Crisis and Creativity in Performing Arts Training

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Edited by

Robert Lewis and Soseh Yekanians

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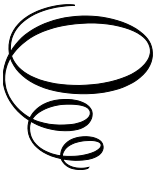

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership and teaching inherently entail imperfections. However, when confronted with a crisis, the complexity intensifies. Defined as emotionally significant events or radical life changes, crises demand decisive action, even in unfamiliar territory. Exceptional leaders, educators, and trainers exhibit heightened bravery, composure, and clarity in such moments. Moreover, crises often present opportunities for growth and advancement.

The years between 2020 and 2021 have been turbulent and have been a period that has asked us all how to inspire the creative energy by adapting to new altered norms whilst continuing to progressively learn. What we have seen is the power, willingness and resourcefulness of academics, trainers, students and actors as they continue to develop, their artistry rising to these new challenges. New online programs, hybrid models, innovative pedagogies and sometimes on-the-spot creative thinking have aided this, stimulating the students and actors, and all the teachers have been astounding, always ahead of the curve, looking for creative inspiration.

Acting and working in the performing arts in general is a meticulous decision that can take years of intense training, education, side hustles, networking, portfolio building, sacrifices and grit. The hours are long, the pay can be poor (or non-existent), the competition fierce and the disappointments huge. And still, we choose it. Because we believe in its power to connect people, and to make the world just a little more exciting, and a little less overwhelming and scary. All this amongst a world that is becoming increasingly uncertain. The underlying fact is that uncertainty tests your values.

The articles in this publication were a result of the 2023 Australasian Actor Training Conference (AusAct) which was held at the Arts Academy, Federation University, Ballarat, which was the third face-to-face conference, the fourth in total, with 2020 being held online. AusAct started in 2018, with the first event being held at the School of Communication and Creative Industries, at Charles Sturt University, in Wagga Wagga. This conference and training event is a presentation of actor training scholarship by researchers, practitioners and pedagogues working with original performer

training methods developed within the Australian context. It is an event focusing on Australian and New Zealand actor training pedagogies and research and its relationship to place, space, land, environment, culture, and technologies. The conference will provide an avenue for the sharing of original materials and knowledge in dialogue within the Australasian performer training context. The conference aims to celebrate, interrogate, and showcase actor training methods that have been created and developed in Australia and New Zealand.

By 2023, the conference has seen over 70 papers, 6 panels, 20 workshops and 4 performances. Academics, artists and practitioners from Australia and abroad including NIDA, VCA, QUT, WAAPA, Federation University and Charles Sturt University, Manchester University, Toi Whakaari O Aotearoa - New Zealand Drama School, and Lasalle College of the Arts.

The event led the development of significant panels since 2018, including the Indigenous Panel featuring Charles Allen, Head of Acting at the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts, Rick Brayford, WAAPA Aboriginal Theatre, Associate Professor Richard Frankland, WILIN Centre VCA, Chaired by Dr Liza-Mare Syron), Actor Training in Australia (featuring panellists from NIDA, WAAPA, VCA, CSU and QUT), Intimacy Panel (featuring panellists Melanie Beddie, Jacqui Somerville, Andrea Moor), a graduate panel, featuring student panellists from Arts Academy, Federation University and Charles Sturt University graduates), and a panel on the Arts Academy Online in a Time of Pandemic (featuring panellists Melanie Beddie, Angela Campbell, Teresa Colantuono, Anthony Crowley, Kim Durban, Julianne Eveleigh and Ross Hall.

In this volume, 15 contributors have responded to the conference theme of Creativity in Crisis. Dr Melanie Beddie's 'Activating the psycho-physical imagination in contemporary student bodies' discusses her use of Impulse Work in the teaching studio, and Dr Vanessa Byrnes, Michael Miller, Alexandra Whitham, Will Wallace, and Elizabeth Hawthorne's article 'Tertiary education reforms challenge the Conservatory: Actor Training at Unitec and the Creative Agency of Change (Auckland, Aotearoa/ New Zealand)' is an attempt to meet the current crisis points and positively advance the dynamic and evolving story of whakapapa (legacy/genealogy). It reflects on the impact of changes implemented by Te Pūkenga and the national sector changes towards a more instrumental view of education which disregards the social value of teaching arts to the detriment of a more utilitarian, accessible, and equitable view of education. Dr Angela Campbell and Anthony Crowley's article, 'If music be the food of love … navigating

crisis through post-punk music and Shakespeare's Twelfth Night' is about Federation University's 2022 production, adapted by Anthony Crowley for their second year Company 2023. It brought Shakespeare's words together with post-punk music and a shared urge to play, celebrate and reaffirm what life has to offer. They asked in production and again in this article, what can we learn from Shakespeare about attending to crisis?

