

The vanishing VCA



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Written by Will Conyers

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You can see it, can't you? "David Copperfield presents his latest trick – he will make the Victorian College of The Arts disappear before your very eyes! Roll up! Roll up!".

Sorry Dave. The University of Melbourne, the new illusionist on the block has beaten you to it and does it with a completely different type of sheet to cover up the subject before it becomes non-matter. No drum rolls here. Just silence. Utter silence.

So, what's going on? Well, you can read a bounty of information at www.savevca.org, but in a nutshell...

Back in 2006, it was discussed that the University of Melbourne would 'acquire' the VCA. We were assured by the Minister for Finance that:

"... the integration will guarantee that the college's role as Australia's pre-eminent provider of visual and performing arts training and education can continue.."

By 2007, the deed was done.

And so we find ourselves in 2009 and the insidious tentacles of a beast called 'The Melbourne Model' has leached its suckers onto hours, subjects and aspects of delivery down at the VCA. Broadly, TMM (The Melbourne Model) brings renegade and pesky little courses (like those at the VCA) into line with the other deliveries offered by The University of Melbourne.

In fact, one lecturer of Film & TV, Ros Walker, wrote to me:

"I have an image of the VCA as a bird, a small colourful one happily singing its heart out, and the University as a large sour vulture."

Following Andrea Hull, who served as Dean of the VCA for 14 years, we have the entrance of Sharman Pretty who appears to have a brief of faculty amalgamation and cost-cutting. Prof Pretty comes with quite a pedigree of being the 'new broom'. She spear-headed the amalgamation of the Sydney Conservatorium with the Sydney University and she is no stranger to opposition to change. Prof Pretty, (a once upon a time Oboe player herself) had this to say about the VCA: "I am astonished how siloed this campus has been. It's siloed in its programs, it's siloed in its narrow little degree programs... Producing elite dancers that only become ballet dancers, or actors that only act, is no longer appropriate in Australia. The only way people are learning to sustain a real career in theatre, for example, is if they can write the play, make their own costume and sell the tickets...The idea of someone being a specialist is a very old view."

I guess lawyers who only practise law are no longer appropriate in Australia either.

One VCA student had these words to say:

"Melbourne Uni's proposition that the Melbourne Model (via the form of the euphemistic 'New

Generation degrees') will expand our opportunities as artists at the VCA is nothing more than a cover up to the university's imperialist motivations. Sharman Pretty's assertions that the days of specialist training are outdated are ludicrous and offensive. She has repeatedly brought the college into disrepute in the media, as if its teaching philosophy of intense studio based practical classes leaves something to be desired."

Now, we have to remember that the VCA is a college for PRACTITIONERS. Always has been. And it was when the University of Melbourne acquired it. It is not a research-driven college. It is a performing arts training college that nurtures the notion that skill-acquisition and discovery happens on the floor, behind the lens, above a marionette, on the string and bow of a cello, at the barre, at the piano.

A 'silo' is precisely what these practitioners-to-be need to have: a place of safety for a time. Good choice of words, Ms Pretty. Perhaps, I have interpreted them differently?

Forget all that nonsense about 'selling the tickets', what I find unforgivably reprehensible in Pretty's quote above is the use of the word 'only'.

"Only act".

"Only dance".

These words come from a performing arts practitioner! I wonder how these words would wash with a Caroline O'Connor, a Nancye Hayes, an Anthony Warlow, a Hugh Jackman, a Geoffrey Rush. Perhaps experience as "only" an Oboe player has necessitated an expansion into more lucrative fields.

"Narrow little degree programs". If becoming a master of puppetry is a "narrow little degree", I say, "So be it!" It's called being a 'specialist'. I don't want a Dentist who can tell me about the environment. I want my teeth fixed. Brilliantly.

So – it appears that the course in Puppetry has indeed hit the deck.

The newly-developed Music Theatre Degree Course (currently in its first year) had 500 applicants and went through only 100 less auditions at commencement! That first year intake is now in its 2nd Semester and auditions/intake for next year have/has been 'suspended'.

NOTE: This course was six years in development and that development was paid for by you and I. It appears that they are taking the product back to the place of purchase but will WE see a cracker?

In the 'VCAM Business Summary 2010' [VCAM – The Faculty of the Victorian College of The Arts and Music] neither the Music Theatre Course nor the Puppetry course is mentioned.

