

The Oxford School of Drama

Inspection of colleges participating in the Dance and Drama Award scheme

Unique reference number: 53771

Name of lead inspector: Alan Marsh HMI

Last day of inspection: 17 February 2011

Address: Sansomes Farm Studios
Woodstock
OX20 1ER

Telephone number: 01993 812883

Website: www.oxforddrama.ac.uk

Information about the college

1. The Oxford School of Drama is a private drama school that trains students for employment as actors. It runs both a three-year course and a one-year course in acting. Both courses are accredited by the National Council for Drama Training. Almost all students take the national diploma or national certificate in professional acting awarded by Trinity College, London. The school is a member of the Conference of Drama Schools.
2. The school is based on a single site in Woodstock, Oxfordshire, but attracts students from across the country and abroad. There are currently 73 students enrolled at the school, of whom 52 (71%) are in receipt of dance and drama awards (DaDA) funded by the Young People's Learning Agency. Fifty-four students are on the three-year course and 19 are on the one-year course.

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 1
Capacity to improve	Grade 1

Overall effectiveness

3. The Oxford School of Drama is an outstanding school, with outstanding capacity to improve yet further. The school is at the forefront of professional training for actors. Students and staff share a passion for acting and for learning. Under their teachers' diligent and highly skilled tuition, students grow into self-reliant practitioners who are constantly reflecting on their own work and striving to improve it. They also come to understand and embrace the essentially collaborative nature of acting, and the school operates as an exciting creative ensemble. Students make outstanding progress. Over the last three years, almost all students have successfully completed their training and gained their professional certificate or diploma. Most students secure work as actors within six months of completing their training, and many quickly build a strong portfolio of contracts. The proportions who secure significant jobs continue to grow steadily.
4. Teaching is highly stimulating and students respond with energy, flair and unstinting commitment. Teachers create a trusting collaborative environment within which each student is developed to their full potential. The work is concentrated and intense but never loses its sense of play and personal discovery. Students take risks, feel free to fail, and know how to learn. Theory and practice, and the various technical disciplines that make up the training, are all expertly integrated. The assessment of work is regular and comprehensive. Students receive detailed feedback from all their teachers and have a clear idea

of which aspects of their work need to be developed and how. The use of individual learning plans to set discipline-specific targets and goals is, however, inconsistent and these are as yet of limited value in helping most students take full responsibility for their own improvement.

5. The course is outstandingly well designed and fully equips students to become actors. In addition to the core technical disciplines needed by an actor, students learn the entrepreneurial skills that will enable them to make and promote their own work with confidence. Innovative partnerships and professional links, such as those established with a new writing company, serve the needs of students in direct and very effective ways. Support and guidance are outstanding, with students' personal welfare and particular learning needs being identified and fully satisfied.
6. The college is inspirationally led and extremely well managed. Students continue to achieve outstanding results, and the school tracks their employment histories with increasing success. The small size of the school and the individually tailored tuition and challenges that students receive ensure that each student enjoys sharply focused personal training to suit their aptitudes and needs. Collectively, students also feel that they are fully valued and that their opinions are sought and heard. The school's self-assessment is comprehensive and insightful, although the lesson observations it conducts are too variable and what emerges is an incomplete picture of what constitute the most and least effective features of teaching.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What students like:

- the very close attention given to each individual, so that training is tailored to each student's personal aptitudes, talents and technical needs
- the intimate, supportive family environment that stems from the small scale of the school, its setting and the way in which teachers treat them
- consistently high standards of teaching that stimulate and motivate them to strive for the very best they can achieve
- the holistic approach to the training of the actor that ensures that the different disciplines are fully integrated
- the use of black working clothes to create a neutrality in lessons and workshops, allowing students to focus entirely on developing their personal qualities and skills within an ensemble
- the carefully managed and growing emphasis throughout the course on preparing for the rigours and vicissitudes of professional work
- the open and trusting nature of all communications between themselves, their teachers and the Principal
- the fact that they are not allowed to settle for easy or comfortable creative choices in their work, but encouraged to be brave and take risks

- the highly efficient organisation that underpins all aspects of how the school is run.

