

Guildford School of Acting (GSA)

Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

Inspection report

Provider reference

50031

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Main findings

Course: Three - year National Diploma in Professional Acting

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Date of inspection: 13 May 2008

Course: Three - year National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Date of inspection: 14 May 2008

Course: Two - year National Diploma in Professional Theatre Production

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Date of inspection: 15 May 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 May and November 2005. The acting course was graded outstanding (grade 1) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. The musical theatre and theatre production courses were both graded good (grade 2) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. The leadership and management of the school as a whole were also graded good (grade 2).

Three - year National Diploma in Professional Acting

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College, London, show that the standards of acting in classes and performances have been maintained at an outstanding level. Recent assessment reports judge that students are 'impressive in their interpretation and use of text' and in their 'understanding of genre and period'. Assessors remark on the all-round conviction of students' performances, noting that in one particular production they displayed 'panache in their multi-disciplined roles'. They also 'work very well as an ensemble'. Students develop very high standards of physical and vocal development to equip them for demanding work. Assessors commend the 'high standards of academic work' reached by some students in their contextual studies, and note that some 'very well researched work' is 'communicated with excitement and flair'.

Retention and success rates are good. The large majority of students who started the course in the last three years completed it, and all those who completed the course in the last three years achieved the qualification. The college keeps very good records of why a few students leave. Punctuality and attendance are excellent.

Almost all students gain employment in the performing arts profession when they leave the school. Of those students graduating between 2005 and 2007, over 90% had worked as a professional actor by the time of the inspection, and many had had numerous engagements with relatively short periods of inactivity between them. The school successfully collects and collates information from individual students about their employment histories, and their records are systematic, detailed and up-to-date.

Typically, recent ex-students have secured live stage work on national touring productions, in the West End, in children's theatre shows and in regional repertory productions and pantomime. They have also worked in a wide range of radio, television and commercial film productions. Recent graduates have taken the leading or other major roles in *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *An Inspector Calls*, joined the RSC, and appeared in *James and the Giant Peach* on national tour and in *The 24-hour plays* at the Old Vic, London.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are outstanding. Lessons are dynamic, challenging all students to strive for the best in themselves. Teachers demand a lot of students, who respond with vigour and ambition. The development and use of actors' bodies and voices is central to the training, and as the course proceeds students are given increasing degrees of responsibility and

autonomy over their creation and projection of character. Lessons in professional development ensure that they are very well prepared for life and work in a volatile professional climate. Personal discipline is rigorous. Teachers combine and share their particular disciplines and skills in an open and exploratory way, emphasising to students that actors require high levels of technical versatility, imaginative flexibility and a spirit of adventure. Contextual studies are taught very well in specific lessons and fully supported by all teachers, so that students develop a depth of understanding of the work they are doing. Students maintain very good personal logs on the development of their craft, and these are well used to identify how they need to work to improve.

The content and structure of the course are subject to constant review in the light of professional developments and of students' changing needs and interests. Students experience a good blend of individual technical development and group production work. They are well prepared to act to camera and microphone, and additional tuition in singing and dance helps to extend their versatility. Specialist skills such as stage combat and acrobatics are taught in intensive blocks. Recent changes to the daily timetable have created more spaces in which students can reflect on what they are learning and review their own areas for further development. In their third and final year, the focus of the work changes to preparation for employment: students have mock auditions and prepare and present material to staff and, potentially, to agents. Some of this work is vital, but in their present form the group presentation sessions are of limited value and students do not consider the time well used.

Guidance and support for students are outstanding. All students are regularly assessed against a wide range of clearly understood technical and performance criteria. In between these formal, graded assessments students receive constant constructive feedback on their progress not only in lessons but at regular review panels attended by their teachers. Oral and written feedback is detailed and specific and contributes to well-maintained individual learning plans (known in the school as 'personal statements of learning'). This approach produces a strongly collective sense of responsibility for the nurturing of students' development. The system changes in the third year as students prepare for auditions and work more on productions, but one negative effect of these changes is to lose the sharp focus on personal goal-setting and progress that students have enjoyed in the first two years of their course.

