

Ms. Cheyney Caddy BPA, PGDip Perf. Creat.

CONTACT DETAILS REMOVED BY SAVE VCA

Saturday the 23rd of January, 2010

The VCA Review Committee
C/- University of Melbourne

By email: vcam-feedback@unimelb.edu.au

Re: Discussion Paper

Dear Review Committee,

My name is Cheyney Caddy and I am a 2009 graduate from the Victorian College of the Arts' Postgraduate Diploma in Performance Creation, specialising in directing live theatre.

In 2008 I applied for the VCA's directing program at the recommendation of the then Head of the School of English Communication and Performance Studies at Monash University, Professor Peter Snow. Having followed my progress through my undergraduate degree he knew that, while I wanted to develop industry level skills in the pursuit of a commercially successful career as a director, more important to me was education in an institution which would value and nurture my own individual enquiry as an artist and academic. How fortunate I was to have the advice of the learned Professor Snow who recommended the Victorian College of the Arts *over NIDA* and even *over his own University's post-graduate program*. More fortunate still to be accepted as a student into an institution which, I would stress, is **utterly unique**.

Whilst my tertiary education followed the pathway proposed in the Melbourne Model for the VCA - three years of more generalised undergraduate study, followed by intensive training at postgraduate level - I firmly believe that **the Melbourne Model is not appropriate at the VCA**.

As a director, such a structure may have suited me but it does not suit performers, nor students from the School of Production. To be an actor of calibre or to work at the highest level in production one needs intensive, specialist training, delivered over a practical amount of time. My career as a director will rely upon the sustained ability of the VCA to produce quality graduates from the Schools of Theatre and Production. It depends on the graduates of the Puppetry and Musical Theatre courses which have now been abolished indefinitely by the University.

I feel that is not just a question of quality arts education in the state of Victoria, but a question of arts education nationally. The function performed by the Victorian College of the Arts in the Performing Arts cannot be fulfilled by WAAPA or NIDA. The disparate orientations of each of the three elite drama schools – NIDA, WAAPA *and the VCA*, produce graduates of completely different kinds. The continued contribution of a diverse range of artists is fundamental to the future of the Arts in this country. The VCA is distinctive and it cannot be replaced.

I would also like to strongly contest the assumption represented in Melbourne University's statements to the media that the VCA's practiced-based model for education is somehow unbalanced or lacking intellectually and in need of replacement.

Practical training does not and has not excluded academic involvement at the VCA. Performance as research or *for* research has long been accepted by the international arts community as of equivalent importance to other research models. I refer the Committee to the website of The Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies (www.adsa.edu.au) which, as the peak academic body in the region, clearly recognises the importance of practice to academia. Learning by doing is not a pipe-dream.

In the VCA I found an institution striving to serve the parallel and co-dependant career paths of artist and academic. During my time as a student I witnessed only the highest commitment from staff and students alike to being *both* a cutting-edge place of training and also of research. I would suggest that any failure to deliver graduates of less than world class – and there has been no evidence of this to date – would be a failure caused by systematic under-resourcing, rather than a failure of ideology or curriculum.

The curriculum I studied at the VCA was extraordinarily dynamic and challenging. It was a curriculum which evolved from year to year, even month to month, which truly replied to the needs of the present. There is nothing ‘old’ or ‘narrow’ about degree programs which can respond as quickly as the VCA’s to address innovations in the field. My experience is that, within the structure of traditional tertiary arts education, semantic shifts generally take much longer to occur and a longer time again to filter down into teaching curriculum. The model formerly in place at the VCA facilitated first-class education through a constant dialogue between students, staff and the wider arts community, and the College’s continued ability to provide it depends on the following conditions:

- A small ratio of students to teaching staff.
- Generous contact hours.
- The provision of funds for sessional staff from the arts industry at large.
- A flexible structure for teaching and assessment.

Any future curriculum for the VCA must meet these conditions, to no less a degree than they were being met when I was enrolled in 2009 and preferably to a greater extent since, in 2009, we were already feeling the erosion caused by lack of funding for staff and inappropriate assessment and teaching structures imposed by the University of Melbourne upon the College.

In practical terms, I would like to offer the following feedback in relation to the Discussion Paper:

Curriculum

I support the retention of the VCA as an elite arts training institution with a focus on intensive, practical, studio-based training. VCA should continue to offer degree-award courses across all art streams including Drama, Dance, Music Theatre, Production, Art, Music and Film and Television.

I do not believe there is a need to add ‘breadth’ to the VCA programs through the introduction of the Melbourne Model.

