

# Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts

Inspection report

---

Provider reference	53432
Published date	July 2008

Audience	
Published date	July 2008
Provider reference	53432

## Main findings

Course: Three-year National Diploma and one-year National Certificate in Professional Acting

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Date of inspection: 24-26 June 2008

Course: Three-year National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Date of inspection: 24-26 June 2008

Course: Two-year National Diploma in Professional Production Skills

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Date of inspection: 24-26 June 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.

These three courses were previously inspected by Ofsted in November 2004. The acting and musical theatre courses were graded outstanding (grade 1) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. The production course was graded good (grade 2) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. The leadership and management of the academy as a whole were graded good (grade 2).

## Three-year National Diploma and one-year National Certificate in Professional Acting

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

### Standards

Reports produced by Trinity assessors in the period 2007-08 are overwhelmingly positive and show that no student failed to satisfy Trinity criteria. One assessor judged third year actors to be reaching 'extremely high standards indeed' and noted their 'subtle and interesting physicality'. In other performances, students showed 'a natural ease and confidence in their work', sang and danced with 'a high level of skill' and gave 'assured, confident performances'. The external examiner appointed by the University of East Anglia for 2006/07 judged students' work to be of high quality, although their achievement in written work was 'less consistent than their commitment and thoroughness in practical work'. Trinity assessments of students on the one-year course are generally positive, although standards seem to be somewhat lower than for three-year students.

Acting students are reflective about their training, work hard to do well and have a committed, professional approach. Attendance is good, although an overall figure was not available. One-year students couple enthusiasm with the responsible, independent approach to acting fostered by the academy. Retention over both acting courses is about 85%. All students who completed the courses in the last three years gained a Trinity qualification.

Most Mountview acting students get work in theatre or television when they leave. Of those graduating from the three-year course in 2007, some 90% have worked as actors and, at the time of the inspection, 68% had agents. Of the one-year students graduating in the same year, 88% have secured professional work and 52% have agents. Acting graduates work with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal National Theatre and in the West End. They also have contracts with regional and touring theatre companies. Examples of recent work include a guest lead in *Casualty*, roles in *Pygmalion* at the Old Vic, London and in *Portrait of a Lady* with the Peter Hall Company and Liz in *Blonde Bombshells of 1943*.

### Quality of provision

In their 2007 re-accreditation report, the National Council for Drama Training (NCDT) wrote that Mountview offers a well-structured three-year acting course 'with a flexible under-pinning philosophy which allows students to develop their individuality'. NCDT praised the one-year course for its flexibility and the way students are supported into work.

Students believe that Mountview provides a safe and supportive learning environment to grow as a performer. In 2004, inspectors considered the very good or excellent teaching to be a significant strength of both acting courses, and students' feedback supports this view. Teachers are experienced professionals in theatre and media and guest directors complement the work of regular class teachers. Slightly over a quarter of teachers have teaching qualifications.

Students' feedback and the evidence of good employment outcomes suggest teaching is very successful in developing students' technical and professional skills. In 2007, NCDT recognised that one-year students benefit from 'a team of dedicated staff, focused on the individual's learning experience'. Students say how much they enjoy the diversity of approaches they experience and report very favourably about the quality of their teachers and the support they are given in classes. The personalised training students receive is a particular strength. 'They really want to develop you as an individual,' said one third year student of her teachers. Students appreciate the professional standards insisted on by teachers and report that the academy's rules, such those on lateness, are now consistently enforced.

Students are happy with their assessments and are confident they know how they are getting on. They receive helpful, formal, verbal feedback after classes and the completion of projects and productions, and formal, written feedback from heads of movement, voice and singing after each production. Students particularly appreciate the way teachers' feedback helps them reflect on their development and understand what they have to do to improve. Verbal assessment always incorporates an element of self-evaluation. There are opportunities throughout the course for students to experience mock auditions, and towards the end of both courses, trainees prepare for and go through simulated auditions with casting directors brought in by the academy. The external examiner is confident that assessment on the three-year course is fair and impartial, as are Trinity assessors.