Students have good access to a range of specialist support services as required. Those with additional learning needs are diagnosed at an early stage and offered specialist support through their course by a trained member of the teaching staff.

Leadership and management

The course is strongly led, and managed efficiently with a constant eye on the changing nature of the profession that the school seeks to serve. The school's strategic plans are ambitious but realistic. Connections with the performing arts industry are extensive and thriving. There is very close liaison between staff and students throughout the school. The school undertakes a range of outreach and community work, and has developed a number of strong relationships with particular schools, further education colleges and community youth arts groups in a partially successful attempt to increase the participation in training of under-represented social class and ethnic groups.

Guildford is a large school on several different sites, but it maintains the dynamics of an extended family in many of its working practices. Staff work very closely together and exhibit a high level of personal trust and artistic cross-fertilisation between different disciplines and courses. Discussions about the work being done and the students who are doing it are constant. Team teaching and team meetings happen regularly, and teachers share and exchange ideas, strategies, resources and concerns in an open, generous way. This environment notwithstanding, communications between some staff and students sometimes lack clarity or consistency when it comes to issues such as expectations of students' commitment of time, work deadlines, or the application of discipline policies. Opportunities for teachers to maintain and extend their own professional work are good, and the school strongly encourages its core teachers to acquire teaching qualifications through good links with a local further education college.

Students contribute significantly to the way the school is managed. They are regularly consulted through a range of forums, including a student council and an annual external appraiser who meets with representatives from each year group. Students consider almost all the staff to be highly approachable people who listen and respond to what they say.

Resources are satisfactory. The school makes excellent use of different professional performance venues in and around Guildford, and it has improved the access students have to computing facilities. The library is well stocked and used, and supports the school's strong emphasis on students' reading and research. Plans are well advanced for the entire school to relocate to a single, purpose-built site within the University of Surrey by 2010.

Quality assurance is operationally effective. A regular programme of lesson observations is linked to teacher appraisals. The views of students and employers are systematically sought and acted upon. A recent curriculum review has led to significant recent changes to patterns of working and the structure of some aspects of training. The acting course board critically reviews the provision and contributes to the school's overall self-assessment report. This latter report, however, lacks an evaluative dimension and makes little summary use of data. It does not do justice to the degree to which each part of the school critically assesses the quality and impact of its work.

Points for action

The school must:

- bring together all processes of self-assessment into a more comprehensive, evaluative summary report for the school.

Points for consideration

The school might usefully:

- review the purpose and effectiveness of the 'presentation' sessions that currently occur in year three of the course
- maintain through year three of the course a stronger focus on personal goal setting and progress monitoring for students
- improve the consistency and clarity of communications between some staff and students.

Three - year National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College, London show that the standards of musical theatre in classes and performances have been maintained at a high level. Recent assessment reports judge that students have 'very strong singing voices . . . and excellent all-round musical theatre skills'. They are capable of 'good comedic timing', and their 'great energy and focus' and 'convincing character portrayals' contribute to productions of a 'very high standard'. Dance skills are more variable. Trinity assessors note that in one particular group assessment 'the company worked very well as an ensemble' but that some dancers 'lacked finesse and grace' and a few 'needed more work on their core strength and stability'. As with students on the acting course, Trinity assessors commend the very good grounding that musical theatre students have in the history and stylistic development of their art, as well as in their overall application of stagecraft. The school acknowledges that acting, singing and all-round performance skills are at the heart of the musical theatre course and that some students are therefore selected who lack the technical dance background of the strongest dancers.

Retention and success rates are very high. The very large majority of students who started the course in the last three years completed it, and all those who completed the course in the last three years achieved the qualification. The college keeps very good records of why a few students leave. Punctuality and attendance are excellent.

Almost all students gain employment in the performing arts profession when they leave the school. Of those students graduating between 2005 and 2007, around 90% had worked as a professional performer by the time of the inspection. The school successfully collects and collates information from individual students about their employment histories, and their records are systematic, detailed and up-to-date.

