

An academic difference: what do unis offer that drama schools can't?

by **Lyn Gardner**

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LONG READ Universities

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The first drama degrees were offered by the University of Bristol just after the war. Since then, university theatre courses have multiplied, with 117 institutions offering degrees across the country. Drama leaders tell **Lyn Gardner** why some students are opting for university over drama school and why this gives them more options

When Ben Anderson started thinking about what to do after his A levels, he knew he was interested in acting, but never for a moment considered applying for drama school.

"I didn't really know much about drama schools. I didn't fancy London, and I thought they were all in London," says the creative producer of In Good Company, the influential creative and business development programme for Midlands-based theatremakers.

"I wanted a degree in case I wanted to be a teacher and I didn't know that you got a degree if you went to drama school. I thought mistakenly they were more expensive than going to university." He also saw university as a "rite of passage", something that all his friends would be doing, and he wanted to do it too.

Anderson studied acting at Bath Spa. He loved his time there not only because the course embraced traditional acting components – including movement, voice and a range of acting skills – but it also introduced him to theatremaking. The three pieces he made at university, and the job he had on the side at the Egg in Bath, all stood him in good stead as he entered the industry. "Would I have been as well-prepared by drama school? I don't know, I haven't been to one," says Anderson. "But my university degree felt useful."

The first drama degrees

Anderson's route into theatre has become increasingly common in recent years, as more universities have offered acting, performing arts and theatre degrees. The first drama degrees were offered by the University of Bristol just after the Second World War, but that course was very different from the hands-on, often practitioner-led programmes on offer to students today at places such as London Metropolitan University, De Montfort University in Leicester and the University of Lincoln.

In the early years, university drama courses were tied to English departments, but as they slipped the leash, becoming departments in their own right and combining academic research with teaching undergraduates, they have become a significant path by which many enter the profession. They have proliferated: every year a new cohort of eager young people joins the ever-growing pool of university-educated graduates with the industry in their sights.

BA (hons) in acting are on offer from 59 institutions across the country, while 117 institutions offer theatre or performance degrees in some form. Some of these courses are brilliant, well-designed and give their graduates the skills and knowledge they need, and many are deeply engaged and entwined with the industry.

University of Derby's theatre degree programme is taught at Derby Theatre so that students have the opportunity to see how every department in a regional producing house operates. They participate in the making of that work while honing skills in everything from acting to stage management to marketing.

"It's hands-on, real-life learning," says Caroline Barth, head of learning at Derby Theatre, which is owned by the university. The venue describes itself as a "learning

theatre", and puts that philosophy at the heart of everything it does. "The students get to know the breadth and depth of everything that happens in a producing theatre."

Rosie Garton, co-artistic director of the Anglo-German theatre company Zoo Indigo, and programme leader on the performance and digital arts course at DMU, sees her job as not just preparing students to make work, but also making sure they know how to fill in an Arts Council England funding application.

"Throughout their time with us, they work with theatre companies such as Gecko and Gob Squad as part of the course. Many of us who lead the course are also practitioners working with our own companies and it demonstrates to the students that if they engage with the course, by the end they should have the skills and the know-how to go out into the world. They leave with more skills and knowledge than I had when I started out," says Garton.

"Almost everyone arrives saying they want to be an actor," say director, writer and dramaturg Rishi Trikha, who is also course leader on the Theatre and Performance Practice BA at London Metropolitan University. "We start to interrogate that with them, and by the time they get to the end of the second year, many will be rethinking and saying they want to be a costume designer or a director. We have an agility within the programme to cater to their developing interests."

Broadening minds

Trikha believes that being part of a bigger institution, with other students studying different and non-related theatre courses, can be an advantage and broaden minds. "Having worked in a conservatoire, I have seen how the culture in a specialist academy can become a bubble. You don't get that in a university, where every student is part of something bigger."

