

# Arts Educational Schools London (Arts Ed)

Inspection report

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Provider reference	102551
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## Main findings

Course: Three-year National Diploma and one-year National Certificate in Professional Acting

Overall effectiveness: Good (grade 2)

Date of inspection: 28-29 May 2008

Course: Three-year National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Date of inspection: 28-29 May 2008

This feedback contains findings from the inspection visit. It draws on the evidence available from performance data, external and internal reviews, other available documentation and interviews held on the day.

The acting course was previously inspected by Ofsted in October 2002 when it was graded outstanding (grade 1) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. The musical theatre course was also previously inspected by Ofsted in October 2002 when it was graded outstanding (grade 1) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. The leadership and management of the school as a whole were last inspected in March 2004 and were graded outstanding (grade 1).

## Three-year National Diploma and one-year National Certificate in Professional Acting

Overall effectiveness: Good (grade 2)

### Standards

Reports produced by Trinity College London assessors in 2005/06 give a mixed picture of students' standard of performance on both acting courses, with a few students failing to meet Trinity criteria. However, most recent reports for the three-year course suggest that the standard of acting 'is showing noticeable progression', with a few negative comments far outweighed by positive ones, such as 'a promising ensemble' and 'a beautifully mature and effortless performance'. In 2006/07, assessors thought the standard of one-year students' stage work was 'variable'. Critical reports at the beginning of the one-year course are replaced by more positive comments towards the end, with praise for students who 'acquitted themselves admirably'. Some of the acting students' film work was judged by Trinity to be outstanding. The external examiner appointed by City University in 2006/07 praised three-year students' ensemble work in a production of *A Winter's Tale* and thought their theatre-in-education work had improved greatly, but noted some shallow performances elsewhere. Viewing films made by one-year students, the external examiner noticed both outstanding performances and a few which 'lacked truth'.

Retention is very good on both courses. On the three-year course, no students left the 2004-07 cohort early; in the same period, only one student left the one-year course before completing. On average, retention is about 95%. So far, all students who complete the courses gain the Trinity qualification.

Acting students are committed to their training and professional in their attitudes. One-year students demonstrate an impressive balance of realism and idealism as they look forward to life after graduation and students on both courses are reflective about their training.

Most Arts Ed acting students get work in theatre or television when they leave. Of those graduating from the three-year course in 2007 (the best year yet for graduate employment), 87% had agents by the time they left; by January 2008, 66% had worked somewhere in the performing arts. Since 2005, four students have worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company and three for the National Theatre. A majority of one-year students find work in children's or community theatre, although one or two have appeared in feature films such as *St Trinians* and *The Darjeeling Limited* and in the West End.

### Quality of provision

Trinity College London judges Arts Ed a very good provider of the three-year National Diploma in Professional Acting and considers that the one-year course 'meets students' needs'.

In 2002, inspectors considered teaching on both acting courses to be excellent and a significant strength of the school. Employment outcomes suggest teaching is still successful in developing students' technical and professional skills. Students report very favourably about the quality of their teachers and the support they are given in classes. Their feedback shows they enjoy their training and feel they are in a learning environment where they are encouraged to do well. Records of class observations often reveal teaching characterised by a 'creative' approach. Teachers are experienced professionals in theatre and media. Many work as freelance practitioners in their specialist fields, sharing their contacts in the industry with students. Guest directors complement the work of class teachers and the professional focus provided by this diversity of approach is particularly valued by students. About one third of teachers have teaching qualifications.

Trinity assessors are confident that the assessment on both courses is extremely rigorous. Students are eloquent about assessment practice and value the written and verbal feedback they receive. They say they receive clear information about the assignments, feel challenged to work on those aspects which need improving and are set clear targets. Simulated auditions give students the opportunity to test themselves against the challenges they will meet after graduation, and, by the time they leave, all have extensive portfolios. Weekly journals are conscientiously completed and encourage students to reflect on their progress.

Both courses have been carefully shaped to meet the needs of training actors. They have an appropriate balance of subjects and offer many opportunities for independent learning and a good range of performance opportunities, particularly on the three-year course. In 2005, the National Council for Drama Training (NCDT) judged the three-year course to be 'well structured, imaginative and coherent; the progress pathway is clear, well crafted and leads to professional outcomes'. The one-year course is designed sensitively to respond to the needs of mature students from a diverse range of backgrounds; the course structure is sufficiently flexible to take account of their many different starting points. All acting programmes are grounded in strong professional practice. A particular strength is the film and media component which includes training in radio and voiceover. Course content is continually being modified as the result of feedback from students and teachers.

