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This set model will not fit easily on the VCA stage

Editorial

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The Victorian College of the Arts is special. It should remain so.

AS ACTOR Geoffrey Rush said earlier this month, "Some people don't want to be academics. They want to be actors who can really act, or singers who can really sing." This is the nub of the growing argument against the ramifications of the merger of the Victorian College of the Arts with Melbourne University. From 2011, the university's so-called Melbourne Model will be imposed on the VCA. Six of the college's specialist training schools have been restructured into three, and students will complete a three-year degree in fine arts or music before specialising in a single postgraduate artistic discipline.

Over the past few months, support for the VCA's existing model has gained in numbers and in prominence. In May, a graduating student told a packed hall, "people could thank the University of Melbourne for ripping the heart out of the VCA". Since then there have been demonstrations and passionate speeches from students present and past and from the arts industry. Last week saw the surprise resignation of three members of the advisory committee overseeing the merger - former Melbourne Festival chairman Noel Turnbull, former Tourism Victoria chairwoman Janine Kirk and Lynne Landy, wife of former governor John Landy. Yesterday, *The Age* reported that 11 former state arts ministers across the political spectrum, including Labor's Race Mathews and former Liberal premier Jeff Kennett, had written to the university's vice-chancellor, Glyn Davis, seeking a meeting to voice their opposition.

That the future of a Melbourne cultural institution has become a matter of national concern is an accurate reflection of the important part the VCA plays not just in this city and this state, but around Australia as a proving ground for the next generation of creative performers and practitioners. Since its inception, the VCA has offered students an education that is vocation oriented. This is in counterpoint to the more formal academic training of universities and in harmony with establishments such as the National Institute of Dramatic Art, the Australian Film and Television School and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts.

The inherent danger if the restructuring proposals for the VCA go ahead, is that it will become something it was never meant to be. The Melbourne Model, which this newspaper has broadly supported as a fundamental part of the evolution of the university itself, fits as easily at the VCA as a round actor descending through a square trapdoor. To proceed with such drastic change, in the face of considerable opposition that is not without good reason, would rob Victoria of one of its most valued cultural assets, as well as put it in a different league from other similar vocational institutions.

So far, the present State Government has not contributed much to the debate. Premier John Brumby said yesterday that Arts Minister Lynne Kosky had sought assurance from the faculty dean, Professor Sharman Pretty, that 75 per cent of VCA courses will have specialist arts content. The longer the precise nature of this content goes unexplained, the longer the core issue remains: will the VCA be performance-based or an academic-focused institution?

Another, related, issue is the VCA's continuing monetary problems, which have been exacerbated by the merger with Melbourne University, itself under financial duress. Already in debt by \$1.5 million, the VCA stands to lose \$5 million in university subsidies from 2011; it also has to pay \$6 million a year in university rent. Mr Kennett said yesterday that if he had won the 1999 election, he had planned to secure the VCA's financial independence. It is to be hoped that Mr Brumby might turn the Government's attention to helping restore the sparkle to what has been called "one of the jewels in the arts in Victoria". Certainly, it is now essential - to use the theatrical term "By public demand" is not to exaggerate - for the state to become more involved in the VCA's future. There is provision for a "de-merger" agreement with the VCA, and the possibility of this step should be carefully considered if the VCA's inherent character seems in danger of extinction.

Over 35 years, the VCA has supplied the arts with a stream of the best and brightest actors, directors, artists and musicians. It is a specialist institution with special needs. It should not be jeopardised by being forced to conform to a model that does not suit it.

Ted Kennedy, tarnished but true liberal hero

EDWARD Moore Kennedy, senior US Senator for Massachusetts, lived a life that seemed to epitomise all the contradictions of his famous family. Senator Kennedy, who died yesterday aged 77, after a year-long struggle with a brain tumour, was not able to pursue the same presidential ambitions as his older brothers John Fitzgerald and Robert Francis. But neither did he succumb, as they did, to an assassin's bullets.

Edward Kennedy succeeded to the Senate seat that John vacated when elected president, though not immediately; at 28 he was two years too young to serve in the chamber, and the seat was "kept warm" until he reached 30 by Benjamin Smith, a family retainer. Edward thereafter held it continuously, making him the third-longest serving member of the Senate at the time of his death. It was assumed that he, too, as patriarch of the Kennedy clan after Robert's death, would follow his brothers' path in seeking the presidency, but that goal became unattainable after the death by drowning in 1969 of Mary Jo Kopechne, a former aide to Robert, in a car accident for which Edward was responsible. It was the most memorable, but not the only, scandal of his career, and although he did eventually announce a presidential bid, in 1980, the Democratic nomination went to Jimmy Carter.

Most Americans, however, will not judge his legacy by the scandals, or by the now rather tarnished Kennedy mystique.

Edward Kennedy was the standard bearer of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, who kept that flame alive when it was most beleaguered, during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and of George Bush, father and son. He campaigned especially for health-care reform and if universal health cover is eventually available to all Americans the achievement will belong as much to him as to the Obama Administration.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/editorial/this-set-model-will-not-fit-easily-on-the-vca-stage-20090826-ezpc.html>