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ARTICOLO

# Acting Out Our Vanities
# Why are university theatre students acting in productions, and how are we assessing them?

di John Freeman and Michael McCall

**Abstract – ITA**

Questo articolo getta un occhio critico sulla presunta necessità di produzioni pratiche da parte degli studenti di programmi di studio dedicati al teatro o alla performance. L'articolo inizialmente pone due questioni: a cosa queste produzioni potrebbero servire, e in che modo i tutor valutano gli studenti in questo settore pratico. Da queste questioni l'articolo si sposta poi verso un'analisi delle competenze, delle abilità e dell'apprendimento. L'articolo vuole essere una provocazione per stimolare una riflessione sui valori della formazione professionale di origine conservatrice, assorbiti da un certo numero di università in modo distorto riguardo obiettivi e in merito alla valutazione.

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**Abstract – ENG**

This article casts a critical eye over the assumed need for staff-directed productions on BA theatre programs, asking what point and rationale these productions might serve, and what tutors are looking for when students are assessed in this area of practice. From these foundations the article moves into a breakdown of skills and ability, prior learning and the kind of boutique borrowing that sees theatre programs at university increasingly adopting the vocabulary of conservatoires. More provocation than prescription, the article suggests that the vocational training values of conservatoires are being absorbed by a number of universities in ways that are skewed when it comes to intent and problematic when it comes to assessment.

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ARTICOLO

# Acting Out Our Vanities. Why are university theatre students acting in productions, and how are we assessing them?

by John Freeman and Michael McCall

The following words address the ways in which university BA theatre students might be assessed in staff-directed productions. Rather than accepting productions as a necessary given on theatre programs, the article asks what point and rationale these productions might serve[1]. In doing so the article also explores distinctions between ability and skill, suggesting that these differences are often overlooked in the assessment of students. Through this overall address, the article focuses on one theme in two parts: one questions how we might approach assessable production-practice in the university and conservatoire sectors; the other asks whether non-vocationally focused programs should include assessed acting at all, and whether we do so for no more reason than because *that is what we do*. The article's various reflections, affirmations, arguments and references coalesce around this overall theme[2].

Although it would be simple to refer to conservatoires as providing training and universities as dealing with education, it would be also reductive and false. It would be false too to suggest that conservatoire training is automatically better by dint of reputation, facilities and contact hours. These things matter, but they are not always clear barometers of quality. The convergence of universities and conservatoires has in some ways muddied the once-clear waters between academic and vocational study. A consequence of this is that actors in training now have considerably more choice than they had at any time in the past. Similarities in the teaching and training of students exist, and yet we are in a time when traditional patriarchal methods of knowledge transfer as handed down in the teacher-as-expert mode are being questioned and potentially reshaped into differently considered formats; to a reimagining of what Persephone Sextou describes as a context within which the tutor is the 'authority' and the student is the 'ignorant' (Sextou 2016). Where theory allows a certain

[1] BA theatre is used here as a shorthand term for programs focusing on drama, theatre and/or performance studies and is not intended to be reductive or partial. A key work on distinctions between Performance Studies, Drama and Theatre remains Roberta Mock and Ruth (2005: 201–213).

[2] Some of the article's issues relate to pedagogy, some to vocation and some to nomenclature. In this latter sense, the word 'production' refers to adopting roles in dramatic works that are generally presented in and to the public, which are directed and assessed by tutors, and where marks awarded go towards a student's overall profile.



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distance, vocational training is immersive, which is to say that student actors learn through a type of tutor-led doing, which is in some ways distinct from the more open-ended knowledge acquisition familiar to university students.

In conservatoire or university, it is not possible to write about either training or teaching in theatre without reference to the circumstances the world is having to deal with. For those of us in the training/teaching sector Covid-19 has forced us all to rapidly reimagine what we do and how we do it. For many this will be seen as a shift in delivery that is without long-term benefit, as an unfortunate bump in the road to be moved over as swiftly and safely as possible in order to return to the way things were. The imperative to deal with social distancing notwithstanding, it may well be that the longer we have worked in a particular way the more certain we can feel that returning smartly to that way of working is right; i.e. that significant change is a necessary but innately temporary phenomenon and that the sooner we can return to our old models of student/teacher and student/trainer practice the better.

