



ADULT LEARNING  
INSPECTORATE



Office for Standards  
in Education

**Inspection report**  
**Performers College**  
**Performing Arts College**

Dates of inspection: 16-19 May 2005

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## **Basic information about the college**

Name of college:	Performers College
Type of college:	Performing arts college
Directors:	Brian Rogers, Jan Rogers, Susan Stephens, Mike Stephens
Address of college:	Southend Road Corringham Essex SS17 8JT
Telephone number:	01375 672053
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Name of reporting inspector:	David Hornbrook HMI
Dates of inspection:	16-19 May 2005

## **Part A: Summary**

### **Information about the college**

Performers College, in Corringham near Basildon in Essex, is an independent further education college for the performing arts, specialising in dance-based musical theatre. The college was founded in 1988 by the four people who are still its owners and directors. There is no principal. In 2003, the college moved to new, purpose built premises in Corringham. The college offers a three-year performers' course for professional dancers leading to the national diplomas in professional musical theatre and professional dance. Slightly more students follow the musical theatre route. Students may also take dance teaching examinations. A one year foundation course was introduced in 2003.

At the time of the inspection in May 2005, there were 134 students on the three-year professional dancers' course. Some 25 of the 55 first-year students, 23 of the 38 second-year students and 27 of the 41 third-year students, were in receipt of Department for Education and Skills (DfES) awards.

In addition to the directors and the course co-ordinator, there are 28 regular teachers. Guest teachers also visit the college from time to time.

The Performers College was last inspected in October 2002 and was graded 1 for the provision and 1 for leadership and management. It was programmed for a full, rather than a short, inspection in the 2004/06 cycle because of its recent move.

### **How effective is the college?**

#### ***Key strengths***

- very good and outstanding teaching
  - very good singing training
  - highly effective preparation for auditions
  - excellent injury prevention and treatment provision
  - high quality accommodation
  - strong, collegiate leadership
  - very effective management of change
  - a positive approach to disability
  - the commitment to continuous improvement.
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***What should be improved***

- computer and library provision
- links between performance information, self-assessment and planning.

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

**Students' view of the college**

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

***What students like about the college***

- the personal support they receive
- the happy atmosphere
- the care taken getting students employment
- the quality of the new building
- the dedication of teachers to their subjects
- the diversity of styles on offer.

***What they feel could be improved***

- day-to-day communications
- the advance notice given of out of term rehearsals
- opportunities to be treated as adults
- the flexibility of the curriculum
- the changing facilities
- the consistency of guidance onto the dance and musical theatre routes.

## **Part B: The Three-Year Performers' Course**

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

### **Strengths**

- very good and outstanding teaching
- very good singing training
- good core stability in dance
- coherent course structure
- outstanding individual vocal performances
- very effective preparation for auditions
- excellent injury prevention and treatment provision
- good use of contextual studies and portfolios
- high quality accommodation
- high proportion of male students.

### **Weaknesses**

- unsatisfactory library and ICT provision.

### **Scope of provision**

1. The college, in its mission, aims to provide a balanced training 'that provides the necessary challenges and encourages standards that are obtainable and reflect (students') intended profession'. The three-year course offers all-round training in dance and musical theatre. In the first year, there is a focus on the 'dancer's lifestyle'. Training is directed towards developing students as healthy, thinking performers who are able to learn. Core subjects are dance, including jazz, ballet and tap, singing and drama. Additional subjects include contextual studies, contemporary dance, gymnastics, weight training and Pilates body conditioning. In their second and third years at the college, depending on their aptitude, students follow programmes leading to a national diploma in either professional musical theatre or professional dance. They also complete a course in professional employment skills. Students may also take external practical examinations in dance teaching.

