

The Academy of Live and Recorded Arts (ALRA)

Inspection report

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Main findings

Course: Three-year National Diploma and one-year National Certificate in Professional Acting

Overall effectiveness: Outstanding (grade 1)

Date of inspection: 12 March 2008

This feedback contains findings from the inspection visit. It draws on the evidence available from performance data, external and internal reviews, other available documentation and interviews held on the day.

The acting course was previously inspected by Ofsted in February/March 2005 when it was graded outstanding (grade 1) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. At the same time, the leadership and management of the school were graded good (grade 2).

Standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that the standard of students' work has risen significantly since the time of the last inspection. 'The standard of the students' work is high with several students noted as outstanding in performance.' Assessors have been fulsome in their praise, frequently using comments such as 'good vocal projection' and 'totally believable' in their reports on students' performances. One assessor thought that the world created by a Chekhov play 'was remarkably fully inhabited' by the cast.

Retention is good and a significant improvement on the weakness noted in the last report. On the three year course, only one student left the 2004-07 cohort early; in the same period, only two students left the one year course before completing. On average, retention is about 85%. All students who complete the courses gain the Trinity diploma.

Students are hard working and committed. Their attendance is excellent, at 98%. Students are realistic about what they need to do to gain and maintain regular employment. Thoughtful about their learning, they are articulate and measured when expressing their views.

Almost all ALRA students get work as performers when they leave. One Trinity assessor thought students were 'reeking of employability'. Thorough tracking of graduate employment enables detailed breakdowns of employment patterns back many years. Of those graduating in 2007, 75% had agents at the time of the inspection and 97% had worked. Of 2006 leavers, 93% had agents and 96% had worked. Graduate employment is extremely varied, but regular. Many ALRA graduates act in film and television as well as signing contracts with theatre

companies. Of those leaving in 2007, two are in West End shows and one on a pre-West End tour.

Quality of provision

Trinity judges ALRA a very good provider of the National Diploma in Professional Acting. 'The course is current and meets students' needs, assessment is clear and rigorous.'

In 2005, inspectors saw very good or excellent teaching. Recent student evaluations are detailed and positive; students believe they are achieving their learning objectives, not always the case at the time of the last inspection. Students value the way teachers balance careful planning with flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of individuals. Trinity assessors' reports support the judgement that teaching is a strength. However, although a process of class observation is in place, the academy itself provides no overall judgement about the quality of teaching or analysis of its features. Teachers are experienced professionals in theatre and media and many work as freelance practitioners in their specialist fields. Some have teaching qualifications and the academy supports those of its regular teachers who wish to acquire certification in post compulsory education and training. Carefully chosen guest directors complement the work of class teachers and the professional focus provided by this diversity of approach is particularly valued by students.

There is a comprehensive process of assessment involving judgements about performances, standards in classes, seminar presentations, essays and portfolios. End of term tutorials are rigorous and fully minuted so that targets can be set and be followed up. As a result, students say they are always clear about their level of progress and about what they need to do to improve. To help them develop as independent learners, students are encouraged to reflect on their own progress in personal journals and class logs. The National Council for Drama Training (NCDT), who reaccredited the academy in 2006, thought that the system of student evaluation 'reinforces students' responsibility for their own learning and provides useful feedback for tutors'.

The course is very well structured and students appreciate the wide range of different performance opportunities. ALRA believes that the academy's strong links with the industry ensure the programmes are grounded in professional practice. This judgement is confirmed by the NCDT: 'The curriculum is broad, flexible and relevant to the changing needs of the profession...' NCDT also notes how well recorded media training was integrated into the overall programme. This element of the courses, which prepares students for working lives in which the electronic media are increasingly important sources of employment, is a distinctive strength of ALRA. The curriculum has been tightened and more sharply focused since the last inspection. At the same time, course content is continually being modified as the result of feedback from students, external assessors and guest directors. Examples of this responsiveness include the recent introduction of classes in Alexander Technique and the screenwriting partnership with the London College of Communication.

The quality of the accommodation has improved since the last inspection. This is particularly noticeable in the theatre which has been completely redesigned. While the restrictions of the Victorian building continue to pose challenges - NCDT thought the academy should 'continue to look at ways in which accommodation might be improved' - the studios and other workspaces are satisfactory. Other resources, such as those supporting television and radio training, are outstanding.

The care and guidance of students are outstanding, with the academy's strong professional ethos suitably complemented by a supportive structure based on the careful consideration of each student's needs. In 2006, the NCDT noted that 'staff and students share a strong sense of community... ' and the atmosphere of trust 'in which students can identify or declare sensitive areas of personal concern and receive appropriate support to help them develop and progress', noted by inspectors in 2005, is still very much apparent. There is excellent diagnostic support for students when they arrive, and the academy is notable for its work with deaf students and with those who have dyslexia.

Leadership and management

According to Trinity, 'the school has made great strides over the past three years... and has successfully addressed significant quality issues.' The commitment to continuous improvement is well embedded at all levels of the institution and the formal process involves senior management, heads of department, the academic board and trustees. The self-assessment report, with its concise action plan and supporting tables, is a model of good practice. Judgements are fairly made and well supported by rigorous evaluations, particularly from students, and there is plentiful evidence of changes being made as a result of self assessment. Improvement is supported by a healthy emphasis on discussion and an openness to ideas.

The NCDT believes that the principal 'has had a very positive impact on the ethos of the school' and it is clear that the steady progress noted by external assessors has marked the years since her appointment. There is a clear but simple management structure and the school runs smoothly. The relationship with the University of Greenwich has enabled the senior management team to look again at management procedures and to reassess their effectiveness. ALRA has developed a sophisticated, web-based system for recording and analysing students' employment, and this enables the academy to identify employment patterns and to make suitable adjustments to courses in response. A well-judged process of staff appraisal is in place, and teachers find it supportive.

ALRA has a management style in which creative risk taking is encouraged. Students come from diverse backgrounds and bring with them a range of prior experience. In its commitment to equality of opportunity, the academy recognises potential and knows how to nurture it. ALRA is working hard to increase the number of students from minority ethnic backgrounds. Meanwhile, it continues to undertake innovative work with disabled performers and has a close partnership with Graeae, a disabled-

led theatre company that profiles the skills of actors, writers and directors with physical and sensory impairments.

Points for consideration

The college might usefully:

- explore ways of using the outcomes of teaching observations to inform a programme of staff development.