Students appreciate the balance of the courses and the range of different subjects which, they say, keeps them challenged. Course content is continually being modified as the result of feedback from students and teachers. The four term, one-year course is designed well to respond to the needs of mature students from many different backgrounds, and, in the short time available, the course director ensures trainees have as much contact with the industry as possible to enhance their employment prospects. All acting programmes are grounded in strong professional practice. Students do not perform publicly until their third year - or their fourth term in the case of one-year students - when they take part in a number of shows in 'Off West End' venues and a showcase in a central London theatre. In 2007, the NCDT commended the number of performances undertaken by one-year students.

Studios and other spaces on the main site are adequate, although according to the students, not up to same high standard as other aspects of the training. Nevertheless, there is a large student common room and showers and changing facilities are adequate. Performance spaces are small, but well supplemented by the hire of external venues. The studios are reasonably well kept, although students complained about cleanliness, a matter of which the academy is aware and dealing with. Film and media facilities are good and the library is well stocked and staffed.

In 2004, inspectors praised the 'excellent health, welfare and pastoral support' received by students. Current students support this view: 'Teachers are always telling you how to look after yourself,' said one. Students like the 'open door policy' adopted by staff and feel there is always someone they can go to for help and advice. Injury support is good. Students' progress is monitored carefully, and staff meet together at regular intervals to discuss how students are getting on. However, students have no

allocated tutor to monitor their overall progression and to ensure that they are making the best possible use of their time. Teachers are sensitive to the needs of dyslexic students and adapt tasks appropriately; they believe that the close contact with texts required helps all of them with language and vocabulary. However, there is no initial assessment of students' literacy and numeracy needs nor formal support systems for those who may be struggling. This was a weakness in the 2004 report.

The NCDT believes that professional development is well embedded in the course and students receive a great deal of help with professional issues, such as tax matters. Students also benefit from an effective marketing and public relations department run by an experienced theatre publicist/marketeer who has also worked as a theatrical agent. The department checks their curriculum vitae, advises on photographs and has established close links with a number of agents and casting directors who give students practice interviews followed by feedback on their performance and presentation.

### Leadership and management

The academy benefits from strong strategic leadership and the quality of management at senior level continues to be high. Strategic planning is of a high order and financial controls are tight. The principal and board of directors fully acknowledge the weaknesses of the present site and are committed to relocation. Mountview has a strong and developing commitment to diversity as demonstrated by its links with companies like Graeae and Mind the Gap. A recent external report on Mountview's status and commercial sustainability as a cultural provider in Haringey describes 'a strong management team whose members are involved effectively in quality systems'.

Since the last inspection the academy has been decentralising its management to its three principal programmes: acting, musical theatre and production arts. The devolution of responsibility works well. Programme teams work very productively together and devolution has brought better communications within programmes and a sharper focus on the needs of individual students. Leadership of both acting courses is strong, inspiring loyalty, commitment and hard work. Management is good and supported by an appropriate programme of meetings at all levels. Staff have a close involvement with the students and their needs, and individual attendance is carefully monitored.

A performance review system for full-time staff, involving a discussion about development and targets, was introduced in 2007. No teaching is seen as part of this process, and while extensive feedback from students in formal questionnaires enables managers to monitor student satisfaction, this lack of formal lesson observation makes it hard for the academy to identify the strengths and weaknesses of teaching overall.

There is an impressive commitment to continuous improvement. Systematic review and evaluation take place at all levels and the academy is quick to respond effectively to the recommendations of inspectors and other external assessors. For example, following the last inspection, when criticisms were made of quality assurance systems, a formal system of course review was instituted. Teachers took

inspectors' concerns about the consistency of students' assessments very seriously and quickly identified a problem with the subjectivity of outsiders' judgements. Criteria are now much tighter, related more closely to grades and consistent across subjects. The outcomes of student questionnaires are carefully recorded and analysed and every year, at the programme, module and component monitoring review meeting, staff, students and an employer representative review all available evidence about the previous year's course. There are detailed records of graduate employment, but the tracking of destinations is not complete and the academy is not yet using the data gathered to identify trends and inform programme planning.