Assuming that what has been right in the past will work in the uncertainty of the future might not be a recipe for disaster, but it does speak to a state where conventions of teaching/training can easily become conventional. We know that theatre is informed if not quite bound by tradition to the extent that while much in contemporary life has changed, theatre has not moved significantly since the realism of Stanislavski and Chekhov, the provocations of Marinetti's Futurists, Jarry's early forays into absurdism and Artaud's appeal for theatre that consumes, surrounds and engulfs. The students' experience of being taught and/or trained has likewise remained relatively unaltered. Despite moves towards inclusivity, diversity, engagement with the postdramatic and a deepening consideration of who has the right to tell a particular tale and who has the right to prevent them, studio classes can look and feel like reproductions masquerading as revelations, and we suffer from a kind of certainty when we roll the past forward like an unbroken wave rather than acknowledging that when we do so the past becomes less a foreign country and more a site of reverence and repetition.

Perhaps certainty within our subject is the enemy of progress: in his book *On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not*, Robert Burton argues that certainty is based on emotion rather than fact; that certainty about beliefs is an emotional response leading to fiercely entrenched positions (Burton 2009). Burton is not alone in his findings that certainty can subconsciously lead us away from the re-examination of assumptions; away in fact from one of the very things we most strongly urge our students to do, which is to challenge received truths even or perhaps most keenly when those truths are uttered by tutors[3]. In this sense,

[3] Werth, L. F. – Strack, J. Förster 2001: 323-341; Newheiser, A.K. – Tausch, N. – Dovidio, J. F. – Hewstone, M. 2009: 920-926.


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we might usefully wonder whether we are doing things wrong, even doing the wrong things, when we are assessing university theatre students in staff-directed productions. We are each of us products to a greater or lesser degree of the people we have worked with and the institutions we have graduated from and through, and we each occupy a place on a lineage of tutors, working in a field where workshop ideas are stolen and borrowed, adapted and reimagined, torn from their original contexts. In a subject like theatre it is all too easy to cement what worked well elsewhere into the foundations of markedly different programs.

We can all be seduced and undone by certainty, by the sense that what worked there and then for us will work again in the here and now for others. For a further note on this we can look to the eminent psychologist Daniel Kahneman who believes we should be cautious of anybody who is overly confident in their own approach, who believes their assumed expertise legitimises what are often no more than a series of borrowed beliefs. Ideas of our own expertise, or we might better say *experience*, can lead us to avoid engaging with an 'unbiased appreciation of uncertainty' preferring instead to act on 'pretended knowledge (as) the preferred solution' (Kahneman 2011: 263). We know, in fact, that experience generally counts for very little. Extensive research across a wide range of fields, including teaching/training, has shown that a great many people not only fail to become remotely expert at what they do, no matter how many years they have spent doing it, they frequently do not even get any better than they were when they started. In field after field it seems, people with considerable experience are no better at their jobs than those with hardly any experience at all (Eveleth 2012). In the context of this article, it is hard to phrase this in a way that does not amount to a *mea culpa* moment on the part of its writers.

It is those same writers' belief that actor training has an obligation to produce technically knowing, investigative, flexible, responsive, resilient, inquiring and innovative performers – graduates who have the potential to not only sustain careers in their discipline of choice but also redefine what acting might be and what might be done with it, not least in applied and increasingly technological forms. Actors are always working in the now, according to and alongside the need to tackle historical and modern texts and working with the techniques of realism, students are likely to encounter traditions where the language is in a register other than that of mainstream theatrical performance. While Stanislavski remains the point of departure for much current thinking about actor training in the West, in some ways the very traditions of artifice and knowing theatricality that his work unsettled have re-emerged in a contemporary theatre that at times has little or no interest in a fictional fourth wall between actor and audience. They have been unsettled too by contemporary technologies which promote ideologies of the present in ever-shifting futuristic forms, by a swathe of twenty-first-century technologies with the capacity to present multiple and overlapping versions of the now from different time frames, scales and