Typically, recent ex-students have secured live stage work on national touring productions, in the West End, in children's theatre shows and in regional repertory productions and pantomime. They have also worked in radio, television and commercial film productions. Recent graduates have appeared in national tours of *The Producers* and *Porgy and Bess*, in a regional production of *Sweeney Todd*, and in West End productions of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* and *The Boyfriend*.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are outstanding. Lessons are dynamic, challenging all students to strive for the best in themselves. Teachers demand a lot of

students, who respond with vigour and ambition. They approach the genre of musical theatre with very open minds and a keen appetite to push the boundaries of the form. The teaching of acting and singing are as central to the musical theatre course as dance, and students receive close individual attention to develop all three disciplines. They are taught to integrate the technical skills they learn into fully rounded performances, with a strong emphasis on the emotional journey of a character and the narrative of the work as a whole, told through dialogue, song and dance. As they make progress through the course, students are given increasing degrees of responsibility and autonomy over their work. Lessons in professional development ensure that they are very well prepared for life and work in a volatile professional climate. Personal discipline is rigorous. Contextual studies are taught very well in specific lessons and fully supported by all teachers, so that students develop a depth of understanding of the work they are doing. Students maintain very good personal logs on the development of their craft, and these are well used to identify how they need to work to improve.

The content and structure of the course are subject to constant review in the light of professional developments and of students' changing needs and interests. Acting and singing, and the actor's engagement with text, emotion story and audience are at the core of the musical theatre course, but all the principal dance styles are taught and extra evening classes are available for those students who arrive at the school with less technically advanced dance skills. A few students who wish to pursue musical theatre training but whose dance skills are relatively underdeveloped are still recruited onto an 'open pathway' in year one, and are required to improve their dance skills to a certain standard by the end of the year before they can transfer fully to the musical theatre course. This aspect of the curriculum is no longer appropriate because of the recent decision to run the acting and musical theatre courses entirely separately from the outset. The school has introduced more rigorous warm-ups and exercise and stretching programmes to increase stamina and address the identified weaknesses in some students' core strength and body condition. It is too early to judge the full impact of these measures.

Recent changes to the daily timetable have created more spaces in which students can reflect on what they are learning and review their own areas for further development. In their third and final year, the focus of the work changes to preparation for employment: students have mock auditions and prepare and present material to staff and, potentially, to agents. Some of this work is vital, but in their current form these group presentation sessions are of limited value in refining self-criticism or developing skills and students do not consider the time well used.

Guidance and support for students are outstanding. All students are regularly assessed against a wide range of clearly understood technical and performance criteria. In between these formal, graded assessments students receive constant constructive feedback on their progress not only in lessons but at regular review panels attended by their teachers. Oral and written feedback is detailed and specific and contributes to well-maintained individual

learning plans (known in the school as 'personal statements of learning'). This approach produces a strongly collective sense of responsibility for the nurturing of students' development. The system changes in the third year as students prepare for auditions and work more on productions, but one negative effect of these changes is to lose the sharp focus on personal goal-setting and progress that students have enjoyed in the first two years of their course.

Students have good access to a range of specialist support services as required, including physiological, nutrition and injury support. Those with additional learning needs are diagnosed at an early stage and offered specialist support through their course by a trained member of the teaching staff.

Leadership and management

The course is strongly led, and managed efficiently with a constant eye on the changing nature of the profession that the school seeks to serve. The school's strategic plans are ambitious but realistic. Connections with the performing arts industry are extensive and thriving. There is very close liaison between staff and students throughout the school. The school undertakes a range of outreach and community work, and has developed a number of strong relationships with particular schools, further education colleges and community youth arts groups in a partially successful attempt to increase the participation in training of under-represented social class and ethnic groups.

Guildford is a large school on several different sites, but it maintains the dynamics of an extended family in many of its working practices. Staff work very closely together and exhibit a high level of personal trust and artistic cross-fertilisation between different disciplines and courses. Discussions about the work being done and the students who are doing it are constant. Team teaching and team meetings happen regularly, and teachers share and exchange ideas, strategies, resources and concerns in an open, generous way. This environment notwithstanding, communications between some staff and students sometimes lack clarity or consistency when it comes to issues such as expectations of students' commitment of time, work deadlines, or the application of discipline policies. Opportunities for teachers to maintain and extend their own professional work are good, and the school strongly encourages its core teachers to acquire teaching qualifications through good links with a local further education college.

