

TERTIARY EDUCATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT
OF AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

Over the past twenty years, there has been an unprecedented expansion of the theatre arts in Australia. Traditional theatre companies have been established in state capital cities, playing repertoires of classical, modern and Australian plays; engaging professional actors, directors, technicians and administrators. There has been a significant expansion of "community theatre," of semi-professional or amateur companies in urban, and more importantly, in outer urban and country areas. There has been a remarkable increase in the amount of children's theatre, youth theatre and "theatre-in-education" (TIE), that is, dramatic performances of "educational" entertainments in the classroom by professional companies.

All this has been made possible by an increasing acceptance of government support as a necessary prerequisite for professional theatre. All political parties at both state and federal levels support the notion of subsidy. The principle has gained greater acceptance in the light of the virtual disappearance of commercial theatre in Australia.

This expansion in Australian theatre has been accompanied by an equally significant growth in tertiary educational programs offering a variety of vocational and academic courses in drama.

There is one national independent school, offering vocational training for the professional theatre: NIDA. There is one multi-art college of advanced education containing a full-time, vocational school of drama: the Victorian College of the Arts.

Many colleges of advanced education offer drama courses which function as electives for intending teachers and as vocational training for people seeking careers in the theatre; Rusden, Darling Downs and WAIT are examples. Other colleges of advanced education offer drama as an elective only within a teacher training course. The Melbourne State College is an example.

Several university schools and departments offer drama as an academic study within the faculty of arts: New South Wales, Newcastle and New England. One university combines the academic study of drama

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with professional training for the theatre. This is Flinders University in South Australia.

Many colleges of advanced education and universities make special staff appointments to stimulate student participation in dramatic art as an extra-curricular activity: Melbourne, Monash, Griffith, Burgmann College, A.N.U. and Sydney.

In some states, notably South Australia, the Department of Technical and Further Education is active in various forms of drama training, particularly in regional areas.

There are a large number of private drama schools inviting participation from the community as a whole, many of which offer professional training. The Arts Council is active in running such schools. In New South Wales many professional and semi-professional theatres do so: Nimrod, 680 and the Ensemble. Many drama schools are run by individuals for commercial gain.

Together these developments clearly indicate a strong awareness of drama as a significant ingredient in Australian cultural life. However, it has been argued that growth in theatre activity has been too rapid and has outstripped the supply of sufficiently talented artists and administrators. In recent years several subsidised companies have collapsed. There has been strong criticism of standards generally. The Industries Assistance Commission Report on Government Assistance for the Performing Arts called into question the whole principle of subsidy.

Similarly tertiary education courses have developed without regard to either national or state requirements. Some states have an abundance of drama courses, others virtually none. Many colleges of advanced education courses are severely limited and handicapped by being tied to other departments. There is a lack of consultation between the professional theatre and CAE departments claiming to offer professional training. Flinders University has temporarily closed the professional training section of its drama department due to lack of employment opportunities. At the same time a CAE in the same city has announced the creation of a new professional training programme.

Clearly there is a need to restrain the haphazard growth of tertiary educational drama courses, to rationalise the use of existing resources and to plan future developments on the basis of a firm policy that avoids needless duplication, has regard to community needs and will generally contribute to improving the quality of dramatic art in Australia.

Any attempt to evolve a rational, economic and realistic approach to tertiary education drama courses in Australia must take into account that there are many different kinds of drama courses possible and there are many different kinds of educational institutions to support them. It

is important to consider which kind of course is best suited to which kind of institution.

Tertiary courses in dramatic arts might be classified into four quite separate and distinct kinds:

- (i) "conservatory," vocational courses which set out to supply the professional theatre and the entertainment industry with artists, technicians and administrators
- (ii) innovative, vocational courses which set out to train future "leaders" in the dramatic and allied arts
- (iii) teacher-training courses which set out to provide students with a theoretical and practical understanding of dramatic art, together with specific teaching skills
- (iv) liberal arts courses committed to the theoretical and practical study of dramatic art as an academic discipline, with emphasis on scholarship and research.

Drama courses which confine their activities to one of the above objectives have proved more successful in England, the United States and Australia than those which have attempted to pursue two or more objectives.

It is generally recognised that British and American university drama departments do not offer effective professional training. In recent years, the United States has followed the British pattern of establishing independent, single objective "conservatory" schools. In Great Britain, it is generally agreed that the best vocational training is offered by the independent schools, such as RADA and LAMDA, as opposed to those schools which also offer teacher training courses. In Australia, NIDA enjoys a higher graduate employment record than university or CAE departments offering professional training.

