

The Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts

Inspection of colleges participating in the Dance and Drama Award scheme

Unique reference number: 50030

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Information about the academy

1. The Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts is a private performing arts academy that trains students for employment in the musical theatre industry. The academy runs a three-year course in musical theatre leading to the national diploma in professional musical theatre, awarded by Trinity College, London. The academy is accredited by the Council for Dance Education and Training.
2. The academy is based close to the Barbican Centre in London and attracts many students from across London, the United Kingdom and internationally. There are currently 170 students enrolled at the academy, of whom 78 are in receipt of dance and drama awards (DaDA) funded by the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA).

Summary report

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

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 1
Capacity to improve	Grade 1

Overall effectiveness

3. The Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts is an outstanding academy with outstanding capacity to sustain further improvement. Currently celebrating its centenary year the academy is rightly proud of the 100 years of achievement in training many leading figures in the musical theatre industry. The vibrant legacy of the academy is a key reason why most students choose to study at Italia Conti. They confidently aspire to secure as prolific a career as their predecessors. Students are passionate, committed and work extremely hard to reach high standards in each aspect of their training. They make certain that that very good attendance gives them the chance to absorb a wealth of knowledge and professional experience from well-qualified staff whose own performance careers enrich the depth of the teaching. Students possess a highly focused professional work ethic reflecting the high expectations and aspirations set by leaders of the academy. Students benefit enormously from access to the extensive performing resources at the local Barbican Centre to support their written and performance studies, and are proactive in arranging tickets to see many West End productions.
4. The outstanding achievement of students in acting, singing and dancing is testament to a very rigorous musical theatre training delivered through the well balanced curriculum. New ideas for curriculum development are carefully considered by leaders so that the cohesion of the curriculum is sustained. The increased input from a team of a regular singing tutors, complemented by a personalised vocal clinic, means that the this strand of the 'triple threat' training is now equally as strong as dancing and acting work. The recent inclusion of

classes for aerial skills reflects increased use of acrobatic work in the industry. The curriculum meets the needs and interests of students outstandingly well.

5. The combination of outstanding care, guidance and support, outstanding teaching and a very successful curriculum, has enabled the large majority of students over the last three years to complete their training and gain their professional diploma. The large majority of students secure work in the musical theatre industry within six months of graduating. Destination data for the last three years show the majority making good progress in the industry. The academy increasingly secures agent contracts for students before they graduate and this already applies to 77% of the current third year students.
6. The academy has sustained and developed further many outstanding features of training identified during the last inspection. Leadership and management are now outstanding because of increased accountability through levels of leadership. Senior leaders have secured greater cohesion in each subject department as a result of more comprehensive and detailed evaluation and planning. The course leader is inspirational, providing energetic and well-focused guidance for staff and students alike. As a result excellent quality assurance processes continually improve the quality of provision and outcomes for all students. A much more focused series of lesson observations ensure that staff have a good overview of the strengths and areas for development in the quality of teaching and learning. The academy's self-assessment is extremely well written, cogent in analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, and identifies accurately key strengths and areas requiring further development.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What students like:

- the excellent range of subjects in the curriculum which are the bedrock of the musical theatre training
- well-respected professional experience and knowledge of teaching staff who make concrete links between training and industry practice
- respect for and nurturing of individual talent
- a support network across the academy helping students feel very safe, well cared for and guided with both academic and personal matters
- the high levels of challenge in lessons encouraging creativity and embedding core performance skills in singing, acting and dancing
- excellent preparation for the industry both through the mainstream curriculum and through methods of assessment such as the 'directors' audition'
- very good guidance about health and fitness which helps students know how to take care of their body and voice.

What students would like to see improved:

- larger studio spaces for some dance classes.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- the reliability and highly professional attitude of graduates
- the expert teaching which leads to high standards of achievement and very good calibre, versatile graduates who are ready for entry to the profession
- high levels of accomplishment in all aspects of the training.