What students would like to see improved:

- the lack of a studio space in which they might work when they are not actively engaged in lessons or rehearsals
- the opportunities to stay later and work on some further evenings in the week
- notification of the plan of the programme of work for one-year students
- the range and quality of food on offer.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- both the technical skills and the attitudes to professional work that are required in the industry
- a unique atmosphere of focus and diligence that prevails amongst students and staff at the school

What employers would like to see improved:

- no areas for specific improvement were identified by employers.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 1

7. Outcomes for students are outstanding and continuing to improve. Students increasingly secure significant work and more sustainable profiles of regular employment. The standard of work in lessons and rehearsals is excellent. Students make outstanding progress, although the school only evaluates this at individual student level through the personal reports that are made on students' assessed work. Teaching and learning are outstanding, as are the design and implementation of the curriculum and the guidance and support given to students. Students are fully engaged in the life of their school: they bring undivided commitment to their work and embrace its challenges with personal dedication, creative flair and an enormous sense of collaborative play.
8. The school is inspirationally led and scrupulously managed. The school's capacity to attract the attention of significant agents and casting directors is

excellent and growing all the time. Communications are open and transparent and all staff feel highly valued. Integrated teamwork is pervasive. Self-assessment and planning for improvement are insightful, accurate and ambitious, although the observations of teaching and learning could be carried out with more consistent penetration and whole-school analysis.

Outcomes for students

Grade 1

9. Most students who complete the course secure related employment as actors within six months of leaving. Many go on to secure a number of further contracts and extend their professional profile successfully within their first year of working. Around 90% of students have achieved this ambition in each of the last three years to 2010. A growing number are taken on by agents who are in a position to help them gain significant work, and the detailed records kept by the school show that the proportion of students who secure high-profile jobs has increased steadily since the last inspection. Typical professional jobs taken by students include regional and national theatre productions; small-scale, site-specific and fringe theatre roles; and radio, short and feature film and television roles and voice-overs. Students also acquire the entrepreneurial skills to make and promote their own work, and many do this successfully.
10. Almost all students complete their training. The school sets very high expectations for attendance, commitment, teamwork and professional discipline. Very occasionally a student is asked to leave if, after much support and several warnings, they persistently infringe these requirements. However, if a student has to discontinue the course for any other reason, such as ill-health or financial problems, the school offers them an opportunity to resit a year of the course. It is a mark of the excellent care and guidance that students receive that the one or two students who have recently chosen to do this have subsequently completed successfully. The intimate scale of the school community and the emotional and social support provided by staff and other students alike mean that the intensive, transformational nature of students' training takes place in an environment of mutual trust and respect.
11. Almost all students take either the certificate or the diploma in professional acting awarded by Trinity College, London. Over the last three years, all students who took it have passed this qualification. Recent reports produced by Trinity College, London show that the standard of performance is very impressive. An unusually high proportion of students are identified by assessors as being outstanding or performing well against a national standard. Very strong ensemble work is noted, with students making bold character choices and having the vocal and physical techniques to realise them fully in performance. Students act with sustained commitment and disciplined focus, bringing a persuasive emotional range to their roles and compelling an audience with the conviction of their playing. Students' reflective journals are extensive, searching and full of valuable insight. In lessons, inspectors found that students were working at a very high level in a fully concentrated way. They demonstrated a confident capacity to apply learning at their own independent level whilst retaining an open, collaborative approach to the work.

12. Students are selected from highly competitive auditions and comprehensive interviews, and most make outstanding progress from their different starting points. They are prepared excellently both for the vicissitudes of a career as an actor and for the likely need to make their own work and handle its promotion. Students' personal progress towards training goals and targets is comprehensively monitored through the regular and varied assessments that result in detailed reports on each aspect of their development. Although these conclude with a termly tutorial that reviews overall progress, the school does not make the rate or extent of each student's progress in relation to aptitude or prior expectations an explicit feature of this dialogue. This aspect of how well students do, compared with how well they might do, is not evaluated systematically, either for each individual student or for each discipline. Very safe practices are learned and applied in studios and performance spaces, and students feel entirely secure in the school. The training is supported very well by a body conditioning regime, by movement and voice lessons and by advice and guidance on nutrition and personal welfare that provide students with the means to look after themselves and minimise the risk of injury or illness.