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countries. This comes when practice embraces embodied as well as aesthetic notions of intimacy and identity, where actors and spectators engage in the interactive navigation of sites that are often as digitally mediated and dreamlike as they are actual, where the site of theatre positions the spectator and actor as both participant and observer. None of this legislates against actors in training being assessed on their developing abilities 'on stage', and nor should it. Trained actors need to be able to act. Graduates of BA theatre programs at universities are not bound by that same covenant.

If university programs with an emphasis on teaching have been rattled by Covid-19 into new ways of imagining practice, then the conservatoire practice of long days of face-to-face training has been ruptured. In many parts of the world the lines between conservatoire and university have blurred. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that actor training at university will have to be broadly consistent with the same offer at conservatoires if it is to stand any form of legitimate comparison. With careers in acting as hard to come by as they are, even for the most highly trained and highly skilled, the last thing university graduates need is to discover that what was sold to them as training has little or no value when it comes to securing professional work. As such, programs emerging from lockdown into what is likely to be a landscape focused on blended learning (partly for health, partly for fiscal reasons) will still have questions of quality and value hanging over them. Any adapted teaching or training mode needs be evaluated, but examination of pedagogical efficacy will likely see many years pass before the landscape of opportunity for graduates is clearer. Some people, such as Richard Gough, are prescient in their idea of training as a process concerned with nurturing 'practitioners not for the profession as it currently exists but rather for how it might be – in the future, as yet unforeseen and unimagined' (Gough 2018: 1-12).

The questioning drive of this article is on *what* is being assessed and *why*, and *how*; and on the assumed educational rather than vocational worth of assessing students as actors. Assessment is inextricably linked to ability. It is also linked to learning. Where productions take place on university programs where acting is rarely if ever taught, or rarely taught in any great depth, it is difficult to understand why students are still graded on their ability to sustain dramatic roles and not significantly on what being in the production teaches them about any wider, subject-specific concerns[4]. The history of assessed productions on university theatre programs does not make the question any less relevant; indeed, as this article is arguing, the very strength of that history might be the prime factor that leaves the question largely unasked.

[4] This is not the case with all universities, and the situation is not clear-cut. In the UK, for example, Plymouth University has developed a BA Acting program that promises training that is both professional and intensive. St Mary's University offers BA Acting under the auspice of its Drama St Mary's banner.


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We can say that with very few exceptions everything an actor does demands control, but how might we measure control when it comes to assessing student performance and what do we mean by the term? We can judge and measure control by observing a student's ability to repeat a range of actions with reliability, consistency and a sense of being in the moment and, within the tropes of realism at least, of rehearsal that is often carried out to the point of seeming spontaneity. The particularities of improvisation notwithstanding, repeatability serves to reduce the impact of good fortune, of those moments of serendipity that allow ordinary actors to produce seemingly extraordinary work by dint of being part of a skilled company, or even of playing roles that appear to be a perfect fit.

The opposite set of circumstances also apply: not all student productions are directed to a high standard (*mea culpa*, again), not all selected scripts are appropriate and not all members of a given cast are competent[5]. In circumstances such as these, tutors taking the role of directors might be hindering rather than aiding student success; we might take the credit for directing a strong performance from a student, but how likely are we to acknowledge that a weak performance is down to us? If we do, how does that acknowledgement impact assessment?

The wider the range of production circumstances within which a student can exercise control over their work, the more accurate are likely to be an examining team's judgement calls. We know that certain roles are more conducive than others are when it comes to providing range and the possibility, necessity even, for student actors to work through differences of mood and attack, action, intent and collaboration. Nevertheless, the fact that a student might be excellent in a particular role does little to make that assessment secure when it comes to turning a project-grade into judgement over a student's learning across the usual three years of registration. Following this line of thought, being able to match one's abilities to a production's requirements reads to us as ability; being able to do this across a range of productions reads to us as skill.