What employers would like to see improved:

- no areas for improvement were identified by employers.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 1

7. Leaders and managers at all levels show outstanding capacity to improve and sustain the recent improvements, which have enhanced quality assurance processes since the last inspection. The course leader and principal help staff understand why the reviews of schemes of work, meticulous department reviews and action plans, feedback from students and frequent lesson observations support the outstanding cycle of evaluation and improvement planning. As a result of clear direction from the course leader, lesson observations more accurately evaluate students' learning and leaders have a realistic view of the strengths and areas for development in teaching. Leaders have achieved a greater consistency in good and outstanding teaching because there is regular discussion about the quality of learning in lessons.
8. The rigorous cycle of evaluation and development planning, meticulously led by the course leader, has sustained and further enhanced the capacity of middle leaders to evaluate the impact of individual departments on outcomes for students. Clear lines of accountability and high expectations of all leaders drive improvement. Department self-evaluations and the whole course improvement plan are tightly configured with realistic and measurable targets. Findings from student feedback and external assessors are considered against student performance data so that teaching and the curriculum are closely scrutinised.
9. Students continue to achieve outstanding results and they know their individuality is valued. Destinations data shows how well students secure both high profile and regular employment. The standard of work in lessons is excellent, particularly enhanced by students' commitment to push themselves. Students have resilience and determination which helps staff stretch their capability. Most students make at least good and often outstanding progress because the tracking of progress is tightly monitored by tutors, heads of department and by the course leader at individual student level. Formative and summative assessment data are used well to analyse trends in achievement. Goal setting with students is realistic and gives staff and students measurable success criteria.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 1

10. Outcomes for students are outstanding and continue to improve because leaders make judicious choices about how to enhance the curriculum and continually improve teaching. Students approach their training with a work ethic that is gritty and determined. Retention since the last inspection has risen considerably, averaging over 90% for the last three years; and of students who completed their training, 100% achieved the national diploma in professional musical theatre. The academy maintains detailed records of graduate destinations and data show that the proportion of students who secure high-profile jobs continues to increase. Over the last three years a higher percentage than previously have secured leading roles in both West End and national touring shows such as *Grease*, *Don't Stop Believing*, *Hairspray*, *Joseph*, *We Will Rock You*, and *Wicked*. Graduate destinations are also shifting in response to industry trends such as the inclusion of core musical theatre skills in leading television shows which search for leading talent. Many students continue to secure voice-over work, cruise ship work and smaller scale regional production work.
11. External reports about first, second and third year performances by Trinity College, London consistently refer to highly skilled and confident performers who possess exceptional timing in comedic work, truthful and convincing acting work with well researched characters, and high standards in dance technique, notably jazz and tap. Students have outstanding skill in interpretation and execution of character with a very strong understanding of the relationship between movement, song and dance. Recent reports also exemplify how a more intensive focus on voice and a broader repertoire of songs has helped students achieve high levels of versatility in singing. In lessons, solo and ensemble work shows rich textures, high competency in dialect and accent, and very good breath control. Individual singing tuition in year three has enhanced achievement in graduate shows. Inspectors observed lessons across disciplines where students' attainment was high. Students quickly apply corrections and make rapid progress. In a few lessons there are missed opportunities to annotate scores and scripts or keep notes in journals so that all students have records of key concepts being learnt.
12. Throughout the course students receive excellent guidance about fitness, diet and nutrition. The complementary gym work for men, Pilates training and the new gymnastics work for women fully support stamina and body conditioning work. Students learn safe practices in lifting and partner work and show responsibility for themselves and others in arriving early to do vocal and movement warm-ups. Teaching staff, the course leader and student welfare officer monitor any injuries carefully. The academy has an in-house physiotherapist and good links with specialist agencies such as the British School of Osteopathy and students feel well supported for referrals to reputable physiotherapists.
13. Students who have learning difficulties and disabilities and students from different minority ethnic groups are fully integrated into the academy. Students comment very favourably about the good cohesion of the entire student community, often generated through team work for performances, such as the recent centenary ball.