The quality of provision

Grade 1

13. Teaching and learning are outstanding. Teachers create a fertile environment for dynamic, collaborative, exploratory learning and students respond with passion and purpose. Students are highly disciplined and fully committed in lessons, engaging excitedly in every challenge they meet and embracing their teachers' skilful invitation to take risks and be brave in their work. The creative environment in lessons is such that students feel free to fail, and their collective learning is uniquely enhanced as a result. Teachers ensure that students understand the need to integrate all their key disciplines. They emphasise the primacy of the practical application of skills in a performance context, but constantly refer students back to the theories and concepts that underpin the work. Consequently, students' understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it, the process of their work, develops alongside their creative expression as actors. They emerge as mature, independent learners who know that the end of their formal training is only the end of the beginning of their development as performers. Indeed, much of the teaching about how to interpret text, tell stories, and realise character through the use of speech, song and movement helps students see how they might bring their own emotional and social selves into the service of their art.
14. Students develop early on the habit of self-critical reflection in lessons, and this is nurtured and refined to a high level of insight by attentive teachers who will not let students settle for easy or indiscriminate creative choices. Criticism by both teachers and other students in a group is offered with care and sensitivity, and teachers ensure that it is tailored to the particular learning needs of each student. Students are very trusting and supportive of each other, but every student is ambitious for their own growth and praise is only valued when deservedly earned. Each year group builds a strong sense of its own high

standards, and these corporate expectations motivate all students keenly. In a few lessons, students are not as sharply attentive of the work of their peers as they might be, and occasionally teachers miss opportunities to coax comments from those students who are not volunteering them. When students are given significant responsibility in this respect, they thrive. For example, in one advanced voice lesson, all the preparatory work for a further session on a specific dialect was conducted by two students, whilst the teacher made extensive notes on each student's personal response as well as on how the two students carried out the exercises. The two workshop leaders generated a huge sense of purposeful fun as well as ensuring that each student worked on freeing their voice in a systematic and technically legitimate way. With the exercises being led by two of their peers and further scrutinised by their teacher, participating students responded with heightened attention to detail and took full responsibility for working on their own expressive instruments.

15. Assessment and feedback are clear and detailed, and the thorough process gives students a very good idea of which aspects of their work need to be improved. Teachers of disciplines usually pinpoint exactly how well a student has implemented particular techniques or realised a set of objectives in their own area of expertise. Because all core teachers watch each formal assessment, the degree of cross-referencing between disciplines is excellent, and termly tutorials with the Principal enable each student to discuss their overall progress. Students then set their own targets deriving from their assessment reports and tutorials in their individual learning plans. However, these vary considerably in their effectiveness, partly because of the different ways in which both students and teachers choose to use them, and partly because they are not monitored systematically. Their potential value in helping each student reach their full potential is not yet realised. The school also acknowledges that there is some inconsistency in the interpretation of the criteria against which teachers mark and grade students.
16. The course is designed around an outstanding combination and integration of the several disciplines required for the professional training of actors in theatre, television, radio and film, together with lessons in professional development which put everything in the context of securing, or making and promoting, paid work. Everything students learn is geared to the flexible demands of the industry in which they wish to work and to the unpredictability of such demands. The work of students in each discipline is discussed daily in the staff room, and the small-scale nature of the school enables this approach to be highly effective. The balance of the time allotted to different work is continuously reviewed, and students are fully engaged in discussion about the changing balance of the curriculum. The school is very responsive to students' comments about this aspect of their training.
17. The school has excellent connections with large numbers of professional practitioners, including some of prominence, and it uses these judiciously to promote its students and guide the development of its work. It has extended and strengthened its showcase activity since the last inspection and creates plentiful opportunities for students to be seen by agents and casting directors. A recent innovative partnership with a new writing company has further enhanced

the capacity of the school to mount work that gives proper and more even exposure to each student in a group, since the work is made on and with the students concerned.

18. Support and guidance, both personal and professional, are outstanding. The teaching team is readily available to all students to discuss any issue in an environment of mutual trust. The Principal, who is also a core acting teacher, pays meticulous attention to the educational and welfare needs of every student. The school operates in a wholly communal way and its size and location allow for such an approach to be highly effective. Specialist professional advice and support are available as required through a wider network of counsellors and medical practitioners. Students with additional learning needs are identified and closely supported through their course. The course is intense and students are put under significant emotional, social and physical pressure in order to develop the resilience they need to succeed in the industry; yet the support and guidance they receive is so good that hardly any student ever fails to complete the course successfully.

