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Cambridge Performing Arts

Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

Inspection report

Main Findings

Course: Three-year National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre or Dance

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Date of inspection: 3 October 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 and dance 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, and good (grade 2) for leadership and management.

Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that the standard of acting and singing in classes and performances has been maintained at a very high level. The standard of dance is not yet at this consistent level of excellence, an assessment recognised by the school in their recent course review. Trinity's 2007 re-validation report judges the school to be 'a good provider' of the Trinity diplomas, producing a 'very high calibre of student'. Musical theatre students 'performed with confidence' in their assessments and displayed a 'uniformly very strong' standard of work. There were 'some concerns regarding some students of dance', but overall students gave 'clear

and moving' performances 'with assurance and strong vocals'. Some individual students were picked out as worthy of special mention, prompting comments on their 'exceptional integrity and maturity' on stage and on the 'truth, sensitivity and conviction' of their performances.

Retention of students on the course is good, although it fell slightly in 2008: of those students who started the three-year course, some 85% completed it in 2007 and 80% completed it in 2008. Of those, almost all passed the qualification. The school keeps good records of why a few students leave, documenting the support and guidance they receive before this decision is reached. Punctuality and attendance are outstanding at over 90%, and the college instils in its students a very strong sense of personal discipline and responsibility.

A large majority of students gain employment in the performing arts profession when they leave. Some 75% of students who left in 2006 and 2007 found such employment, and most have since secured several subsequent contracts. Of those who left in 2008, over 60% had secured contracts within just three months of graduating. The school is increasingly successful at tracking the professional progress of its students, and works hard to maintain this profile. Typically, former students work in cruise ships, musical productions in the West End, international touring shows, and commercial dance and cabaret work. A few students secure West End contracts immediately on leaving. For example, students who left in 2007 or 2008 have appeared in *The Lion King* and *We Will Rock You*. Others have gained employment with Cork City Ballet, in a USA tour of *Spirit of the Dance*, in a UK tour of *Saturday Night Fever* and in a workshop production of *Branded* at the Old Vic, London.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are outstanding. Students appreciate the very high expectations that teachers have of them, and enjoy being stretched and challenged to reach their goals. They undertake their training with adventure and enthusiasm, and enjoy the approach of the school which encourages them to take creative risks in their work. Lessons make frequent reference to professional practice and as the course proceeds there is an increasing emphasis on the artistic implementation of students' technique. The three core disciplines are much less isolated than they used to be, and this integration is producing more versatile, rounded performers. Teachers are acutely aware of how each student is developing in a lesson, and what they need to focus on to refine their technique. Constructive criticism and correction are skilfully used to enable students to realise their fullest potential. Students remark on how their individuality as artists is encouraged and nurtured alongside their demanding technical training. There is a very strong

emphasis upon developing in students their own capacity for self-awareness and self-criticism in class, rehearsal and performance, and the school prepares students very well for this aspect of their subsequent selfmanagement as performers.

Assessment is, according to Trinity, 'clear and rigorous'. It is very effectively structured, consistently applied and fully understood by students. The results of assessment are collated in regular written reports back to students, to reinforce verbal feedback. Individual tutorials follow termly assessments and provide students with an opportunity to discuss their progress in detail. Students are set clear personal targets following their assessments, and these are closely monitored by their tutors.

The curriculum for all three core disciplines of acting, singing and dance has been reviewed and revised over the last year, and is highly responsive to changing professional practice and market competition. Students join the school to follow a common curriculum in their first year, so that prospective dance students learn to act in a rounded way and prospective musical theatre students are well grounded in a range of dance styles and technique. Jazz dance is particularly promoted. The course curricula separate and acquire more distinctiveness in years two and three, and a new programme of extended workshops puts a growing emphasis on exploring and expressing creativity, on performance artistry, and on making work for audiences. In the third year, students are more exposed to performance opportunities, but not at the expense of continued technical tuition. They are also fully prepared for audition and for the rigours of professional work.

Support and guidance are outstanding. Following a programme of individual tutorials in the first year, small group tutorials in years two and three ensure that students are able to discuss any course-related issues that they wish to, as well as giving them a first point of personal contact for any support they might require. There is now better clarity about the role of tutors, who focus primarily on vocational and academic development and progress. Pastoral and personal support is provided on an individual basis by a full-time welfare officer who works closely with the school's physiotherapist and specialist masseur. Pilates classes, body conditioning, injury diagnosis and treatment and nutrition advice all combine to provide students with a very thorough network of fitness support. Initial physical screening has been improved. Students feel very secure in a school that has their all-round welfare as its first priority. Those with declared additional learning needs or disabilities, such as dyslexia or Aspergers, are supported by the welfare officer and provided with specialist additional help as required. A system has recently been established whereby students with learning support needs are offered a student 'buddy' to work alongside them in lessons. The school has its own agency which manages students' early careers, although as they prepare to

leave the school they are free to be represented by another agency if they so wish. The very detailed knowledge the agency has of their particular skills means that students can be matched expertly to performance briefs and prepared precisely for auditions.

Leadership and management

The school is very well led and managed. Teachers are formally observed teaching as part of their annual appraisal, and heads of each discipline ensure that all teachers follow the school's agreed practices and ethos. Less formal peer observation is also well established. Staff and students speak highly of the close family atmosphere in the school, and it is clear that despite working on two sites general communications are very good. In response to criticism made at the last inspection, meetings are now more businesslike and proper records kept of discussions and agreed actions. The school has developed a strategic business plan. The computer system is not yet networked, and this does impede communication efficiency at times.

Teachers bring a wealth of experience from the performing arts profession to inform their work. A few, especially those with leadership responsibility, are qualified as teachers, and the school is actively encouraging other regular teachers to 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. For example, recently students asked for a common lunch break to be created, and for some gymnastics lessons to be offered. Both have been enacted this year. However, each year group representative has to gather opinion informally and anecdotally, since there is no time when all students in one year meet for discussion.

Resources are generally very good, with the school's own studios being augmented by regular use of at least two local professional theatres. The college library stock is relatively small and there are few smaller practice rooms in which students might do their own work. The school is involved in considerable outreach work, and actively promotes its equal opportunities and diversity policy.

Quality assurance and self assessment have improved since the last inspection, although analysis of data is still weak and the current annual self assessment report fails to capture some of the rigorous scrutiny of curriculum, teaching methodology and standards that has in fact taken place since then. It is clear from departmental reviews and from what staff and students say that a sharp self-critical spirit permeates a school that is striving to reach the very highest standards.

Points for action

The school must:

- analyse data better and incorporate outcomes from course reviews more explicitly in the annual self-assessment report so that it has a more focused evaluative edge

Points for consideration

The school might usefully:

- create formal opportunities for year groups to discuss student-related issues for their representatives to take forward for further consideration

- network the computer system to aid communications and the sharing of information between staff

- seek to expand library, research and individual practice resources for Students

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