



ADULT LEARNING  
INSPECTORATE



Office for Standards  
in Education

**Inspection report**  
**The Oxford School of Drama**

Date of inspection: 27 June - 1 July 2005

© Crown copyright 2005. This report may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that all extracts quoted are reproduced verbatim without adaptation and on condition that the source and date thereof are stated.

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspects dance and drama colleges in receipt of awards allocated by the Department for Education and Skills.

Inspection reports are available on the Ofsted web site ([www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)).

Reference:

## **Contents**

<b>Section</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Basic information about the school</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Part A: Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Information about the school</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>How effective is the school?</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Students' view of the school</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Part B: The professional acting courses</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Scope of provision</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Achievements and standards</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Quality of education and training</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Part C: Leadership and management</b>	<b>7</b>

## **Basic information about the college**

Name of college:	Oxford School of Drama
Type of college:	Drama School
Principal:	George Peck
Address of college:	Sansomes Farm Studios Woodstock OX20 1ER
Telephone number:	01993 812 883
Fax number:	01993 811 220
Name of reporting inspector:	Tony Davis ALI
Date of inspection:	27 June - 1 July 2005

## **Part A: Summary**

### **Information about the school**

The Oxford School of Drama is an independent drama school based in Woodstock, Oxfordshire. The school began running full-time acting courses in 1986 and moved to its present location the following year. It is accommodated in converted and purpose built studios in a rural setting. Students produce their final show reels in an off-site radio studio and at the National Film and Television School and some of the school's productions are staged in an Oxford theatre. Third-year students spend the final term working and performing in London.

The school offers a three-year and a one-year course in acting. Students in receipt of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) dance and drama awards (DADA) study for a national diploma or certificate in professional acting awarded by Trinity College, London, for the three-year and one-year courses respectively. The school also offers a six month foundation course in acting.

At the time of inspection, there were 61 students, 48 of whom are enrolled on the three-year acting course and 13 on the one-year acting course. On the three-year acting course, 14 students out of 17 in the first year, 11 out of 15 in the second year and 12 out of 16 in the third year are in receipt of DfES dance and drama awards. On the one-year acting course, 11 of the 13 students are in receipt of the awards.

The three-year and one-year courses are run by the Oxford School of Drama Trust which is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. The foundation course is run off site by a private limited company, the Oxford School of Drama Limited. A board of 12 directors governs the trust. The executive director acts as business manager and is head of the school's administration. She works alongside an administrative director and an administrative assistant. Together with the principal, they comprise the trust's full-time employees. The principal is also the head of acting. The school employs approximately 21 part-time staff teaching acting, voice, movement, music, stage management, stage combat, radio, film and television.

The school was last inspected in March 2002 when it received a grade 2 for the provision and a grade 1 for leadership and management.

### **How effective is the school?**

#### *Key strengths*

- outstanding acting skills
  - the strong emphasis on reflective practice
-

- very good preparation for students' professional life
- the high number of significant acting roles gained by students on graduation
- outstanding teaching
- very good pastoral and learning support
- the strong, clear vision for the development of the school
- highly effective operational management
- excellent quality improvement arrangements
- outstanding self-assessment and action planning
- good promotion of diversity.

*What should be improved*

- the library and the information and communication technology (ICT) provision.

Further aspects of provision requiring improvement are identified in the sections on individual subjects and courses in the full report.

**Students' view of the school**

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

*What students like about the school*

- the friendly and open atmosphere
  - the emphasis on their individual development
  - the school's strong commitment to placing acting in a theoretical context
  - the country location which enables them to learn without distractions
  - the individual attention and care of staff
  - the freedom to express themselves
  - the encouragement to take risks
  - the consistent placing of all activities in the context of their future employment.
-

*What they feel could be improved*

- the on-site facilities for radio, theatre and film
- the amount of time for research
- the structure of the one-year course to give earlier opportunities for performance
- the flexibility of the transport to and from the school
- the amount of praise given by staff when they do well.

## **Part B: The professional acting courses**

Inspectors judged the provision to be **outstanding (Grade 1)**

### **Strengths**

- outstanding acting skills
- the strong emphasis on reflective practice
- the high number of significant acting roles gained by students on graduation
- outstanding teaching
- an inventive approach to teaching movement
- students' very good physical awareness and core stability
- very good preparation for students' professional life
- very good pastoral and learning support.

### **Weaknesses**

- insufficient access to library and ICT provision.

### **Scope of provision**

1. The school is committed to providing training for a small number of students. The school received 441 applications for 32 places for entry in 2004. Core subjects are acting, voice and movement studies. Additional supporting studies include music, singing, radio, film and television and professional development. Students are given classes that prepare them for joining the profession and which include a series of master classes from leading professionals.

### **Achievements and standards**

2. Students are investigative and enquiring and invest much emotional and physical energy in their acting, which is of an outstanding standard. The programme of voice classes has been devised well and is effective. There is a strong emphasis on self development. Students are responsive, engaged, and mutually supportive and have a professional approach to their work. Throughout their course, students become increasingly responsible and reflective performers. Students are articulate and use the appropriate vocational vocabulary fluently. Students gain confidence in their abilities in an environment in which they feel safe to take risks. Their level of concentration in classes is impressive and students use their journals well to record learning points for later reflection.