#### Points for action

The academy must:

- find effective ways of evaluating the quality of teaching
- ensure that appropriate learning support is available for students who need it
- continue working to raise standards on the one-year course.

#### Points for consideration

The academy might usefully:

- further develop the systems for recording and evaluating graduate employment
- consider allocating students a personal tutor to monitor their overall progression and to ensure that they are making the very best use of their training
- improve the quality of the accommodation.

## Three-year National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

### Standards

Reports produced by Trinity assessors in the period 2007-08 are overwhelmingly positive and show that no student failed to satisfy Trinity criteria. One assessor praised the high standard of work while another felt it was invidious to single out individual students because 'standards of performance were such that virtually all would be worthy of mention'. In the same production the assessor thought numbers were delivered with 'punch and style' and was confident that the students were achieving 'at least professional competency in chorus song and dance'. The external examiner appointed by the University of East Anglia in 2006/07 judged standards to be very high and considered a third year production of *Company* 'a hugely engaging performance, demonstrating work at the very highest level within this sector'.

Students work hard to do well and have a professional approach. The external examiner thought students 'give of their all to their performance work' although he was less fulsome about their reflective journals, some of which were 'loose and rather superficial'. Attendance is good, although an overall figure was not available. Retention fluctuates between about 80% and 95%, although some of these apparent early leavers subsequently return to complete the course. All students who completed the course in the last three years gained the Trinity qualification.

Mountview's musical theatre students are very successful in getting work as performers when they leave. By the autumn of 2007, some 88% of 2006 graduates had worked professionally and 94% had agents. At the time of the inspection, 97% of third year students had agents. Significant numbers of students work in the West End in their first year of employment. Roles already secured by 2008 leavers include the mistress in a national tour of *Evita* and the lead in a national tour of *Our House*. Two students have joined the West End cast of *Wicked* and another is playing Carrie in a production of *Carousel* which will transfer to the West End. As well as joining companies, many musical theatre graduates set up their own projects. For example, 11 former students are developing a multimedia project based on the life and work of the artist Egon Schiele.

### Quality of provision

In its 2007 re-accreditation report of the musical theatre course, the National Council for Drama Training (NCDT) praised the comprehensive curriculum which 'is delivered by the core staff in an integrated and co-operative way [and] which ensures all musical theatre skills'.

In 2004, inspectors considered the very good or excellent teaching to be a significant strength of the musical theatre course and feedback from current students supports this view. Since the last inspection, staffing has been strengthened with the appointment of four new full-time teachers. Regular teachers are experienced

performing arts professionals and guest directors and musical directors expertly complement their work. About a quarter of teachers have teaching qualifications.

Students say how much they appreciate teachers' highly personalised approach and the individual attention they are given. They very much like the family feel of the course - one said that their teachers are 'a bit like surrogate parents' – and they are impressed by how much each of their specialist teachers know about them and how that translates into support in classes. Students are grouped by ability in ballet, jazz dance and tap and in 2007, the NCDT judged the teaching of dance and movement 'to be extremely effective to cover the range of student abilities as they progress through the course'. In all subjects, students appreciate the professional standards demanded of them and the challenges they are set.

Students receive formal, written feedback on their projects and written feedback on every subject twice a year which is discussed with the head of acting, dance or singing; they may receive additional verbal feedback if they ask for it, or if their performance is giving cause for concern. Students feel that teachers' 'open door policy' means that they can always seek further comments if needed. However, in 2004, inspectors were concerned that teachers' feedback to students was not sufficiently developmental and this element seems still to be underdeveloped. There are opportunities in song presentation classes for students to experience mock auditions, and towards the end of both courses, trainees prepare for and go through simulated auditions with casting directors brought in by the academy.