Professor Richard Chew's article 'End(e)Games: Adapting Michael Ende's fantasy novel Momo for the stage as an experiential learning activity; offering scope for dialogic pedagogy, synergies of creative practice and improved educational outcomes post-pandemic' discusses the new version of the story, performed as a music theatre work, has been devised as a core-curriculum production course for the 2nd year cohort of students in the Bachelor of Performing Arts at the Arts Academy, Federation University. A company of 36 actors have explored the story and themes of Momo through a process which integrates skills-based practice and research. Momo has been adapted variously as a film (1986), starring John Huston and Radost Bokel; an animated film (2001) directed by Enzo D'Alò and most recently as an opera, Momo and the Time Theives (2015) by Ukrainian-Dutch composer Svitlana Azarova (Royal Danish Opera). Associate Professor Kim Durban's article, 'Crisis? What Crisis? The Meaning of Time in Artistic Training' proposes a model of recovery, taking inspiration from nature. In this article, Durban will challenge herself to suggest some ways that time can be reclaimed as the central principle of professional practice in arts training.

Luzita Fereday's article 'Reimagining Voice Training: Embracing Diversity and Radical Kindness' discusses the notion of getting out of the analytical brain and down into the body. It's a series of imaginative investigations and the leading sensory stimulus will be phonetic pillows that can form the basis of a more inclusive starting point. It explores how the performer works with resonance, embodying the sound of vowels to inspire the breath and galvanize the voice. Dr Thomas Heath's article 'Mindsets in actor training: fostering a growth mindset in training actors' focuses on facilitating optimal conditions within workshop contexts that foster brave spaces in contemporary Australian actor training. To do so, this paper explores the integration of Carol Dwek's mindset principles into actor training contexts using data gathered from interviews with graduate actors from WAAPA's diploma of acting 2022 cohort.

Amy Hume and Colin Sneesby's article 'Training in a time of ongoing crisis: developing resiliency in pandemic-era student cohorts' discusses

tools, techniques, and strategies for developing resilience in actor and performance-making cohorts. Hume and Sneesby will draw on their experiences teaching voice and movement over the last three years, both online and in-studio, and share learnings and discoveries that have informed curriculum ideas and led to the redesign of assessments to deepen the engagement of students in a time of ongoing crisis. Dr Robert Lewis and Dr Soseh Yekanians's article 'How to bring performing arts training out of the compounding clouds of crisis?' outlines their experience having gone through multiple course changes which includes the dismantling of various creative disciplines, merging of performing arts programs and learning to adapt in challenging times to an online environment.

Dr Jo Loth and Dr Rob Pensalfini's article 'Creative Critical Pedagogy: Combining Suzuki and Linklater training techniques to develop embodied awareness, expressivity and personal agency' reflects on the findings of a four-day workshop exploring ways to combine the Suzuki actor training method and Linklater voice. The workshop was designed with the hypothesis that Suzuki and Linklater can be combined to create a performer who is powerful, expressive and responsive to impulse. Dr Gabrielle Metcalf's article 'Crisis as Revelation and Opportunity: the intersection of Power and Consent in Actor training' argues that in response to 'crisis' a turning point has revealed itself - a fortuitous moment to move towards more ethical practices in actor training, therefore reframing how we consider power and drawing on the emerging philosophies of intimacy practices offers educators and directors tools to traverse actor training in a post pandemic world.

Professor Julian Meyrick's article 'Walking the Story Back: Drama Teaching & the Politics of Nihilism' discusses the problem of disengaging a nihilistic and monetized view of the tertiary education system, and re-engaging core pedagogical motives and missions. Associate Professor Andrea Moor's article 'Adaptation in crisis: Creating new methodologies for quicker absorption of essential acting skills' explores a combined methodology of Practical Aesthetics (Bruder et al), Viewpoints (Bogart) and Active Analysis (Sharon Carnicke) as a template for establishing good habits in the student actor. Dr Mark Radvan's article 'A Learning Model for Future-Focused Actor-Training' Radvan briefly reviews a selection of current learning theorists, including Illeris, Whetherell, Elkjaer and Lave and Wenger, identifying contemporary concepts and principles that seem most relevant to the domain of acting. Adopting a combination of these he proposes a revised learning theory for acting that draws on their ideas about how theoretical and practical knowledge and skills can be structured, how

students learn, and how learning can be understood. And finally, Nicole Stinton's article 'Monologuing the Music: Empowering the singing actor' discusses a process and repertoire of activities that can assist actors to easily and consistently access and utilise the music to make character choices. The cornerstone of this canon is what Stinton has come to term "Monologuing the music".

The timing of this conference and its papers captured a moment in time that was vital for the Performing Arts and how it would move forward in and after the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only effected universities and performance training programs across the country but similarly, saw extensive cuts to government funded programs that once supported the Creative Industries and their counterparts.

CAN LESS STILL BE MORE?

