

Jane Woppard's exploration of the 'generalist versus specialist' debate in the training of theatre artists leads her to some burning questions affecting the future of theatre in Australia.

How are emerging theatre artists prepared by their training for a career in the performing arts? Are the various vocational training courses and broader drama courses equipping them with the skills they need to survive and thrive in the industry?

In the last ten years a number of drama courses have ceased to exist. The demise of the BA in Drama Studies at the University of Adelaide, the Drama Dip Ed at Rusden College and Melbourne State College in Victoria and the emergence of interdisciplinary courses at TAFEs and universities has reinvigorated the debate about generalist versus specialist training in theatre. In conversations with a range of teachers, practitioners and survivors, I found that the argument about specialist versus generalist training is fertile ground for debate – and leads us towards a larger issue.

In the '70s and '80s there were a number of teacher training courses in Australian universities and colleges which provided a broad education in the practical skills of theatre. They focused on training the 'theatre animal', a practical worker who could perform, improvise, write and teach. For the purposes of this article we will name these courses 'generalist', and the type of courses offered by WAAPA, NIDA and VCA as 'specialist'. In the mid-1980s another kind of generalist course emerged, commonly known as 'Theatre Studies' or 'Performance Studies'. For the purposes of this article we will name these courses 'interdisciplinary'.

Julian Meyrick, lecturer in Drama Studies at the University of Newcastle and freelance theatre director, provides a potted history of why the generalist drama courses emerged:

'One of the keys to an older, "mainstream" dramatic practice – the sort embodied by Australian state theatres for example – was the notion of specialisation. Basically, you worked as an apprentice in your chosen area and, over the years, came to know that area well.'

'In opposing this view of theatre craft, alternative theatre put forward a different conception of the practitioner, as someone who could move across specialisations, particularly from front to back stage roles. This suited the collectivist ideals of the time, and clearly reflected the reality of alternative theatre practice which had to be smaller, more portable and more flexible than its mainstream opposition. While mainstream theatres continued to look to the conservatoriums for trainee actors, directors and designers, alternative theatre looked to university drama departments, who were more sympathetic to its socially progressive and aesthetically challenging approach, and knew all about being flexible since they didn't have any money either!'

'Out of this conjunction of forces – the resources of universities and the needs of alternative theatre – came the "generalist" theatre animal. Rusden and Melbourne State College drew from the methods of Dorothy Heathcote and the drama-in-education movement. Early VCA under Peter Oysten was heavily influenced by British community theatre. La Trobe, Adelaide and Newcastle were founded on a notional marriage between "theory"

and "practice". But the results in many cases were the same. The point of generalist training was to train suitable potential practitioners for an articulate, resourced alternative theatre.'

Christopher Thompson, a Melbourne writer, director and member of the Hothouse Theatre Directorate, is a graduate of the Rusden College Drama Course and benefited from the breadth of opportunity the course offered. He says it gave many graduates the confidence and

'What troubles me is not success or failure – I am far removed from these vulgar goals – but rather theatrical mystery, like a liturgy, which is being realised. This is my last hope, my faith in the human being, in the Eternal Man who the theatre must exalt, enoble, and raise through archetypes and myths.'

You learnt about process and craft by doing it. I sometimes wish there'd been a bit more on the academic side, a bit more required reading, but the range of skills and the levels of self-motivation we developed have carried lots of us through a very wide range of experiences.'

Leigh Sutton coordinated the now defunct BA in Drama Studies at the University of Adelaide in the mid-'90s, and wondered whether it was accurate to term this course a generalist course since 'the course was applicable to a specific work force'. He tells the story of how the course evolved into a highly successful training ground for resourceful practitioners.

'It was an amorphous course that used to prepare drama teachers, then the University stepped in because that was not in their brief.' The course was given 'two years to live' so that the enrolled students could graduate. The two staff members 'had a think tank and decided we better stick to what we could do well. We agreed we both liked drama from the community theatre angle and from the multi-skilling angle. There had been some graduates who had gone out into that kind of work – that was exciting so we decided to cement that.'

'We did physical theatre and multimedia and acting classes and theatresports peppered with theoretical text and field trips – we did it on a shoestring and the kids learnt a lot. We equipped them with survival skills and gave them industry practicums. Now a lot of those kids have cornered the market in SA: people like Sasha Zahra, Artistic Director of D Faces of Youth Arts; Arts SA Emerging Artists Mentorship Award winner Astrid Pill; and Rachel Paterson, Artistic Coordinator of Jumbuck Theatre.'

Siobhan Tuke, Artistic Coordinator at the Melbourne Theatre Company, performer and director, paradoxically believes that greater competency in the specific skills of acting 'does not mean stronger talent'. Siobhan, a graduate of both the Rusden drama course and the VCA School of Drama, is convinced that the crucial ingredient for success is motivation, vision and energy.

