

## Rethinking the Conservatoire: Is the traditional drama school model tenable in a post Covid world and if not, how can institutions maintain excellence in training?

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Leading Australian actor training institutions were originally modelled on the conservatoire format of the British Drama School. This model included many hours of acting classes or rehearsals, hours of voice and speech classes and hours of a variety of movement classes per day. In addition, there were specialist classes in fight choreography, accent, Alexander technique, period movement, acting in style, comedy and more. Traditionally there were a number of second year and third year productions each year. And in more recent years screen training has been introduced in the shape of studio and location shoots, with emphasis also on self-testing. This smorgasbord of classes and projects has created a forty hour plus week with programs requiring specialist teachers and directors to deliver industry standard training. Staff costs are very high for such a program, and, with between four and eight productions a year, plus filming costs, these projects have a hefty price tag. Actor training institutions all over the world are faced with diminished budgets, and yet institutions remain committed to maintaining their reputation of excellence. Can we continue to train actors in the conservatoire model going forward? This paper will attempt to answer this question. Via a series of interviews with teachers from leading schools around the world I will attempt to offer new models for the BA/BFA. One cannot attempt this task without considering the urgent need for a more diverse representation in the teaching staff as well as exposure to a wider variety of playscripts that challenge the patriarchal heteronormative status quo of years gone by. These changes are already afoot as suggested by initiatives being implemented at London's Central School; "They include moves to "de-colonise" its curriculum and "cultivate a workforce of more diverse academic staff"."(BBC, 2020) I will look at those schools who are at the forefront of this change and seek to redefine what relevant training could look like in the post Covid world.

Key words: Conservatoire, Acting, Training, COVID, Theatre

## WHAT IS CONSERVATOIRE TRAINING?

In the time of Covid led budget constraints and major social upheaval Drama Schools across the world are being impacted with many courses facing closure or considerable remodelling. The Drama Centre London closes its doors in 2021 and at the university where I teach the well respected BFA acting program has been remodelled considerably and now open to twice the number of students. This restructure is forcing our school to reconsider the traditional conservatoire model of long hours of small class consultation and look instead to a self-directed learning model.

The conservatoire model of training is defined by the Oxford Learners dictionary as “an academy or college of Music”. Most other dictionaries refer to the conservatoire as also only pertaining to the study of music. Dictionary dot com includes ‘theatrical arts’ in the definition. Lexico, powered by Oxford describes it as ‘A college for the study of classical music or other arts, typically in the continental European tradition.’ A music conservatoire may have one on one teaching with a master musician working privately with a sole musician in intensive practice. When applied to acting training I am going to borrow from my colleague Glenda Linscott, head of acting at WAAPA. Glenda described the Acting conservatoire as:

Skills based training for an artist – be it acting, music, etc- intensive immersive, rigorous, regular training and always connected to the industry. It’s important to be taught by and influenced by the current artists of the day (2020).

This connection to industry and career pathway building has traditionally been the hallmark of the conservatoire, clearly marking the vocational nature of such a course of study.

The British conservatoire model could be said to have been modelled on the French design by Michel Saint Denis, who was heavily influenced by his uncle Jacque Copeau (Shirley, 2012). Shirley notes that Saint Denis “sought to foster an approach to actor training that combined

advanced levels of physical skill and expressiveness with an acute sensitivity to the internal impulses that fuel complex and psychologically convincing characterisations (ibid.)”. NIDA was the first conservatoire style drama school in Australia offering first a two-year then a three-year course on a full-time basis, followed by VCA and WAAPA. QUT existed in different institutional structures and course formats from the late 70’s until arriving at a solid conservatoire style training in the 1990’s. In the last three decades NIDA and WAAPA have remained fairly consistent in the adoption of around forty hours a week of face to face contact with QUT and VCA adopting a variety of teaching models as a result of various restructures. The variance in models is mostly to do with the number of hours of face to face contact for skills classes and the number of productions and length of production rehearsal. Both VCA and QUT students need to engage in broader university subjects as well as those specific to Actor training. Whilst these factors may differ from school to school it could be said that each school adopts a conservatoire-style model, attempting to provide individual or small group tuition to students in order to best prepare the student for employment as an actor. Again, this employment is varied and includes self-generated theatre and screen opportunities as well as employment by theatre companies and screen production companies. All schools are committed to graduate success and would judge their graduate success on the take up by agents on graduation, the working profile of their graduates and the impact their graduates may have on the cultural direction of the performing arts.