UNEARTHING CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES IN THE FACE OF PERCEIVED CRISES WITHIN TERTIARY ACTOR TRAINING IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

DR MELANIE BEDDIE

Introduction

In this paper I consider challenges facing actor trainers and acting students in contemporary university degree courses. I suggest practical ways of addressing these challenges and discuss an unexpected alliance between the technique of Impulse Work and a unit in Critical Thinking as one way of adding depth and breadth to the actor's education. I focus on practical, artistic and process-oriented solutions to what has been describe as a 'crisis' in actor training.[1]

I am a Melbourne-based theatre director and actor-trainer who is currently Lecturer in Acting at Arts Academy, Federation University after teaching there as a sessional for many years.[2] I have taught extensively at Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in Melbourne and Western Australian Arts Academy (WAAPA) in Perth. I trained as an actor at VCA in the late 1980s and I hold a PhD in Performance from La Trobe University.

The AusAct Conference: *Crisis and Creativity* held in Ballarat in January 2023 proposed a discussion of the perceived 'crisis' in actor training. Conference papers given by actor trainers from across Australia reported on the status quo within actor training and proposed a variety of responses to the working conditions they were experiencing. Most agreed that there was indeed a crisis -for many this had been exacerbated by the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the many social changes that emerged from that period.

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[1] AusAct 2023

[2] A conservatoire style course within a BA degree

I am not sure that I wish to call the situation within drama schools a 'crisis'. Or if it is, this 'crisis' has now become 'chronic'. Over twelve years ago John Freeman, working at that time at Curtin University, identified a series of problems and chose to name his article *Drama at a time of crisis*. (2012). In this article Freeman recognises the precarious position of university-based actor training courses and advocates for teaching that values depth rather than perceived graduate success. Bernadette Meenach seems to agree that the problem has moved beyond crisis mode when she proposes that we consider the possibility of creating and working with 'post-crisis narratives' (2023:10).

Crisis or Chronic

Before elaborating my own practical responses within contemporary actor training it might be helpful to consider two different meanings of 'crisis' and how these might offer an alternate view of structural problems within actor training in Australian tertiary institutions. One 'crisis' definition refers to a time of intense difficulty, an emergency which calls for an immediate intervention or response to avert disaster. It is a time when we are called upon to act decisively and implement measures, often radical in their nature. In the arts, crises frequently occur when governments radically shift arts policies that result in cuts to spending and to loss of jobs for artists.[3]

Those of us who have worked in theatre in Australia for many decades, and in my case since the 1980s, have experienced several of these kinds of crises and have often heard predictions of 'the death of live theatre'. With difficulties and adjustments, we have survived. So too has the demand for actor training. Whilst the number of tertiary-based courses has diminished since the closure (during Covid) of important seeding grounds at universities such as Monash, La Trobe and Newcastle there has been a steady rise in pay-as-you-go private studios of which Howard Fine, Screenwise and 16th St are only a few. Whether actor training continues to be pursued within universities, diploma courses or private studios remains to be seen.

A second definition of 'crisis' comes from the medical profession and may prove a more useful model for examining the nature of current economic and social pressures in the arts and in actor training. In some medical conditions a crisis is defined as 'the point *in the course of a disease at which*

[3] In 2015, for example George Brandis, the then Federal Minister for the Arts, made huge cuts to the Australia Council budget resulting in the loss of innumerable companies and arts organisations.

a decisive change occurs, leading either to recovery or to death" (Runciman & Merry (2005). This medical use of the term 'crisis' offers a possibility in discovering a road to recovery, not necessarily to 'pre-disease' capacity but to a so-called 'new normal' which demands fresh approaches and thoughtful adaptations.

Thus, to continue the medical analogy, the arts in general (and certainly actor training) in Australia can be thought of as in a 'chronic state'- one which cannot be cured until governments recognise the necessity for long-term arts planning and funding. Instead, the situation must, in the short term at least, be managed. Viable measures toward achieving this goal for the Australian arts sector are discussed by Pennington and Eltham (2021) in their paper *Creativity in Crisis*. They argue that the role of the arts and cultural production in Australia is misunderstood in economic terms (2021:8) and for their contribution to society (2021:41). As a specific sub-category of the arts and arts education it is likely that the position of tertiary-degree actor-training courses will continue to be under pressure to relinquish resources and become more cost-effective. The requirement to do 'more with less' will continue as we strive to deliver high quality teaching. Fortunately for university administrations many of the arts workers who are employed either full-time or as sessional teachers in degree courses are familiar with this state of affairs and it is one to which they bring experience and resourcefulness. Change (and its discomforts) seem pretty much the norm within arts companies and tertiary institutions. Indeed, my own teaching and artistic work has been consistently under pressure throughout 35 years of practice. In my teaching work I continue to draw upon my professional experience as an independent theatre maker. I am grateful for a period in the 1990s where I was part of a collective who formed The $5 Theatre Co. whose motto was 'less is more'. The artistic ensemble explored a stripped-back aesthetic that relied on the imaginative use of the minimum. The company set itself the challenge to create entertaining theatre with extraordinarily low-ticket prices to encourage participation in the theatrical experience by a broad section of the community.

