

Farrago

Now or Never for the VCA

Monday, July 26 2010

Hugo Chiarella

With state and federal elections looming, the passion and fervor that instigated the monumental Save VCA rally of last August finally has somewhere to go. For those who weren't part of the debate, now is the time to get engaged and get involved. It is now or never for the VCA, writes *Hugo Chiarella*



Until 2006 the VCA was run as an independently administered affiliate of the University of Melbourne, receiving additional federal funding to cover the high costs of practical training being delivered across the entire arts spectrum (dance, drama, music, production including puppetry, film & TV, art and more recently, music

theatre). In 2005, under the Howard government, the then education minister Brendan Nelson introduced amendments to the national “cluster” funding model that resulted in a \$5 million annual cut for the VCA.

In an attempt to return some financial security to VCA, the Victorian Government merged VCA and the University of Melbourne, to create the “Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts” in 2007. As part of the merger the University inherited all VCA’s assets (at the time valued at \$103m) yet would only have to pick up the annual VCA deficit until 2011. In 2009 the merger was expanded by the State Government, joining the Faculty of Music with the Faculty of VCA, to create the oddly named Faculty of VCAM. At the same time, Professor Sharman Pretty, or “The Chainsaw” as she was reputedly nicknamed in her previous position at Auckland University, was appointed as Dean of the VCAM. Pretty made clear from the outset she was interested in two things – the implementation of the Melbourne Model at VCA and getting rid of any reliance on University subsidy.

Arriving at the VCAM at the start of 2009 as part of the inaugural intake of the newly instated Bachelor of Music Theatre, I was entirely ignorant of this turbulent history. My first semester was not even complete when speculation began to circulate about changes in the offing that would potentially compromise the nature of the training at the VCAM. By May we were informed that, while the current intake would be “taught out”, future intake for the Bachelor of Music Theatre would be suspended from 2010. Puppetry was also “suspended” (the only course of its kind in the country) and since that time, Film & TV Documentary and Visual Effects have also been suspended. The atmosphere on campus quickly turned from one of concerned curiosity to heated indignation. Crisis meetings were held with concerned students and staff, rumors of staff cuts began emerging, documents were leaked and piece-by-piece a picture of the direction the VCAM was heading in began to come to light.

Of particular concern was a perceived shift in the pedagogical tenets of the school. The leaked 2011 Business plan talks of a shift from a model of “apprenticeship/certification/entitlement” to one of “discovery/ownership/accountability”. The general consensus among students was that this was simply parlance for broader, theory-based classes with fewer contact hours and a larger intake. This view was compounded by discussion surrounding the implementation of the controversial “Melbourne Model” that would see the current courses re-worked to accommodate a 25% “Breadth Study” component. This, on top of a 25% decrease in semester length to align the VCAM with the UOM academic calendar would essentially mean a 50% reduction to the practical training hours as offered in the current courses.

In an email to the students, Pretty defended the integrity of the Melbourne Model courses as “stand-alone degrees with depth of specialisation” that would “be taught to international best practice standards” (despite Pretty herself having told *The Australian* that specialisation was a “very old view”). This continued assurance, while on one level comforting, failed to address the motivation behind the changes. At every turn it was difficult to ignore the fact that the instigating factor behind the curriculum review had become financial rather than educational. As playwright, David Hare, writes in his essay *Ah! Mischief*, “All around me there is evidence that, as in all over-inflated institutions, the chief loyalty of those in charge has come to be to the

institution itself and not to its original purpose. The evidence exists that the executive has become deferential to government.” There was a sense that the executive staff of the VCAM had lost sight of why it is that people come to an institution like the VCAM in the first place.

What became known as the “SAVEVCA” campaign was quickly gaining momentum on campus. Meetings were held more and more frequently as the official campaign song, *The Final Countdown*, would blast across the Southbank campus beckoning students to come together and take action. Noni Hazelhurst launched the official “Save VCA Week” at the VCA open day on the 16th of August 2009. A tent city was set up in front of the college and what followed was more akin to a festival than a protest. Activism was replaced by creativity, anger by celebration. Dancers performed ballet barre across the Yarra footbridge, musicians mounted a silent symphony in front of the Victorian Arts Centre, actors staged Romeo and Juliet’s balcony scene en masse at Spencer St Station, music theatre students formed singing flash mobs across the city and every night the tent city on St Kilda Rd would come alive with musicians jamming and students dancing on the median strip. The communal charge among the students was palpable. The week’s activities concluded on the Friday with a march from the VCA to the steps of parliament. Hosted by Julia Zemiro, the march was bookended by speeches from the likes of Geoffrey Rush, Race Mathews, John Michael Howson, State Liberal MP Heidi Victoria and State Greens MP Sue Pennecuik. According to the *Herald Sun*, 2000 people attended the march; the Save VCA petition attracted 15,000 signatures, media across the country reported the story—surely someone was bound to sit up and pay attention.

In the wake of the protest march, a motion was tabled in the Victorian Upper House, expressing “its concern about the proposed changes to the Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts curriculum and budget cuts by the University of Melbourne”. An expression of concern however, was not going to secure the college the funding necessary to bridge a \$5 million annual shortfall.

