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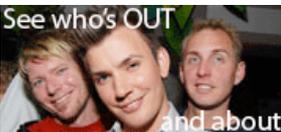
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LATEST NEWS

Transman victory

In a decision hailed as a victory by transgender activists, two transmen have won the right to be legally considered men without sex reassignment surgery.

Wedding belles at The Laird

The Laird hosted its first ever wedding on the weekend.

Nine refuses to settle with Burns

Channel Nine has refused to conciliate a complaint made by anti-discrimination campaigner Gary Burns about a May 7 episode of The NRL Footy Show.

Tassie mums recognised

Tasmanian activists have applauded the state's Lower House for passing a bill to recognise both mothers in lesbian families.

Brethren apologies for homophobic attack

Tasmanian activist Martine Delaney has said she will seriously consider a fresh anti-discrimination complaint against the Liberal Party if it attacks the human rights of transgender and intersex people in

Features - Remember my name?

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Written by Andrew Shaw

Tuesday, 18 August 2009 16:21

What happens when a university takes over an arts school? Andrew Shaw investigates.

A remake of *Fame* will splash onto our screens later this year, featuring the usual line-up of characters who need to discover who they are before they can achieve their dreams. That's how things work in Hollywood – the sudden realisation that you love your mama more than anything else, and you morph into that perfect dancer/singer she always knew you could be.

Meanwhile, on St Kilda Road in Melbourne, a real school for performers – one that's built up a reputation to rank alongside NIDA and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts – is facing what some say are devastating changes.

The Victorian College of the Arts, founded in 1972, has given hands-on, practical training to people like animator Adam Elliot, director Sarah Watt, TV presenter Julia Zemiro and choreographer Phillip Adams. Since 2007 it's been a faculty of the University of Melbourne, but before that it was a self-governing body funded by the state government. In April this year its name was changed to the Faculty of VCA and Music; that is, VCA no longer exists – meet VCAM.

The demise of the VCA is a result of a major change in the University of Melbourne's educational philosophy. The university is phasing in its 'Melbourne Model', which adopts the American practice of students taking a general undergraduate degree before enrolling in a continuing course. Although universities like Monash now spruik the fact that they still offer direct entry specialist degrees to Year 12 graduates, Melbourne is speculating its courses will gain prestige at home and abroad, since more time and (private) money will be spent producing its alumni.

But some VCA graduates, along with industry professionals, say this approach strikes at the heart of VCA's reputation for producing performers. Add to that a new dean committed to economic cutbacks – when VCA lost its independence it lost vital government funds – and alarm bells are ringing. From 2011, all VCAM students will complete a three-year degree, either in fine arts or music, with another two years' specialisation.

Scott Dawkins (pictured) completed the two-year VCA music theatre course in 2006. He's currently working on *Jersey Boys* at Princess' Theatre, and says 'specialty' is frowned upon at VCAM. "The thing they've missed is that somehow 'specialising' has become a dirty word," Dawkins says. "This is completely out of whack with the industry, and that's why the industry is up in arms – talent agents, casting agents, producers, indeed Geoffrey Rush is on ABC 774, lamenting what's happened to the VCA, as we speak."

The university has suspended VCAM's new music theatre course in its inaugural year. Current students will be its first and only graduates. "When it was suspended by the new dean, who took over this year, there were cuts. She told staff and students that she didn't know why it was approved, it should never have been approved."

The new dean is Professor Sharman Pretty, who told *The Australian* in June that "producing elite dancers that only become ballet dancers, or actors that only act, is no longer appropriate in



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Australia.”

“The only way people are learning to sustain a real career in the theatre, for example, is if they can write the play, act, make their own costume and sell the tickets.”

Dawkins disagrees: “To compare [VCAM] to another institution: it’s like going to the AIS [Australian Institute of Sport]. You don’t have swimmers at the AIS being given 25 per cent of their undergraduate degrees in commerce or science. It’s absolute madness.”

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