The $5 Theatre Co. was an ensemble-based theatre company that produced new text-based works.[4] The company's work tended to be a blend of both contemporary Australian work and existing texts. From 1990-1996, the

[4] The core company consisted of Melanie Beddie, Tom Considine, Chris Corbett, Glenn Perry and Victoria Eagger who determined artistic policy and Sue Strano who acted as an administrative advisor. Numerous guest artists were also invited to work on various projects.

company produced 6 new seasons of work and commissioned 12 new plays: some short, some full length. The focus of the company was on the presence of the actor and their relationship to text, and we explored the boundaries of what is unique to live theatre.[5] By developing an elegant, though minimal, production aesthetic we decided that a lack of resources would be a virtue rather than a mere necessity.

In my artistic and academic roles, having strategies for making engaging art with minimal resources has proven stimulating and extremely useful. This does not in any way justify the lack of resources and support that are allocated to the arts and, by extension, university creative arts courses, despite demonstrated economic and societal benefits. If, however, academics and teachers begin to view conditions within tertiary actor training as chronic then we need, as individual teachers, to address the immediate needs of the students in front of us. This is not to say that more systemic solutions could be found but I leave these to Heads of Schools and administrators of major institutions.

The current situation, whether a crisis or chronic, requires Australian actor trainers in universities and in private studios to manage constrained budgets and ongoing rapid cultural change. Robert Lewis and Soseh Yekanians identify many of these shifts, including the impact of a focus on inclusivity, gender identity and cultural diversity within theatre and drama programmes (2023:12). In his book *Elite Capture* (2022) Nigerian American philosopher Olúfémi Táíwò embraces inclusivity within education but goes further suggesting we also need to rethink the architecture of the room in which activities take place. These social developments are welcome and overdue. They challenge us to reflect and become more progressive teachers, however, we should be cautious that we do not exhaust ourselves by continuing to offer training models that are unsustainable. Perhaps now is an opportunity to view these challenges as a turning point where new approaches can be discovered and applied.

Redesigning the Room

What then can those of us working in the studio bring to our thinking and planning to ensure excellent educational outcomes for enrolled students? One starting point might be to interrogate what we believe to be truths about successful actor training. A useful model for this is offered by John Freeman

[5] In this way, the philosophy of the $5 Theatre Co. embodied some of the ideas in Grotowski's *Towards A Poor Theatre*. (1968)

and Michael McCall in their article entitled *Acting Out Our Vanities* (2020). They evaluate the effectiveness of student productions and query their value in offering equitable and assessable educational outcomes. Importantly, Freeman and McCall offer a provocation to actor trainers to reconsider some principles of training we think of as immutable, such as the idea that the number of productions within a course indicate the quality of training. Instead, Freeman and McCall challenge us to consider whether all parts of a training program are progressing specific student learning. Taking on board this provocation has led me to think deeply about which parts of an actor's training are most beneficial.

Diminishing the number of play productions within a course is simultaneously unpopular with students yet exactly the kind of rationalization departmental budgets expect. Rather than assume that all budget cuts lead to less valuable training it is possible to examine more carefully what a course offers, how units of teaching interact with each other and ensure that depth within each unit is compensating for any loss of range. The celebration of depth rather than breadth is advocated for by Mark Radvan in his article *View from the Bridge* (2020) in which he discusses the need to teach actors how to work deeply into material to gain a structural understanding of the work (2020:161). The theme of working on less to gain more was further elaborated by Radvan in his paper *A Learning Model for Future-Focused Actor-Training* at the AusAct conference 2023. His suggestion that, at times, student actors could be encouraged to work more slowly and more independently is often met with skepticism by actor trainers who are quick to see the losses rather than gains from this approach. Thus, many of us working within training courses find ourselves habitually overworking in the attempt to replicate our own training environment which probably occurred in a vastly different economic climate several decades prior. Jessica Hartley comments on this trend in her article about recognising our own positionality as teachers (2020:7). Whilst it is useful to reflect upon the lineages and legacies of one's own training, it is also essential that we find new models that serve the structural problems we face and the important cultural struggles that are occurring around us.

When I trained as an actor at VCA in the 1980's the course structure was essentially a Master/Apprentice system with all the difficulties and hierarchies that label implies. The teaching was at times spontaneous, invigorating and surprising but also subjective, cruel, disorganised and often unfair.[6] Since then, actor training has become more professionalised, and

[6] An analysis is offered in my doctoral work (Beddie 2017)

this is in part due to its entwinement with universities. Not all parts of the relationship with universities benefit conservatoire-style acting courses, however the requirement for a developed curriculum, stated learning outcomes and clear assessment criteria are welcome aspects.