The relationship between study and training is central here. We can read knowledge as the ability to know what to do next and skill as the ability to do it. Within universities, the given aim is often one of knowledge: university tutors want to know that students understand what is needed to be done and they are able to assess this demonstration even when it is lacking in skill. Quite commonly, university practical work is assessed by conflating the distance a student has travelled with the point arrived at. In this way, a student with little by way of perceived ability who is trying hard and in some ways failing to reach a high standard can be rewarded more highly than a

[5] It is not unusual for tutors to stage productions that suit their own research interests more than the educational needs of students.


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gifted student who travels no distance to fulfil the demands of a role. This is not something that can be easily credited when it comes to the assessment of achievement in acting.

The flipside of this is aptitude of the type that sees a student who finds some element of performance particularly easy. A student who has an innate propensity for moving their body rhythmically and gymnastically might do well in a piece of physical theatre at the same time as tutors responsible for giving a grade might regard this activity as occurring without a parallel sense of either learning or accomplishment. The work is lacking in accomplishment precisely because it relates so clearly to something pre-existing. In this sense, what we see is ability without effort, something that relates to a natural gift, which whilst being a skill is innate to the point of making assessment as evidence of learning somewhat redundant. Significantly, within a university-context, we are seeing something that does not *ipso facto* evidence learning. In most cases, when we assess 'acting' we are measuring the quality of the thing done; when we assess learning we are measuring what is gained through the doing.

Some wider questions of learning emerge from this. If the nature of a theatre program at university is not that students are learning to act, then what are the learning expectations that come from playing roles in productions? If students are not learning to act, what learning is being evidenced in their work? If students are learning something other than 'how to act', then why is the quality of their performance assessed at all?

Are those of us who teach at institutions where the focus is study and teaching rather than training staging plays because we feel we should? Are we staging plays because that is what students want? Are we paying a kind of lip service to the idea of occasional training? Are we pretending, through public visibility, that the programs we deliver are attractively vocational? Are we acting out our own vanities when students perform in the work we direct? If we are looking at how we mark university students in productions, we need first to know why we are assessing their acting at all. This means asking ourselves what it is that we want our students to know and how we want that knowledge to be demonstrated. We need to ask this because a program does more than manage student expectations, it creates them. Where we priorities the acquisition of skill over knowledge we run the very real risk of creating contracts that will not stand up to scrutiny[6].

Knowledge refers to familiarity with information and concepts; knowledge can be transferred between people or it can be acquired through observation and study. Skill refers to the ability to apply knowledge to a certain situation; skill is earned and enhanced through practice. Trial and error is not as necessary an aspect of

[6] According to Dean Carey, Founder, Director and CEO of Actors Centre Australia (ACA) it can be "psychologically damaging to take on students who aren't ready for a rigorous acting program". Carey believes that it is morally challenging to put students in an environment they were neither equipped nor ready for (Watts 2019).


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knowledge as it of achieving the mastery of skills. We can say that knowledge is theoretical and skills are practical. Knowledge allows Student A to understand a great deal about Shakespeare, Miller and Chekhov; skill allows Student B to play Macbeth, Willy Loman and Trigorin.

In its widely accepted (although in no way exclusive) sense, acting is one of the few occasions when we know not only what we are saying next, but how the people we are acting with will respond to our words. The ability to make the rehearsed feel fresh, alive, in the moment and in the present is one of the actor's hardest tasks. This difficulty, which is controlled by training, can find a short cut in improvisation. Students will often thrive in improvised performance contexts precisely because the now they are dealing with is always new. Improvisation is a necessary tool for an actor to possess and it is sometimes the end as well as the means; nevertheless, being an actor almost invariably requires the skill to produce and reproduce certain results on a type of call. This call is different in detail to a musician's ability to reach perfect pitch in the playing of scores or a fine artist's ability at painting a portrait, but it is not so different in kind. Virtuosity is a desirable but unnecessary attribute when it comes to measuring skill at the level of university student performance, where the word 'talent' is rarely used. Skill itself might not be required in every undergraduate performance, but it is a considered pre-requisite in most people's determination of what it means to be professional.

