



 [Print this article](#) |  [Close this window](#)

VCA alumni fuming over college changes

Miki Perkins

August 1, 2009 - 12:00AM

WHEN comedian, actor and *RocKwiz* host Julia Zemiro auditioned for a place at the Victorian College of the Arts she soon realised she didn't want to study drama anywhere else.

The young Sydneysider liked the collegiate atmosphere and the lecturers' "no bullshit" approach: "From day one you were straight in there and learning the craft by doing it."

But 15 years later Zemiro and other prominent VCA alumni — including *Summer Heights High* director Stuart McDonald, musical theatre performer Anne Wood and talent agent Ian White — are livid about changes afoot at their alma mater.

Following its merger with Melbourne University's faculty of music — creating the Victorian College of the Arts and Music — the college is now slowly phasing in the university's so-called Melbourne model, a broad undergraduate degree with postgrad specialisation.

Ahead of the model's introduction in 2011, the college's six schools have been merged into three, 12 casual support staff have been lost and staff fear more job cuts. The inaugural musical theatre course has been axed a year after it opened and puppetry has also closed. Curriculum plans seen by *The Age* show the semester will contract from 16 weeks to 12 next year.

Zemiro and the other alumni warn that students will not get enough practical experience to be employable in a cut-throat industry.

It will no longer be able to compete with nationally recognised institutions such as Sydney's NIDA and the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, they say.

McDonald believes the institution has a tradition of creative freedom, turning out directors like Andrew Dominik (*Chopper*) and Sarah Watt (*My Year without Sex* and *Look Both Ways*).

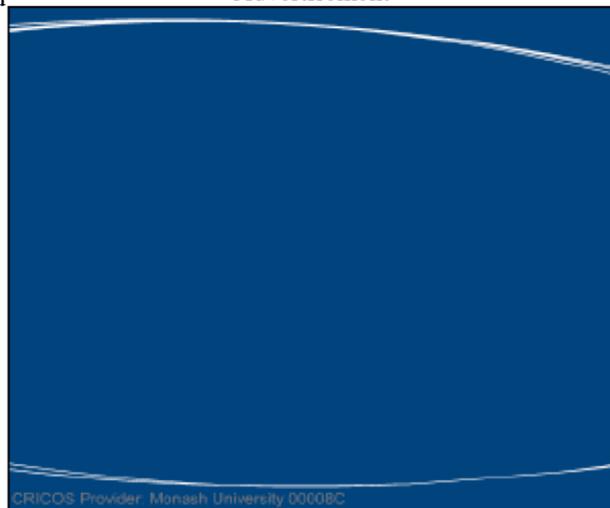
"You learn through doing, you don't learn through talking about it," he said yesterday. "There is an 'ecology' of the arts in Melbourne, and it surrounds the VCA."

Wood agrees, saying that while students do specialised training, they often work in complementary fields — opera graduates do musical theatre, drama graduates go into film.

Melbourne University argues that the college is in debt and a change to the curriculum is 30 years overdue. There will continue to be a wide variety of opportunities for practical training, it says.

Asked if there would be further job cuts, university communications manager Christina Buckridge said the axing of 220 university-wide positions — announced earlier this week — were the only ones planned. VCAM would continue

Advertisement



to play a significant role, she said.

Staff say the university has underestimated the depth of community concern about the changes. A former arts minister, Race Mathews, has called on the state and federal governments to intervene and musical theatre alumni put on a tongue-in-cheek concert — *Disappearing Act* — to protest against the changes.

Zemiro warns that reducing sessional teachers will sever links to the arts industry and — importantly — jobs. White, who sources performers for shows like *Wicked* and *Jersey Boys*, is appalled that the musical theatre course has been suspended. Agents demand a high level of practical experience, he said. If the VCA graduates didn't have this, talent scouts would look interstate.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/vca-alumni-fuming-over-college-changes-20090731-e4ir.html>