Working in teaching studios with contemporary acting students has made me aware of certain issues they face. Some of these are connected to complex social developments of which one example is the rise of identity politics. Additionally, students wish to engage with a decolonised curriculum: one that includes previously omitted material, acknowledges who is teaching and how the content is being taught. These are valid concerns and are shared with students across the education sector. More specific issues for acting students are observable in the training studio environment. There is no lack of applicants for places in tertiary performing arts academies, yet I find that despite talent and enthusiasm many contemporary students struggle to release themselves into the physical and psychological demands of the work to serve their own artistic development. Thankfully, I am now seeing student cohorts who are rightly aware of the need for both personal and professional boundaries but who can nevertheless be fearful of causing offense if crossing those boundaries when engaging in a creative state. I have observed this in particular with young male students when I am working in my role as an Intimacy Co-ordinator or teaching Intimacy protocols in class. Transgressing social norms in the given circumstances of a character can feel quite frightening and students may limit or edit their imaginative responses. [7]

Without analysing too precisely where their internal constraints come from, I offer some observations of possible external forces that may be limiting student's free and imaginative expression. Firstly, in Victoria we lived through some of the most rigorous and extensive Covid lockdowns in the world and actor trainers are still dealing with cohorts of students whose final years of school were defined by screen-based learning and social isolation. The prevalence of screen-based leisure and learning has also lessened students embodied experiences and the medical profession has documented the effects of this on physical and mental health since well before the Covid-19 pandemic (Melkevik et al 2010). This reduced physical engagement and minimised social contact can lead to complexities within the hothouse environment of ensemble work in the acting studio.

[7] Applying Brené Brown's thinking to create not only 'safe spaces' but also 'brave spaces' for training ameliorates this to some degree (Brown 2020)

Additionally, there is pressure to increase class sizes within university degree training, and this can mean that student cohorts often have a wide range of aptitude and aspirations. As teachers we need to acknowledge and celebrate this and encourage students towards greater self-determination in their level of engagement in group activities. Coupled with these larger class sizes, is the call from universities to diminish our training hours. This is chiefly a cost-saving measure but can be also understood to create breathing space for students who may be under emotional economic and physical strain. Susan Taylor offers detailed insights into these factors in her doctoral research (Taylor 2016).

These are perhaps some of the current stresses and specific hurdles we face when training actors in Australia in 2024. Factors such as these are not new to many people who pursue artistic lives. It is worth remembering that Stanislavsky himself demonstrated extraordinary resilience in the face of a series of extreme events in his personal life. Professionally, he had to contend with the all the intricacies of being an artist within the Soviet Union and under scrutiny by Stalin [8]. Yet during this he continued to create art and interrogate performance processes. Due in part to these political pressures, in his last years Stanislavsky and Maria Knebel worked together in small scale and highly personal teaching studios but we in universities find ourselves in a very different environment with higher student numbers and less contact hours. Like our predecessors, we remain committed to delivering excellent actor training, while actively engaging with student interests and well-being and acknowledging their range of career aspirations. This combination of factors challenges the traditions of how actor training is best delivered.

Two Techniques

It can be difficult for a young actor to acknowledge the feelings of insecurity that exist as they navigate traditionally hierarchical systems within what is ‘the original gig economy’ (Pennington and Eltham 2021:15). How can we teach actors to be inventive thinkers and arts workers while simultaneously

[8] To name but some of his personal challenges -the Soviet confiscation of his family business and assets, the death in infancy of his first child, an enforced separation from his first wife, the arrest and exile of his nephew and a heart attack which led to chronic ill health. Professionally There were constant struggles for control of and succession at the Moscow Arts Theatre and constant demands from his editors (both Russian and American). And finally, his dismissal from his own beloved theatre which he founded.

reminding them of the complex industrialised processes of the 'creative economy' they are hoping to enter? In my work as a teacher, I have noticed how a blend of teaching styles and delivery modes can build a sense of agency for the contemporary student. My observations are based on an unintentional combination of teaching modes: in Acting classes, using a version of Impulse Work as ensemble practice and scene study, and in Critical Studies, delivering a carefully scaffolded unit that teaches research skills and critical thinking. Both classes are integral to the actor's training: in Impulse Work implicit learning is primarily built through embodied experiences and in Critical Studies knowledge is acquired more explicitly through reading, research and discussion. I have observed that what is learnt across these units goes some of the way to empower students to make strong choices when creating work and when accepting professional projects. Having an opportunity to delve deeply into the material via techniques learnt in Impulse Work whilst also discerning dramaturgical parameters via Critical Studies, position the student to enter individual projects with eyes wide(r) open.

In teaching two very different teaching and learning strategies with a cohort of students I have adopted Stephen Kemmis' idea of a 'praxis-oriented trainer' (2008:292) who supports their studio teaching practice with critical reflection and academic research. I may also be beginning to engage in some useful 'post-crisis narratives' (Meecham 2023:10) by embracing challenges. I will discuss the two approaches individually below and then suggest some ways I see these supporting each other to create an integrated syllabus that encourages students to synthesise their learning.

I came to Impulse Work after entering the profession. I have applied and adapted this technique over many decades with several colleagues. For a more detailed discussion on the lineages and practice of Impulse Work in both dance and theatre in Australia I refer you to my article *Exploring Impulse Work and Active Analysis in Practice* (Beddie 2019). My directorial and teaching practice now includes the use of Impulse Work, alongside text analysis and scene work, to allow actors to bring autonomy and inventiveness to their work with dramatic texts.