---



3. Most graduates secure acting work in film, television and theatre soon after graduation. The profile of work continues to improve and includes significant contracts in feature films and television and major roles with such companies as Theatre Clwyd, Birmingham Rep and Out of Joint. One student recently won the Alan Bates award, which is given to the most outstanding graduate from all drama schools. Retention rates are very good; no students left the course early in 2004/05.

### **Quality of education and training**

4. All teaching is good or better and most is outstanding. Lessons are characterised by an imaginative and creative approach. Lesson plans are used well and adjusted to take account of students' individual needs. Teachers regularly make relevant connections between students' work in class and the professional theatre, while at the same time placing their teaching in a suitable theoretical context. Teachers are clear, judge the pace of their classes well and engage the students effectively. In an exciting acting class, students improvised in role to develop their understanding of their characters. The teacher inspired them to take risks with their characterisations through increasingly challenging directing and generous personal support. When students returned to the text of the play the sophistication of their performances had matured greatly. Students and staff understand the wider relevance of individual classes to the overall course. Movement classes are taught particularly well. The classes are designed to challenge students safely at an appropriate level and to support their acting studies. Students develop very good physical awareness and core stability through the teachers' careful attention to detail. In an applied movement class, students practised archetypal behaviour with great enthusiasm and maturity. Working in pairs, students gave each other incisive feedback on their characterisations. The teacher helped students to develop their understanding through comments on both their movement work and on the effectiveness of their critique. Students' capacity for physical expression is greatly aided by their strong movement skills.

5. Students are taught by a range of very experienced and well-qualified staff, many of whom are current practitioners within the acting, directing, radio and film-making professions. Professional freelance directors are also used to lead projects and produce shows. Students receive a series of master classes given by leading figures from the industry. Students work in an appropriate learning environment which is well lit and well ventilated. The school has four studios, a music room and a tutorial room. Each room has suitable flooring and is of adequate size for the number of students enrolled at the school. There is a small library and one computer for students to use which the school recognises are not sufficient to meet current needs.

6. The assessment procedures are effective. Students have a clear understanding of their progress and the areas of their work which need further development. Every subject is assessed informally by teachers and there are formal assessments against clear grading criteria in voice and movement at the end of each year. Written reports are prepared for students twice each term. The results of assessments and the individual tutorials are used to develop students' individual learning plans which are used to guide and monitor students' development needs and are contained in comprehensive personal files. Students receive

---

continuous, developmental feedback from their key subject teachers and the principal on their performance.

7. Students are prepared well for a professional acting career. They are given appropriate opportunities to perform throughout their course. The first year culminates in an in-house performance at the end of their final term. In the second year, students perform in two in-house productions and in a public performance at the end of the year in an Oxford theatre. In the third year, in addition to in-house shows, students tour a theatre-in-education production and perform in Oxford and London theatres. For their final term, students on both the one-year and the three-year courses relocate to London where they continue to work on challenging performance projects and thorough audition preparation activities. These projects are often based on material which goes on to receive professional performances in London and around the country. Third-year students use an external professional recording studio and the National Film and Television School to produce their voice-over CDs and show reels. The carefully structured move to London before the end of their course ensures that students are best placed to take advantage of the greater concentration of agents and performing opportunities. A mentoring system for graduates also helps them to bridge the gap between student and professional life. All mentors, who are ex-students of the school, are working within the industry and are available to give advice as needed.

8. The audition procedure is very good. Applicants are given a two-hour movement workshop and then perform a classical and a contemporary drama piece. Candidates are selected for recall by a panel which usually consists of one member of staff and two external professional advisors who have a good knowledge of the school. The principal leads the recall sessions. The selection criteria are clear and documented well and the school is able to give verbal feedback to unsuccessful applicants.

9. There is very good pastoral and learning support. Students receive, on average, seven individual tutorials each term for concentrated work on their acting, singing and movement skills and a further individual tutorial each term with the principal to consider their overall progress. During production work, additional technique support is provided by voice and movement tutors to help students with their individual development needs. Additional learning needs are initially identified at students' second auditions and further screening takes place in the sight reading and voice classes. Individual support issues are clearly identified and students' progress is carefully monitored. A range of measures is in place to assist dyslexic students. The student handbook is comprehensive and informative. Students have access to a counsellor. A comprehensive injury list displayed in the staff room highlights any current injury problems. Students are assisted to find suitable accommodation both in Oxford and in London in their final term. The school provides a subsidised bus service from Oxford.

## Part C: Leadership and Management

Inspectors judged leadership and management to be **outstanding (Grade 1)**.

### Strengths

- the strong, clear vision for the development of the school
- highly effective operational management
- excellent quality improvement arrangements
- outstanding self-assessment and action planning
- good promotion of diversity.

### Weaknesses

- no significant weaknesses.