Leadership and management

Grade 1

19. Leadership and management are outstanding. The significance and depth of the profile of students' professional destinations have improved still further since the last inspection, and the school is increasingly realising its ambition to be amongst the most talented students' first choices for their professional training as an actor. This profile of destinations is becoming increasingly comprehensive because of the time and effort the school puts into contacting ex-students and researching the industry's data records. The Principal is an inspirational leader whose philosophy of training actors continues to drive the ethos of the school. This ethos is shared and transmitted by a highly committed, integrated teaching and administrative team who create a familial environment in which students thrive. Communications between all staff and students are excellent. Students benefit from the relatively small size of the school by receiving very close attention to their individual development. They emerge as self-reliant, reflective practitioners who relish the collaborative nature of their work. They enjoy plentiful opportunities to take creative risks in an environment that combines trust, aspiration and support. The Board of Trustees advises and promotes the school effectively from a professional standpoint, and so further contributes to improving students' employment prospects.
20. The college's self-assessment process is incisive and meticulous in many respects, but the final report has little to say about the quality or characteristics of teaching or learning. The main vehicle for the formal review is an annual two-day retreat in which all staff contribute to detailed evaluative discussion. This works well in identifying practices that are not functioning as well as the school might wish: for example, the 2010 retreat revealed that students' individual learning plans were being used inconsistently and with variable impact. However, this annual review is not informed by a preliminary summary of the outcomes from the observation of lessons that take place through the year. These observations themselves vary in depth and detail: some of the best

examples emerge from the highly effective practice of peer observation, but the lack of standardisation produces inconsistent results and several observations fail to give teachers points to reflect on further.

22. Arrangements to keep students safe and secure are good. The school expects high standards of respect, tolerance and collaboration and these are met. Students play a full role in the life of their school, and feel able to discuss any issue freely and openly. Their voice is listened to and what they say materially shapes the operational management of the school. The school's promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. In training students for an intensely competitive industry, the school maintains a rigorous sense of fairness and transparency in all its dealings with them. For several years the school has recruited a higher proportion of its students from minority ethnic groups, and from applicants who are registered disabled, than elsewhere in this sector. It collects a wide range of data, but the relative destinations of different categories of student are not currently analysed.
23. The school makes excellent use of its resources. Since the last inspection, it has created a separate library with improved access to computers. The school provides outstanding value for money.

What does The Oxford School of Drama need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all students and teachers understand the place and purpose of individual learning plans within the structure of assessing students' work and setting with them targets and goals for their improvement, so that these learning plans become valuable as a working reference tool for all.
- Enable students to work more productively outside lessons or rehearsals by creating or allocating a space for them to do so.
- Include as part of the annual self-assessment retreat a more explicit review of the nature and quality of teaching and learning, in order to arrive at a collective evaluation of what constitutes the best practice in lessons.

Information about the inspection

25. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the school's executive director, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors took account of the school's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the qualification awarding body, the previous inspection report, and data on students and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
26. Inspectors observed lessons. They used group and individual interviews and emails to gain the views of students and employers. They considered questionnaires students had recently completed for the school.

Record of main findings			
Provider name	The Oxford School of Drama	Inspection number	367204
Learning types:16-18 learner responsive: FE full-time courses			

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall
Approximate number of enrolled students at the time of inspection Full-time students	73
Overall effectiveness	1
Capacity to improve	1
Outcomes for students	1
How well do students achieve and enjoy their learning?	1
How well do students attain their learning goals?	1
How well do students progress?	1
How well do students improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	1
How safe do students feel?	1
Are students able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*	2
How well do students make a positive contribution to the community?*	-
Quality of provision	1
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	1
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	1
How well partnerships with schools, colleges, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for students?	1
How effective are the care, guidance and support students receive in helping them to achieve?	1
Leadership and management	1
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	1
How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*	-
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of students?	2
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	1
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	1
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for students?	2
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	1

*where applicable to the type of provision

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231

Textphone: 0161 618 8524

E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

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