Conservatory training for the professional theatre is best undertaken within small independent schools. The leading British theatre schools (RADA, LAMDA, Central) jealously guard their independence and autonomy. Conservatory training must be entirely flexible and free of academic pressures in matters such as the admission of students, the recruitment of staff and the content of courses. Training young artists is a unique and sensitive operation in which many of the rigidly formal procedures proper to universities and colleges simply do not apply.

Neither university nor college of advanced education drama departments are suitable places for training creative artists for professional theatre and the entertainment industry. There is a basic incompatibility between the academic process which is concerned almost wholly with the mind and conservatory training which is concerned with the co-ordination of all the faculties, mind, body, emotions and imagination,

within the creative act.

University and college education is fundamentally concerned with individual study. Conservatory training is concerned with the development of the individual artist through group activity.

Conservatory training is a collaborative group activity which imposes particular disciplines on a student very different from the individual freedom open to the university or college student.

The university and college educational approach encourages a critical, as opposed to a creative attitude. In conservatory training, a critical approach can prove damaging to the development of the imagination.

University and college students study different subjects, often totally unrelated. The "subjects" within a conservatory school are part of an integrated system of training. Students are encouraged to approach them simply as different aspects of the creative act.

The whole rhythm and pace of university and college life are much slower, more gentle and reflective than the conditions which apply to theatrical production. Their methods of work often militate against the proper development of performing artists.

Compared with conservatory theatre schools, multi-art colleges are a relatively new educational development which have not yet proved their educational effectiveness. While it is an admirable principle that artists of various kinds should be trained in the one institution so that cross-fertilisation may be encouraged, a number of multi-discipline schools established on this principle have found it extremely difficult to translate educational theory into effective practice.

Colleges in which training for the various arts is fully integrated (e.g. the Californian Institute of the Arts) have experienced severe problems in finding a satisfactory educational format. Partly integrated colleges, such as the Purchase School of the Arts with the State University of New York, have experienced similar problems. Even in multi-art colleges which guarantee each art almost total autonomy, such as the Julliard School, New York City, the various schools (Music, Dance, Drama) compete so strenuously for funds and facilities that interaction and co-operation between them is minimal. Competition for funds and facilities often leads to resentment and jealousy.

Multi-art colleges do not always provide a sound educational environment for conservatory theatre training courses. They are better suited to training leaders for community drama, who will benefit from a wide range of courses in theoretical drama, theatre practice, technical skills and management which are not readily available in the more narrow, specialised courses of a conservatory school. Again, the multi-art colleges

often provide a better environment for non-conformist theatre activity, for experiment and innovation by virtue of their freedom from industry pressures and the proprietary interest the professional theatre naturally shows in conservatory schools.

Colleges of advanced education drama courses are best suited to the pursuit of objectives which require a practical knowledge of drama with specialist skills relating to other disciplines usually available with the college, such as education. There are many areas of expanding dramatic activity in Australia for which there are no specialised training courses available. Theatre-in-education is a new development of great importance which requires performers who are also skilled teachers. Youth and children's theatre, including puppetry, require practitioners who possess specialised theatre techniques as well as a thorough knowledge of child behaviour. There is an increasing need for specialist drama teachers equipped to work in professional or community theatres, in tertiary educational drama schools or youth groups. Primary and secondary schools may, in the future, require more teachers skilled in the use of drama in child development as a teaching aid for other subjects. There is no course available for teachers of voice and speech, trained to work in schools, theatres, or colleges.

It would be difficult to find supporting figures but community theatre, youth theatre and children's theatre are all areas which are rapidly expanding and more likely to continue expanding than the established professional theatre. The demand for trained personnel in these areas, as well as the demand for specialist teachers, will increase substantially in future years.

Drama as an academic discipline is now well established in several Australian universities as it has been for many years in the United States and Great Britain. There are strong arguments to support the value of theatre studies as part of a liberal education. By increasing general knowledge of the theatre and its allied arts, university drama studies have contributed significantly to community cultural awareness. The most successful university schools and departments have confined their activities to academic objectives. They have not attempted to engage in professional training.

Finally, there is a strong demand for part-time courses in dramatic arts by people active in the entertainment industry, by people wishing to participate in regional dramatic activity and by people simply requiring some practical assistance in various aspects of dramatic art. Courses are presently run by a variety of public and private companies such as the Arts Council, small theatre companies and individuals. Standards of teaching vary enormously.

The following section attempts to suggest how, over the next decade or so, tertiary education institutions might channel their resources towards the continuing development of professional and community theatre in Australia in a rational and economic way.

Conservatory Schools

The Australian Government should maintain *one* independent, national school to provide training for young people seeking careers in the established professional theatre and allied areas of the entertainment industry. It must be a small, selective and highly specialised school. Adequate provision must be made for its proper housing. It should be funded in a manner *not* determined by student numbers. This function has been undertaken since 1958 by The National Institute of Dramatic Art.