Accommodation is adequate, although aspects have been the subject of criticism for a number of years. The studios are reasonably well kept, although it is possible to sympathise with the teacher who felt that rooms 'look run down, they look old fashioned'. In 2004, inspectors noted that while the ground floor was adapted to ensure access for people in wheelchairs, the rest of the building was inaccessible for people with restricted mobility. This is still the case. Noise has been a particular problem. After their accreditation visit in 2005, NCDT advised Arts Ed 'to improve and provide a suitable professional training environment particularly with regard to noise level'. The Catholic Centre, where the one-year course is based, is a pleasant space but with few specialist facilities. Film and media facilities are good. The library is well stocked, and students have better access to it than at the time of the last report, but

study space is still limited, as is access to information and communication technology (ICT), a point noted by NCDT.

The care and guidance of students on both courses are outstanding. Arts Ed provides excellent pastoral and professional support within a very safe, nurturing environment. 'Here there is a real sense of family', said one student. There is a strong emphasis on the promotion of healthy performers and medical welfare is good. In 2005, the NCDT considered the buddy scheme, where each first year student is paired up with someone from the second year, 'an example of good practice'. Students speak highly of the counselling provision. There is a good, well-established tutorial system, with an experienced member of staff acting as tutor for each year and able to maintain an overview of each student's progress and development. Procedures for coaching students into employment are exemplary. Students are not automatically assessed for any literacy or numeracy support needs when they enrol, but those who self-refer are offered extra help with their studies; staff supporting students with additional learning needs are highly committed, but would benefit from appropriate training.

### Leadership and management

The leadership of both acting courses is very strong, inspiring loyalty, commitment and hard work. In 2005, NCDT called the leadership of the school of acting 'dynamic'. On both courses, staff at all levels are committed to good professional practice. Operational management is good and supported by an appropriate programme of meetings at all levels; students know what they have to do and when they have to do it. All staff have a close involvement with the students and their needs, and there is a strong commitment to inclusion and diversity. However, it is surprising that some quite basic management information, such as an overall attendance figure for the course, is not more readily available.

The new dean has a clear vision and recognises the need to address past weaknesses and reposition Arts Ed so it is better placed to face the challenges of the future. He has quickly instituted a number of reviews and reports, including one on the facilities and accommodation, and devised new management structures designed to bring greater coherence to Arts Ed's offer. He has so far been successful in drawing staff at all levels into the change process.

Systematic review and evaluation are not built into the culture of the institution, which is disappointing in view of the very positive judgements about quality assurance in the last inspection report. The acting self-assessment report is descriptive rather than evaluative and does not include any reference to the one-year course. No action is identified following some quite critical comments from Trinity assessors. Student feedback is taken into account informally, and staff say they often discuss and help introduce minor changes. However, too many issues raised in previous reports have not had sufficient attention, and recommendations have sometimes been ignored. For example, formal teaching observations are still not being used to make judgements about the quality of teaching overall (Ofsted 2002)

and data on students' destinations are only now being used to analyse patterns of employment (Ofsted 2004).

#### Points for action

The college must:

- improve the consistency of the standards of students' work
- ensure that the quality assurance process for both acting courses is based upon a rigorous process of self assessment at course and subject level.

#### Points for consideration

The college might usefully:

- improve the quality of the accommodation, including disabled access
- improve the use of data on students' destinations, attendance, and the quality of teaching to inform planning
- improve the quality of students' study area and the ICT provision.

## Three-year National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

### Standards

Recent reports produced by assessors from Trinity College London judge the overall standard of students' performances to be 'excellent'. 'Students are above average in the first year and there are always names in the "outstanding" box.' Assessors' comments include: 'each student gave an assured, mature and confident performance' and 'a high level of technical ability'. The external examiner appointed by City University in 2006/07 judged students' performances to be 'almost always of a very high standard' with dance and singing in productions 'effective throughout'.

A report from the Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET) in 2005 observed that 'the quality of work in all three disciplines was consistently of a high standard...' and that students in classes were 'attentive, enthusiastic and highly motivated', responding to teaching with 'confidence and energy'. Students are reflective learners and articulate when expressing their views.

Retention over the three years of the course is about 80% and all students who complete gain the Trinity diploma.

Most musical theatre students get work quickly when they leave. Of the present third year cohort graduating in July 2008, half have already signed contracts and only three are without agents. Of those graduating in 2007, all left with agent representation and 90% were working within a year. Typically, students work in national and international touring companies, pantomime and West End shows. Strong links with the industry and the high reputation of the musical theatre course mean that some graduates are able to secure leading roles as their first jobs. For example, one student has a leading role in *High School Musical* in the West End, another has the male lead in *Our House* at Birmingham Repertory Theatre and another has a major role in a touring production of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*.

### Quality of provision

Trinity College London judges Arts Ed to be 'an exemplary provider of the National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre'.