Students contribute significantly to the way the school is managed. They are regularly consulted through a range of forums, including a student council and an annual external appraiser who meets with representatives from each year group. Students consider almost all the staff to be highly approachable people who listen and respond to what they say.

Resources are satisfactory. The school makes excellent use of different professional performance venues in and around Guildford, and it has

improved the access students have to computing facilities. The library is well stocked and used, and supports the school's strong emphasis on students' reading and research. Plans are well advanced for the entire school to relocate to a single, purpose-built site within the University of Surrey by 2010.

Quality assurance is operationally effective. A regular programme of lesson observations is linked to teacher appraisals. The views of students and employers are systematically sought and acted upon. A recent curriculum review has led to significant recent changes to patterns of working and the structure of some aspects of training. The continuation of an 'open pathway' training route in year one for aspiring musical theatre students is, however, anachronistic in the light of the recent decision to separate the acting and musical theatre course groups' timetables. The musical theatre course board critically reviews the provision and contributes to the school's overall self-assessment report. This latter report, however, lacks an evaluative dimension and makes little summary use of data. It does not do justice to the degree to which each part of the school critically assesses the quality and impact of its work.

Points for action

The school must:

- continue to improve the core strength, stamina and technical dance skills of some musical theatre students
- bring together all processes of self-assessment into a more comprehensive, evaluative summary report for the school.

Points for consideration

The school might usefully:

- review the purpose and effectiveness of the 'presentation' sessions that currently occur in year three of the course
- maintain through year three of the course a stronger focus on personal goal setting and progress monitoring for students
- review the purpose of the 'open pathway' training route for some musical theatre students who lack adequate technical dance skills
- improve the consistency and clarity of communications between some staff and students.

Two - year National Diploma in Professional Theatre Production

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College, London show that the standards of theatre production in classes and performances have been maintained at a high level. Recent assessment reports of particular productions observed judge that 'students are encouraged to flourish in their respective roles whilst working on professionally presented . . . work'. Typically, students are described by Trinity assessors as 'eminently employable', and individual students attract a range of very positive comments such as 'a very competent execution of a challenging role' and 'demonstrating substantial skills and competence for a large and complex sound plot'. Formal feedback from employers who have taken students on work placements confirm that, when in a professional working environment, students' standards are excellent. One student is described in an employer's report as 'a quick learner, and a joy to have on the crew'; another is 'highly competent, with excellent technical and communication skills'. Students develop their very wide range of stage management and technical production skills in an environment that emphasises the importance of teamworking and communications. They develop their capacities for decisiveness, flexibility, problem-solving and diplomacy alongside their diverse technical skills.

Retention and success rates are high. The large majority of students who started the course in the last three years completed it, and all those who completed the course in the last three years achieved the qualification. The school keeps very good records of why a few students leave. Punctuality and attendance are excellent.

Almost all students gain employment in the performing arts profession when they leave the school. Some also continue their education and training by returning for a third year and completing the degree course at the school, but obtain some work at the same time. Of those students graduating between 2005 and 2007, over 90% had worked in theatre production by the time of the inspection. The school successfully collects and collates information from individual students about their employment histories, and their records are systematic, detailed and up-to-date.

Typically, recent ex-students have secured work on national touring productions, in the West End, in regional repertory houses, on cruise ships and in commercial studios and production companies. Recent graduates have secured jobs as assistant and deputy stage managers, production assistants, technical managers, lighting board operators, assistant lighting designers, flymen, and sound number twos. They have worked, for example, at The Royal Court Theatre, Trafalgar Studios, The Bush Theatre, and for various commercial lighting and sound companies.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are outstanding. Lessons are highly focused, combining theory with practice in a dynamic and illuminating way. The full range of production roles and skills are taught, with a prime emphasis on the close interdependence of these roles on any production. Constant reference is made to the different demands that might be made on students' skills, according to the professional settings in which they might be working. Teachers demand a lot from students, who respond with vigour and ambition. From early in the course, students are required to show individual initiative and flexibility and take personal responsibility, yet work to the needs of the team. These attributes are continually tested in the production allocations that put students in specified individual roles in production teams. Teachers conduct these negotiated allocations in a scrupulous, well-informed way to try and ensure that students are always being challenged but are working within their boundaries of competence. Students receive high levels of personal attention whilst acquiring the habit of working under pressure in supportive teams. They are very well prepared for a wide range of jobs.