It would be difficult to find convincing arguments for the existence of more than one national, conservatory school for the following reasons:

- (i) NIDA receives 1000 applications each year for 50 places. For many years now, few if any suitably talented applicants have been turned away.
- (ii) In most parts of Australia, there are either amateur theatre companies, private and part-time schools to accommodate those denied entrance to NIDA.
- (iii) Approximately thirty people graduate from NIDA per annum. It is doubtful the entertainment industry could absorb many more.
- (iv) It is difficult to justify admitting unsuitable students to a professional training course, to encourage them in false hopes and allow them to enter the job market with very little chance of success in a very overcrowded profession.
- (v) Flinders University Drama Department closed its professional training unit in 1976 because graduates were unable to obtain employment in South Australia.
- (vi) Conservatory training serves traditional forms of theatre. It is largely geared to the employment requirements of the state subsidised theatre companies. It is unlikely the number of companies will increase; rather the opposite. Several small professional companies have ceased operation in recent years.

Innovative Schools

There should be *one* full-time school with national status, providing training for people who wish to engage mainly in the various forms of community theatre. It must be a small, selective school. Adequate provision should be made for it to be properly accommodated and

recurrent expenditure should not be dependent upon student enrolment. This function has been undertaken since mid 1976 by the School of Drama within the Victorian College of the Arts. It would be difficult to find convincing arguments for the establishment of other schools of this kind until

- (i) there is clear evidence of an excess of suitable applicants over and above the number of places available in the VCA.
- (ii) The VCA school is properly established in terms of facilities and personnel.
- (iii) The VCA school has time to test in practice the educational philosophies of drama training within a multi-art college.
- (iv) Some indication is available of the placement of graduates within community theatre.

It is appropriate that NIDA should be based in Sydney and the alternative school in Melbourne. These two cities are the major Australian centres for theatre, film and television production. By comparison, the other state capitals offer minimal employment opportunities in these areas. The State theatre companies tend to recruit people from the major centres.

Educational Drama Courses

Responsibility for all educational drama courses, including youth and children's theatre, should be with colleges of advanced education. A balanced and economical national policy should make provision for the following:

- (i) The support of *one* college of advanced education drama department as a national training institution for specialist drama teachers seeking careers in the professional theatre, community theatre or tertiary education. Such a college should be closely associated with professional theatre activity. Ideally, it should be situated in Sydney or Melbourne.
- (ii) Each state Higher Education Board should seek to establish within colleges of advanced education drama departments offering courses in one of the following areas: drama specialisation for primary teaching, drama specialisation for secondary teaching, youth theatre, children's theatre, theatre-in-education or puppetry.

Some of these areas are closely related and therefore might be taught happily in the one department, depending upon other circumstances operating with the college. It is vitally important that each department should pursue well defined educational objectives that do not duplicate those of other departments and strenuously avoid the glamorous aspects of theatre, particularly "professional training."

Many, if not all, of these courses might well be located in regional colleges to encourage more original work within the department and generally to encourage cultural activity within the community.

Academic Drama Courses

Theatre studies as an academic discipline is properly a university responsibility. Support should be given to schools or departments, where neither the educational objectives nor the physical resources duplicate those of conservatory schools, multi-art colleges or colleges of advanced education. Such departments or schools might be well located in regional universities.

All universities and colleges should be invited to encourage the dramatic arts as extra-curricular activities. They are best stimulated by the ready availability of a performance space and by the appointment of a director of student drama whose function is to provide students with leadership, technical assistance and specialist craft skills.

Many schools, colleges and universities in all parts of Australia have wasted millions of dollars in constructing traditional "theatres," poorly designed and totally unrelated to the real needs of students. All universities and colleges should make provisions for a performance space, separate from "the great hall" and multi-purpose lecture theatres. Special technical advice should be sought in creating these spaces to avoid wasteful expenditure on building theatres needlessly large, expensive to equip and requiring a large technical staff to run. Proper advice from recognised theatre consultants must be sought to ensure architectural plans are economical, practical and precisely related to the educational objectives of the institution.

Technical and Further Education

The Department of Technical and Further Education might be invited to accept responsibility for part-time community drama courses and for the continuing education of those working in the entertainment industry.

- (i) The demand for part-time community drama courses, particularly in country areas is extremely high. There is a need for proper accreditation of such courses in order to improve standards.
- (ii) People engaged in the entertainment industry would welcome refresher courses in speech and movement for professional actors, courses in new materials and techniques for theatre, film and television designers, courses in theatre administration, stage management techniques and architectural design.