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Uni of Melb backtracks

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I have to admit I didn't have anything lined up for this week's starting post. But in looking for inspiration I remembered something I received in my email last week: news about VCA. For those who aren't in the know, are overseas, or who missed the info last time around, VCA (Victorian College of the Arts) was the only institution in Australia - actually the entire Southern hemisphere - to offer formal education for puppeteers. They started the course no less than eight years ago (I can never remember the official date, but it was after I started my job in 2001), and had been cancelled last year.



What happened was, the college, being under the jurisdiction of the University of Melbourne, was being 'closed' down and merged in the Uni of Melb's normal educational offerings. This is a pretty big deal, as VCA had some of the best training in Australia for artists of a number of different fields; and has a focus on 'practical' over 'theory'. Under the Uni of Melb umbrella however, the courses would turn into mainly academic tuition, meaning a huge loss in technical, proficient training and more of an emphasis on writing essays over, you know, actually knowing how to make art.

This caused a huge uproar for students and teachers alike. Many of the staff were let go, chose to leave, stayed under protest, or simply got lost in the confusion. Students suddenly discovered they were without lecturers, a budget for their courses, some lost their course (not just the puppetry students; in the biggest turnaround ever, the musical theatre course which had been open for literally *one year* was closed), and in fact, the entire campus had been shut down and everything removed.

This past year has seen a lot of campaigning - it being an election year in Australia, it's even caught the attention of a number of hopeful politicians - and a review had been made of the action. Well, about two months ago, the review was handed down. A number of things are important to mention: puppetry got a specific callout, thanks to a well-worded submission from UNIMA Australia (and a submission in front of the review panel, in conjunction with a number of well-known puppeteers).

Secondly, last week the Uni of Melb announced that they are reversing their position, in response to this review. Well, it's almost a reversal. VCA (or VCAM as it was renamed) will remain as a single entity, the courses will remain practical and not theory-based, and the ill-appointed Dean who was going to implement the changes has resigned. You can read the full response here. There's nothing about the puppetry course, but I suspect that will be going down the drain anyway - VCA was way over-budget and I have no doubt the bean counters are looking for a way to slice and dice wherever they can.

Of course, this sums up only a small fraction of the ... well, fracturous goings-on at the Uni of Melb. From conversations with those affiliated with the uni, it was

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obvious that the only thing *anyone* knew in the past year was that *nothing* was known. Teachers themselves have been left out of the loop. ... And suddenly I'm extremely grateful that I never attended.

Although it's not safe to yell 'hurrah' yet, this is a good sign. Make enough noise, and the administrators will listen. Arts activism and advocacy works; and that you can never be too complacent about making sure your local university, college, politician, or whoever, knows how much the arts means to you.

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