

Transitioning from training to employment in the performing arts: the model of the graduate-performance-company

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ABSTRACT

A broad overview of the current status of employment in the performing arts provides a context for the core problem of this paper, namely, new ways of thinking about creating employment opportunities in professional theatre and dance for newly graduated and emerging performers. Graduate-performance-companies exist to bridge the period immediately following the end of formal vocational training and establishing a career as a practising professional performer. Assessing the strengths and limitations in that model would be useful for the emerging performer, policy-makers and educators in performing arts conservatories and potential employers. There is a need for further research to analyse which of the graduate-performance-company models, if any, optimises the transition from training to employment.

Australian actors and dancers have an enviable reputation at home and abroad. However those performers 'with the reputation' are a tiny percentage of the equally talented performers graduating from Australian performing arts conservatories each year. Many just as talented, committed performers have not received recognition because they have not been able to find paid work in their profession. Australia's performing arts conservatories have established an international reputation for producing graduates exhibiting high levels of creativity, artistry and versatility. The graduates of these professional training institutions are bound for careers in an industry where limited employment is a long established problem. If indeed, as federal Arts Minister Peter Garrett declared, it is a "brand new day for arts and culture" (Perkin, 2008:12) what are the opportunities for rethinking employment paths for our new graduate performers and emerging artists?

“[V]ery little within the performing arts and entertainment industry is constant. The employment opportunities are sporadic, appearing abundant one minute and seemingly non-existent the next, the roles and responsibilities of any particular job can vary noticeably from company to company, and payment can be equally as unpredictable” (Davidson, 2004:55). The period immediately following graduation from a conservatory is a critical period in the young professional’s career. Emerging performers are well served if they can continue their skill training, observe and work with established artists, make professional contacts, begin to develop a professional profile and learn the practicalities of the ‘business’ of creative practice.

This paper analyses the model of the graduate-performance-company as a pathway to employment for emerging performers in two performing arts, namely contemporary dance and acting. In Australia these two specialties are offered in performing arts institutions (called ‘conservatories’ in this paper). These include vocationally-oriented tertiary contemporary dance programs at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the Adelaide Centre for the Arts. Equivalent vocationally-oriented tertiary acting programs are offered at the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA), WAAPA and VCA. The intent of these conservatories is to produce the most professionally employable performer-graduates possible. Any professionally minded dancer or actor is aware that a career in the performing arts is not centred on creative desires and talent alone. Notwithstanding the overriding passion and commitment of most performers to their artistry, knowledge that the performing arts is a business is essential to an ongoing career. After the structure of the conservatory much energy and time needs to be directed to actually finding or creating employment opportunities. While most programs offer a course in theoretical arts business practice most graduates have no real idea of the requirements of a day-in-the-life as a ‘working’ actor/dancer.

The performing arts industry is a subsection of the creative industries with particular needs, due to its history of heavy dependence on public funding. Current and future uncertainties relate to the willingness of public bodies to subsidise Australian theatre and contemporary dance. If funding issues primarily determine the precariousness of employment then performers are dependent on decision makers outside the performing arts sector. Consequently, it behoves all stakeholders, educators, current employers and emerging performers to rethink ways of doing business - of rethinking how to link creative ‘makers’ with audiences while earning income.

Discussions about improving the business of dance and theatre - creating, producing, marketing and performing – can bog down in the funding debate. Money is undeniably a central concern of practising professional actors and dancers, as earning a living by their creativity is one definition of 'professional'. However there are other issues that affect recently graduated actors' and dancers' employability. These highly skilled, highly motivated performers are hampered by their lack of industry experience and professional contacts. Both are critical factors in achieving even short-term contracts.