The quality of provision

Grade 1

14. The quality of teaching is outstanding. In the very best lessons teaching blends artistry, technical skill and creativity, pace is demanding, expectations are high and students confidently use peer and self assessment to critique their work. Students told inspectors that because of good trust and respect there is room to learn from mistakes and support each other to refine performance skills. Students feel comfortable taking risks in vocal, dance and acting work that pushes them out of their comfort zone. As one student said, 'you get back what you put in'. Good and outstanding teaching regularly uses technical vocabulary to support students' literacy skills and extend their ability to use correct terminology for their art. For example, in an acting for camera class students became quickly familiar with language and practical directing skills related to angles, light, and use of eye line, making good progress in applying and evaluating new techniques to short scenes. Teaching makes links across disciplines because teachers have a very good understanding of what subject teams have planned for each term. Excellent contextual studies sessions help students understand key periods in the history of musical theatre and they quickly assimilate how this links directly to studio performance work. However, audio-visual resources showing professional interpretations by leading performers are not used effectively in studio practice.
15. Rigorous tracking of students' progress through systematic use of assessment data and very good communication between staff across subject disciplines helps staff maximise student potential. Student progress is monitored very well, because systems in place to judge potential at audition and then follow this through from enrolment to targets for each student each year give a clear picture of whether students make expected or better than expected progress. Tutorial records and feedback from formative class work and twice-yearly summative assessments give students very clear guidance about what and how to improve. The course leader successfully moderates marking for assessments and department meetings are used well to review assessment criteria against the learning outcomes in schemes of work. A most successful mode of assessment is the 'directors' audition panel' which establishes how well students cope with unseen material and how they present themselves in an audition-based assessment.
16. Students' ability to critique their progress and agree targets with tutors arises from highly reflective technique logs. Students enjoy writing their weekly journals to capture their achievements. These are honest and often very critical, showing clearly how students are encouraged to appraise their work both in technical skills and artistry. Journals are used well for reflection after class but are used less well in studio work to record comments from peers, key teaching points and concepts learnt. The combination of personalised guidance, very clear targets for each subject and impressive reflective practice by students, means that most students make at least good progress and some exceed their potential and make outstanding progress.

17. The training course provides outstanding integration of the three disciplines required for professional training in musical theatre. Students benefit from a timetable that is flexible to their needs as they move through their training. They understand why streaming for classes is appropriate and say there is good transparency when students move up or down a level. The balance of the time allocated to different disciplines is monitored carefully by the course leader. Leaders are highly responsive to student feedback and suggestions for improvement. Since the last inspection the adaptation of the curriculum to include aerial work, more work in heels for girls, acting for camera, contemporary dance classes and music theory to enhance sight reading, purposefully reflects industry trends and the areas for improvement in the self-assessment report. The impact of these changes is evident in reports by external assessors. Innovative performance options in the third year include the new 'made2move' dance company, the theatre in education Shakespeare company, and a range of musical performances to give students exposure to demanding rehearsal schedules, working as a company and taking responsibility for producing quality public performances. Third-year students are extremely pleased with these opportunities, especially how much they learn through the theatre in education project with a special school for severely disabled children. Having to think on their feet, be flexible and use a range of communicative skills enriches their experience of using their skill set in response to many different contexts.
18. The academy's good links with the profession are established through the high profile of former students who return to teach classes, through the Italia Conti agency whose work is critical to tracking destinations and sustaining contact with agents and casting directors, and through the prominence of the third-year touring work which successfully showcases their skills. Whilst leaders act upon feedback from the agency and industry professionals, a regular forum for advice from the industry is not part of the committee structure at the academy. There are missed opportunities to use the very good links with industry in more formal ways for annual course evaluation and development planning.
19. Students receive outstanding personal and professional support helping them achieve very well. Excellent communication between staff means that students' educational and welfare needs are known by staff and appropriate support is offered. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities are identified and supported effectively throughout their course. The course leader diligently checks that their progress is comparable to their peers and individual student records give insightful guidance about how to support specific needs such as dyspraxia and dyslexia in studio teaching. Specialist advice and guidance are quickly available because the academy has established a good network of counsellors and medical practitioners. The overwhelming majority of students express how much they feel well looked after. They appreciate sessions such as 'staying safe in London' delivered by community officers from the Metropolitan Police Service. The size of the school, cohesive team working and open door policy helps students feel there is always someone there to listen. This is particularly so in cases of financial hardship. The principal works closely with the board of trustees to secure additional scholarship and hardship funding to support students at risk of having to leave the course.