Adding to this group of schools are others with notable graduate success, many of which would consider their training conservatoire. They include the Actors Centre of Australia (ACA, now associated with Torrens University) which offer a conservatoire training over three days a week; Federation University, Flinders University, Charles Sturt University and Griffith University. NIDA is the only program that sits independently of a university and is a member of the national elite training organisations in the performing arts. Wollongong University and Newcastle university also offer acting majors. At the time of writing this article Flinders University were restructuring the drama course, cutting back on time spent in acting classes and increasing broader offerings. The Acting Vice President and Executive Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Professor Peter Monteath, claimed in an article on Triple J hack (2020) that these measures needed to be taken to make the course more sustainable. The same measures have been implemented at QUT, dropping

the number of Acting specific units down from fourteen to eight in an attempt to put acting students in drama units in order to increase the Equivalent Full Time Student Load (EFTSL). These restructures are forcing the adoption of radically different forms of delivery in order to ensure student outcome success.

The term conservatoire training has been traditionally associated with elite musicianship. British acting and voice teacher Robert Price, suggests that the adoption of the term applied to drama schools is quite a recent phenomenon. Many British Drama Schools have amalgamated with universities and, as noted, in Australia only NIDA sits independently of a university. It is fair to assume that the need to differentiate between drama degrees and the more intensive, vocation focused acting programs, gave rise to the common use of ‘conservatoire’. And here is where the tension lies. If an Acting degree is delivered within a university why should it be that the Acting student is receiving so many more hours of training for the same cost of a drama degree? Unfortunately, we live in a time when the argument of excellence of program and outstanding graduate outcome fall on deaf ears, as Universities scramble to make up for loss of income from the now depleted International student market. The argument for many years across the world has been that Drama Schools or conservatoire style Acting degrees are vocational and that university drama degrees are not. In the UK this distinction was made very clear with the establishment of the Standing Conference of University Drama (SCUDD) and the more recently re-named Federation of Drama Schools (FDA). The FDA makes very clear the criteria for membership which includes intensive hours per week of training. The FDA boast that:

All our partners have a demonstrable track record of producing graduates with long term careers, providing professional training with recognisable identity and value in a complex market and have an emphasis on professionally focused opportunities and skillsets. (FDA website 2021)

There is no such governing body in Australia and each institution is left to ensure the integrity of the qualification on offer. John Freeman (2012) notes that some universities offer an industry standard training that promise to equip students for a career in the field and yet are providing them with very limited exposure to the essential elements of actor training. It is

no wonder that the most reputable courses judge their success on graduate employment and make efforts to differentiate themselves from the time poor university drama degrees.

The dilution of acting programs attached to universities is of great concern as traditionally university drama programs have had little success in securing employment for actors in the industry. John Freeman (2012) posits that only a few university drama degree subjects have real overlap with industry and these graduates are ill equipped for the professional rigor of stage demands. The ‘drama school’ model in the UK is strenuously industry connected with intensive hours of study that serve to increase skill levels to a professional standard. Freeman suggests the following stages as imperative to the creative process: inspiration, saturation, frustration and realisation (ibid). This focus on creative intelligence is found in small dose in the drama degree and sits at the core of Actor training. But can creative intelligence be nurtured even more that the current conservatoire model would allow? And how do we fulfil the need for ‘saturation’ within reduced hours of contact?

## RETHINKING THE CONSERVATOIRE

What feels like an upheaval in the sector does offer us an opportunity to seriously rethink how we are delivering our programs and to ask how we might restructure to better prepare our students for the creation of their own work. The traditional conservatoire offering of intensive skills classes is simply not affordable in this new structure and we are forced to ask if it is indeed possible to adequately train students in these skills within a different model. This upheaval comes at a time when actor training institutions all over the world are trying to respond to issues of equity within the diversity of the study body. We are living in a time when finally, we are seeing a greater diversity on our screens and stages. Actor training institutions are reflecting a greater diversity in their cohort and this comes with certain responsibilities. In order to create a safe space for all students we need to increase the diversity of our staff and this is proving more difficult for some of us as we deal with sessional staff cuts and little hope of recruiting new full-time staff. We are also looking to decolonise the material we use in acting classes and to seek a broader cannon of text for all scene and production work. But is it worth going further? If our society is wishing to reflect the true make up of our peoples in artistic endeavours does that pose the issue that if we are

operating in the traditional conservatoire model are we actually working within a Euro-centric paradigm that itself may be the problem?