What is Impulse Work? Australian theatre practitioners, particularly those in Melbourne, use the term to denote a type of physical and spatial improvisation and there are many variations of the technique. It is useful as a mode of ensemble training, and encourages trainee actors to trust and refine their own artistic instincts. Its training outcomes are similar to those sought by Stanislavsky in his later experiments in physical actions and by

Knebel in her reception and development of this work known as Active Analysis (2022:27). It is a search for a methodology that liberates actors from that enemy in performance – self-consciousness – as identified by Donna Soto-Morettini (2022) and allows them to expand their potential to be expressive.

In Impulse Work actors make discoveries by focusing on the present time and space. Merlin calls this working in the 'here, now, today' (Merlin 2007:200). The sessions are highly physical and actor led. Using simple, initially repetitive parameters, the actor can discover a playfulness and physical ease. In the early training sessions, there is no requirement for the actor to prepare material, and it offers a period of freedom from decision-making or interpretation. The work begins quite casually and encourages actors to let go of the need to achieve specific goals or to impress in any way. The work, when employed as a training exercise, can be silent and non- text based. As a technique in scene and play rehearsals it encourages the actor find the line of physical action in the text by getting away from the passivity of table work and to be confident to bring their own experiences to the work. It activates their imagination through physical responses to dramatic text and gives an embodied experience of psycho-physicality. Often the author's text is fed in by other actors or assistants in small sections. The purpose is to discover the nuances of the specific text and to work in an associative rather than literal way. This stage is about building up a pool of possibilities rather than making choices. It privileges imaginative responses rather than conscious decision making and does not demand narrative logic. I think of it as working deeply on the vertical axis of the inner life of the play rather than on the horizontal axis of plot and narrative action.[9]

What are the benefits of this approach for the actor? When working in this way, in shared time and space, the class develops a common yet flexible artistic language. I often witness an evident pleasure as they discover a sense of ensemble but not conformity. I also see students engage with the energy of childlike play - ideal conditions to foster confidence and imagination. They learn to trust themselves, and the ensemble, as creative beings who can generate material. In Impulse Work the actor is practising imaginative play using text, space and body and by trialling ideas and relationships. This is evidenced when a short session of reflective writing is included at the end of each session and students share their broadened dramaturgical responses. Trusting their impulses to freely discover possibilities and variations to

[9] This comes later and is often the responsibility of the director.

ideas without judging the quality of the idea before it is even expressed is beneficial. Notably, it circumvents the actor who asks, 'have I got it right?'. It allows the actor to recognise when they are working richly and freely and when they are pushing or demonstrating.

I find that Impulse Work offers a more inclusive pedagogy. Importantly for the current conditions with institutions Impulse Work removes the parameters of traditional casting or allocation of roles based on appearance, gender, age, abled bodies, race or sexuality. It allows many students to work on the floor simultaneously, feeds their imaginations, allows them to make choices about how deeply they engage and assists them to progress at a pace appropriate to their aspirations and according to their own well-being. During a session actors can give themselves permission to drop out from the work on the floor yet remain actively engaged by observing. This encourages the student to be self-monitoring and they can recognise and nominate their own boundaries. The exploration within Impulse Work recognises that many truths and textual interpretations can co-exist and that actors always select from possibilities to make choices about the role. It is useful for interpreting poetic or expressionistic text where several meanings overlap or where narrative logic and through lines are deliberately rejected. This promotes the capacity for more complex dramaturgical thinking.

The highly responsive and personal work of Impulse Work can be balanced in the syllabus by a form of Critical Studies that is specifically tailored to students engaged in embodied training. In a First Year Unit I introduce students, some for the first time, to performance material written by Australians and for Australian audiences. We can learn a lot about a country and it's society by studying the plays and films it produces. Significant issues, historical events and common themes emerge. It is a site for entertainment but also public debate. The unit is designed to offer students an informed perspective on how their work as an actor fits into contemporary society. By explicitly tying the learning of research skills and historical knowledge to their embodied training they come to discern how play texts can reflect social issues that interest them and contribute to contemporary conversations.

My focus in shaping the unit is informed by reading the work of Jessica Hartley who runs the MFA/MA in Actor Pedagogy at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. The classes explicitly discuss power and politics and acknowledge the hierarchies of tertiary learning. Including historically sidelined material, modelling inclusive practices and encouraging debate sets a tone for open discussion whereby a range of student experiences and

opinions can be heard. The chosen texts are analysed through a socio-political and historical lens. The course uses a post-modernist approach to question how we think about history and whose stories we focus on. The unit establishes some principles in critical reflection and research methods that are applicable in both academic and artistic contexts. To recognize and accommodate a range of learning styles a wide variety of material and media are offered as part of the reading and assessment tasks.

