

# The Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts Ltd

Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

Inspection report

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Provider reference

50030

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## Main findings

Course: Three-year National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Date of inspection: 24 January 2008

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 musical theatre course was previously inspected by Ofsted in March 2004 when it was graded outstanding (grade 1) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training and satisfactory for leadership and management. At a subsequent short reinspection in November 2005, the leadership and management of the school were graded good (grade 2).

### Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that the standards of acting, singing and dancing in classes and performances have been maintained at a very high level. The recent re-validation report judges the college to be 'a very good provider' and notes that, amongst some work of 'variable' quality there 'are outstanding students in most performances'. The school collects feedback from professional agencies who employ some students during their course and who comment on the 'high levels of professionalism' shown by students on tour. Reports by assessors representing the Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET) comment on 'high standards in singing and dance' and 'excellent group work', although they also note that vocal production in acting is still relatively weak, with voices not being fully supported and so strained.

Retention is good. It was outstanding in 2005 and 2006, at 95%; but in 2007, of those students who started the course only 77% completed it. All students who completed the course in the last three years achieved the qualification. The college keeps very good records of why some students leave, and these are mostly for financial reasons. Punctuality and attendance are very good and improving as a result of even tighter individual monitoring; although as yet the school has not undertaken any overall analysis to identify trends.

A large majority of students gain employment in the performing arts profession when they leave. In 2007, nearly two thirds of students secured professional contracts within three months of completing their training. Of those who completed in 2006, some 85% have subsequently secured performance-related employment. The school successfully tracks the continuing employment histories of a large majority of students over several years. Typical jobs include musical productions in the West End, international touring shows, commercial dance, singing and cabaret work, and cruise ship shows. Recent graduates have taken leading roles in *Grease*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*, *Hairspray* and *Starlight Express*.

### Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are outstanding and the quality of training very high. Students are vigorously challenged to reach their full potential as performers across a wide range of disciplines, yet they are also very well supported in areas where they lack confidence or relative technical proficiency. As a result of the close attention given to their personal levels of ability, they develop strongly individual styles as performers. Technical skills are very precisely developed. For example, assessors from the Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET) remark on how 'difficult isolation techniques are taught with precision and care' and select for special commendation an instance of 'authoritative teaching of classical operatic aria to 15 boys'. Teachers are a closely knit group who communicate very well with each other. They coordinate their work and share good practice in an environment of mutual trust and respect for each other's specialist contributions to students' overall training. Assessment is rigorous and very effectively structured. Students receive good, clear feedback on their work, but the technical advice and guidance given in the tutorial reviews of their overall progress are inconsistent. Record-keeping and the formal coordination of these processes are not fully secure. Trinity also note that 'some care needs to be taken with the assessment of supporting studies', which lacks detail.

The curriculum is very well designed to meet the changing needs of students training for musical theatre employment. Students have individual timetables which take account of their different previous experiences and levels of technical skill. The school has taken a bold initiative and made some imaginative changes to the balance of work undertaken by students. There is significant emphasis on improvisation and the taking of creative risk, and acting through song and contemporary dance have been introduced. Additional studies include playing to camera and stage combat. Preparation for auditions and professional work is very thorough and occupies much of the third year of the course.

Students are very well supported and guided whilst at the school. All students have a tutor for each year who oversees the monitoring of their progress. There are formal systems for the recording and reviewing of students'

progress against specific areas for development, but these are not yet consistently or rigorously used by all staff. Pilates classes have been introduced to help develop core strength and flexibility. There are remedial clinics for specific technical skills such as voice production, and the services of a physiotherapist are available. Students with additional learning needs such as literacy or disabilities such as dyslexia or Asperger's syndrome are given individual help by a member of the teaching staff, but this is not available from trained specialists.

## Leadership and management

The school is well led and managed. The course director has been in post for just over a year and has made a number of changes that are having a beneficial impact on staff and students. A robust lesson observation scheme is now in place together with self-appraisal by staff, both of which will inform formal annual appraisals as they are implemented. A strong team ethic prevails in which teachers are very open to their work being observed, shared and critically discussed, in the spirit of raising standards still further and responding to the changing demands of the industry. Communications through the school are very good, and particularly so between art disciplines.

Teachers bring a wealth of experience from the performing arts profession to inform their work. Few, however, are qualified as teachers. The school is exploring ways in which recently appointed staff might undertake such training. Students are listened to carefully, and a variety of mechanisms are used – from questionnaires to year-group representatives – to find out what they think and need. No formal records are kept of meetings with students, however, and not all students think that their views are fully considered on issues such as the balance between technical training and professional practice in the third year.

The school makes very good use of its two associated agencies to help students find work, both during and after the completion of their course. Partly as a direct result of their impact, students feel extremely well prepared for auditions and the unpredictable demands of the profession and this gives them both technical flexibility and a sharp edge of personal confidence.

Resources are good. Whilst the school explores ways in which they might acquire more and larger studios for some types of work, students make increasing use of nearby external facilities such as a gymnasium. Library and computer facilities are adequate.

Quality assurance and self assessment have improved considerably since the last inspection and continue to enhance the school's capacity to improve. The self-assessment report is a detailed and evaluative document that clearly identifies areas for improvement, and it is supported by an action plan with clear responsibilities and deadlines identified. Module reviews are an excellent mechanism whereby teachers and students can reflect on what has been

accomplished over a specific piece of work. Some quality assurance processes, such as lesson observations and tutorial progress reviews, are not yet fully effective because they vary too much in quality and detail.

#### Points for consideration

The college might usefully:

- ensure that systems to monitor students' progress and record the quality of lessons are consistently implemented by all staff
- explore further the opportunities for recently appointed staff to train and become qualified as professional teachers
- provide students with additional learning needs and disabilities access to trained professional support.