

# The Oxford School of Drama

Inspection of Colleges in the Dance and Drama Award Scheme

Inspection report

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## Main Findings

Course:	Three-year National Diploma and one-year National Certificate in Professional Acting
Overall effectiveness:	Outstanding (grade 1)
Date of inspection:	14 November 2007

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 courses were previously inspected by Ofsted in June 2005 when they were graded outstanding (grade 1) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. At the same time, the leadership and management of the school were also graded outstanding (grade 1).

## Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by the National Council for Drama Training and Trinity College London judge that standards have been maintained at an outstanding level. A high proportion of students are cited in these reports as worthy of particular mention. Almost all students perform at a very high level in their individual roles. They develop and use their voices and bodies to create and express thoroughly convincing, truthful characters and communicate emotions and ideas with technical skill and emotional power. Levels of concentration and focus are exceptional. They approach their work with integrity, imagination and courage, taking creative risks and seeking to maintain the exploratory nature of their art at all times. Final performances are outstanding: 'One of the best drama school shows I have ever seen' was the verdict of one assessor. Retention and pass rates are good: the very large majority of students complete the course and gain the qualification.

Students succeed in securing employment quickly. Almost all recent students have obtained work in the industry within six months of completing the course. A recent survey by the Centre for Education and Development Appraisal and Research evaluating post-graduation destinations of students from drama schools, placed the Oxford School of Drama top of the 18 leading schools. Jobs range from small scale and fringe theatre to large scale, London West End or national company work; many gain employment in independent or corporate film production, television and radio. For example, recent graduates have appeared in leading roles in *That Face* at the Royal Court, *The Sea* at The Theatre Royal Haymarket and *Troilus and Cressida* for The Royal Shakespeare Company. Several have secured significant roles in recent major films or television productions, such as *Sense and Sensibility*, *Rome*, *Severance* and *Brideshead Revisited*.

## Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are outstanding. The school sets very high expectations for its teachers and has a rigorous lesson observation programme to ensure they meet them. Students themselves contribute to the high expectations because they evaluate the quality of their training and development in each part of their course. There is a strong emphasis on peer assessment, and students make insightful and constructive criticisms of each other's work at each assessment point. Marking and feedback by staff are detailed and very helpful. Students are clear about how their progress is reviewed and what they need to do to improve the quality of their work. However, the use of individual learning plans and reflective journals by students is inconsistent, and a minority of these are of limited value as working documents to aid improvement.

The curriculum is very well balanced between improvisation, textual interpretation, the development of the voice and body as expressive instruments, the realisation of character and overall development of the independent professional practitioner. Basic stage management knowledge and skills are also developed. Students' development is founded strongly on performance for theatre, but they are also taught the particular skills required to work successfully in television, film and radio. Throughout the course, and in particular in their final year, students are given a very good grounding in how to prepare for auditions and create professional show reels, seek and gain employment, manage contracts, manage finances and tax, and look after themselves emotionally and physically in what can be a gruelling professional environment. They feel very well prepared for employment in the performing arts profession.

Students receive outstanding guidance and support in their pursuit of work as actors. Their personal, physical and psychological development is carefully nurtured and they have good access to a range of professional welfare agencies associated with the school. Students with specific learning needs are given excellent support by trained staff.

### Leadership and management

The inspirational leadership given by the principal is wholeheartedly embraced and taken forward by a highly committed, integrated teaching team. The relatively small size of the school is used to very good effect to create a learning and training community in which each teacher and student feels highly valued. All teachers have a thorough knowledge of all students. The school was recently awarded Beacon Status by the Learning and Skills Council for the overall quality of its provision; it is using this status in a pioneering way by reviewing what vocational drama training should encompass and what students and the profession itself are entitled to expect from it.

Quality assurance is outstanding. An annual residential retreat for all key staff creates the opportunity for them to reflect thoroughly on all aspects of provision, and to draw together findings from meetings and reviews throughout the year. The final outcome of this process is a detailed, sharply focused self-assessment report in which collective evaluation leads to shared actions and rigorous monitoring. The lesson observation scheme effectively identifies the best teaching practice and aspects of teachers' work that could be improved. Students are encouraged to have a strong voice in the daily operations of their school and most of them value this and contribute accordingly. The sense of a creative company at work is palpable.

The trustees provide strong support to the work of the school and act as a further external quality review body. They bring considerable professional

experience and expertise to their role. The school is working hard to try and expand further its network of established directors.

Most resources are very good. A new studio theatre has increased opportunities for rehearsal and in-house performance in a medium-sized space. A new London base – the Southwark Playhouse – has been secured for use during the final term when students move to London for the season. Teachers are very experienced in their fields. However, the library is still housed in the open administrative office and students only have access to one computer.

### Points for consideration

The school might usefully:

- ensure that students use individual learning plans and reflective journals more consistently to reflect on their work and set themselves targets to improve
- create a separate space for the library and provide more computers for students to use.