2. There are many opportunities for students to perform in front of an audience. All students perform at least once a year in the college's in-house music and drama productions. In

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addition, all students take part in the college's annual summer show, held in a West End theatre. There are regular competitions and choreographic events, some of which take place in a local theatre. Final-year students join the Performers Dance Company, which regularly performs at corporate shows and charity events in London and overseas. A few students undertake professional engagements while at the college, but the days allowed for such activities are limited and strictly monitored. The college has a small theatrical agency, which acts as a conduit to the industry and manages any employment of students during their training.

### **Achievements and standards**

3. The standard of students' work remains as high as that observed in the last inspection. Students demonstrate a serious and dedicated work ethic and arrive in class well prepared and properly warmed up. The weakness in the core body strength of some female students noted in the last report has been addressed and the overall standard of fitness shown is now impressive. All students display depth of movement and very good core stability, although some need to work on the strength of the backs of their legs. First year male students approach their ballet classes with high levels of focus and commitment. Some, previously untrained in the discipline, have made remarkable progress in their first three terms, both in technique and placement. In the other dance disciplines students perform a range of jazz styles with the kind of energy commented on in the last report. They have also improved their physical awareness and understanding of contemporary dance technique. By the third year most students show an impressive level of technique in tap combined with an engaging performance style, although, in some classes, a minority tend to forget performance qualities when concentrating on technique. In singing, the students following the musical theatre diploma have an exceptionally well-developed vocal technique. In a third year musical theatre class, for example, the students sang exacting choral work as well as beautifully controlled duets and solos. Standards in drama are satisfactory. Students' portfolios remain thoughtful and self-analytical. Pass rates in external examinations continue to be high. Students are punctual for their classes and retention rates are currently 84%, an improvement since the last inspection.

4. Nearly all students succeed in securing employment when they leave. Most initially find employment in quality cruise lines, touring companies in the United States and Europe, or summer shows and light entertainment venues in the United Kingdom. For example, employment destinations of students graduating in 2002 include Disneyland Paris, '*Spirit of the Dance*' and '*Lullaby of Broadway*'. A significant number of these students subsequently gained West End contracts.

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

5. Teaching was very good or outstanding in nearly all of the classes observed. Singing, in particular, is very well taught with much attention being paid to the correct use and understanding of technique. Students are taught to understand the anatomical process of voice production and as a consequence are able to take responsibility for their own progress.

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Diction is taught creatively and songs are brought to life by asking students firstly to speak the words in a way which conveys their meaning, and then to sing them with the same intention. In one second-year class the musical technique of 'belting' (developing the ability to project powerfully) was carefully introduced. Students were encouraged to sing and place their voices correctly with an American twang by thinking of the Wicked Witch from The Wizard of Oz. Nothing was forced and the teacher was very careful to open the vocal chords again at the end of the class. In most dance classes students are drilled rigorously and make tangible progress. At the same time, teachers use a range of creative techniques to engage students. For example, in a double work class, cabaret-style duets were taught using chairs with flair and imagination. Ballet technique is taught meticulously and the teaching of contemporary dance is also very good. In a tap class, a teacher used challenging rhythm games to help students develop rhythmic discipline, similar to that needed for close harmony singing. Students take their portfolios seriously and they are well-incorporated into teaching and learning.

6. Audition procedures are thorough. Almost all students who apply are accepted for audition. They are observed in ballet and jazz classes and then present a song and a monologue. Each discipline is graded according to set criteria on a numbered scale and an overall grade given. Students over a certain grade then attend a physiotherapy examination and an interview. Once a student has been awarded a place a further audition is then held for an award. The college is very successful in attracting male students; about a third of the present cohort is male. Some of this success is due to the separate audition days held for male students.

7. Since the last inspection the college has moved to an impressive new site. This has allowed for more time to be given to each subject as students no longer have to travel between classes. The new building has eight dance studios, three music studios, a physiotherapy treatment room and a very high quality Pilates body conditioning studio. All studios are of adequate size and are suitably equipped. There is a library that is also used for contextual study classes. Although there are now word-processing facilities and students have access to the internet, the college acknowledges in its self-assessment report that the onsite learning resources are still insufficient. The library is not well stocked and there are only four computers available for student's use. The teaching staff are well qualified and have relevant experience. Several members of staff have had dyslexia awareness training. Visiting teachers currently working in the profession add to the rich variety of styles taught across the course.