Conservatoires accept onto their programs those people who are best able to demonstrate aptitude alongside the ability and willingness to be trained; i.e. the people they select will have shown enough to make the process of recruitment a carefully judged gamble. Despite the fact that some aspirant actors are adept at the point of entry onto a program and fail to develop, inasmuch as they possessed ability that did not adequately transform into skill, the intention is that students will improve by working alongside people of their grade and above who are of more or less equal ability. An actor in training signals by daily endeavour nothing less than the intent to become a highly skilled professional, an endeavour which is supported fully by the people who deliver that training. A conservatoire that failed to produce professionals in reasonable numbers would quickly go the wall. University theatre programs rarely face the same litmus test of efficiency.

This is not to disparage university programs, neither is it intended to sidestep the idea of degrees in theatre-related subjects as valuable qualifications in their own right. University theatre programs do many things, and they do a lot of them very well. Numerous theatre companies have emerged from university programs and the transferable competencies that students graduate with are useful across a range of professions[7]. When it comes

[7] In Australia and the UK teaching is an obvious career route for drama graduates. A drama degree can also offer valuable skills in literary criticism, analysis, media studies and other skills. Drama graduates tend towards jobs within educational institutions, arts organizations, media companies and hospitality and leisure organizations. A significant number of university drama graduates form


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to the messages given to applicants, however, university tutors are often guilty of submitting to the urge to exaggerate the arc of their graduates' careers as actors (*mea culpa* once again). Exceptions exist and things are changing, but the reality is that only a very small percentage of university graduates are ever likely to make a living as actors[8]. This is certainly the feeling of Alan Eisenberg, the executive director of Actor's Equity. Eisenberg is forthright in his belief that universities are turning out graduates 'for whom there is no work' and that universities are preparing students for 'a career that has no interest in them' (Eisenberg in Merrifield 2013) [9]

On the face of it, there is one reason for this, and the reason is simple: training as an actor at a conservatoire is almost without exception a far more rigorous process than one will receive as part of a university education. Conservatoire values run through a number of university programs in a number of countries, but this does not legislate against what are usually markedly different experiences in terms of across-the-year contact hours. The essence of effective actor training is that it provides a supportive environment of vocational facilities and industry-savvy tutors within which students can develop and hone their experience. It follows that the 'industry', a curious cover-all term if ever there was one, will be more inclined to look to people who are almost certainly better trained, and likely more skillful than their university-educated peers.

Skill is linked to challenge. In order to analyse a student's skill in performance we need first to see the student facing a challenge. Every production brings its own challenges, but some bring more than others. A devised production, where roles are often created for the display of certain abilities and the concealment of others, might not pose the same challenge as applying oneself to an externally created character. In order to assess a student's skill, we need to see that student rising to and meeting particular challenges. The larger the cast, where involvement is based on every student being given some parity of opportunity, the less likely the opportunity for each student to be challenged: five students playing versions of Miss Julie will not provide the same challenge for each actor as we would find if one person attempted the whole role. Although it is an obvious point, it is worth noting that the more complex the acting challenge the more potential there is for a student to

portfolio careers, combining different jobs - often part-time roles and freelance work. Drama graduates also frequently work in roles not associated with their degree, such as recruitment, marketing and customer services.

[8] This is not to suggest that graduates of conservatoires, where the training has been both intensive and extensive are able to easily find sustainable careers as actors. The situation for members of the UK-based actors' union Equity is consistent in its year-on-year assessment that 90% of actors are out of work at any one time.

[9] Eisenberg, A, in Merrifield, N. (2013) 'Three-year drama training not needed by "majority of actors"'. The Stage, 24 October 2013. https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2013/three-year-drama-training-needed-majority-actors/.


