

Liverpool Theatre School

Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

Inspection report

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Main findings

Course:	Three-year National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre
Overall effectiveness:	Outstanding (grade 1)
Date of inspection:	20 February 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 November 2005 when it was 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 graded good (grade 2).

Standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that Trinity assessors have noted a year on year improvement in standards since the course began. The standards required by Trinity criteria are met and it is clear that some students exceed them. Students' singing is particularly strong, 'simply enormous in intensity and competence'. Assessors comment on performances that are 'passionate and moving' and singing of 'power and warmth' performed with 'ease and professionalism'. In acting and dance students do not achieve the same uniformly high standards, although assessors found their work engaging 'with many fine touches and moments of interest'.

In 2004-07, only two students left the course early, giving a retention figure of about 87% for the cohort. This is a significant improvement on previous years. In 2007, only one completing student failed to achieve the Trinity diploma.

When they leave, students secure employment quickly; at the time of the inspection, 85% of 2007 graduates were already in work, and five had contracts as lead singers. Typically, former students find themselves in cruise ships, pantomime and national and international touring companies. A few find roles in West End productions. For example, recent graduates have had leading roles in the West End shows *Blood Brothers*, *Footloose* and *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

Quality of provision

According to Trinity, the school has a very strong ethos and is 'committed to bringing out the best of talent in its aspiring students'. Assessors note that many students have no previous training and are being 'turned round' in under two years. For Trinity, this success is entirely due to 'the professional and dedicated approach of the principal and the staff'.

Relationships between teachers, managers and students are excellent. Students consider their teachers to be challenging and supportive. They particularly value the singing teaching and the individual singing tuition they receive as part of the course. Regular staff are experienced professionals and they are supplemented by visiting guest teachers who make a valuable input. Students are much less reliant on teachers for direction and the contextualisation of work than they were at the last inspection, and a number of evaluative tasks such as 'class accounts' have been introduced to encourage critical reflection. There are three assessments a year in dance acting and singing, the final one being performance based. Feedback at all levels is particularly thorough, so that students are never in any doubt as to where they are and what they need to do to improve. In a review of the contextual studies programme, for example, Trinity noted 'copious and meticulous student tutorial feedback which is signed by tutor and student'.

The course has a strong focus on performance with many opportunities for students to participate in productions and showcases. Trinity assessors praise the suitability of productions which enable students to demonstrate an appropriate range of performance skills. Productions exhibit a high degree of professionalism, not least in the presentation to agents where, according to Trinity, 'casting, showcase and production literature is highly professional'. The course itself is very well-structured and fulfils Trinity's requirements. There is a very good balance between the three components of dance, singing and acting, giving students an excellent preparation for the range of demands that are likely to be made of them when they leave. This allows them to give serious consideration to employment as singers, or in straight drama, as well as in musical theatre. In ballet and jazz, students are placed in classes according to their different levels of ability and where they are able to make the most progress and receive the closest individual attention. In the third year, students receive effective preparation for the industry which includes practice auditions.

The support students receive through tutorials, both pastoral and academic, remains very good. There are two pastoral tutors, one for the first year and one for second and third year students, whom students see individually twice a term. Students speak most highly about the 'the good friendly atmosphere' of the school and the approachability of staff. They believe they have a 'voice' in the affairs of the school and value the system of student representatives. The caring, supportive environment noted at the time of the last inspection is still tangible. There is a good student handbook and students know what is expected of them. Studios and other spaces are warm and safe, and students' access to injury support is satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The school continues to be led with the passion and clear sense of purpose noted at the last inspection, with the commitment of the two principals strongly complemented by that of the course director who gives the course intellectual clarity and ensures its effective day-to-day management. Systems function well and lines of accountability are clear; the leadership and management of the school are characterised by a strong emphasis on team working and mutual support.

The strong links with the Liverpool community which inspired the school have been maintained, with the principals still active members of several regional organisations, and considerable efforts have been made to attract students from local black and minority ethnic groups with visits to schools and 'taster' events. Unfortunately, these initiatives have yet to bear fruit. Some 30% of students are male and in 2007, for the first time, the school enrolled a small number of fee-paying students.

Teachers are regularly appraised and observed teaching in a way which is both open and supportive. Quality assurance processes cover all aspects of the course and staff are fully involved in the course review process which happens twice a year. Students' views are regularly elicited and taken into account and their representatives play a full part in discussions about the running of the school. However, while the school has taken action on many of the points raised in the last inspection report, key issues relating to the school's performance, such as the quality of teaching and learning, are not critically analysed and records of graduate employment are not presented in a way which makes it possible to examine patterns and trends. As a result, overall self-assessment is descriptive rather than usefully evaluative.

Points for action

The school must:

- present records of graduate employment in a clear and accessible way
- ensure that the self-assessment report focuses on judgements about the quality of outcomes rather than descriptions of processes.