

Inspection of Doreen Bird College of Performing Arts Ltd.

Inspection dates: 30 January to 1 February 2024

Overall effectiveness

Outstanding

The quality of education	Outstanding
Behaviour and attitudes	Outstanding
Personal development	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Outstanding
Education programmes for young people	Outstanding
Adult learning programmes	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Outstanding

Information about this provider

Doreen Bird College of Performing Arts Ltd (Bird College) is an independent college that trains students for employment in the musical theatre industry. It has a single campus in Sidcup, in the London Borough of Bexley. The college teaches diploma and degree courses. This inspection was of the provision for students on the level 6 diploma in professional musical theatre, validated by Trinity College London.

At the time of inspection, 81 students were in receipt of Dance and Drama Award funding. Of these, 29 were aged 16 to 18.

The college does not work with any subcontractors.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Students are highly motivated to develop their expertise in singing, dance and acting. They show exceptional dedication to their individual work and to the needs of their peers. For example, students perform difficult a cappella harmonies with very well blended voice work. In acting lessons, they consider thoughtfully how they can produce well defined characters within an ensemble.

Students are encouraged by teachers to become the best, most authentic version of themselves as performers. Across the disciplines teachers make sure that the training goes beyond technical repetition. They teach students to understand the thought processes that influence characterisation in performance. Acting teachers make sure that students can portray complex characters, based on their detailed analysis of a script.

By their third year, students become stage- and film-ready performers. They have a highly developed dance repertoire, confident and versatile voice, versatile acting ability, and knowledge about being a resilient performer. Their work is of the high standard required by the industry, as is reflected in their high-quality final showreel.

Students from all backgrounds feel very welcome at the college. Leaders and staff make excellent use of feedback from students through a range of forums. These include student representatives from each year group, as well as from the global majority, international, neurodiverse, Pride and under 18 groups of students. Leaders respond well to issues raised by students to find resolutions.

Students have a thorough understanding of positive conduct. They recognise unwanted behaviours and are well-informed about possible manipulation or grooming in the industry. Students feel especially safe when playing intimate scenes. They and their teachers routinely seek consent for hand-on contact and can define boundaries, so that when they work at proximity this is always preceded by defining personal levels of comfort.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

The board of directors, leaders and staff are passionate about and dedicated to training their students to be skilled performers ready to fulfil their dreams of working in musical theatre. To achieve this, they have designed a curriculum that is focused extremely well on the evolving needs of the performing arts industry. They seek continuous feedback from industry professionals to guide them on curriculum development so that it is up to date and relevant. For example, they have amended how they teach singing and embedded this into the actor training. They have increased the amount of singing tuition, with one-to-one lessons for all students. Because of the outstanding training they receive, most students, including those who need extra help, complete their course, achieve their qualification and are ready for their career in the performing arts.

Teachers consistently build practice, repetition, and reflection into workshops, enabling students to practise and acquire skills highly effectively. They provide outstanding guidance to students when they are learning new skills and continuously assess students' abilities across the three performance disciplines. For example, dance teachers use very effective strategies so that students can achieve difficult movement sequences. When teaching a complex jump, they carefully break this down into manageable and achievable components at an adjusted tempo that students can repeat. They provide continuous correction and show students how to use their image in the mirror to self-correct.

Teachers are very attentive to the physical vulnerabilities that students face in training and as performers. They make sure, through body conditioning, that students work safely. They teach students an intrinsic understanding of body mechanics and self-care so that they know the potential risks, for example, of a leaping sequence in dance. Teachers provide students with adaptations and options to consider that help them to avoid injury. Staff provide students who need it with comprehensive well-being and mental health support.

Teachers are experts in their disciplines and maintain their practice at the highest level. They also make excellent use of external practitioners to teach masterclasses to students. They invite performers from current West End productions to teach a complex fusion of demanding dance styles from their shows. Students learn quickly to pick up the movement quality of dance sequences that include hip hop, commercial, and jazz elements to perform challenging stage-worthy choreography.

Staff model extremely well the professional etiquette expected of students as future performers. They train students to pay close attention to direction and instructions, and to make best use of their time in lessons and during rehearsals. Students respond very positively. They make detailed notes on scores and listen and watch intently to the way tutors use phrases of movement or melody. As a result, students pick up new material extremely quickly. They practise, refine, repeat and perfect their work through diligent repetition, ultimately finding unique ways to present work and make it their own.

Staff support students thoroughly to go into their chosen careers. Staff at the college's associated Bird Agency provide third year students with useful weekly guidance to help them prepare for careers, including information on topics such as tax returns when self-employed. Students know how to engage with agents and how to prepare for auditions. Through their third-year performances they are thoroughly prepared to go into work and know the high standards of performance that they need to achieve. Students have good-quality audition calls and recalls, and a high proportion obtain desirable stage, film, and commercial contracts.

Leaders and staff have an exceptional approach to equality and inclusion. This is exemplified in the excellent monthly newsletter, in which staff explain to students how themes such as Black history, neurodiversity, mental health awareness, and intersectionality are relevant to theatre arts. Teachers integrate these themes seamlessly into the curriculum. For example, in singing they look at 1920s songs

written and performed by Black artists, and in employability skills they learn about a casting agency set up to improve representation of Black people on stage.

Students are very well informed about social and moral values, which staff promote highly effectively through the curriculum. When teaching topics such as Epic theatre, teachers discuss with students the nature of peaceful protest, and the boundary between this and radical or extremist action. Similarly, through their explorations of characters and relationships in scripts, students have a very mature understanding of social stereotypes and the dangers these present.

Most managers and staff are very positive about the support they receive from college leaders. They value the training they have so that they can maintain their industry expertise and develop their teaching practice. Staff take up the comprehensive opportunities they have to develop themselves professionally, including through sharing of best practice. Teachers have very helpful training in how to teach people who need extra help with their studies.

The board of directors has very good representation of different skills and backgrounds, including in the performing arts industry, education, finance, and human resources. Board members are very well informed by leaders, and therefore understand the provision. They provide effective challenge and support to the leadership team. They use their considerable industry expertise to gauge the calibre of training and its impact on students. They are aware of how the college is evolving in response to industry demands and know how leaders achieve this.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Provider details

Unique reference number	50701
Address	Alma Road Sidcup Kent DA14 4ED
Contact number	020 8300 6004
Website	https://birdcollege.co.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Shirley Coen/Luis De Abreu
Provider type	Dance and drama college
Date of previous inspection	2 to 3 December 2015
Main subcontractors	Not applicable

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the assistant principal, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

Rieks Drijver, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Christina Christou

Ofsted Inspector

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