Dan Rebellato, playwright and professor of contemporary theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London, says: "The drama school offer is a really targeted one. It's more intense but narrower. What a university can offer is something broader. If you want to know how to act and do sword fights, then drama school would be for you, but if you are also interested in debate about theatre, its past and its future, then a university can provide that and offer transferable skills. Both have their place. Each year, a number of students from our course audition for drama school when they graduate, seeking that specialist training, and others go on to found their own companies."

The London Metropolitan University course was ranked best for student satisfaction across the country in the 2020 National Student Survey and received 100% for teaching on the course. But some of the many courses offered by other institutions are perhaps more of a reflection that higher education is now a business, and that courses exist in a marketplace where students are customers who will shop around when deciding where to spend their £9,000 a year. If universities spot a demand, they will develop courses to meet that demand.

"Young people want to do performing arts degrees and higher education responds to that," says Andy Lavender, vice principal and director of production arts at Guildhall



'Many of us who lead the course also work with our own companies. It teaches students that they can develop the skills to go out into the world'

DMU programme leader
Rosie Garton (below)





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Main image: *Memory Lane*, by students on the Drama and Theatre BA at the University of Lincoln, directed by Rachel Baynton. Top: working with Gecko as part of the DMU performance and digital arts course. Above: *Variations on a Theme (Or Jazz Out of Nowhere)* by students at the University of Lincoln, directed by Baynton



School of Music and Drama since August 2020. His career spans working in both universities and drama schools including the University of Warwick and Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. “But the current challenges that theatre faces because of Covid mean that there are ethical issues about how we are training and for what reason, which have to be addressed.”

Garton points out that there was a lot more money in the arts when she was starting out as a theatremaker and that students graduating now have more debt and face greater challenges in getting a foothold in the industry.

“Many of them will be graduating into a pandemic or in its wake. It’s going to be very tough for them. We have a real responsibility to be truthful about what we offer, to prepare them well and make sure they have the skills they will need to survive.”

Trikha agrees, saying the fact that the students are paying means “we have a duty towards them, and there is a moral imperative as teachers that during the time they are with us, we equip them as best as we can for the rest of their lives”.

The connection between academia and the theatre profession is a long one. For the second half of the 20th century, and even into the 21st century, an Oxbridge degree appeared to be a prerequisite to run a significant British theatre – not that any Oxbridge colleges actually offer theatre degrees.

Encouraging diversity

That Oxbridge and Russell Group bias in leadership is changing. In part, it is driven by theatre’s belated realisation that it has to broaden access or risk becoming irrelevant. But the drive may also have sped up because many of the theatre and performing arts courses at newer universities are attracting students who come from less privileged backgrounds and who are often the first generation in their families to go into higher education. As they

start making their mark in the industry, they will change the industry. But that will take time.

What is undeniable is the significant impact university courses have already had on the way theatre is made and the companies that now populate the theatre landscape, which are pushing at the boundaries of form.

Many of the key companies of the past 40 years – from Forced Entertainment and Punchdrunk (both graduates of the University of Exeter, though decades apart) to Barrel Organ, Breach and Walrus (University of Warwick) – are far more likely to have come through the university route than from drama schools.

For Lavender, that is no surprise. He points to the fact that universities are always interested in emergent practices, far more than drama schools have been in the past. Rebellato wonders whether the acceleration of company-led theatremaking, and its increasing impact on British theatre, might – in part – stem from changes in university courses, which moved towards a module format in the 1990s. That did away with older forms of drama teaching, in which the only practical element was often an obscure Renaissance play dredged up and directed by a senior lecturer in the summer term.

Instead, students started taking modules, some of which involved them making or devising their own work as part of their courses. Graduate shows from companies such as Little Bulb (University of Kent) or Non Zero One (Royal Holloway) started being programmed professionally, or would pop up on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in the summers after graduation. And so, careers were born. It seems there has been a proliferation of companies over the past 20 years.