Despite acting or dancing in many conservatory showcases, on graduation, emerging performers have insufficient proven experience in the industry. The vicious circle of needing experience to gain work and needing work to gain experience has long been noted in the arts industry. Graduation from a selective performing arts conservatory results, almost without exception, in graduates with high order skills, passion and talent. The opportunity to actually work in a company ensemble for a sustained period – creating, rehearsing, performing, touring, paying bills, and taking part in the business of arts-employment – is a model that can assist emerging performers to gain both a profile and proven repertoire when competing for funding or at auditions for paid employment. For the performers whose creative work centres on devised or choreographed projects, in a micro-business model, experience and contacts in arts management are essential. Audience development is critical to all performing artists. A graduate-performance-company also has the potential to build an audience following for individuals, the ensemble and the art form itself.

Employment in the arts has always been problematic and episodic. Throsby and Hollister in their seminal economic study on working conditions in the Australian arts found that the average period of unemployment over a six year span was 10 months for dancers and 15 months for actors. (Throsby & Hollister, 2003:table 31). The general public see the stars of theatre and dance as being highly paid and highly acclaimed. The reality is that most performers are among the lowest paid workers in Australia. Unemployment is part of a performer's career and accepted as such. It is nevertheless undesirable and conservatories and performers aim to optimise work and maximize earnings. In their detailed economic analysis Throsby and Hollister demonstrate that "...only about one-quarter of all artists work as employees, on a permanent or casual basis, and are paid a salary or wages. The remaining three-quarters operate as freelance or self-employed individuals (Throsby & Hollister,

2003:38). Given that performers work on average 11.3 weeks of the year and earn low salaries most performers must undertake temporary periods of alternative employment. “The majority of artists (63 percent) work at more than one job” (Throsby & Hollister, 2003:38). For practising professional performers only 15 per cent were able to devote 100 per cent of their working time to their creative activity. “[A]s many as 38 per cent of artists spent 25 per cent or less of their working time at their creative occupation (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005:40). These statistics are generally worse for emerging performers. “Failure is a statistical probability and thus no personal reflection on those who suffer it.”(Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1975:12). This is the status quo. The *raison d’être* for any conservatory, however, is to prepare professionally employable graduates.

The problem of employment in the arts has been tackled variously at different times and countries. The common feature of many of the reports is the need to assist skilled emerging performers to gain knowledge and experience in the “business”. A proposal considered by British Actors’ Equity in 1951 advanced the notion of professional theatre employment requiring 52 weeks’ experience as a working apprentice/student in a repertory company. In 1975, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation commissioned a report on professional training for drama in Britain. It considered the proposal that “certain theatres should be designated as training theatres and should play a regular part in training by taking students for planned working attachments...” (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1975:72). The graduate performance company model under consideration is an extension of this notion; however it is primarily linked to a conservatory and/or a professional company.

The primary advantage of graduate-performance-company is the opportunity to establish proven industry experience. A performance company, which links a tertiary training institution and an operating professional theatre company, offers many benefits to new graduates. It allows access to resources, rehearsal studios, performance spaces, costume workshops and support staff. It also links the creative process, fellow artists and ‘real’ audiences. The model of the graduate-performance-company suggests a transitional period where the performers’ work and paying public’s expectations are determined by standards closer to those of the competitive reality of the performance world. The word ‘transition’ suggests links both *to* and *from* something. Another benefit of this model is the entity of the ‘company’ itself. Many performers, particularly in dance, will work as independent artists but the opportunity to work as an ensemble for a transitional period, in this case, a year,

allows for maturation individually and creatively. When articulating his philosophy and goals for his new Australian acting company John Bell, wrote “In my desire to build an acting ensemble, I attempted early on to keep most of the same actors from season to season, and to keep plays in the repertoire...My experience...convinced me that an ensemble and long-term repertoire were the keys to artistic excellence” (Bell, 2002:226).

To gain real-world experience, emerging performers need the opportunity, not only to mount productions but to experience day to day life as an actor/dancer. The graduate-performance-company offers a structure which is effective in combining high quality rehearsals and public performances, maintaining a rigorous skill base, and, ideally, providing an ongoing mentoring relationship with professional artists. The prospectus describing the graduate actor training offered at San Francisco’s American Conservatory Theatre states “you will grow as an actor and as a person in a community where young and old – novice and master – are together engaged in the struggle to create vital...and meaningful art” (A.C.T. website, 2007: accessed 09/08/2007).