In 2007, the external examiner thought the programme was 'very well structured and responsive to the needs of the profession and the musical theatre industry as a whole'. It is grounded in strong professional practice; teachers see themselves preparing students for long term employment and put a high priority on transferrable skills. The course has the right balance of singing, dance and acting so that third year students can, with justification, call themselves 'all rounders'. In 2007, the NCDT praised 'the extensive and coherent repertoire' covered. A particular strength is the music theory course which, in the words of the NCDT, 'enables them to communicate effectively with a musical director'. Students do not perform publicly until their third year when they have what the NCDT judges to be 'a professionally relevant range of production opportunities', including a showcase in the West End. As one student said, 'the first two years are about the means, not the ends'.

Mountview uses accommodation close to its main site for musical theatre training. Studios and other spaces are satisfactory. There is a large student common room and showers and changing facilities are cramped but adequate. Performance spaces are small, but well supplemented by the hire of external venues. The studios are reasonably well kept, and standards of cleanliness have improved recently. While the library is well stocked, musical theatre students report that it is often closed at times when they might reasonably expect access to it.

Students believe they are well looked after at Mountview. There is good injury support and a clear focus on care for the individual. If they need them, students have access to a counsellor and a physiotherapist. Students' progress is monitored carefully, and staff meet together at regular intervals to discuss how they are getting on. However, students have no allocated tutor to monitor their overall progression



and to ensure that they are making the best possible use of their time. Teachers are sensitive to the needs of dyslexic students by adapting tasks appropriately, but there is no initial assessment of students' literacy and numeracy needs nor formal support systems for those who may be struggling.

Students receive a great deal of help with professional issues, such as tax matters. They also benefit from an effective marketing and public relations department run by an experienced theatre publicist/marketeer who has also worked as a theatrical agent. The department checks their curriculum vitae, advises on photographs and has established close links with a number of agents and casting directors who give students practice interviews followed by feedback on their performance and presentation.

### Leadership and management

The academy benefits from strong strategic leadership and the quality of management at senior level continues to be high. Strategic planning is of a high order and financial controls are tight. The principal and board of directors fully acknowledge the weaknesses of the present site and are committed to relocation. Mountview has a strong and developing commitment to diversity as demonstrated by its links with companies like Graeae and Mind the Gap. A recent external report on Mountview's status and commercial sustainability as a cultural provider in Haringey describes 'a strong management team whose members are involved effectively in quality systems... For musical theatre training, the academy is in the top rank along with only one, or perhaps two, others'.

Since the last inspection the academy has been decentralising its management to its three principal programmes: acting, musical theatre and production arts. The devolution of responsibility works well. Programme teams work very productively together and devolution has brought better communications within programmes and a sharper focus on the needs of individual students. Leadership of the musical theatre course is strong, inspiring loyalty, commitment and hard work. Very effective arrangements have been made to cover the head of programme's sabbatical. Management is good and supported by an appropriate programme of meetings at all levels. Staff have a close involvement with the students and their needs, and individual attendance is carefully monitored.

A performance review system for full-time staff, involving a discussion about development and targets, was introduced in 2007. No teaching is seen as part of this process, and while extensive feedback from students in formal questionnaires enables managers to monitor student satisfaction, this lack of formal lesson observation makes it hard for the academy to identify the strengths and weaknesses of teaching overall.

There is an impressive commitment to continuous improvement. Systematic review and evaluation take place at all levels and the academy is quick to respond effectively to the recommendations of inspectors and other external assessors. For example, following the last inspection, when criticisms were made of quality assurance systems, a formal system of course review was instituted. The outcomes of student questionnaires are carefully recorded and analysed and every year, at the

programme, module and component monitoring review meeting, staff, students and an employer representative review all available evidence about the previous year's course. There are detailed records of graduate employment, but the tracking of destinations is not complete and the academy is not yet using the data gathered to identify trends and inform programme planning.

#### Points for action

The academy must:

- find effective ways of evaluating the quality of teaching
- ensure that appropriate learning support is available for students who need it
- ensure that the feedback given to students helps them understand clearly what they need to do to improve.

#### Points for consideration

The academy might usefully:

- further develop the systems for recording and evaluating graduate employment
- consider allocating students a personal tutor to monitor their overall progression and to ensure that they are making the very best use of their training
- improve the quality of the accommodation.