Michel de Ghelderode, October 1949

ability to make their own work, or their own opportunities. According to Christopher, the classic Rusden graduate was a theatre animal who graduated and went out and started a Theatre in Education company – a perfect way to blend the arts of teaching and making theatre. Chris remembers the course as being very practical. 'There wasn't a lot of theory. It was very hands on.'

'The people I trained with at Rusden have had a great impact in the arts community. They are self-motivating and have great initiative. These courses nurture the lateral thinkers rather than the single focused artist and attract great teachers. There was a popularity for courses such as those offered at Rusden and Melbourne State College during the boom of community theatre in the '70s and '80s. There was a

real demand for the all-rounder. The current economic and cultural conservatism now suggests that one must specialise.'

However, if opportunities for work in small companies have decreased, Siobhan sees that the multi-skilled artist can find a niche in the world of festivals and events, where artists who can act, direct, write and coordinate are sought after. Those who

artist. 'An intensive training is best supported by a broad based education, covering not only the practice and theory of theatre but also its connection with other artforms – visual arts, performing arts, literature and multi media arts. The performing arts are now inextricably linked with other artforms.'

Angela O'Brien agrees that many 'good people' in Victoria came out of university

'Success as a professional artist in Australia involves at least the same suite of skills expected of any person who chooses to set up a small business. These include: understanding the market in which they will operate and the competition they face; dealing with government processes that might either provide funding or require compliance; communicating with their audience directly or via the media; legal issues; basic administration; and so on.'

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can turn their skills and training to other contexts can survive.

James Buick, Manager of the Clocktower Centre and former Administrator of FM Theatre in Education and St Martins Youth Arts Centre, trained at Melbourne State College in the early 1980s, and remembers the training he received there as 'gutsy'. 'Melbourne State College's drama course was really a teacher's course, but the people who applied for these courses wanted to be in theatre – to be a performer. Then there was a crackdown and the drama course became more for people training to be teachers who picked up drama as a subject to teach.'

The generalist course has been replaced to a large degree by the interdisciplinary drama course, which is not so focused on training the theatre animal, the practical theatre worker. Julian Meyrick explains how the interdisciplinary approach developed in the 1980s. 'It got its clarion call in a famous exchange between the Tulane Drama Review and the Performing Arts Journal in the mid-1980s. The editor of the TDR, Richard Schechner, called for an end to generalist drama training (accusing it of producing second-rate practitioners) and its replacement, instead, by a more self-consciously critical (that is, theoretical) approach – what he called a "broad spectrum" performance approach. Everything from semiotics to structuralism, from Lacanian feminism to cognitive anthropology was to be invited in to performance studies to provide it with a new intellectual mandate.'

Angela O'Brien is Dean of the School of Creative Arts at the University of Melbourne, which was known for a time as 'The Sixth School of the VCA' before being recently 'handed back' by the VCA to the University of Melbourne. The School of Creative Arts enables students to put together an interdisciplinary course which encompasses subjects such as media studies, theatre studies and creative writing. Angela O'Brien does not think that specialist training should be regarded as the only way to make a career as a theatre

theatre and the teacher training courses. She believes that a prosperous career in the performing arts is not so much to do with 'basic training', but the way graduates 'manage themselves and shape their careers'.

Richard Murphet is Head of the Directing, Writing and Animating Courses at the VCA, and taught at Deakin University and Rusden in the 1980s. He reminds me that, 'It is not as if the vocational courses are growing while the generalist courses are disappearing'. He wades into the debate: 'Places like the Victoria University of Technology train performance makers rather than actors, directors and writers. Most of these students come to these courses via their TER scores, and have a varied level of skill. Even though there may be extraordinary individuals committed to making work, there is dead wood in these courses which drags them down.'

Richard Murphet is not convinced that the answer for theatre lies in such generalist and interdisciplinary courses. But he believes that committed artists are going to emerge wherever they are, wherever they can. Richard is passionate about the benefits of specialised drama training. 'When you have a group of students who work five days a week, it is a fantastic intensive ensemble experience', an experience which he does not believe is possible in an interdisciplinary or generalist course. 'These courses institute unhealthy ways of working. One of the dangers is that you can skim. You just get to the edge of something, and you have to go on to the next thing. It doesn't allow for a rigour of intensity – great companies in Europe

work on a project for eight months. They want something to drop really deep.'

John Butler is the Coordinator of Performing Arts at Swinburne TAFE. 'At Swinburne we are not interested in general theatre course, we prefer a niche area, and physical theatre is just one example. We started training in circus skills 12 years ago and now have a National Institute of Circus Arts. This is highly specialised and something the circus industry called for.' Swinburne also offers a two year Diploma of Arts in Small Companies and Community Theatre. John says the course is 'in many ways "post-Rusden", John Ellis and Peter Oyston, because it carries on the tradition of empowering theatre workers in writing, staging, acting and touring original works.'