The novice-master relationship was the historical training mode in the performing arts. Both dance and drama were traditionally taught in a master-apprentice form. In Western Europe drama and ballet schools were first created several centuries ago and the training in them began to develop on more formal lines. Contemporary dance is primarily a twentieth century development and coincided with an increasingly technical quality of life which was reflected in all forms of education. Dance and drama education followed this same pattern of increasingly formal training and in the twentieth century professional training in Britain, Europe USA and Australia became the property of ‘professional training institutions’ (Schechner, 2002:193-198). One of the primary elements of the master-apprentice model was continued exposure to ‘expert performance’. Many established performers note that formalised skills-based-training not only limits exposure to ‘the business’ but has the potential to set the level of artistry to that of the most talented student, rather than that of the expert or ‘master’. In the twenty-first century, particularly in Australia, very few opportunities exist for the traditional model of a young or emerging artist being solely nurtured by a ‘master’. Julie Dyson and Susan Street (1997) explored the need for embracing new models for training and early professional experience in their presentation at Green Mill in 1997.

Change requires partnerships with the profession. We cannot keep perpetuating training and education methods... The handed-down traditions of training [within our dance schools] assume the world will stay the same, and it hasn't. We have to take risks with the next generation of tertiary graduates if they are to have any chance of being able to develop the dance industry into the next century (cited in Hillis, 1997:140).

The graduate-performance-company model which is the focus of this paper has as its underlying philosophy the importance of skills and artistry from established performers/performance-makers being passed on to young artists; coupled with professional productions mounted for public audiences, allowing maximum exposure to the 'performing arts business'.

Three theoretical options for the model of a graduate-performance-company are discussed below. Option one proposes that the graduate company is connected to a conservatory and performers earn a graduate qualification while "working". *LINK Dance Company* is a graduate performance company attached to the training programs offered in dance at WAAPA. The company of dancers rehearse, perform and tour while working with established and emerging choreographers. In Britain there are similar graduate dance companies - *Transitions Dance Company* is attached to Laban (formerly named Laban Centre for Movement and Dance), *EDge* is attached to the London Contemporary Dance School (LCDS) and *Verve* is the graduate dance company at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance (NSCD).

There are currently no equivalent Australian graduate acting companies connected solely with a conservatory. Option Two proposes that the graduate company is affiliated with an established producing company. Several of the state theatre companies mentor emerging performers but only Black Swan Theatre Company (BSTC), in Perth, has established an 'emerging performer' acting ensemble. The *HotBed Ensemble* was introduced in 2006. It was the new face of BSX, an emerging artist development program.

The third option is for the graduate-performance-company to be linked to both a conservatory and a resident performance company. This is an established model used at a number of renowned performing arts institutions in USA. Examples include acting companies based at American Repertory Theatre/Harvard, Yale Repertory Theatre/Yale Drama School, and The Old Globe Theatre/University of San Diego. These graduate acting companies are primarily situated at professional resident

theatre companies, while being administered by an adjunct tertiary institution and offering the performers a qualification. This model falls somewhere between *LINK* and *HotBed*.

LINK Dance Company, WAAPA's graduate contemporary dance company was established in 2002 with the goal of providing a bridging year for a company of dancers who would "spend a year working and investigating choreographic practice with a diverse group of artists" (Hassall, 2007:3). It functions as a one year, post-graduate practice-based programme and has drawn its dancers from dance programmes throughout Australia and New Zealand. The 2007 season included mainstage performances at WAAPA in Perth, performances and studio workshops and touring in Europe as well as an innovative community dance residency in regional Western Australia. In 2008, *LINK* will employ national and international choreographers, tour in Europe and employ an established dancer/choreographer to 'embed' with the company allowing ongoing mentoring with an experienced independent dance maker. Michael Whaites, the artistic director has also initiated a programme for four emerging choreographers to workshop embryonic ideas by 'creating on the dancers': the process is designed for experimentation and not necessarily performance.