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fail[10]. Within the context of assessment, the possibility of failure is a positive aspect of getting things wrong for the right reasons, a feature, in fact, of the trial and error element so vital for skills acquisition. The development of skill emerges through consistently meeting the challenges of particular tasks. If all that mattered was a desire to achieve high grades, either as a student meeting the challenges of work or a tutor setting that bar of challenge too low, then adapting modules so that any type of completion equaled success would become an understandable choice, albeit one that made a mockery of learning outcomes as appropriately difficult challenges to be met[11].

The nature of challenge can differ depending on one's personal situation as much as by the context of a given production. For a student who struggles with shyness, the simple activity of being watched by an audience might be a challenge worth meeting; but doing so does not require skill-measurement that is shared consistently within a group. The drive to inclusivity is underway in education and training as it is in professional theatre, nevertheless, the overcoming of potentially crippling shyness is not something that can easily credited when it comes to the assessment of achievement in acting; i.e. it is almost entirely a personal achievement rather than demonstration of ability that can be assessed with parity and fairness.

In all but the rarest and/or most solipsistic of examples, theatre productions are designed to speak to spectators. Productions are designed for spectators and rehearsal is designed for production. Ability and skill might be demonstrated in rehearsal as well as, and perhaps even rather than, in performance, but it is through performance that skill is most ably and appropriately judged. Problems in rehearsal are to be expected, even hoped for, and the ways in which they are addressed are almost always reversible. In other words, if all process amounts to trial it is only in rehearsal that error (other than in types of performance where a kind of knowing disruption is the aim) is considered acceptable.

[10] Interestingly, assessments at some universities are often generously applied to students who are burdened by the magnitude of these kind of roles, so that the greater the acting challenge the higher the grade. Not only does this have little currency when it comes to the assessment of actors in professional productions, it legislates against parity in terms of student grades. The aim should be, one would think, that all students on any given module need to be faced with equal challenges and equal opportunities to meet them. In production work this amounts to parity of opportunity rather than replication of experience.

[11] This is not to undermine the value of theatre, and work within productions, as a social exercise and as something that can increase one's sense of self-esteem. The professional theatre industry has taken significant steps to address perceptions of special educational needs, disability and access. Surprisingly perhaps, a recent study revealed just 1% of graduates from major UK drama schools declaring a physical impairment, covering mobility, sight or hearing impairments. In 2017, of 2,274 graduates from the eight UK conservatoires providing data, 28 students declared a physical disability. https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2018/disability-in-drama-schools-study-reveals-extent-of-under-representation/ Accessed on 22/05/2020. Were this study to have included BA university theatre programs, the percentage would be markedly higher.


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Productions are events that speak to exposure and appraisal. Actors expose themselves to spectators and spectators appraise what they see. Productions are entered into under the premise if not quite the promise of success and it remains the case that actors will always want their work to be appreciated. Productions set themselves up to be enjoyed, but audience appreciation or pleasure is no barometer of skill. Philip Auslander made good use of the example of Milli Vanilli in his book *Liveness*, reminding us that as well as lip-synching to their songs during live performances, the duo were not even miming to their own voices (Auslander 1999: 94). Success by means of popularity can thus be a skewed measure, yet a student production that succeeds by means of a qualitatively assessed negotiation between actors and audience matters, and this arena is one of the places we look to measure an actor's skill.

An important part of the way we assess skill is through identifying what works when a production is set before spectators and of cycling backwards through what a particular student might have had to overcome to reach that point. If all that a student has to do to demonstrate skill in this area is to realise a script, score and other textual or documentary sources in public performance, then notwithstanding grade descriptors, we are dealing here with ability rather than skills, and ability of a fairly prosaic level. As many university colleagues would likely admit, these acquisitions are often of a very minor chord. The gap between study and training is wide enough for students to fall through and fine-sounding enough to obscure questions of quality[12].

