from whole school quality assurance processes. Enable leaders to interpret and evaluate trends in quantitative and qualitative data so that decisions are based on evidence and are responsive to industry need.

## **Information about the inspection**

25. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the course director as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the qualification awarding body, Trinity London, the previous inspection report and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
26. Inspectors observed lessons including some joint observations with the course director and the Principal. The lead inspector met with groups of students to gain their views and also met with staff in leadership roles. Inspectors considered the views of employers and views expressed in recent student feedback questionnaires.

Record of main findings			
<b>Provider name</b>	<b>Liverpool Theatre School</b>	<b>Inspection number</b>	<b>364905</b>
<b>Learning types:16-18 learner responsive:</b> FE full-time course.			

Grades <b>using the 4 point scale</b> 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	<b>Overall</b>
<b>Approximate number of enrolled learners at the time of inspection</b>	
Full-time learners	50
Part-time learners	0
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Capacity to improve</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Outcomes for learners</b>	<b>1</b>
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	1
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	1
How well do learners progress?	1
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2
How safe do learners feel?	1
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	1
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	
<b>Quality of provision</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?	2
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	1
<b>Leadership and management</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>	2
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	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?	2
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	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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