10. In the period since the last inspection the school has addressed the key issue raised in the report and many other improvements have been made. The principal leads the school effectively and communicates a strong and clear vision for developments and for the maintenance of its ethos. The school's overall direction is checked and debated at regular points throughout the year with staff and the board of trustees. The school is shortly to complete its 10-year building programme with the addition of a studio theatre, radio studio and extra rehearsal and recreational space for students. It is also committed to increasing participation in its training by students from under-represented groups. The changing needs of the industry are investigated and debated at an annual two-day retreat attended by the majority of staff. Experienced trustees use their expertise well to benefit the school. Board papers are prepared well and minutes are detailed. The board has an appropriate range of measures for assuring itself of the quality of provision.

11. The operational management of the school is highly effective. The curriculum is planned well and the placing of third-year students in London for their final term is particularly effective in helping them find work in the profession. Communications within the school are effective. The principal teaches all students and has a clear knowledge of their progress. The small scale of the school and the structure of the timetable enable staff to discuss operational issues and the progress of individual students regularly. The informal meetings are supplemented by weekly administration meetings and staff meetings which are held twice each term. Detailed minutes are taken for all meetings. Actions required are clearly recorded with accountabilities, and development actions are reviewed at subsequent meetings. The executive director and two full-time administrative staff provide good support for the teachers and ensure that the school runs effectively. Detailed job descriptions are available for every role in the school. Full-time administrative staff are effectively appraised

---

and areas for improvement are identified. The handbooks for staff and students are comprehensive and include information on assessment procedures, the importance of individual learning plans, the content of the library, and key policies such as those for equal opportunities and health and safety.

12. The school has excellent quality assurance arrangements. A comprehensive and clear overview of the quality assurance cycle enables all staff to understand how their contribution to quality improvements ultimately feeds into the self-assessment report. The detailed quality assurance procedures then clearly show how every aspect of the school's work will be reviewed, by whom, when the review will take place and when the resulting actions will be monitored. The school has a well-established and effective lesson observation system. Observers include the principal, teachers and external professionals. The feedback from these formal observations has helped teachers improve their confidence, their perspective on how their work relates to the overall course and their coaching skills. The school also has a well-established system for collecting the views of students on the quality of the provision. Students complete a review questionnaire after induction, at the end of each year. The results of the questionnaires are analysed and compared to previous results. A student representative also collects the views of all students in advance of a termly meeting with the principal. Improvements include changes to the structure of the courses, the number of individual tutorials, the choice of tutors for future projects, and general improvements to the operational aspects of the provision.

13. In May 2005, the school produced its fifth self-assessment report. This outstanding report thoroughly assesses all aspects of the provision against the requirements of the *Common Inspection Framework*. The report is honest and evaluative and brings together information about all aspects of provision from the many elements of the quality assurance procedures. All staff were involved in the review of the previous self-assessment report. The current report was developed during the two-day staff retreat and has resulted in a detailed action plan which clearly identifies responsibilities, indicators of success, completion and review dates, and each issue's level of priority. Improvements include changes to the content of the courses, the significant increase in the emphasis on sight reading and television script work, the introduction of, on average, seven individual tutorials per term for each student, the provision of voice and movement support during rehearsal periods for performances, the integration of film and television work throughout the curriculum, and improvements to technical resources. Significant changes to practice are re-evaluated after a period of acclimatisation. During the staff retreats, teachers debate the standards expected of students at each stage of their course. There is a rolling programme of team teaching and peer observation which enables staff to share their experience and improve their teaching.

14. The school has a very good approach to the promotion of diversity. It has detailed policies and procedures for equality of opportunity, health and safety, grievance and appeals and a comprehensive disability policy which clearly signals the school's positive approach to working with students with a wide range of individual needs. Over the last few years, the school has developed a number of increasingly successful initiatives to work with external organisations to help them recruit students from minority ethnic groups. Prospective students visit the school and take part in workshops to develop their skills. They are encouraged to

---

consider applying for the school's foundation or three-year courses, receiving free audition places and, in some instances, financial support. Almost half of the actors who took part in the workshops subsequently applied to the school and 40% of those were offered places for September 2005. All staff have received diversity training. The implementation plan for the equal opportunities policy identifies aspects of the curriculum where the emphasis on diversity can be increased. Application, audition and recruitment data are analysed by ethnicity. The school has made a very good response to the requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2000 (SENDA). A thorough external audit was commissioned in 2004 from which a detailed development plan was produced. The school has made significant progress with the actions required. It continues to recruit students with additional physical needs. There is wheelchair access to the majority of its premises. Third-year students have taken part in project work with disabled students. All staff have received training to support students with dyslexia.

15. The school manages its resources efficiently. Management accounts are produced at the end of each term by the administrative director and an external accountant. The accounts are monitored by the principal and the board of trustees at their quarterly meetings. Annual budgets are prepared against an historical profile for income and expenditure. There is a contingency fund for repairs and renewals. Annual accounts are prepared by an external accountant and approved by the whole board of trustees. These accounts are subject to an external audit. The school seeks to secure value for money when purchasing capital equipment.

**Notes**