Toi Whakaari, New Zealand Drama School, is the most unique example of a total rethink of what an intensive acting program might look like. The institution of Toi Whakaari deeply and authentically reflects the marriage of Maori and European culture in every aspect of the institution. Proudly bicultural, the institution embraces values that in turn are reflected in the approach to teaching and learning. I will not be able to do justice to this sophisticated approach but would like to at least attempt to describe the philosophical connection between the work and the culture. The program sits within the concept of Tūrangawaewae: The place where an individual has the right to stand. This is both a philosophy and a creed for curriculum design and forms the spine of the three-year training. Tūranga is about the individual and this is the focus of first year training as actors learn about their artistry and develop their skills. The second year is based on Rarunga which means weaving and this year is about weaving the knowledge and artistry of the first year back over and over again. And third year is centered on Waewae, the time for independent practice and shifting from student actor to professional. Using these metaphors has helped to shape the training in a way that has freed up the delivery of the elements within it. This has given the staff freedom to adapt traditional modes of delivery to better serve the developmental stage of the actor and the artistry of each individual. In Australian drama schools there may be indigenous perspectives found sprinkled through many of our units of study, but I am not aware of a program that has deeply imbedded Indigenous perspectives within the very structure of the course.

African American artists have adopted specific methodologies in teaching actors of “coloured bodies” (2017). African American playwright August Wilson made clear the need for non-white approaches to the work, reflecting the four fundamental principles of Black Theatre decried by American sociologist and civil rights activist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois in 1926: About us, By us, For us, and Near us (Omodele,2002). Wilson stated:

We cannot share a single value system if that value system consists of the values of white Americans based on their European ancestors. We reject that as Cultural

Imperialism. We need a value system that includes our contributions as Africans in America. (Luckett and Shaffer, 2017)

Editor of *Black Acting Methods*, Sharrell D. Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer point out the ‘whiteness’ of the average acting class:

Often times, in the majority of U.S. acting classrooms, just like in other subject areas, White-ness overtly and covertly pervades the texts and linguistic structures, and those who do not share a White lineage or hue are de-centered, misaligned, and exiled from a theatre history that they rightfully co-constructed. (ibid. P1)

The editors posit that African-centred approaches to acting training are able to create a safe space for black actors. They note the Hendricks method which has Devising, Spirituality, and the Hyper- Ego as the three elements (ibid). Devising assumes a place of equality where, in the circle of continuum, all creativity is respected. Hendricks was careful to create a place of joy and encouragement that liberated the African American students who themselves had experienced or continued to experience trauma. Hendricks was known for training artists who went on to achieve great success and this has been attributed to the Hyper Ego element of the training where artists were encouraged and supported and made to believe that anything was possible. Many training grounds are trying to adopt a similar philosophy but when all degrees are now forced to assess students on their performance it is impossible for a student not to feel that they are being compared and rated against other students.

The conscious acknowledgement of first nations perspectives within the curriculum in colonized countries speaks directly to the art being made in these countries. The Australian theatrical landscape has changed dramatically over the last fifty years as we have broken away from the influences of the British repertoire and found our voice in Australian dramatists. Whilst Australian audiences are still able to enjoy the best of European and American playwrighting across all levels of theatre experience, the development investment has been in new works that reflect the contemporary Australian voice. If art is the mirror to our society, our tertiary institutions are responsible for creating a structure that acknowledges our colonization and the silencing of first nations peoples. Structuring an acting program that

could as easily be taught in Britain is no longer relevant to our cultural needs. Liza-Mare Syron (2014) acknowledges that culture sits at the core of most first nations students approach to their work and yet it is often experienced in the environment outside of the work in communion with first nations staff and other students. This need for a greater community of first nations artists and teachers within the training institution is vital in providing a safe and culturally respectful place of learning.

## THE CHALLENGES GOING FORWARD

Many schools are facing a contraction of hours of student contact per week, a reduction of weeks of teaching per year and a reduction in the outsourcing of teachers, with more of the teaching burden being placed on full time staff.

In summary, I believe these are the four main changes that many of the schools are facing as budgets are cut:

1. Reduced funds for sessional staff.
2. Reduced hours of teaching.
3. Increase in student numbers.
4. Limitations on resources affecting production and screen training output.

These factors are forcing some of us to ask if we can indeed still maintain the outstanding graduate outcomes that we base our reputation on, or do we need to accept that we can no longer guarantee that a graduate will achieve agent representation on graduation. And yet there are private one-year programs that are graduating actors into the industry and even the one-year programs at NIDA and WAAPA are achieving some success in agent representation.