## Two-year National Diploma in Professional Production Skills

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

### Standards

Reports produced by Trinity assessors in the period 2007-08 are unfailingly positive and show that no student failed to satisfy Trinity criteria. One assessor describes a second-year production at a London venue having 'high production values'. On another occasion, two students are described as fulfilling their backstage roles 'with a high degree of skills and learning development'. Another assessor thought the look of a piece was 'consistent with what one would expect from a professional production'. The external examiner appointed by Middlesex University for 2006/07 thought that there was 'a range of both ability and commitment' with some students showing 'great development'.

Technical theatre students are reflective about their training, work hard to do well and have a committed, professional approach. Attendance is good, although an overall figure was not available. Retention is between 80% and 85%. All students who completed the course in the last three years gained the Trinity qualification.

Most students get work when they leave. Of those graduating in 2006, some 81% had worked professionally within a year. Of the 18 graduates of 2007, all have had at least one professional contract, nine have permanent contracts and at least seven have regular freelance work. Few technical theatre graduates fail to find theatre work in their chosen specialism. Recent freelance contracts include prop making and scene painting for the Chichester Festival and at Glyndebourne. Two recent graduates are in the lighting team for *The Lion King* at the Lyceum and two others are now permanent members of the construction department at the Royal Opera House.

### Quality of provision

Students' feedback and the evidence of good employment outcomes suggest teaching is still as successful in developing students' technical and professional skills as it was at the time of the last inspection. Much has improved and, according to the external examiner, 'Ideas are clearly shared and teaching strengthened by discussion and support... a variety of new teaching methods has emerged'. Students say that classes are now better prepared and that first year students are receiving a better grounding in basic good practice rather than being left to learn from their mistakes. Several students commented on the good teaching in their specialist subjects. They like the way their teachers work alongside them and treat them as fellow professionals. No technical theatre teachers have teaching qualifications.

In 2007, the external examiner praised the way teachers maintained a practical focus but at the same time were informed by a clear intellectual rationale. The new programme director is ensuring trainees have as much contact with the industry as possible to enhance their employment prospects. In this, students are much helped by the regular contact they have in their second year with the many free-lance

practitioners with whom they come into contact during productions. They also benefit from the contributions made by actors and other professionals to the training. For example, an actor from the Royal Shakespeare Company was able to give students some experience of the frustrations of a deputy stage manager by playing the role of a 'difficult' actor in rehearsal and feeding back to them how he felt about their responses. The personalised training students receive is a strength of the course.

The assessment process is very thorough. In 2007, the external examiner noted that staff continued to 'impress with the quality of feedback to students'. Students are confident they know how they are getting on and confirm the external examiner's judgement by praising the care taken in both written and aural reports. First year students have projects in each of the disciplines and receive helpful, formal feedback on each one, including guidance on what they need to do to improve. They also receive much verbal feedback. In their second year, students are debriefed after every show and have to present their own self-evaluation of how well they performed.

Students appreciate the layout of the course which enables them to acquire a range of skills in design, stage management, lighting, sound and construction in the first year before specialising in the second year when they take greater responsibility for aspects of production. In 2007, the external examiner considered that the course was well designed and covered its many specialist areas well; he applauded the 'many opportunities for practical production work'. There have been a number of changes since the last inspection. A stagecraft module has been introduced in response to a National Council for Drama Training (NCDT) report and the number of practical workshops in the first year has been increased. Career development classes, including interview practice, have been added. In their planning, teachers are sensitive to students from very diverse backgrounds, and with very different levels of experience, and as the course progresses, they increasingly adapt the training to meet students' individual needs. All technical theatre options are grounded in strong professional practice and course content is continually being modified as the result of feedback from students and teachers. In April, the NCDT judged there to be 'a good range of outside venues providing students with a variety of production experiences'.

