



Liverpool Theatre School and College



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

Inspection Report

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Basic information about the college

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| Name of college: | Liverpool Theatre School and College |
| Type of college: | Performing arts college |
| Principals: | Norah Button Maxine Ellis |
| Address of college: | 19 Aigburth Road Aigburth Liverpool L17 4JR |
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| Name of reporting inspector: | Alan Marsh HMI |
| Date of inspection: | 21–24 November 2005 |

Part A: Summary

Information about the college

Liverpool Theatre School was founded in 1935 to provide training in the performing arts for disadvantaged young people in Liverpool. The school later extended its age range and added the term 'college' to its title. Both the school and the college now occupy a single building in Aigburth, Liverpool, which has been converted and extended from a former night club. The college continues in its commitment to assist, in particular, those students aged 16 and over who have the talent but lack the independent financial means to train for careers in the performing arts. The college also operates as a management agency which provides a service to students during and after their training, arranging auditions and contracts.

The school provides part-time dance courses to children from the age of two. The college has offered the three year full-time national diploma in professional musical theatre since 2001. It also offers a one year foundation course. The college joined the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) dance and drama awards scheme in 2002. There are currently 47 students on the course: 18 in year one, 16 in year two and 13 in year three. Currently all students are in receipt of dance and drama awards.

The college is owned and led by two co-principals. A senior management team of four is made up of the principals, the musical theatre course manager and a quality assurance co-ordinator. There are 14 members of staff who teach regularly at the college, as well as many guest teachers, and two accompanists.

The college aims to offer students a balanced and exciting professional training for the performing arts, within a caring environment.

Liverpool Theatre School was first inspected by Ofsted in January 2003. It was awarded a grade 2 (good) for its provision and a grade 2 (good) for leadership and management.

How effective is the college?

Key strengths

- all teaching is good or better, and some is outstanding
 - the very high standards of singing
 - the strong leadership with its clear direction and purpose
 - the philanthropic ethos of the college
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- the high proportion of students quickly gaining employment in London's West End
 - the quality and frequency of guest teachers and directors
 - the highly productive links with the local community and the profession.

What should be improved

- muscle tone and articulation in students' legs when dancing
- some aspects of quality assurance and self-assessment systems.

Further aspects of provision requiring improvement are identified in the section on the musical theatre course in the full report.

Students' views of the college

Students' views of the college were taken into account and are summarised below.

What students like about the college

- the close individual attention and correction in classes
- the very friendly and supportive working environment
- the amount of individual singing tuition they receive
- the stimulating variety provided by weekly guest teachers
- the strong emphasis on ballet as a core discipline
- learning about nutrition
- the opportunities to learn and use information and communications technology (ICT).

What they feel could be improved

- the gymnastic facilities
- access to a public performance space on site
- the number of acting classes
- the opportunities for tap
- the quality of the library.

Part B: The three year professional musical theatre course

Inspectors judged the provision to be outstanding (grade 1).

Inspectors observed 14 classes.

Strengths

- all teaching is good or better, and some is outstanding
- the very high standards of singing
- the good attention to the dramatic context of musical theatre work
- the high proportion of students quickly gaining employment in London's West End
- the philanthropic ethos of the college
- students' access to extensive musical score library
- the quality and frequency of guest teachers and directors.

Weaknesses

- students' excessive reliance on teachers for direction and contextualisation of work
- the poor muscle tone and articulation in students' legs when dancing.

Scope of provision

Liverpool Theatre School and College offers a three year musical theatre course. The core subjects are classical ballet, jazz, singing, and acting. Additional subjects are career development, the history of musical theatre, Latin-American dancing, musical theory, ICT, nutrition, Pilates body conditioning, audition preparation, tap, and voice. Further skills, such as stage combat, are also taught on an occasional basis. In their third year, students work towards the performance of a musical or play each term with a guest director. Each year group receives weekly workshops from guest teachers. The school mounts two in-house productions a year. A third, end of year, performance is held at a theatre in Liverpool and then the graduating year presents a review showcase at the Criterion Theatre in London.

Achievements and standards

Students achieve very high standards in singing and drama, and present their work with energy and enthusiasm. Singing, both solo and choral, is a particular strength of the school. Almost all students have strong, very well placed voices and are adept at singing in different styles. They also realise the dramatic contexts of their songs confidently. In dance and singing classes, detailed corrections are assimilated quickly. Throughout the school students demonstrate a solid understanding of

postural alignment and present themselves very well. In drama classes students bring convincing and sustained physical life to their work. They show their ability to create credible and fully rounded characters. However, students tend to rely too much on their teachers for correction, direction and contextual information rather than take responsibility for their own artistic development and learning. Dance standards have improved considerably since the last inspection and are particularly strong in second year male students, but dance continues to be the discipline in which students have to make the most progress from their starting points. Generally, students' leg work lacks clarity and muscle tone. Attendance is very good; students are punctual and come to class with an enthusiastic attitude. Retention is low but is improving markedly: it currently stands at 71% but for the two cohorts who started in 2004 and 2005 it is 90%.