I believe any move away from the intensive, studio-based training in defined areas of specialisation threatens the ability of VCA’s students to compete with graduates of other schools like NIDA and WAAPA, and would make VCA graduates less work-ready. This would in turn impact upon arts business by causing a decline in the availability of Victorian-based graduate artisans with the skills required to enter the workforce.

I do support regular curriculum review at VCA to ensure the College continues to meet the rapidly changing demands of students and their future employers. All reviews should include extensive consultation with all stakeholders and operate independently from VCA and University of Melbourne (UoM) management.

Funding & Structure

I support the view that the optimum outcome for VCA is to be an independent institution, capable of awarding its own degrees and managing its own curriculum.

Accordingly, I suggest that direct Arts Ministry funding (through inclusion in the Australian Roundtable program) at levels comparable to NIDA, is the best hope for a financially sound, independent VCA. I encourage the UoM to aggressively pursue this option, drawing upon the great public and industry interest in VCA evident in recent times.

In the interim, I support calls for the Federal Government to immediately reverse the 2005 \$5m p/a funding cut to VCA. I believe the Federal Government is putting great strain on both the University and VCA by holding off on this review until 2012, and is thereby threatening elite arts education in Australia.

I also support calls for the Victorian Government to commit to sustained funding for VCA to supplement the Federal contribution. I support the Victorian Shadow Minister for the Arts' suggestion that this sum be in the ballpark of \$6m p/a or alternatively in the guise of a sustained contribution to VCA infrastructure development.

I support the demerger of UoM Music and VCA Music from the 2011 academic year. I believe this outcome would return choice to the music education sphere, so that students can choose between a Melbourne Model based degree with strong ties to scholarship and research (UoM Music) and completely practical, studio-based training (VCA Music). Demerger would also address the unworkable constraints of having two music campuses. I support this demerger regardless of whether VCA remains a faculty of the University or becomes independent.

As secondary structural options, I would also support investigation of VCA being transferred to another University that was willing to retain the practical nature of VCA's courses OR VCA becoming an autonomous VET institution. In either case, the Federal and State Governments would need to recognise the unique cost of providing elite arts education and fund VCA's new guise appropriately.

I support the pursuit of new income streams (e.g. extended post-graduate programs, open programs, pursuing international students) and believe VCA's best chance of obtaining this income is by committing to the supply of intensive, studio-based training which is most attractive to the arts education marketplace.

Leadership

I am concerned the current senior leadership of Victorian College of the Arts & Music does not necessarily represent the views of the current staff and students. As such, I would support a review of VCAM management as part of any structural and/or funding changes, with particular preference for allowing students and staff a direct say in appointments of the Dean, Deputy Dean and Heads of School.

I support a greater, active involvement by both the Victorian State and Federal Governments at VCA, to ensure Australia's arts education and arts business landscapes are better safeguarded than has been evident throughout 2009.

Accountability

I would urge the University of Melbourne to address contraventions of the Heads of Agreement that merged UoM with VCA. Particularly:

- Reinstating the VCA name.

- Reinstating the VCA logo.
- Reinstating VCA's unique graduation ceremony.
- Reversing the alignment of VCA and UoM's funding arrangements, which was not due until the fifth year of integration.
- And in the interim of VCA's future being decided, UoM should allow VCA "to continue to exercise high levels of autonomy over the conduct and future development of its educational programs [including] the VCA's commitment to provide individual and small group tuition within an arts practice environment with an emphasis on context, performance, production and exhibition and with studio practice as its core."

Students & Staff

I express concern that many talented and valuable teaching staff will not be returning to VCA in 2010.

I also express concern that suggestions the Melbourne Model would be applied to VCA, and news of staff leaving, may have impacted upon VCA's attractiveness to high calibre applicants.

As such, I would support new mechanisms to actively retain quality staff, such as formal, quarterly opportunities for VCA staff to supply feedback to VCAM Management (both anonymously and publicly).

I would also encourage a renewed drive to attract high calibre students as part of any 're-launch' of an independent VCA, through emphasising the College's continued commitment to providing 100% practical education across the entire arts spectrum.

Future

I look forward to VCA emerging from the turmoil of the last year as a stronger institution, capable of answering student demand for the highest level of intensive, wholly practical-based, studio training across the entire arts spectrum. I am confident the protection of this ideal will ensure VCA graduates will continue to have the best chance of making a career in one of the most competitive industries in the country. In doing this, we also support a vibrant Australian artistic culture and ever-expanding arts business.

Yours sincerely,

Cheyney Caddy, BPA PGDip Perf. Creat.