Leadership and management

Grade 1

20. Leadership and management are outstanding and outcomes for students continue to improve because leaders are fastidious in making sure that the high profile of Italia Conti graduates remains so. The work of the current principal passionately upholds the original mission of its founder, giving young people a secure grounding in a 'triple threat' training. The academy successfully enrolls students from different ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds and ensures that the students who attend the Italia Conti 11 to 16 school are given sound guidance about progressing onto the diploma course. The ethos of the academy is one of excellence, equality of opportunity and widening access, and the student population reflects this.
21. Leaders have a comprehensive understanding of the vision for the academy and improvement planning since the last inspection has significantly enhanced the quality of provision and outcomes for students. Staff have a clear understanding of the vision for Italia Conti as well as the detail in the subject and whole course action plans. The academy's self-assessment report is detailed, insightful and provides solid evidence that the evaluation of the quality of provision is rooted in assessing the impact on outcomes for students. Subsections of the self-assessment report give succinct analyses of why features of the course have changed. These are well linked to destinations and retention data and standards of work achieved by all year groups. The course leader successfully draws together findings from formal lesson observations so that staff have clear targets from their appraisals. All staff actively contribute to course development through department meetings, termly and end of year reviews. The line of sight from subject reviews through to whole-course evaluation and action planning is excellent and ensures that staff fully understand the main strengths and areas for development on an annual and termly basis. The course leader includes middle leaders in training to observe colleagues, further strengthening the capacity of leaders to steer developments in teaching across the academy. The policy for peer observation is well written, taking staff through how to jointly agree the foci for observations to best practice in giving constructive feedback. An open studio policy for observations gives good opportunity to observe best practice informally. Staff are pleased that this increased transparency feeds into critical debate about teaching during staff development days. Since the last inspection more staff have acquired formal teaching qualifications, deepening their understanding of what constitutes good planning. As a result lesson plans are good and in most instances staff plan learning that helps students make good and often outstanding progress against individual targets. On occasion some planning is too brief and does not sufficiently differentiate the learning against goals for each student.
22. Students are safe as a result of very good health and safety audits, regular risk assessments and appropriate vetting of staff. Regular and well-planned staff training in first aid, dealing with eating disorders and how to support students with medical conditions helps everyone feel secure in their welfare role. The academy's promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Expectations of staff and students are high and discriminatory behaviour is not tolerated.

Students judge that there is transparency and fairness in the auditioning for productions. Double casting gives excellent opportunity for students to be included in lead roles, solo parts and ensemble work throughout their training. Students feel their voice is well heard and highly valued because leaders use their ideas to improve the academy. The academy continues to attract and recruit students from minority ethnic groups and students with specific learning or medical needs, often exceeding that found typically in this sector.

23. Italia Conti makes outstanding use of its physical and human resources to the great benefit of students. Using studios for external hire secures additional revenue which can be used to support students in financial need. The academy provides outstanding value for money.

What does Italia Conti need to do to improve further?

- Exploit use of the information and communication technology in lessons to further enhance student's appreciation of historical and contemporary performances by musical theatre practitioners.
- Enable all staff to plan lessons which consistently differentiate learning for students by using the excellent target-setting information available across the academy.
- Develop ways of formally capturing and evaluating views of employers and advisors from the industry so that improvement planning is more evidently responsive to views of stakeholders.

Information about the inspection

24. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the course leader as the nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors took account of the previous inspection report, the self-assessment report, department action plans, reports by the qualification awarding body and data on students' achievement since the previous inspection.
25. Inspectors observed lessons, some of which were jointly conducted with the course leader. Inspectors met with students across all three year groups and met with staff and leaders from across the academy. Inspectors also considered feedback from employers.

Record of main findings			
Provider name	Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts	Inspection number	364504
Learning types: 16-18 learner responsive: FE full-time.			

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall
Approximate number of enrolled learners at the time of inspection Full-time learners.	170
Overall effectiveness	1
Capacity to improve	1
Outcomes for learners	1
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?	1
How safe do learners feel?	1
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	2
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	
Quality of provision	1
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	1
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	1
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	1
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	1
Leadership and management	1
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	1
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	NA
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?	1
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?	1
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	1

*where applicable to the type of provision

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