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Hazlehurst takes centre stage in protest against VCA changes

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August 17, 2009 - 12:00AM

AS AN acclaimed actor who has been in the industry for 35 years, Noni Hazlehurst says she smells "something distinctly rotten" going on at the former Victorian College of the Arts.

She is not sure what the future holds for the college, which has merged with Melbourne University's faculty of music in a contentious move that has resulted in job losses and courses being scrapped.

But with even more changes afoot, the award-winning actor and former *Play School* presenter believes this could well be the latest example of what she regards as the "constant diminishing and devaluing" of the arts.

Hazlehurst appeared at the college's open day yesterday to throw her weight behind the "Save the VCA" campaign against Melbourne University's new curriculum structure, the "Melbourne Model".

"If these changes ... are actually going to advance the cause of arts in society, and if all the kids who want to study here are going to be better actors, better musicians, better dancers, better producers, better technicians - fantastic. But prove it," she told hundreds of students yesterday.

Following the creation of the university's Victorian College of the Arts and Music in 2007, six schools have merged into three, 12 casual positions have been axed and musical theatre and puppetry courses have been dropped. Now, a confidential business plan seen by *The Age* has confirmed fears of further job losses. It stresses the need for a major reduction in academic and administrative staff over the next two years.

Hazlehurst, whose eldest son had considered enrolling into the musical theatre course before it was scrapped, said that because of their specialised training, graduates of the VCA were as highly regarded as those from Sydney's National Institute of Dramatic Art, the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts.

Like others who have criticised changes at the college - including actor Geoffrey Rush, former arts minister Race Mathews and TV presenter and comedian Julia Zemiro - Hazlehurst fears that practical training will give way to a more academic curriculum.

But the university has defended its changes, handing out a flyer at the open day to "debunk the myths" about the future of the college.

It said that specialisation in dance, art, theatre, film, television, production or music would be key to the new curriculum and that subjects would continue to be taught "according to international best practice".

It said that staff would be involved in developing the curriculum when it was introduced in 2011.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/hazlehurst-takes-centre-stage-in-protest-against-vca-changes-20090816-emcz.html>

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