The content and structure of the course are subject to constant review in the light of professional developments, feedback from employers and students' changing needs and interests. Students are taught to become valued employees in a wide range of production roles, and to develop a close rapport with the performance students. They acquire some experience of almost all aspects of modern performance production, giving them a highly versatile base from which they might later choose to specialise. They undertake significant work placements in a wide range of professional settings, and many are offered subsequent work as a direct result of the very good reputation they establish whilst there. The timetabling of the taught elements of the course has been revised recently to ensure that students have early opportunities to apply and refine what they are learning in the practical context of their production allocations. Provision for computer-aided design is currently underdeveloped, but the school is already taking steps to ensure that students have more experience of working directly with industry-standard design packages.

Guidance and support for students are outstanding. All students are assessed on their production allocations by two teachers against a clear set of criteria for each production role. Individual targets derive from these assessments. Students' overall progress is then regularly reviewed by panels of core teachers. Oral and written feedback is detailed and specific. This approach produces a strongly collective sense of responsibility for the nurturing of students' development and the monitoring of their progress. In the final production allocations, professional employment practice is replicated by the use of formal interviews for the in-house jobs. This places an appropriate emphasis on students' capacity to present themselves with conviction and confidence, with staff largely discounting their previous knowledge of students in their awarding of these final job allocations.

Students have good access to a range of specialist support services as required. Those with additional learning needs are diagnosed at an early stage and offered specialist support through their course by a trained member of the teaching staff.

Leadership and management

The course is strongly led, and managed efficiently with a constant eye on the changing nature of the profession that the school seeks to serve. The school's strategic plans are ambitious but realistic. Connections with the performing arts industry are extensive and thriving. There is very close liaison between staff and students of the production course and the two performance courses. The school undertakes a range of outreach and community work, and has developed a number of strong relationships with particular schools, further education colleges and community youth arts groups in a partially successful attempt to increase the participation in training of under-represented social class and ethnic groups.

Guildford is a large school on several different sites, but it maintains the dynamics of an extended family in many of its working practices. Staff work very closely together and exhibit a high level of personal trust and artistic cross-fertilisation between different disciplines. Discussions about the work being done and the students who are doing it are constant. Team teaching and team meetings happen regularly, reflecting the inter-disciplinary nature of all the work done on the production course, and teachers share and exchange ideas, strategies, resources and concerns in an open, generous way. Opportunities for teachers to maintain and extend their own professional work are good, and the school strongly encourages its core teachers to acquire teaching qualifications through good links with a local further education college.

Students contribute significantly to the way the school is managed. They are regularly consulted through a range of forums, including a student council and an annual external appraiser who meets with representatives from each year group. Students consider almost all the staff to be highly approachable people who listen and respond to what they say.

Resources have improved since the last inspection and are satisfactory or good, with the exception of the facilities for computer-aided design which are underdeveloped. The school makes excellent use of different professional performance venues in and around Guildford, and it has improved the access students have to general purpose computing facilities. The library is well stocked and used, and supports the school's strong emphasis on students' reading and research. Plans are well advanced for the entire school to relocate to a single, purpose-built site within the University of Surrey by 2010.

Quality assurance is operationally effective. A regular programme of lesson observations is linked to teacher appraisals. The views of students and

employers are systematically sought and acted upon. The theatre production course board critically reviews the provision and contributes to the school's overall self-assessment report. This latter report, however, lacks an evaluative dimension and makes little summary use of data. It does not do justice to the degree to which each part of the school critically assesses the quality and impact of its work.

Points for action

The school must:

- bring together all processes of self-assessment into a more comprehensive, evaluative summary report for the school.

Points for consideration

The school might usefully:

- improve the capacity for production students to learn computer-aided design
- improve the consistency and clarity of communications between some staff and students.