Performance scores that set out to disrupt conventional notions of acting skill are no less valuable experiences for students. The type of temporal continuity that exists in what might be called a straight or well-made play is not the only test of a student's skill; in the cases of a three-act play or one-on-one performance, what is being sought is a display of what we might refer to as *relevant interpretive reliability*. A production that relies on aesthetic surprise for its effectiveness might suggest discontinuity to its spectators at the same time as its performers can be operating with maturity, confidence and skill within the world of the work. In this context, reliability does not amount to sameness so much as to a state that can be consistently maintained; relevance is linked to the production's aims and demands; and interpretive speaks to a student's engagement with creative interrogation as opposed to slavish adherence to a pre-existing model.

Steve Dixon has suggested that many of us are 'using an inappropriately rational, objective, quasi-scientific model to assess a largely irrational, spontaneous and subjective art' (Dixon 2000). Dixon suggests too that we are inclined toward a certain nervousness around assessment that manifests as caution (Dixon 2000). Perhaps

[12] The UK benchmark statement for university drama does not differ significantly from the AQA GCSE descriptor for Drama normally undertaken by children aged 16; i.e. that students will 'develop a range of theatrical skills and apply them to create performance'. https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/drama/gcse/drama-8261/scheme-of-assessment Accessed on 22/05/2020.


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this stems from the idea that the assessment of practice draws on personal responses to stimuli; perhaps, as Janette Harris believes, great care should be taken to make sure that the work we are assessing is not too closely a product of our own directorial or supervisory influence (Harris 2008). Many of us will be familiar with this last point, where we are assessing students for presenting as though their own a series of acting choices tutors have provided for them. Easy to assume there is discernible tension when we are at once the facilitator/creator of particular learning experiences and the person who assesses students in the presentation that arises from this. One address to this, and one that draws us back to the article's title and theme, is for those of us who direct student productions to have no say in how the students we have worked with are to be graded in performance. This is logical inasmuch as work in rehearsal is aimed at the tutor/director whereas work in performance is directed at an audience. Where process is important to the grade, as it generally is on university theatre programs, the tutor with responsibility for directing the work might be invited to submit a process mark that accounts for a particular percentage, of whatever weighting the program and module decree. In this way, the quality of the work in performance would be measured by colleagues with a greater degree of distance if not quite neutrality.

The bigger question to ask, of course, is why we are staging productions at all; and it may be no more than the allusions to certainty this article set out with that make the question read as a form of heresy, as something naïve or pointlessly provocative, or both. University students routinely expect their theatre programs to include productions, and under normal circumstances students want them. Subject benchmarking all but demands production work.

The question then is what good do productions do? i.e. in terms of student learning on a BA theatre program, what is their point and purpose? Given the time, space and commitment required to stage productions - commonly more than twice the allocated staff time than for a module-length lecture and seminar series and often double-weighted in terms of student assessment – what value do they represent pedagogically, culturally or financially? Who benefits from them, and what form does that benefit take? If Student A receives a grade of 80% for playing Hamlet and Student B 55% for playing Gertrude, does that mean that the former has learned more than the latter? And more about what? About Shakespeare? About re-interpretation? About relevance? About liveness? About theatre? We might hope so, but that hope is redundant if what we are assessing is a blend of presence and charisma, line-learning and reliability, good natured persistence, collaboration and the willingness to listen to a tutor-director's every word.

An article riddled with binaries offers another one: student actors are trained, and theatre students are taught. Referring to BA theatre students as actors when we direct them in productions does more than muddy the


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waters, it speaks to our own hidden desires: when students become actors we become directors, a type of wish-fulfilment that serves little purposive end. The best way we can serve all of the students on our programs is to create supportive and informed opportunities for their own investigations. Depending on a program's intentions, some of these will take place practically, where ideas are worked out in and through bodies and sites, bodies-as-sites even. Some will be worked out in libraries, lecture theatres and seminar rooms. Some will be merged and fluid, thinking as doing, thought as action, word as deed, processes where practice research functions as more than a sound bite.

The better the student, perhaps, and the deeper the level of learning, the more accurate our hope that investigations are interrogative, complex and probing. The better the program, the more likely it is to be honest about its intent and limitations, about what it does well and, perhaps, about what it does not do at all.

