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Culture clash

Raymond Gill

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Can the Victorian College of the Arts maintain its fine tradition under the Melbourne Model? Raymond Gill asked the arts community.

THE storm over the merger of the Victorian College of the Arts with Melbourne University has been a long time coming. The two institutions merged in 2007 as one of the cost consequences of the Howard government's deregulation of universities.

Any hopes that the arts training college might continue with its highly specialised courses and its ratio of 7:4 students to one teacher have been scuttled as details of the VCA's merger into the university's "Melbourne Model" became clearer this year. Earlier this month, *The Age* revealed that a confidential plan recommended a big reduction in staff and the student-teacher ratio changed to 12:1. Six specialist schools were merged into three and a puppetry and musical theatre course was suspended.

VCAM's new dean, Sharman Pretty, criticised the college soon after she took on the job in April. "I am astonished at how siloed this campus has been," she said. "It's siloed in its narrow little degree programs ... producing elite dancers that only become ballet dancers, or actors that only act, is no longer appropriate in Australia." Her comments incensed many students, staff, alumni and high-profile performers including Geoffrey Rush and yesterday saw the unprecedented display of bipartisanship from 11 former Victorian arts ministers who have requested a meeting with Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis. Former minister Dr Race Mathews said the group had been planning its protest over the past month: "There was a dawning realisation of the imminent loss of a major arts resource."

PAUL GRABOWSKY, Artistic director, Adelaide Festival

MUSICAL training at an elite or specialist level requires more than just practise and guidance. Gifted musicians tend to have inquiring minds, and broad knowledge of history, literature and theoretical context are excellent ways to broaden the understanding of the mysteries of the creative moment.

However, the trick is getting the balance right between the studio method of teaching, which generally involves - in the case of music - one-on-one contact with a teacher for intensive instrumental/compositional work, and whatever broader academic subjects might be considered necessary for the "complete" musician.

The nature of musical training means that it is not a cheap option, nor should it be. The reason a student attends a tertiary music school in the first place is to have the best possible training from the best possible teachers. That should always be the driver in any thinking about teaching tomorrow's performers. To apply a time-and-motion rationale at the expense of quality education is never a good idea; the needs of performing artists at this level cannot be compared to lawyers, doctors or scientists.

I support a balanced inclusion of carefully considered and useful academic subjects as part of the training of a performer or composer, but not at its expense. Good music requires, in the first instance, people who can play and/or compose.

Paul Grabowsky is a pianist and composer. He has been an artist-in-residence at the VCA during 2007-08 and has taught there since the late 1980s. He is currently artistic director of the Adelaide Festival. He has no academic qualifications.

ANA KOKKINOS, Writer-director

AT THE time I was contemplating a career as a filmmaker, the VCA was the place to be. I applied and was

accepted into the one-year post-graduate Film and TV course.

I learnt the basics in scriptwriting, camera, sound, lighting and directing. It was one gloriously superb year when I immersed myself in the art and craft of filmmaking.

The fact that a specialised training institution existed in Melbourne enabled me to stay in my own city and learn my craft. The teaching staff were connected to the film and TV industry and created opportunities for students to find work when they graduated - be it as cinematographers, directors or editors.

The danger of a university-focused approach that is more academic is that it has little relevance to the working life of a filmmaker.

Ana Kokkinos is a writer/director and VCA graduate. Her latest film is *Blessed*, which opens on September 10.

JOHN HOPKINS, VCA's founding dean of music

IT IS important to see the Melbourne Model as nothing more than a step on a journey that lasts a lifetime. The idea that you attain a degree and that's that, doesn't work in the music profession. Music is a different and difficult skill to acquire, and university training is only part of it. The teaching of any performing musician must be highly specialised and shaped to the needs of the individual.

That journey should begin at secondary school, and that's where a lot of problems in music education stem from. When it's good, it's very good, but when it is not it puts more responsibility on tertiary institutions.

I have spent my entire professional life in teaching. I helped put the VCA together, and I could easily question what is happening there. But I would rather say that the college, like any arts-educational institution, is in a constant state of evolution. The VCA can't be the same as it was, and it concerns me that some people think it can return to what it was. It can be shaped very much better if we all work to get it right instead of fighting it. One must always fight for funding, and be aware of the need the VCA has for a wide range of teachers. At the same time, these needs must be kept in balance with achieving academic requirements that could help students in their later professional lives.