When I studied, there were none of these 'one stop shop' degree courses (NIDA had not long started). I got on a tram to go to this ballet class, tap class, a voice class here, a drama class there. All private providers. Many of us started out like that. It was a great. Self-disciplined and self-motivated. Many of us learned our craft this way.

It was not until I got a scholarship to the National Theatre Drama School (a private provider), that I realised that an inspired and nurturing pedagogy harnesses what could otherwise be random in one's training. This is why training sanctuaries like the VCA are an imperative.

I had the privilege of being the Founding Director of and running the first East Coast Music Theatre Course at the National Theatre. Many of its alumni are in your programmes at home. But – I was

SUPPORTED. Let's take a Music Theatre Repertoire Class for example: you need the director, you need the MD, you need the choreographer. 3 staff members. We costed those classes into the fees and everyone was happy. And the National Theatre supported it.

Performing Arts training costs more. Please read again.

It's not rocket science. It's non-comparable. To 'rationalise' it into the consideration of other careers is actually I-rational.

"Why does the University want the VCA in its portfolio? It is expensive to teach practical arts (but staff can be cut and small specialist classes replaced with large lectures), the VCA is non academic..." Ros Walker

There are mandatory hours of one-on-one training. Time and tutor-heavy class ratios. Production costs. Equipment costs. The library costs are massive. But we must deliver it.

And then, the University wants to attract full-fee paying students from overseas. Fair enough. But one student asks:

"Will full-fee paying students be subjected to the same rigorous audition and selection process that takes place currently at the school, or will they be able to sidestep that?"

Good question.

And we discover yesterday (August 20, 2009) that members of Sharman Pretty's Advisory Committee have resigned (Jon Faine, ABC 774 with Sharman Pretty).

In that interview, Ms Pretty does stress that she does not want any less practical focus but wants the student body to have access to 'breadth' subjects. She also states the new curriculum has not yet been written.

The thing that irritates me – no, it pisses me off - is that once again, a Government body, the Melbourne University - that WE pay for - is actively perpetrating and feeding-into a myth that what we, as performing arts practitioners, do is not elite. That the various forms of theatre, TV, Film, Puppetry & music are not elite, vital, and imperative for a sane society.

We have been fighting against this mind set since the Greeks!

It's OUR JOB to make it look like it's easy for Christ sakes! But, to arrive at that transparency of illusion takes enormous skill, hours (nay-a lifetime) of confrontation and brutal self assessment so that our work is delivered with the responsibility of absolute truth.

Take away these hours from these practitioners-to-be and you will create a generation of loose cannon performers. The consequences are unconscionable.

I sincerely wish that there was no need for students to rally today. No need for me to write this. But like in a hospital, the patient who yells loudest gets treated first.

NOTE FROM WILL CONYERS:

Dear Reader,

Those who know me, know very well that my personal ethic and mandate is to absolutely celebrate and support the Arts, it's practitioners and to protect it's place as being vital to the preservation and survival of a sane society.

The researching and writing of this article has been, without doubt, the most depressing, anger-making and frustrating task I have undertaken in all the years I have been in the performing arts industry.

I repeat, the notion that we still have to fight for the Arts and it's sustenance is a despicable nonsense. It is an embarrassment. It is an endichment. Are we really this pathetically slow as learners? Are we all pedants?

Take a moment. Look at your favourite vase, piece of furniture, lampshade. Every one of the designers who created those pieces are ARTISTS! Next time you walk past a garden, a fountain or a statue, acknowledge that the beauty that they bring to your town was created by an ARTIST! Art does not just hang in galleries, or dances across our stages, or sings high notes, or creates the movies that you remember. ART is bloody well all around us.

Now – imagine the world without that lamp, that vase, that painting, that Wicked, that Hamlet, that puppet show you saw when you were a kid (of any age), that man that lifted that girl above his head and made it look like poetry, that water feature, that necklace, that favourite tie of yours, that breath-taking magic trick, that set that transformed before your eyes. Go on. Imagine it.

It's impossible - isn't it? So why are we still fighting for the Arts and having to bloody well justify it's existence? It's training.

My wish for the Arts is simple: that the Arts never need an advocate again and that we, as citizens, acknowledge the beauty and reflection of ourselves that only the Arts can provide. No more fighting. No more rallies.

Acceptance and support reinforced by sound and sane business practise is what I want.

You can always send your topic suggestions through to me at: straighttothepoint@aussietheatre.com