In 2002, inspectors thought teaching on the musical theatre course was excellent and a significant strength of the school. Very impressive employment outcomes suggest teaching is highly successful in developing students' technical and professional skills. In 2005, the CDET saw 'effective teaching across all three disciplines that sets challenging and appropriate targets for students'. Students report very favourably about the quality of their teachers and the support they are

given in classes. Their feedback shows they enjoy their training and feel they are in a learning environment where they are encouraged to do well. Teachers are experienced professionals in the performing arts. Many work as freelance practitioners in their specialist fields, sharing their contacts in the industry with students. Guest directors and choreographers complement the work of class teachers and the professional focus provided by this diversity of approach is particularly valued by students. About one third of teachers have teaching qualifications.

Trinity assessors are confident that 'extremely rigorous assessment procedures are in place' and that assessment is 'consistent and accurate'. Students are eloquent about assessment practice and value the written and verbal feedback they receive. They say they receive clear information about the assignments, feel challenged to work on those aspects which need improving and are set clear targets. Simulated auditions give students the opportunity to test themselves against the challenges they will meet after graduation, and by the time they leave all have extensive portfolios. Weekly journals are conscientiously completed and encourage students to reflect on their progress.

The course is well designed to meet the needs of training performers in the 'triple threat' of dancing, singing and acting. It has an appropriate balance of subjects with, according to Trinity, 'entirely appropriate content', and offers many opportunities for independent learning and a good range of performance opportunities. In 2005, CDET considered Arts Ed provided 'a well-structured course.... designed to develop understanding on the wide-ranging issues relating to professional employment as a musical theatre artist'. Course content is continually being modified as the result of feedback from students and teachers.

Accommodation is adequate, although aspects have been the subject of criticism for a number of years and after their accreditation visit in 2005, CDET noted that 'the building would benefit from some refurbishment...'. The studios are reasonably well kept, although it is possible to sympathise with the teacher who felt that rooms 'look run down, they look old fashioned'. In 2004, inspectors noted that while the ground floor was adapted to ensure access for people in wheelchairs, the rest of the building was inaccessible for people with restricted mobility. This is still the case. Noise has been a particular problem. The library is well stocked, and students have better access to it than at the time of the last report, but study space is still limited as is access to information and communication technology (ICT), a point noted by CDET in 2005: 'The limited IT resources were a concern for several students and the college is aware of the need to develop these facilities'.

The care and guidance of students on the musical theatre course are outstanding. The school provides excellent pastoral and professional support within a very safe, nurturing environment. There is strong emphasis on the promotion of healthy performers and, in 2005, CDET noted that Arts Ed gave high priority to 'ensuring that the welfare and medical provision is appropriate to the needs of students'. Students speak highly of the counselling provision. There is a good, well-established tutorial system, with an experienced member of staff acting as tutor for each year and able to maintain an overview of each student's progress and development. Procedures for

coaching students into employment are exemplary. Students are not automatically assessed for any literacy or numeracy support needs when they enrol, but those who self-refer are offered extra help with their studies; staff supporting students with additional learning needs are highly committed, but would benefit from appropriate training.

## Leadership and management

The leadership of the musical theatre school is very strong, inspiring loyalty, commitment and hard work. In 2005, CDET thought the leadership of the school was 'highly effective'. Staff at all levels are committed to good professional practice. Operational management is good and supported by an appropriate programme of meetings at all levels; students know what they have to do and when they have to do it. All staff have a close involvement with the students and their needs, and there is a strong commitment to inclusion and diversity. However, it is surprising that some quite basic management information, such as an overall attendance figure for the course, is not more readily available.

The new dean has a clear vision and recognises the need to address past weaknesses and reposition Arts Ed so it is better placed to face the challenges of the future. He has quickly instituted a number of reviews and reports, including one on the facilities and accommodation, and devised new management structures designed to bring greater coherence to Arts Ed's offer. He has so far been successful in drawing staff at all levels into the change process.

Systematic review and evaluation are not built into the culture of the institution, which is disappointing in view of the very positive judgements about quality assurance in the last inspection report. Although the musical theatre self-assessment report is not afraid to identify some areas of weakness, it is mostly descriptive rather than evaluative. Student feedback is taken into account informally, and staff say they often discuss and help introduce minor changes. However, too many issues raised in previous reports have not had sufficient attention, and recommendations have sometimes been ignored. For example, formal teaching observations are still not being used to make judgements about the quality of teaching overall (Ofsted 2002) and data on students destinations are only now being used to analyse patterns of employment (Ofsted 2004).

## Points for action

The college must:

- ensure that the quality assurance process are based upon a rigorous process of self assessment at course and subject level.

## Points for consideration

The college might usefully:

- improve the quality of the accommodation, including disabled access
- improve the use of data on students' destinations, attendance and the quality of teaching to inform planning
- improve quality of students' study area and the ICT provision.