Even though John speaks in glowing terms of his training at Rusden College, he has some criticisms of that course now. 'Rusden did not offer the technical skills and awareness of occupational health and safety. There were never classes in voice or theatre administration, and no visits by key figures in the industry. However, it did give us gestation time, diversity, the ability to do a contract unit and to be assessed in a more flexible manner. It didn't teach us how to teach drama, but gave us practical theatre production hours.'

In his research Julian Meyrick has severely criticised academic performance theory for its inadequate view of cultural practice, and is sceptical of the global claims made for interdisciplinary analysis. 'Although the interdisciplinary approach has many things to offer theatre, the boundaries between competing lines of thought are often poorly drawn, and the notion of practice is often simplistic, erroneous or non-existent. Whereas the strength of the generalist approach to drama training was to know quite precisely what kind of theatre it was trying to serve...'

Julian thinks the generalist/ specialist argument points us towards a bigger question. 'I think it's giving the current situation too much credit to talk about a shift from a "generalist" to a "specialist" mode of

theatre training. Rather, a certain way of thinking about theatre has collapsed and what we see now are the leftover fragments. The point is to grasp in a historical sense what has gone on; and to appreciate that no solution to the current situation is possible until certain fundamental questions are addressed.'

And the fundamental question in Julian Meyrick's mind is: What has happened to alternative theatre? 'What has collapsed is

Feeding the Theatre Animal

the notion of "alternative" theatre – an aesthetically progressive, socially challenging theatre practice which on all levels opposed an equally homogenised notion of "mainstream" theatre. Given a boost by the increase of government subsidy in the 1970s, alternative theatre expressed itself in terms of alternative actors, alternative plays, alternative venues and, of course, alternative theatre companies.

Siobhan Tuke agrees that 'there has been a 'white-anting' of our theatre industry across the country to such an extent that companies such as MTC come under a lot of pressure to employ the local theatre community. And so they should, but there should also be the relief of other companies – other contexts of work. What MTC does is very mainstream – that is stultifying to an arts community.'

Could the resurrection of the theatre animal save a collapsed artform? Angela O'Brien leans toward this ideal. 'What you need is people who are aesthetically and emotionally healthy. After emerging from closed training programs people aren't ready to meet a variety of situations.'

Julian Meyrick maintains there are many reasons for the collapse of alternative theatre, naming the 'ascendancy of film, the collapse of the opposition between high and popular culture, the low quality of a lot of alternative theatre stage work', but, he says, 'none of these fully explain its extraordinary disappearance. Since the collapse of alternative theatre it is patently obvious that the hard questions of what kind of theatre we want to see have been left to one side, avoided by all, buried by a theoretical loquacity.'

Leigh Sutton remembers the ideal theatre makers he taught at the University of Adelaide. 'We tried to throw as much into the mix as we could to create rich and febrile performers, the kind of graduates who could work in youth arts and community arts. With the closing of many of these "generalist" courses the opportunity to train for these areas is now gone. We were determined to excite them about the possibilities for expression so they could extend it when they left. They wound up being part of a vintage that no longer gets produced. A collector's item.'

Can the collapse of alternative theatre be reversed? Can theatre transform into an artform in the centre of the community once more?

Siobhan Tuke believes the industry needs 'leaders, people who have ideas and are prepared to get something moving. This

can come from anyone irrespective of training. It's a matter of responding to what is before you and trying to make a way into that – to find your niche.'

'The Swinburne TAFE Diplomas are under the jurisdiction of the Australian National Training Authority', says John Butler. 'The A.N.T.A is responsible for national training, and is geared to delivery of training packages. It is obsessed with competency-based assessments of skills related to the arts and entertainment industry. The problem is its industry model is mainstream musicals, opera, theatre or ballet. There is no consideration of the medium to small company and the need for a multi-skilling approach. Victoria is unique with its range of festivals, events, and community art centres, yet this doesn't seem to come into the A.N.T.A. equation. Too often industry panels are stacked with mainstream representatives looking for young blood to service their industry.'

Julian Meyrick is not so concerned about the training debate as the industry itself. 'It is less that current training programs leave the student unprepared for what they will

find when they graduate, and more the fact that the industry has ceased to be an object of scrutiny for anyone save the artists in it.'

This discussion has led me to questions about what theatre is for, who it is for and what it can be. We no longer speak about the arts as a calling, and perhaps that has impoverished our thinking. Now theatre practitioners are asked to think of themselves as a small business and must interact with the corporate agenda to survive. This view throws the burden entirely on the shoulders of the artist. We are no longer asked to be theatre animals, but to be accountants, marketers, tax collectors and strategists who must market their product not only locally, but also nationally and globally.

It is not the responsibility of the theatre worker alone to reinvigorate theatre in Australia by becoming a hybrid 'multi-professional'. If there is no alternative theatre, no small companies for emerging and established artists to work with, then theatre will die, and there will be no industry to train for. Arts funding boards should ask the question, 'Why theatre?' And if they really want it, they should fight for the habitat of the theatre animal – before it withers at the root.

JANE WOOLLARD

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