Traditionally, the offer from drama schools and universities has been very different. But there are signs that they are moving closer together. Drama schools were once purely vocational but now they increasingly offer degrees, which they can validate themselves. University ►

‘Almost everyone arrives saying they want to be an actor. By the time they get to their second year, many will want to be a designer or a director’

London Met course leader
Rishi Trikha (above)

LONG READ



'Drama school seemed like it was pie in the sky for someone like me. I didn't even know how you applied'

University of Lincoln lecturer
Rachel Baynton (above)

of Kent's director of education and undergraduate student experience Will Wollen has just been appointed by LAMDA to oversee the process by which the school will achieve degree-awarding status in its own right, rather than going through the University of Kent.

New breed of drama school leaders

The number of contact hours offered by a conservatoire drama school and a university theatre course still remains far apart and that is unlikely to change. But a new forward-looking breed of drama school leaders with close industry ties such as Sarah Frankcom at LAMDA and Orla O'Loughlin at Guildhall are exploring how they might rethink drama school training, so it is fit for a 21st-century, post-Covid industry.

The vocational elements of training remain strong, but the aim is to produce graduates who don't just see themselves as actors but as creators, facilitators and change-makers. As O'Loughlin told *The Stage* last year: "The actor as artist is the direction of travel. What it means to be an artist in the 21st century is the top line here at Guildhall for students, whether they are in the acting, music or production department. What do you have to say? What are your responsibilities and what is your relationship to the community and the world, and how do you speak for yourself? They are all questions at the very heart of that."

This approach is much closer to what universities have offered through their performing arts degrees, awards that sit within the liberal arts tradition and which put learning to think critically and interrogate the world at their core.

"At London Met, we've always seen ourselves as trying to create leaders, whereas what drama schools have done traditionally is create employees," says Trikha. "If drama schools are going to create leaders too, that is only a good thing for the industry. It's what we've always been trying to do here. We're not just replicating industry norms or accepting that the industry operates in certain ways and that students have to toughen up to deal with that. We see them as change-makers, and we encourage them to feel confident enough to demand decency and dignity and push for change."

Drama schools are clearly in a period of rapid transformation – including of leadership – and change is often driven by cultural shifts and an industry responding to movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. RADA's director, Edward Kemp, recently announced his departure after 14 years at the helm. But even though that change – and initiatives include the dropping of audition fees and more outreach to attract a broader range of students – is taking place at a time when theatre is looking to increase diversity and access, it remains the case that drama schools are still often viewed as elitist institutions. Students don't have to pay to apply to university.

Anderson didn't think drama school was for him and neither did Rachel Baynton of Proto-type Theater. She grew up in Lincoln and is now back in the city as creative engagement producer and lecturer in the University of Lincoln's School of Fine and Performing Arts. Baynton's role may be unique in a British university, working as an embedded producer supporting student-created work and acting as a bridge between the student and the professional sectors.

"Drama school seemed like it was pie in the sky for someone like me from a small place such as Lincoln," says Baynton. "I didn't even know how you applied, but I did know that UCAS was the way into university."

Because of her own background, she understands that many students arriving at Lincoln will come with little knowledge about jobs in theatre and may have no idea what a producer does. "We try to open their eyes, broaden their horizons and help them find their calling," she says. "It may be arts marketing or directing. There is nothing stopping them going to auditions, but they know they also have the skills to make work."

Baynton thinks that a good drama school may be able to do that too, but its narrower focus makes it harder for students to shift direction. "For those entering the course at Lincoln, it is seamless and easy."

Garton says that one of the advantages of university over drama school is that those who arrive determined to act can do so when they graduate from the course, but many find that when presented with a broader range of options "they rethink their trajectory".

Trikha puts it succinctly when he says: "We are committed to showing [students] the possibilities and the opportunities and making them feel that they are masters of their own destiny."

Details: derbytheatre.co.uk, zooindigo.co.uk, dmu.ac.uk, londonmet.ac.uk, royalholloway.ac.uk, gsmd.ac.uk, proto-type.org



Top: *Hello Dust*, an original devised piece by second-year students at London Metropolitan University, directed by Rishi Trikha.
Above: *My Hair*, created and performed by a third-year student as part of the Installation and Site module at London Met