The employment record is very good. The college achieves exactly what it sets out to do. Only one student graduating over the last two years did not go directly into employment or to further training elsewhere. Six students have recently been employed in London's West End directly after graduation. Others are working in television, in touring musicals, in high profile singing jobs with well known bands, on cruise ships or in holiday centres.

Quality of education and training

Most of the teaching is very good and some is outstanding. Students are appropriately challenged and in the best classes teachers ensure that students pay great attention to detail. Teachers contextualize the work very well thereby enhancing students' understanding and performance qualities. Singing is very well taught with an integrated methodology that is being constantly debated and reviewed within the college. Students are given very good practical guidance. For example, in one singing class students were told to lift their eyebrows on a certain note to help them pitch the note correctly. In another singing class, when approaching the technique of full-bodied voice projection known as belting, students who could not yet achieve this demanding technique safely in all registers were guided towards a credible mix of operatic and belting techniques. In drama, students are constantly questioned and prompted to explore and develop roles further. The college has developed a fitness regime in dance that enhances both aerobic and anaerobic fitness. This demonstrates a progressive attitude to dance training and all students have strong bodies. Posture is good. However, jazz classes lack specific leg work, such as brushes and sustained adage. As a result, most students have not developed strongly articulated legs and feet. In musical theatre performance, students integrate their disciplines very effectively. In a third year rehearsal the depth of knowledge and professional expertise displayed by the teacher was outstanding; students quickly reached very high standards of performance.

The college has improved resources considerably since the last inspection. There are now eight computers with internet access in a learning resource room. There are seven studios and all but one have sprung wooden floors, mirrors, good ventilation

and sound systems. There is a separate music studio and weights room. Students give in-house performances in one studio that contains a small stage. Pianists play for most ballet classes and singing classes all have piano accompaniment. All staff are suitably experienced in their specialist field. Most have worked extensively within the performance industry. A broad range of current industry professionals supplement the teaching staff with weekly workshops. The college has a separate website hosting the *curriculum vitae* of the graduating cohort. There is a comprehensive library of musical scores that is kept up to date, enabling students to build a wide and original repertoire of songs. There is also a very extensive stock of costumes, but the stock of books in the library is too small.

The audition procedure remains very thorough. All applicants are offered an audition and are sent an information pack which clearly explains the process. Applicants present a drama piece, a song, and a solo dance, and then take part in a workshop in each core discipline. All are interviewed by the co-principals. Current students are on call to show applicants around the college. There are recall auditions to decide the final intake. Some students are asked to have physical examinations by the college's approved osteopath. Criteria for final selection are clear and fair and the college has a good knowledge of the particular strengths and weaknesses of its incoming students before they start the course. Their induction, which takes place over two days, is comprehensive and effective. Students are made aware of their responsibilities within the college and of the college's policies on equal opportunities and other matters. Course teachers introduce each subject. Students are given useful handouts and are enrolled at the local library.

Assessment procedures are very good and are held each term in all core subjects. Each student gets both written and verbal feedback which is detailed and focused on clear actions to improve. As part of the tutorial system both personal and technical goals are set for individual improvement. Written reports summarise assessment results annually. Each student is assessed for literacy and learning support needs at the start of every year. There is a qualified member of staff who is available to give individual support for identified learning needs.

Many aspects of pastoral care are outstanding and the caring, supportive environment is tangible. Students feel very well cared for. In addition, many students are offered free or heavily subsidised accommodation; the college subsidises health care treatment, and each student receives two private singing lessons a week in their first two years. The formal tutorial system is satisfactory. There are two pastoral tutors, one for the first year and one for second and third year students. Each student sees their tutor twice a term, once for pastoral care and once for training support. Tutors are available at all other times on request. Owing to the intimacy of the college, teachers have regular informal contact with students and are readily aware of any student issues.

The course is well balanced. There are suitable breaks between classes for both students and staff. The teaching of singing is structured very well. There is a very

good balance between technical styles, individual tuition, repertoire and harmony work. This discipline is well supported by theory classes. Ballet is now taught daily in the first and second years. Students enjoy plentiful opportunities to perform under a variety of conditions. The employment of external directors to direct productions in the third year ensures that these students are propelled to experience a fully professional working environment several times before they graduate. A lot of attention is also given to honing solo performance and to audition preparation.

Part C: Leadership and Management

Inspectors judged leadership and management to be good (grade 2).

Strengths

- very effective action taken in response to the last inspection report
- strong leadership with clear direction and purpose
- highly productive links with the local community and the profession
- very effective support for students facing financial hardship
- very effective communications throughout the college.