What commenced from here on in was a game of political hot potato in which, conveniently, everyone in a position of power absolved themselves of responsibility and nothing was achieved. The then Victorian Minister for the Arts, Lynne Kosky, said in an interview with *Stateline*, “State Governments have never funded tertiary institutions. That is rightly the responsibility of the Federal Government in terms of the operating funding.” The then Education Minister, Julia Gillard, put the onus back on the University of Melbourne saying, “The VCA has been funded by the Australian Government as a higher education provider rather than a cultural institution... As an autonomous institution, the University of Melbourne is responsible for managing its internal affairs...” To all those who had just spent the last three months rallying against the University’s management of its internal affairs, this didn’t seem like much of a consolation.

In November of last year the university released a discussion paper, *Defining the Future*, calling for submissions from concerned parties regarding the way forward for the VCA. These submissions were to be evaluated by an apparently independent review committee who would then compile a series of formal recommendations based on their findings. In early February of this year the VCAM review committee was

announced. Chaired by Ziggy Switowski, perhaps the most alarming thing about the purportedly “independent” review committee was the fact that of the nine positions available only two had been elected. The rest had been personally appointed by Dean Pretty and Vice Chancellor Glyn Davis. Four of that seven were the current VCAM heads of school, three of whom have been quite outspoken in their support of the Melbourne Model and/or of the merger. Of the 371 submissions that did come in, however, the overwhelming sentiment was that the merger was threatening to jeopardize the very foundations that made the VCA important to staff, students and the arts business.

When the Review Committee did publish their report in May, perhaps one of the most affirmative recommendations was the suggestion that any implementation of the Melbourne Model be postponed until at least 2013 pending further consultation. The report also endorsed VCA’s traditional method of intensive, specialised training. Aside from this, it is difficult to find much in the way of practical steps forward amidst the rhetoric of the review report. As it states, “This report stops short of proposing an inspirational strategic plan for the VCAM... It was uncommon to have a unanimous view on any issue, or even a majority one where several alternatives were discussed.” The value of recommendations that make such apologies at their commencement is questionable at best and at worst inconsequential.

So where does that leave us? On Thursday the 22nd of July 2010, the University of Melbourne released its response to the Switowsky report. The university “broadly endorsed” the recommendations of the report, the most significant of which being a division within the faculty of the VCA and Music. “The VCA will include the current schools of Art and Performing Arts, with the discipline of Film and Television to be recognised as a third school. The Parkville and Southbank music programs will become one school called the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music,” the university announced. These two entities will operate under separate directors responsible for curriculum and budget, both answerable to the same dean. Soon after this announcement, Dean Sharman Pretty tendered her resignation, stating that the role of the Dean under this structural reshuffling is not one that she would be interested in pursuing. While these are potentially positive developments, there are many questions yet to be answered. The UOM’s response also stipulates a curriculum review “adopting the principle of financial sustainability as a core component.” The Melbourne Model has still not been ruled out as an option for future VCA courses, and will remain a reality for the merged VCA and UOM music courses. Overshadowing all of this the reality—that the VCA requires a greater level of government subsidy to function in the way it should—remains.

The most empowered thing we as students can do for the VCA right now is vote. The very same evening the UOM released its response, Premier John Brumby announce at the Melbourne International Film Festival that the State Government are currently “having constructive conversations with the Commonwealth on the future of the VCA” and that he is “determined to deliver a solution for a sustainable, vibrant and appropriately resourced VCA into the future.” An ALP media release the same day also reported, “Following representations from Cath Bowtell, Labor Candidate for Melbourne, [Federal Education Minister] Mr Crean has agreed to consider how the

Federal Government can constructively engage with the issues raised in the University's response."

Last year the Victorian Liberals also announced a promise of \$6 million in extra annual funding should they win the 2010 state election set for this November—a proposition supported by the Victorian Greens. The federal seat of Melbourne, now no longer being re-contested by federal Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner, has the highest density of artists and arts businesses in the state and possibly the country. If the Greens pick up the seat of Melbourne, they will also be in a real position to enact change. The future of the VCAM is in the hands of its staff, students, alumni and employers. And make no mistake—people are fighting for your vote. [Make sure you're enrolled and your address is up to date \(http://www.aec.gov.au\)](http://www.aec.gov.au). Anyone really wishing to show their support can email [Simon Crean](mailto:Simon.Crean@aph.gov.au) (<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/members/member.asp?id=DT4>) and demand recurring federal funding of at least \$6 million per annum. Staying informed and engaged is the only way we will see this invaluable institution nursed back to health. Subscribe to the [SAVEVCA mailing list \(http://savevca.org/contact-us\)](http://savevca.org/contact-us) or join the [Facebook group \(http://union.unimelb.edu.au/www.facebook.com/SAVEVCA\)](http://union.unimelb.edu.au/www.facebook.com/SAVEVCA).

There's a good chance 2010 will be the year we SAVEVCA.

Hugo Chiarella is a VCA Music Theatre student and a member of SAVE VCA