If you talk to those of us who have been brought up in and who have taught in the conservatoire model we cannot fathom the notion of reducing hours of contact. We may have already brought the hours of voice or movement down from six hours to four hours a week and we feel deeply that a further reduction will deem them impotent. We are often quite cynical as we contemplate more hours of independent practice. But let's unpack this. Toi Whakaari run Independent Craft Practice sessions throughout all three years of the training.

There will be up to six hours per week of these sessions in first year, supervised by a teacher. In second year, the sessions are less supervised and by third year they are mostly driven by the students. These sessions are much like the Montessori education system philosophy of self-directed learning with the acting student committing to a contract of work to be explored each week.

Montessori had a personal mission—liberation of the developing mind through observation and support for humanity (Hunt and Valsiner 2014).

This sentiment was reflected in some of the methodologies outlined in *Black Acting Approaches* (2017). Approaches that focus of connectedness as the good of all rather than the betterment of the individual as reflected in Cristal Chantelle Truscott approach, *SoulWork* (2017).

SoulWork is a philosophy of theatre-making based on African American performance traditions and aesthetics that shifts actors' focus away from "me" and onto "we"; it relocates directors' ownership from "mine" to "ours" and rescues the audience relationship from "them" to "all of us" (Truscott, 2017).

Heather Timms (2020) noted the positive impact of this self-directed craft practice as students were taking greater responsibility for their learning which in turn liberated their artistry. In this case the design was not a cost saving initiative but a conscious attempt to build professional discipline. The example from Toi Whakaari would suggest that an increase in independent practice, if well designed, may in fact improve the student's comprehension and actualization of the acting skills.

The delivery of skills classes within the conservatoire model has traditionally been teacher modelled and student repeated, a kind of student apprentice model. Acting classes have been part demonstration and part watch and give feedback. The level of student engagement in these classes has always been patchy with some students acutely aware of each moment in the class and others only able to grasp the work in the practical doing of it. By putting more emphasis on independent learning, the student is being asked to prepare work for each class in order to receive immediate feedback in preparation for the next task. Any demonstration

of work will need to be repeated by the student both inside and outside of the class. This immediately forces the student to take closer note of every aspect of what they are learning in order to learn from repetition in their own time. This resets the students learning from one of “I’ll be shown and led and will not need to instigate anything myself” to “I must watch every aspect, ask lots of questions and make sure I know how to repeat this on my own”.

Student overload needs also to be addressed. Mental health issues amongst young people are indeed challenging and the intensity of a conservatoire program can at times put a student into a space of trauma where they are incapable of learning. Perhaps a reduction in hours, and more independent practice may go far to assist our students in better coping with the very demanding work we are asking of them. Much has changed since the publication of *The Australian Actros Wellbeing Study* (Maxwell, Seton and Marianna Szabó 2015) in which issues of bullying and inequity were highlighted throughout the industry. Many schools are adopting measures to ensure the student’s wellbeing such as check ins and checkouts and de-roling activities. Intimacy choreography is being supported by trained professionals and measures are being put in place to address content trauma amongst all students associated with the work. Students are often forced to hold down up to twenty hours of work per week to afford their studies and support their living costs. This heavy work schedule has an impact on the students overall wellbeing and ability to commit to the work. Providing some relief to the weekly workload would improve the learning experience for these students.

Innovative measures are being adopted in institutions across the world that serve to not only support the cost saving measures needed but to also provide a more flexible and possibly more rewarding student experience. The pivot to online learning that we were forced to adopt during the Covid 19 pandemic provided many positive initiatives. The provision of all training materials being accessible on line allows for students to prepare more thoroughly for each class. With class time being so precious the onus is now on the student to come to the class well prepared, having read the material on line, perhaps watching their tutor deliver the first class on line and having a clear idea of exactly what the structure of the class will be. A more formal planning of on line and in class engagement will serve to make clear the definition between teacher led and student led learning. The old pattern of teaching may have had a teacher run a two- or three-hour workshop, constantly engaging with the students. This

new model allows for one hour of preparation, one hour of teacher led learning and one hour of student independent recapping.

One valuable lesson from teaching during Covid was the effective use of the students filming acting exercises. A short video can be uploaded to a central portal and the teacher could give comments for the student to improve on the exercise. These exercises may have taken up to half an hour of class time to perform and receive feedback. This represents a substantial saving in both time and teacher hours. Students can work alone or in small groups to film exercises for either in-class feedback or written feedback. The student still does the exercise, they are still provided feedback, they get to repeat the exercise with further feedback and the class is able to access the exercises if the teacher wishes to point out a particularly effective use of the exercise. In this model the student has succeeded in self-directed learning, taken on feedback and put that feedback straight back into their work.