8. The overall structure of the course enables students to make rapid progress in their core subjects. In September 2003, the school divided the course into two routes: one leading to the national diploma in professional musical theatre, the other to the national diploma in professional dance. In their first year all students study the same curriculum; in the second year they are guided onto one of the two routes. A one-year foundation course has also been established for students not ready for the full-time course. Most one-year students progress to the full-time course or to similar courses in other colleges. The overall balance of the curriculum on both routes is appropriate; students experience a healthy range of classes in the key disciplines of dance and musical theatre. The inclusion of high quality contemporary

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dance teaching provides a valuable additional experience. The college recognises some weakness in the acting provision, and plans are in place to give drama a higher profile. A carefully structured contextual studies programme underpins the practical elements of the course.

9. Assessment procedures are good and under continuous review. Students continue to receive regular formal and informal feedback on their progress. They are formally assessed in the second term of each year and grade descriptors are clear and suitable for each discipline. Students are interviewed after their assessments with the directors to discuss their progress. Each student's progress is monitored on a comprehensive tracking sheet. Students receive written reports from the individual subject teachers every term. They complete a self-evaluation form in each subject which is then discussed in individual tutorials with their specialist teachers on termly 'report days'.

10. The students have very good pastoral care and receive high quality, individual attention when they need it. There is also an excellent injury monitoring and treatment system. Two physiotherapists attend the college four times a week and have an extremely well equipped treatment room to deal with any student's ongoing physical problems. The physiotherapists also attend classes to diagnose potential difficulties. Good Pilates instruction complements these arrangements. This comprehensive care is reflected in the improvements in students' core strength and posture evident since the last inspection. Students' basic skills are assessed at the beginning of their first year and arrangements are made to give extra support where necessary. The school has several students with hearing difficulties who are very well supported.

11. Students are very well guided into work. For example, towards the end of the course, third-year students have weekly audition classes that precisely reflect West End practice and last for a whole afternoon. The teacher and any injured students form an audition panel. As in reality, students are not told how many are to be 'hired' nor what selection criteria are being used. Rejected students leave the room and only learn the reasons for their failure at the end of the class. The college's own agency has very useful contacts in the industry and arranges an audition week for graduating students. Members of staff also help students prepare curricula vitae and photographs. Agents come to the college and attend the summer show.

## Part C: Leadership and Management

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

### Strengths

- strong, collegiate leadership
- very effective management of change
- good strategic and operational management
- effective feedback and appraisal
- a positive approach to disability
- a commitment to continuous improvement
- good communication between staff at all levels.

### Weaknesses

- too few links between performance information, self-assessment and planning.

12. Since the last inspection, the college has addressed issues raised in the inspection report and has made significant improvements. The new building is the most substantial of these. It has, at a stroke, radically transformed the quality of the college's accommodation by drawing together all the teaching and administrative facilities into a single, coherent environment. The successful completion of the building project, and the transfer to it of the college's operations, has been a very significant achievement although, inevitably, it has stretched the college's resources. There is a small, dedicated library, but the book and video stock and the provision of computers are still very modest. The college has employed an additional administrator to prepare, among other things, the self-assessment report. Data on a range of topics, such as minority ethnic recruitment, is more plentiful than it was at the time of the last inspection, but it is still not used to set targets or inform planning.

13. The four directors give strong, collegiate leadership to the college. Partnership, consultation and show business flair remain the characterising features of an inclusive leadership style which is both supportive and rooted industry practice. Each director takes responsibility for a different aspect of the college's work covering, broadly speaking, finance and administration, pastoral and employment matters and course management and development; one director continues to work as a theatre director and choreographer, sustaining valuable links between the college and the performing arts industry. The course co-ordinator has a range of administrative responsibilities in relation to the training and she is ably supported by the new academic administrator. The directors and the course co-ordinator

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work closely with four faculty co-ordinators for ballet, musical theatre and acting, jazz and singing. There are job descriptions for all managers.