Each weekly class focuses on a key theme in Australian playwriting and examines performance texts that engage with these ideas. I frame the class by outlining socio-political themes and historical background as well as including cold reading of texts. By including spontaneous, unrehearsed reading exercises, and later research tasks that feed into short scene studies, I am creating clear connections between the acquisition of research skills and its relevance to embodied practice. I am also signaling to students that I am aware of their desire to be guided how to apply new processes and knowledge to practice-based activities. One assessment, for example, is an exercise in applying character research and creating a visual diary for a nominated scene study. By emphasising how the research tasks can help them in performance the perceived chasm between Critical Studies and Acting begins to be bridged.

The classes raise a variety of points of view and aim to stimulate discussion while respect for differing points of view is encouraged via a culture of active listening (Hartley 2020:13). The discussions are deliberately framed as conversations rather than academic debate. This is designed to encourage all members of the class to contribute (sometimes most successfully through smaller groups) rather than privilege those students already articulate in academic formats. Critical Studies units can be intimidating for some students and seem to lack relevance to their aspirations to be working actors. Coaxing students to engage fully in these kinds of subjects requires an approach that stimulates their curiosity and encourages them to trust their intuitive responses whilst teaching them the value of feeding themselves, and their work, with ideas. Small group activities are therefore structured into each class to allow students to create more personal responses to the material. By introducing frequent informal group work I create a platform for individuals to share their specific cultural knowledge and lived experience rather than rely solely on the authority of the teacher or existing resources sources.

The course is designed to increase student autonomy across the semester. Gradually the students take a more leading role in delivering class content. Initially, I offer a model for presenting material through vibrant power points and selected scene readings. The power points are designed to stimulate interest in visual and aural resources as well as written ones. Across the weeks the emphasis shifts to asking students to present research findings and perform short, rehearsed readings of material that demonstrate their research. This introduces a less hierarchal structure and increases student confidence and ownership over the work. The emphasis on informal and formal group work within the unit may go some of the way to redesigning the dynamic within the room (Táíwò 2022:76).

Student feedback has expressed positive engagement with the unit. They see the of applying newly acquired research skills to character and scene analysis. They are pleased to be introduced to a variety of research methods including using visual and aural resources. They express an understanding how the material is related to other parts of their embodied training. Students believed themselves to have become more confident at cold reading and were keen to continue to develop these skills. They were pleasantly surprised that there were many practical embodied elements in the unit 'even though it was crit studies' (student comment *PAATC 1001* 2022).

Conclusion

How do the strategies I outline above offer creative opportunities in an actor training course that finds itself dealing with large cohorts and with students keen to participate in training that resists outdated models?

Faced with larger classes and students with broad range of aspirations and learning styles the units discussed above allow students to work together while accommodating their diverse boundaries and abilities. This is not merely practical but a crucial step in seeding the changes Táíwò (2022) advocates for. Both Impulse Work and Critical Studies take time to deliver yet encourage depth of learning and emphasise the value of investigation and process rather than outcomes. This is the kind of learning Radvan (2023), Freeman and McCall (2020) advocate. These units set tasks that are equitable and assessable in ways that student productions sometimes miss. By creating smaller scale and artistically satisfying outcomes in the form of scene studies some of the burden for finding large cast plays that satisfy equitable casting and appropriate subject matter is lifted. The budgetary benefits are self-evident.

Incorporating Impulse Work and Critical Studies into a syllabus create praxis, where theory and practice support each other. Both units are predicated on the belief that the student have inventive and useful intuitive responses to artistic material and are designed to empower the student to believe that they have something to say. Including critical reflection in the acting studio at the end of an Impulse session and weaving embodied activities into Critical Studies is one way the two systems of learning and teaching become integrated. The reflection the student experiences as a researcher, debater and essayist becomes useful on the studio floor when the actor wishes to draw connections between imaginative and physical responses in scene analysis to a wider dramaturgical framework. Students with critical analysis skills can place their personal responses within a broader socio-political context. This last point is of special importance in contemporary actor training as it lifts the student out of a sense of isolation and offers them access to communities of thinkers who interest and inspire them. The discovery that multiple point of views and artistic interpretations can co-exist in both artistic and academic modes promotes shared principles in collaborations.

As Freeman reminds us

> ‘We know too that if our work is a blend of the Apollonian, with its stress on the rational, systematic, linear and controlling, then it is equally Dionysian, with its tendency towards the divergent, the imaginative, the expressive, the impromptu and the open-ended. (Freeman 2012:18)

The two subjects further support one another as a similar language of autonomy and inclusivism is used in both. Creating and maintaining safe and brave spaces in studios and tutorial rooms assists acting students to share personal and political concerns alongside the pleasure of learning through personal expression. Designing units where the work can be student-led and where autonomy is encouraged builds artistic confidence, a sense of ownership and the capacity for more complex dramaturgical expression. These are key skills for their future as working artists across many fields.