## COACHING

Student coaching is a useful method of increasing the students understanding of a task or process as well as developing a manner of respectfully supporting each other's work. Students can be trained to support each other with appropriate coaching language so as to offer ideas and not to criticise or 'direct'. The teacher can introduce a series of processes to arrive at a finished product. In my own work I introduce viewpoints and active analysis along with Practical Aesthetics to create a three-step process of shape-finding a scene. Two pairs work together to go through the process with one pair note taking and coaching while the other pair enact the steps. This process leads to a first draft of a scene ready to be shown to the teacher for input. Both pairs listen to the teacher input and together they problem solve that for the second draft of the scene.

Many measures are being taken at schools around the world to reduce costs of running an acting program. These measures include the following:

- Theatre production rehearsals shifting from a five, or six-week rehearsal process spent entirely with a director to a new model. The first week is independent practice giving

the student time to research and prepare for rehearsal, followed by afternoons only of rehearsal.

- Shifting public productions out of second year and instead doing class projects such as scene work or a showing of a play.
- Increasing the number of self-directed film outcomes.
- Taking productions to schools, prisons, aged care as a way of creating community engagement and possibly generating income for the institution.
- Shifting the production season from a teacher led initiative to a student led one with students pitching play ideas and outcome ideas. This makes students responsible for marketing as well and starts to build box office revenue for future productions.
- Genuinely acknowledging that students need to work while studying and giving them time in the timetable to work.
- Increasing self-devised productions as a means to encourage writing – presenting these as theatre or screen initiatives.
- Go to an intensive four day or three day a week model.
- Combine different courses together to deliver various classes and exercises in larger mixed groups.
- Consider teaching artistry as a way to connect a graduate with a theatre company.
- Consider the American model of creating a professional theatre company that offers opportunities to staff and students as apprentices. Allowing those students to graduate with a professional resume.
- Employ teachers who are skilled in a more varied selection of practices.
- Consider the teaching and learning outcomes of productions and whether smaller less expensive options may in fact deliver a higher level of student development.
- Limit fully produced works to one production in third year.
- Deliver ‘projects’ in favour of productions.
- Cut back on professional design elements.

## INCREASED SIZE OF INTAKE

As some schools have been pressured to increase student intake I wanted to see if there were advantages to this. The leading drama schools have long been the gatekeepers to who might

enter the industry and this may in fact be limiting the opportunity to a broader spectrum of artist. UK Drama School, East 15 takes in 34 actors each year and prides itself on high student satisfaction. There is a strong emphasis on ownership of work with many opportunities for cross collaboration. Lately, E15 is boasting some significant graduate success on screen internationally. The students engage in long days of training, with less full production outcome but many more projects across the three years. Another advantage of larger cohorts is that a broader range of material will be castable, serving a more diverse group of students. It also increases the opportunity for artistic connections from which devised projects can be built throughout the course and beyond.

## EQUITY

If we are looking to radically change the nature of the conservatoire we may also need to address issues of equity. Is the audition process actually excluding some applicants? Toi Whakaari made significant changes to their audition process, no longer having auditionees performing on their own but instead conducting interactive workshops that give the facilitator a greater insight into how the auditionee works with other actors. This process has attracted applicants who may not have normally applied. We also need to address equity issues that may indeed be impeding some succeeding in their studies. If a student has to earn money via a part time job to support themselves or their family it will immediately exclude them from full time study. We should be doing all we can to create a flourishing environment for all artists. This would be an argument for doing less hours per week and freeing up time for students to have part time work.

## IN SUMMARY

This paper is a small attempt to address some of the complex challenges facing BA/BFA acting training programs in Australia today. It will be interesting to look at the landscape in five years' time to see if we have managed to still deliver our programs to the high standard we are so proud of. It will also be interesting to see if indeed we have improved the outcomes for our students and brought a wider range of artists to the industry. I wish my colleagues well as we navigate a new path to a shared positive future.

## INTERVIEWS

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Fernandez, Peter J. Assistant Professor, Theatre, Columbia University, November 25, 2020.

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Price, Robert. independent acting and voice teacher, London, November 13, 2020.

Smith, Tony. Interim Head of Theatre, Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), Nov 16, 2020.

Timms, Heather. Director of Actor Training at Toi Whakaari, New Zealand Drama School, November 26, 2020.

Weaver, Phillip. Head of BA Acting, East 15, November 18, 2020.

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