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Maker of the stars in search of white knight

Gabriella Coslovich

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TOMORROW night, young Melbourne filmmaker Edward Housden could become the proud recipient of the world's most prestigious award for short films, the Palme d'Or, for his student film *Muscles*, about teenage bodybuilders.

Housden, a student at the Victorian College of the Arts and Music graduated this week - and it would not have been that tough a decision for him to skip the ceremony in Melbourne in favour of a trip to the French Riviera, where his short film is showing in the Official Selection at the Cannes Film Festival.

Only two Australian films were selected for this year's Cannes Film Festival - and both were made by graduates from the VCAM. Last night, Housden's classmate Ariel Kleiman, whose short film *Deeper Than Yesterday* was selected for Critics Week, won two awards at Cannes, the Kodak Award for best short film and the Rail d'Or, voted for by French railway workers. Housden will be hoping to follow Kleiman's accolades and possibly become the second VCA film graduate to win a Palme d'Or at Cannes (Glendyn Ivin won the award in 2003 for his short film *Cracker Bag*).

The irony is, that while VCAM graduates are in Cannes being recognised for their talents, the renowned college which nurtured them is fighting for survival.

Last week, a review commissioned by Melbourne University and independently chaired by Ziggy Switkowski was released and it made one thing blatantly clear: the college, which merged with the university in 2007, is facing a deficit of at least \$6 million a year and without a lifesaving injection of funds from the federal and state governments, its days are numbered. The VCAM finds itself at a perilous crossroad.

There is no doubting the star-making power of the college. It has an impressive roll-call of graduates: actors such as Vince Colosimo, Julia Zemiro and Sibylla Budd; playwright Hannie Rayson; Academy Award winner Adam Elliot and fellow filmmakers such as Ana Kokkinos, John Hillcoat and Sarah Watt; and visual artists such as Ricky Swallow, Patricia Piccinini and Jenny Watson. The list goes on.

Clearly, the college has been doing something right. But over the past year the VCAM formula has been under intense scrutiny. Last year, the college endured a fraught merger with Melbourne University's faculty of music, losing the internationally respected "VCA" name to become the VCAM. It also faced the threat of its specialised courses being replaced under the university's so-called Melbourne model, which requires undergraduate students to gain a broad, general education before specialising - an idea that runs counter to the VCA's focus on developing students' excellence in specialised artistic fields.

And then there was the arrival of a new dean, Sharman Pretty, a hard-nosed operator accused of being more intent on balancing the budget than inspiring the future filmmakers, artists and performers of Australia. Far from defending the college's traditions and teaching methods, Pretty has been one of its most aggressive critics. Soon after being appointed dean, she alienated teachers and students by damning the VCA's teaching model with its supposedly old-fashioned emphasis on specialisation.

"I am astonished at how siloed this campus has been," she said last year. "It's siloed in its programs, it's siloed in its narrow little degree programs."

Amid the furore of the Switkowski report's release last week, one important element was overlooked - the report undermines almost everything that Pretty has argued thus far.

The review affirmed the college's studio-based learning, intensive practice and performance. "This is an expensive

form of education and training but underpins the distinctive culture of the VCA and Music and the competencies of its graduates," the report stated.

It also affirmed the relevance of graduate programs and encouraged the reinstatement of the lost music theatre and puppetry courses. Furthermore, it recommended the postponement of the introduction of the Melbourne model until after 2012, pending further consultation.

Pretty was not available to answer *The Age's* questions this week. The dean attended the VCAM graduation ceremony on Tuesday night, but apparently left the country soon after. Melbourne University's publicity department said she was overseas and unavailable for comment. Vice-chancellor Glyn Davis was tied up in "back-to-back" meetings.

It was left to Provost Professor John Dewar to respond to questions about the viability of the dean's job in light of the Switkowski report. "The dean has the university's full support and she will be fully involved in the response to the recommendations. Of course, we will expect our deans to implement recommendations whatever their personal views," Dewar said.

The unresolved problem is money. Studio-based practice with low student-teacher ratios is expensive, and Melbourne University has been picking up the college's \$6 million-a-year deficit under an agreement expiring in 2011. What then?

This week, state Arts Minister Peter Batchelor ruled out the state government stepping in to make up the shortfall. He said financial support for the VCAM was the responsibility of the federal government. Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard has yet to receive the Switkowski report, but her office issued this statement: "The federal government is happy to participate in discussions regarding future funding arrangements between the University of Melbourne and the Victorian College of the Arts before the existing arrangement expires next year."

There is only one white knight standing in the wings: Victorian Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu, who has vowed to provide up to \$6 million extra a year to the college if the Liberals win government this year.

"This is a critical arts institution for what is the arts capital of Australia," he says. "The state government is complicit in its neglect and indifference."

Batchelor dismisses Baillieu's pledge as "hollow", an offer "made out of guilt".

It was, after all, the Howard government that got the VCA into this mess in the first place. Former education minister Brendan Nelson's education revolution fatally changed the funding mechanism for the VCA.

The college, which was being funded as a specialist organisation because of its costly studio-based learning, suddenly found itself being funded as though it were offering generic bachelor of arts degrees.

"The difference is huge ... about \$5 million a year," says Ian McRae, former president of the VCA council. McRae and then VCA director Andrea Hull met Nelson to argue their case, to no avail. Nelson expected Melbourne University, with which the VCA was affiliated, to pick up the shortfall, as the university has been doing since.

Batchelor expects the university to continue to do so.

"I am not aware of any statements made by the university or any indication given by the university that they will not continue to subsidise the VCAM," he told *The Age* this week.

Meanwhile, the VCAM's supporters will have to wait at least another three months for the university's response to the Switkowski report - a wait that has angered the SAVE VCA group, who see this as simply more tactical stalling.

"By August we'll be just three months to the end of semester, meaning 2011 will be the same for the VCAM as 2010, so no music theatre, no puppetry, no postgraduate documentary and visual effects courses, and no certainty for applicants about the Melbourne model," says Scott Dawkins, a graduate of the VCAM's music theatre course and member of SAVE VCA. "This is a calculated move by Davis ... another year like 2010."

With the federal election between mid-July and October, and the state election set for November 27, the fate of the VCAM could become a hot political issue.

SAVE VCA will be doing its best to ensure that it does. And if Edward Housden wins that Palme d'Or tomorrow night following on from Kleiman's win, it will be a victory loaded with symbolic meaning.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/maker-of-the-stars-in-search-of-white-knight-20100521-w1yg.html>