Universities have been at the forefront when it comes to fighting for various kinds of diversity. Those of us fortunate enough to work in the sector know that diverse workforces perform better than less diverse workforces as well as being more reflective of the wider societies in which we function (Hunt – Layton – Prince 2015). The kinds of diversity that universities have stressed commonly include gender, ethnicity, sexuality and ableism. There is one kind of diversity, however, that is regularly ignored by universities, and that is diversity of opinion (Brooks 2015). When it comes to theatre, our programs often closely mirror the same named programs from 20 or 30 years ago; which is to say that we do what we have done and we do as we did. There are some shifts in terminology and some changes at the edges of our world, but to a considerable extent a university theatre class today looks and feels very much as it looked a generation ago.

Rather than seeking to emulate the training focus of conservatoires, university drama, theatre and performance programs might be better and more honestly served by holding fast to traditions of study in ways that fuse innovative pedagogy with shifts in opportunities for graduates. In this way, the illusion of training makes way for learning that makes a positive feature of low staff/student contact hours and places emphasis on creativity rather than theatre craft.

What theatre graduates need are the skills, support and confidence that prepare and allow them to develop as independent and creative thinkers, fashioning their own careers in light of opportunities made available through the broadening of the creative ecology and workspace. Without this, their study is not an investment so much as a waste. Calling study 'training', or approaching it as though it were, does not alter this covenant.

We know a few things in theatre. We know that there are many ways of knowing and many ways of discovering that we do not know very much at all. That the things we do know come through empathy, identification, experience, frustration, flawed resolution, reflection and resonance. We know that learning generally takes


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place when explanation is linked to action. We know that learning through action is very different from knowing about action. We know that theatre is messy and that its manners are bad; that it sits uneasily with many ideas of academic objectivity and verification; that its goals are often murkily defined and always hard to measure. None of this and nothing in the previous pages legislates in any way against learning through doing: theatre celebrates that, just as it is predicated upon it. What matters is not just *how* learning takes place but *what* is being learned, and unless learning to act is what a program is concerned with, and unless this concern is backed up by training expertise and support then staff-directed productions might just be the elephant in the room of false promise.

Training implies technique, and just as non-vocational university study is about asking *why*, training for the professional stage is innately bound up with knowing *how*, with students who learn and unlearn, strip away and accumulate until they are considered ready to begin their professional lives. Whilst actor training is about the evaluation and application of ideas, we can say that the type of creative thinking that accompanies BA theatre is (or was) about the expansion of ideas, and through this it is linked innately to curiosity rather than to replication.

Studying theatre at university has always been something of an anomaly inasmuch as we are one of the few subjects with a profession-based counterpoint in conservatoires. If one wants to be an architect or a journalist, then a B.A. in architecture or journalism provides sound preparation, just as studying business management and a B.A. in tourism equips graduates for work in those fields. The amount of accredited conservatoires already so far outstrips the opportunities for professional acting work that theatre graduates are all too easily ignored by directors with an abundance of ready-to-audition actors who are at once both highly trained and available. 21st century employment is driven by collaborative thinking, group interaction, flexibility and teamwork. As jobs change, employers are turning more and more to workers who are capable of bringing original thinking into group tasks and assignments; and these are the graduate attributes university theatre programs have always championed.

More concerned with conceptualizing their subject than with preparation for careers as actors, the skill-sets theatre graduates possess equip them for a wide range of careers. Somewhat inevitably, a career on the mainstream stage or in cinema or television is one that we celebrate when it happens to our graduates – whether they would have achieved it without us or not – and we probably over-celebrate it in our various prospectus entries. But it is one career destination amongst many and it is one a tiny minority of our graduates will move into. In some ways one would be forgiven for thinking that a BA theatre program would do much to unfix the high school aspirations towards mainstream forms that have changed relatively little and very slowly


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over recent years. One would think, too, when a great many more of our graduates will forge careers as teachers, animateurs and creative entrepreneurs than as actors, directors or playwrights, that our undergraduate programs would reflect this in their constitution. Strange always and strangely disappointing when they do not.


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