14. The directors are open and approachable and make sure that all staff are involved in the discussion of forward planning. Strategic issues, such as those arising from the course review process, are placed on the agendas of meetings as and when appropriate. There is a development plan for the current academic year which provides a focus for thinking and discussion in four key areas – the development of the new two-route course structure, the foundation course, the planned new theatre, and the recruitment of students from minority ethnic groups. The plan is clear and concise and enables managers to keep the college's key development aims in the forefront of their thinking. However, it is not supplemented by a more detailed action plan derived from the outcomes of the quality assurance process.

15. The operational management of the course is good. The course is capably administered, records are properly maintained and systems are working effectively. Between them, the co-ordinators are responsible for the day-to-day management of the curriculum. Communication between staff at all levels, much of which is informal, is good. There are regular and carefully recorded meetings at all levels of the organisation. Directors meet formally twice a term and then discuss the outcomes of their meeting with co-ordinators. There are weekly staff meetings, attended by all those working on that day, and full staff meetings, which teachers and accompanists are paid to attend, at the beginning of each term. Faculties meet twice a term. All staff receive agendas and copies of appropriate minutes. Agendas for most meetings focus on operational matters and there are opportunities to discuss issues relating to individual students. There is a comprehensive and welcoming staff handbook supported by helpful packs of checklists and pro forma. The handbook contains, among other things, the college charter, which outlines the college's commitment to students, parents and equality of opportunity, arrangements for complaints and grievances and good policies on health and safety, equality of opportunity and disability. A staff mentoring scheme is much valued by teachers.

16. The course co-ordinator and the academic administrator have responsibility for quality assurance. There are well-developed and effective processes for gathering information about the college's performance. These include regular lesson observation, staff appraisal, an annual survey of student satisfaction, feedback from student representatives and annual course reviews. Staff are also asked to assess the management of the college. Feedback from staff and students is evaluated at staff meetings and changes may be made as a result. Although the college is conscientious in the gathering of evidence, systems of evaluation and analysis remain underdeveloped. The decision to introduce a musical theatre route was made after it became apparent that relatively few students were getting parts in shows. However, this process is not yet sufficiently embedded. For example, although many teachers have taken advantage of funds set aside for the professional development, outcomes of lesson observations are not used to identify common weaknesses in the quality of teaching so that appropriate training can be provided. The self-assessment report is succinct and well organised. It identifies many of the college's strengths and weaknesses, but does not make enough use of the statistical evidence available in formulating key judgements and the college does not use it to inform an action plan.

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17. Good attention is paid to equality of opportunity. The college collects information on the ethnic origins of its students and is conscious that fewer than 1% of applicants are from minority ethnic groups. As a result, it is advertising the course in two publications aimed at young people from these groups. The college has a very positive attitude to disability and has over the years recruited a number of students with hearing impairments. All parts of the college are accessible to people with disabilities. A productive relationship has been established with a local secondary school. Year 9 and 10 pupils have visited the college and a member of staff has taught classes there. The college hopes to enlist the help of the school with learning support for students who need it.

18. The college continues to manage its financial affairs efficiently. One of the directors, with the help of the college accountant, maintains a database of up-to-date financial information. The directors do not meet regularly to discuss finance, but are alerted to any emerging issues and have access to financial information at any time. Teachers may apply to the course co-ordinator for teaching materials. The college takes steps to secure value for money when purchasing supplies and services. Since the last inspection, two subsidiary companies have been established. 'Performers Productions' manages the college's productions and 'Performers Agency', formerly part of the college, gives careers advice and where possible helps students into employment. Both companies have their own budgets.

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**Notes**