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TERTIARY EDUCATION REFORMS CHALLENGE THE CONSERVATORY: ACTOR TRAINING AT UNITEC AND THE CREATIVE AGENCY OF CHANGE

WEAVING THE MARAE, THE CONSERVATORY, AND THE VOCATIONAL INSTITUTE IN PARTNERSHIP

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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land throughout Aotearoa New Zealand and across the world and pay our respects to the First Nations People wherever this paper is being read.

We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters, and culture, and pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

"He toi whakairo, he mana tangata"
"Where there is artistic excellence, there is human dignity."
—Whakataukī/ Māori proverb

Introduction

Tena koutou katoa. Welcome to our response to the theme of *Crisis and Creativity*. We are a team of six educators who manage, advise, and teach into the Unitec Bachelor of Performing and Screen Arts Acting Programme. Our programme, housed within the School of Creative Industries at Unitec Institute of Technology in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland in Aotearoa New Zealand, offers one of the two professional actor training Bachelor degree programmes in the country. Heralding a successful legacy spanning more than thirty years, our programme was initially based on Michel St-Denis' Conservatory Model of Actor training. However, much like many other

similar programmes globally, has come under increasing pressure from neo-liberal reforms in tertiary education.

This chapter is a reflective weaving of insights gained during a period of significant change and innovation from 2020 to 2024. This innovation was enabled through a deepening connection with Unitec's *Te Noho Kotahitanga* Marae (the Sacred Māori Community Centre and meeting ground at the centre of our campus). The values of *Te Noho Kotahitanga* were put forward in a treaty when our Marae was formed and are the basis of this reflective case study.

This document serves as an argument for sustainable, culturally responsive, long-term frameworks that are equipped with the design and resources to nurture professional actor education in Aotearoa.

Who We Are

This chapter has been written through a process of collaboration by a diverse team of six practitioners. Though each of us has a different perspective on the journey that we have been on together, we are united in our desire to share this story and our discoveries.

It is pertinent to our narrative to acknowledge that one of our writing team is Tangata Whenua (A person who traces their genealogy to Māori ancestors), and five of our writing team are white, and non-Māori. The latter identify as Tangata Tiriti. This means that they/ we do not have Māori ancestry but reside in New Zealand. According to Te Kuru o Te Marama Dewes in their article in *the Spinoff*, the term Tangata Tiriti is ... "aspirational as much as it is political. To be a person of the Treaty is to build a relationship with Māori, to understand the history of how this nation was formed and to commit to the ongoing fight for Māori self-sovereignty. It acknowledges that Aotearoa is a multicultural country, that Pākehā [European New Zealanders of non-Māori descent] aren't the only grouping brought together with Māori under the Treaty." Dewes (2022).

Darlene Cameron, who was Te Pou Manawa/ Manager of the Unitec Marae Team during the period under discussion, has contributed her thoughts and experiences from the perspective of an educator of many years' experiences bridging Te Āo Māori and Te Āo Pākeha (the Māori and non-Māori worlds). Vanessa Byrnes, Michael Miller, Alexandra Whitham, Will Wallace, and Elizabeth Hawthorne are actor-educators from the School of Creative Industries. They/ we come to this story with a combined experience of about

150 years in the field of learning and teaching within the Conservatory model of actor-training in Aotearoa and abroad.

By naming (some parts of) our identities, we position ourselves as practitioners, academics, and teachers who are grappling with the "discomfort from pedagogical change as it relates to whiteness and coloniality." Ginther (2023). The Conservatory model of actor training has been criticized as being Euro-centric, often perpetuating coloniality (Ginther, 2023).

Fundamentally, Conservatory-style actor training differs from traditional university performance courses. University courses, even when they include drama or acting courses, tend to run as semester-long modules within a wider degree. Students may pick and choose a practical performance module from a selection of papers within the degree, often with unrestricted entry, so long as they have the prerequisite credits for that degree programme. Limited studio time is provided, and participants may or may not be interested in pursuing acting as a career. In contrast, Conservatory training is framed as vocational training.

At Unitec, students go through a rigorous audition process and are selected to be a part of a small cohort of 24 students who will study together as a company for three years. They engage in daily studio-based classes in the fundamentals of voice, text, performance, and movement, as well as professional development and theory subjects related to the field. The expectation from teachers, students, and industry, is that they will graduate with the embodied skills, attitudes, and knowledge to thrive as an actor in the industry.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell states the 10,000 hours rule. He says, "It takes 10,000 hours of intensive practice to achieve mastery of complex skill." Though it may not take exactly 10,000 hours, in our experience, time in the studio, along with embodied learning, good teaching, and a diligent work ethic are essential factors in supporting our students to become skilful actors across their 3 years of study.

As a kind of educational hothouse, Conservatory training enables a selected cohort of students to experience time-based, iterative, studio-based learning together. Learning how to manage perceived failures and attempting to expand one's perceived limits is a theme, as is working out the strengths and weaknesses of an individual in the context of a collective. Rarely are these conditions set up in society in such a sustained way, so it is a primary