Weaknesses

- lack of evaluative overview of self-assessment
- quality assurance systems not sufficiently refined or embedded.

Since the last inspection the college has systematically and successfully addressed all the issues raised in the previous report. Standards of work in dance have improved as a result of a revision to the curriculum and the engagement of more dance teachers. Planning, both strategic and operational, and management systems have all been improved, and close attention is now paid to the review cycle, including all staff in the process of monitoring quality and agreeing actions to improve. A full-time quality assurance co-ordinator has been appointed; however, quality assurance systems are not yet routinely used by the whole senior management team. The extension of the premises has been carefully planned and completed.

Physical expansion and the growing success of students have not diluted the college's demonstrable commitment to providing heavily subsidised full-time training in musical theatre to students who might otherwise not be able to afford it. It exploits its reputation in the community and in the profession at large to the direct benefit of students. The philanthropic ethos that prevails is genuinely appreciated by students for the opportunities it has given them.

The college continues to be led with passion and clear purpose by the two co-principals. They are ably supported by two other senior managers. Working relationships are very close and productive, and all staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities. Hitherto, the musical theatre course manager has carried significant pastoral as well as curriculum responsibilities, but the college has recognised the shortcomings of these arrangements and has moved to re-distribute some of his duties. Communications throughout the college are very good, with meetings being held regularly between various groups of staff. Following an identified weakness in the last report, these meetings are now minuted and used to inform operational decisions. The intimate working environment in the college encourages constant informal discussion. The central focus for all these

communications is the students and their standards of work. Teachers collaborate closely to nurture their students' potential. Records of support given to those students who eventually choose to leave the course reveal diligent care and guidance. The views of staff are sought through questionnaires and individual meetings, and the results carefully analysed.

Arrangements for staff development are good. The college has maintained its commitment to providing all staff with both corporate training on common issues (for example, a session was held on current disability legislation and practice) and with opportunities to pursue personal development goals. Teachers have termly meetings with the course manager, and more formal annual appraisals with one of the co-principals in her role as course director. Documentation of these appraisals by both parties is too brief and seldom explores any issues of significance.

Quality assurance procedures have been considerably improved since the last inspection, but their use by all staff, particularly the senior management team, still needs refinement and reinforcement. They remain too much the exclusive province of the quality assurance co-ordinator. Teachers are observed each term by the course manager. The written commentary and feedback on their lessons are detailed, although areas for development are not often identified. Grading will be introduced from January 2006. There is a series of review processes that ensures a consistency of approach to all main course functions, such as auditions, the curriculum, and student assessment; their integration within the college is clearly mapped. The outcomes inform management meetings. Overall performance measures are produced to give clear comparative indications of how well the college is doing year by year. However, the results of all these deliberations are not brought together into an overall evaluative self-assessment report, with qualitative judgements on the college's own performance. Key issues such as students' destinations and the quality of teaching and learning observed are not critically analysed. Students' opinions are genuinely sought and listened to: the results of questionnaires are carefully analysed, and the means of students' representation has been expanded from a head boy and head girl to a male and female representative from each year group, whose submissions are considered at course meetings.

There are clear policies and codes of practice for equality of opportunity, health and safety, risk assessment, and discipline and grievance. Staff and students are made fully aware of these and other core elements of the college's codes of conduct and values through the quality manual, the student handbook and thorough inductions. One of the principals carries responsibility for child protection. The school provides well for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Parts of the building remain inaccessible to those with restricted mobility, but such students could be and have been accommodated by adjustments to room timetables and the college satisfies the requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2000.

The college is strongly committed to the pursuit of equal opportunities, especially for those students who face significant obstacles in pursuit of their performing arts

ambitions. The overriding criteria for selection to the course remains aptitude and professional potential at audition, but the college analyses applications and final intake by ethnicity, gender and disability, and has a declared intention to try and attract more male students, more students from minority ethnic heritages and students from poorer backgrounds. In 2005 it succeeded in enrolling a higher proportion of male students (31%). The college also serves the local community vigorously and generously in a number of ways. For example, there are thriving links with many local schools and with 'Compact', the Merseyside education and business partnership. The principals are active members of several regional and national organisations, and through extensive networking and the nurturing of patronage they successfully broadcast the work and reputation of the college well beyond its locality without losing its strong regional identity.

The college is financially stable and its fiscal affairs are well managed by one of the principals, assisted by a financial officer. A budget is delegated to the course manager to allow for very quick response to operational needs. Accounts are properly audited. The college is highly experienced and successful in raising additional funds directly to support students on the course, and it also makes donations and grants to other organisations who share its commitment to young people's creative development. These aspects of its work, together with its outstanding provision and strong employment record for students, means that it provides very good value for money.

Notes

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