The technical theatre provision is now consolidated in a building close to Mountview's main site and accommodation criticised in the last inspection has been sold. Workshops and training rooms are good and students feel that when it comes to facilities they 'couldn't really do better'. However, because they fully appreciate the value of cross fertilisation, they are disappointed that they are physically separated from the acting and musical theatre courses. Specialist equipment is good and the programme director has spent much energy ensuring that it is up-to-date. Weaknesses in the information and communication technology provision mentioned in the previous report, and by NCDT, have been effectively addressed, and there are further improvements in the pipeline. Developing partnerships with the industry enable the course to enhance students' experience. For example, one such partnership has led to important input on stage automation and supporting visits to West End theatres to see automated staging in action. The library is well stocked and students appreciate the range of resources available to them.

In 2004, inspectors thought that teachers provided 'good pastoral and academic support'; current students support this view. Students like the 'open door policy' adopted by staff and feel there is always someone they can go to for help and advice. They praise the work of the student counsellor. Students' progress is monitored carefully, and staff meet together at regular intervals to discuss how students are getting on. In the second year, specialist groups comprise only half a dozen or so students thus enabling close and regular contact with one teacher who gets to know them very well. First year students have a personal tutor, but because they do not meet with their tutor in a programmed way, they have no-one to monitor their overall progression and to ensure that they are making the best possible use of their time. Teachers are sensitive to the learning needs of students, but there is no initial assessment of students' literacy and numeracy needs or formal support systems for those who may be struggling. In finding work, students benefit from an effective marketing and public relations department run by an experienced theatre publicist/marketeer who has also worked as a theatrical agent. The department helps with students' 'grad book' curriculum vitae which it then circulates to employers.

## Leadership and management

The academy benefits from strong strategic leadership and the quality of management at senior level continues to be high. Strategic planning is of a high order and financial controls are tight. Mountview has a strong and developing commitment to diversity as demonstrated by its links with companies like Graeae and Mind the Gap. A recent external report on Mountview's status and commercial sustainability as a cultural provider in Haringey describes 'a strong management team whose members are involved effectively in quality systems'.

Since the last inspection the academy has been decentralising its management to its three principal programmes: acting, musical theatre and production arts. The devolution of responsibility works well. Programme teams work very productively together and devolution has brought better communications within programmes and a sharper focus on the needs of individual students. The production arts department is going through a challenging staffing restructure and it is to the credit of the teaching team that this is not having a negative impact on the students. Operational management is good and supported by an appropriate programme of meetings at all levels. Staff have a close involvement with the students and their needs, and individual attendance is carefully monitored.

In 2007, the external examiner remained impressed by the common purpose shared by staff and the strong collegiate atmosphere. 'I get a great feeling of self-confidence emerging which I have found invigorating.' The new leadership of the technical theatre programme is strong and innovative and beneficial changes are happening quickly. One second-year student remarked that since the new programme director took over, 'things that weren't so good have been improved all the time. Next year will be fantastic!'

A performance review system for full-time staff, involving a discussion about development and targets, was introduced in 2007. No teaching is seen as part of this process, and while extensive feedback from students in formal questionnaires enables managers to monitor student satisfaction, this lack of formal lesson

observation makes it hard for the academy to identify the strengths and weaknesses of teaching overall.

There is an impressive commitment to continuous improvement and the academy is quick to respond effectively to the recommendations of inspectors and other external assessors. For example, following the last inspection, when criticisms were made of quality assurance systems, a formal process of course review was instituted. The outcomes of student questionnaires are carefully recorded and analysed, and where appropriate, action is taken. For example, a lighting design project was effectively adapted to meet the varying needs of students as a result of their feedback. Judgements about the course are consolidated in the collaborative programme annual monitoring report, which includes the external examiner's report. There are detailed records of graduate employment, but the tracking of destinations is not complete and the academy is not yet using the data gathered to identify trends and inform programme planning.

#### Points for action

The academy must:

- find effective ways of evaluating the quality of teaching
- ensure that appropriate learning support is available for students who need it

#### Points for consideration

The academy might usefully:

- further develop the systems for recording and evaluating graduate employment
- consider developing the head of department role so that students have a personal tutor to monitor their overall progression and to ensure that they are making the very best use of their training
- find ways to integrate technical theatre students further in the collective life of the academy
- encourage teachers to train for professional teaching qualifications.