In 2006 Western Australia's flagship theatre company, Black Swan Theatre Company (BSTC), founded a professional development program for emerging actors, designers and directors called '*The HotBed Ensemble*'. Initially *HotBed* was created as an unpaid program to provide a bridge to professional mainstage work for talented performers establishing a reputation in the independent theatre scene or recently graduated from training. In 2008, due to corporate sponsorship, the six actors, one director and one designer will be paid for the eight months they are contracted to BSTC (BSTC website, 2007). It is a unique program in Australia being the only formalised emerging artist ensemble attached to a state theatre company. "The program includes exclusive training and mentoring opportunities, close contact with Black Swan artists, and creative opportunities in *HotBed* productions. There is also an opportunity to be involved in play readings, secondments to BSTC mainhouse productions and exclusive master classes with national and international visiting artists" (BSTC website, 2007) In 2008 BSTC entered a three year business arts partnership agreement with RAC whereby RAC paid the salaries of the members of *HotBed*. The financial support enabled six actors and one designer to dedicate themselves fulltime to *The Hotbed Ensemble* during the rehearsal and performance

periods for two productions in each of the three years. In this model of graduate-performance-company the professional theatre is the sponsoring institution.

An example of an acting-company linking both conservatory and professional theatre is the program operating in Denver, Colorado, USA. The third year in the National Theatre Conservatory (NTC) at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (DCPA) operates as a graduate-performance-company. There are three components to this program – participation in T.A.P. (Theatre Apprentice Program), Third-Year Repertory and an Acting Colloquium resulting in a showcase for agents and directors. Each aspect emphasises performing experience in a ‘real world’ theatre environment. The graduate students “spend the majority of their time as apprentices with the Denver Center Theater Company (DCTC). Casting is the responsibility of the Artistic Director. Apprentices work closely with the professional ensemble whose members provide a wide range of age and experience....Students will be offered an Equity contract as part of the T.A.P. program.” They also rehearse and perform as a graduate ensemble in two public productions. These plays are mounted with full production values and performed in repertory in one of the DCPA’s main stages (DCPA website, 2007: accessed 09/08/2007). These three models differ primarily in modes of administration and whether they are fee-charging, no cost or performer-paying. They offer collectively many attributes of the ideal transition from training to employment.

A successful career in the performing arts involves creative talent, skill, commitment, adaptability, business ‘know-how’ and a liberal dose of luck. The predicament of the contemporary Australian performer is underemployment and underpayment. Conservatories are dedicated to training performers who can be employed practising their art. Graduate-performance-companies provide a model for emerging performers to optimise the possibility of accessing existing available work. They also create the opportunity for emerging performers to acquire the skill, confidence and flexibility to create new work and new companies.

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Appendix

GLOSSARY

This study employs the following definitions:

- Conservatory

This study presents the definition of a performing arts vocational training institution as a *conservatory*. Multiple terms are used throughout Australia and internationally: WAAPA uses the term 'academy'; NIDA uses the term 'institute'; VCA uses the term 'college'; Australian Ballet School uses the term 'school'. This study seeks to describe a *conservatory* as a place specializing in one or more performing arts, where pre-selected students are vocationally educated for a career in their chosen field.

- Emerging performer

The Australia Council has created three categories to define the stages within a performer's career: young artist, emerging artist, established artist. In this study what the Australia Council terms a "young artist" will be named an *emerging performer*. The term will be used for recently graduated contemporary dancers and actors.

- Graduate-performance-company

This study employs the definition of an ensemble of emerging performers working under the direction of established directors, choreographers as a *graduate-performance-company*. The ensemble is connected to the theatre profession by an association with a conservatory, with an established sponsoring performance company, or with both.