We should be respectful of what Melbourne University has done in bringing the VCA into its fold. After all, the whole of the VCA could have disappeared without the funding to keep it going. That would have been the real tragedy. Instead, I have the same hopes for the college's future as I have for the future of music.

John Hopkins teaches conducting at the University of Melbourne School of Music, Parkville.

SCOTT DAWKINS, Production, Jersey Boys

I MOVED from Sydney to study Music Theatre at VCA, such was the reputation of the school for providing intense, practical training. Throughout my two years in the Foundation Program, I sweated, laughed, got angry, was challenged to the point of tears and truly had the most remarkable education experience of my life. We were taught by the best - teachers and guest staff who were working in the industry concurrent with being educators. No other school can offer the industry links VCA can. My training was of a calibre that allowed me to get an agent and work.

However, my specialist education has in no way produced a limited graduate - yes, I perform, but I have worked for Peter Bridges as a publicist for *Priscilla* and now in production for *Jersey Boys*. I am an example of how the VCA feeds our arts and tourism business. The suspension of the VCA Music Theatre degree in its inaugural year shows a shameful disparity between what the industry needs and what the VCAM dean plans on delivering. The conversion of the remaining degrees to the Melbourne Model is the nail in the coffin. You can't cut your red ribbon on opening night if there aren't the 100 per cent, industry-ready, elite cast, crew and production staff there to keep the curtain up. Are we the arts capital of Australia or not?

Scott Dawkins is the production co-ordinator of *Jersey Boys*. He is a VCA Music Theatre Foundation graduate.

HANNIE RAYSON, Melbourne playwright

I WAS one of the first intake of students in the Drama School in 1978. I graduated when I was 24 and I have been in full-time work as a playwright/screenwriter ever since. I owe my career to the VCA. In fact, my three years at drama school were the most intense, exhilarating and empowering years of my life.

I was also a student of Melbourne University. I am a senior fellow in the Australian Centre. From the moment it was mooted that VCA become a faculty of the university I have been concerned. I could not see how the specialist training offered at VCA could fit within the academic requirements and funding imperatives of the university. In my 25 years of working in the theatre, I know that academic predisposition has no bearing on creative practice. Put simply, I have known actors who were brilliant thinkers and I've known actors who were really stupid. Intelligence bears no relation to an actor's capacity to be brilliant on stage. None.

Training as an actor has little to do with essays and exams, it has everything to do with a deep knowledge of body and soul, knowing how to inhabit the light on stage and how to transform into someone else. When I read regularly of the achievements of VCA graduates I am reminded of the great work that goes on there; and the distinctive and brilliant creative talents that have been trained there.

The university's media office says that entry will continue to be talent-based and that the VCA will remain a practice-based faculty. We must hold the university to this. Victoria cannot be a leader in cultural activity without the VCA.

Hannie Rayson is an award-winning playwright, whose works include *Hotel Sorrento*, *Life After George* and *Inheritance*.

IAN McRAE, Former president, VCA Council

THE merger of the VCA into the University of Melbourne occurred because the then Commonwealth government refused to provide the funding necessary to maintain the essential studio-based teaching model so crucial to developing the talents of creative artists. It seems that history is repeating itself.

I accept that there will always be a need for change at the VCA - all organisations need to move forward - and integration into a complex body like the university requires adjustment. But one of the fundamental tenets at the time of the merger was that studio-based learning would be ongoing and protected. Is this undertaking now in jeopardy? As reported, the focus at the VCA appears to be on cost cutting and achieving a "significantly different approach".

The ratio of students to staff for a studio-based learning model is always going to be significantly higher than the university average. It is therefore quite unrealistic to expect that the cost structure for the VCA model would be able to be aligned with other faculties in the university, as seems to be the current objective.

The VCA has long enjoyed a reputation of high-quality intensive training of artists. To maintain it into the future will require governments and the university to face the cost reality of such training and thereby safeguard this country's artistic vibrancy.

Ian McRae is chairman of the Australian Ballet School and the Australian National Academy of Music, and a director of the Malthouse Theatre and Bangarra Dance Theatre.

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