MA in Theatre Consultancy

The genesis for this course was the need for the Society of Theatre Consultants to develop the professional nature of the Society for its members. In particular there was a need to give members an opportunity to widen their knowledge across the huge spectrum of work that theatre consultants undertake. The course that has developed from this perceived need has been hugely successful and will be a mainstay in the advancement of the art and science of creating better buildings for the performing arts.

The course was required by the Society to provide for members who do not have a first degree in such a way that they are eligible to undertake the MA. Theatre consultancy is an experientially learned profession and not all members of the society have come to it with higher academic qualifications. In its turn the MA signifies the level of attainment made by the member as part of their individual professional development.

The course was required to review theatre history in building and programme terms; it needed to review the way in which we see, hear, feel and emotionally respond to a performance and the impact this has on the functionality and perceived warmth of a theatre, concert hall, studio, or even a cinema. To this had to be added knowledge of licensing law, and knowledge of the managerial and financial concerns in running a range of performance building types. The latter is especially important as the typical route into theatre consultancy is from a production manager or theatre technical background rather than through the management of performance spaces.

These complex requirements were met and surpassed by Warwick University, led by its Theatre Studies Department and supported by the Digital Laboratory and the Law Departments. In addition, Warwick University was able to offer us the benefit of access to a major, multi-auditorium and multi-disciplinary Performing Arts Centre. This unique combination of opportunities made Warwick the only choice for the course.

Through the excellent work of Margaret Shewing with the support of Jim Davis and Ronnie Mulryne, the course structure was conceived and brought into being. These members of the University team have now widened the historical perspectives of some three cohorts of Theatre Consultancy students. Alan Chalmers’ Digital Laboratory has shown students that only a tiny fraction of the images and sounds they receive are processed by the brain into a coherent picture and ‘story’ and how other sensory perceptions influence this interpretation.

A grounding in law from Colin Manchester gives theatre consultants the tools to prepare and evidence a case they may need to make in law and to anticipate some of the pitfalls in contracts, but more importantly it addresses ethics and moral considerations. Finally Alan Rivett and the whole management team of Warwick Arts Centre give us insights and access to the operational and financial imperatives of the eight different performance spaces and the art gallery in that building.

Just as Warwick University provides a unique range of facilities, it also structures the course in a form that suits working professionals. This consists of three residential weeks in the first year and tutorials as required in the second. The course modules allow Theatre Consultancy students to explore the theme of the module in an interpretation which furthers their own skills and interests, or in response to a new concept provided in the teaching. The final two papers students prepare (for the Diploma and then for the MA) are entirely the student’s choice and most have taken the opportunity to explore particular interests within the field of theatre history or performance support and sensitivity. As with any university course the opportunity to spend time (inevitably in the bar!) with your peer group leads to invaluable exchanges of knowledge.

The first cohort of students rose magnificently to the opportunity. At their graduation in January three of the four graduands had distinctions and one a merit award. The promise of following cohorts is for a similar level of achievement. As more theatre consultants develop their professional value through the Warwick course a considerable number of papers are leading to significant advances in the field of theatre consultancy. This is a true professional development course as well as an academic analysis of how theatre buildings and managements work to make theatre more meaningful to the artist and the audience.

Michael Holden, chair of the Society of Theatre Consultants, on a new qualification.