

Technical Paper 041
Evaluating Graduate Destinations – Drama and Stage Management

Vivien Freakley and Susan Band

Introduction

This paper follows up the dance pilot study reported in technical paper 035 : *Evaluating Graduate Destinations*. It reports on interviews with four DADA drama providers undertaken in February/March 2004. It seeks to contribute to the overall understanding of first work destinations and early career paths for actors and stage managers.

Aims

In this second phase, the intention is to focus on drama provider perspectives: gathering **preliminary** information from a sample of DADA drama providers which can then be tested in a larger provider survey. The aims are to:

- seek out ways in which first work destinations and early career paths can be categorised so as to reflect similarities and differences across DADA drama providers.
- open up the debate on the characteristics of a good start in the sector/s.
- investigate ways in which the performance of providers might be assessed to ensure diversity and range across the DADA portfolio.

Methods

Site visits were made to four drama providers for face-to-face interviews with school principals, one offering degree courses and three offering Trinity diplomas. The HE provider offers separate degree courses in Acting and Musical Theatre, one of the FE providers offers separate courses in Acting and Stage Management, the other two offer courses in Acting. Three schools were London-based, one was based regionally.

The following questions were sent out in advance of the site visits:

1. Please describe the type/s of work aimed at by the school.
2. a) How would you describe the dream first job/s and early career paths for your students?
b) How often do these happen?
3. How would you describe the range and scope of your first destinations and early career paths?
4. Within this scope, does the school have any characteristic first destinations/early career patterns?
5. In your opinion do some first destinations indicate potential career success?
6. Are there any to avoid?
7. How do your graduates normally secure work?

Range of Work Aspirations

The range of work aspirations within the sample of schools covered 5 primary occupational roles and 8 primary employment contexts.

Primary occupational roles identified:

- Actor
- Musical Theatre performer ie multi-talented dancer/actor/singer.
- Stage Manager
- Technician
- Technical designer

Primary employment contexts identified:

Block 1

- Television
- Touring theatre
- Repertory Theatre
- Radio
- TIE
- Film

Block 2

- Corporate/management training (role play)
- Commercials
- Voice overs
- Stand-up comedy
- Promotional work
- Self employment as an independent theatre practitioner working on self-generated projects

Block 3

- West End theatre shows
- Musical Theatre touring shows
- Cruise ship/cruise line companies.
- Show girl spectacles eg Moulin Rouge
- Cabaret work

Block 4

- Event management/technical support
- Entertainment management/technical support
- Facility management technical support

Block 1 categories relate chiefly to the actor and stage management courses, block 2 to the actor courses, block 3 to the musical theatre course and block 4 to the stage management course. BUT there is significant cross-over, for example: musical

theatre students may take on straight acting roles or voice overs, actors may work as technical support.

Acting Courses

All acting course providers aim for the full range of working contexts described above, recognising that actors will need that flexibility for long-term career sustainability. As one commented:

“.. we would hope and expect that our students would get everything from, you know, your flagship job which might be, um, the West End or it might be a good TV series, to...right down to small-scale ITC fringe work, you know, a couple of days on television So we're trying to train students who are flexible enough to get a wide variety of work”.

This provider stressed the importance of helping the student to find creative fulfilment in all these areas in order to sustain themselves and rejected the notion of training as producing a type of actor for a specific industry niche. Another provider emphasised the variety of work destinations for actors:

“.. we have very many different destinations that the students go off into the students go into television and we have somebody who's got a lead in Hollyoaks at the moment; the Royal Shakespeare Company, fringe theatre, corporate work is now quite popular where you go and role play for a solicitor's office or a lawyer. Then also theme parks – Lego land, Thorpe Park – that sort of thing that's acting work and then it spills over to singing and dance, all sorts of things ... tours, national tours, quite a lot of theatre education ... other theatres like the Globe, and obviously pantomime, radio, and commercials. And all our students at different times have done all these things... sometimes they can get quite a major part in the West End, and then not work for a year! I mean it's very very unpredictable and they can go from being a Lego land brick to a fairly major part.”

However, within this diversity, three of the four providers were clear that their destination data showed two predominant areas for early acting work: small television parts in soaps and drama series and fringe or touring theatre. One noted:

“The first home for quite a lot of them is small vignette parts on television, on the soaps, and on ‘Casualty’ and ‘The Bill’. We do better on ‘Casualty’ than we do on ‘The Bill’ - some schools do better on, on ‘Casualty’. But the paid roles, they would tend to be, often the first paid roles, and commercials.... These pay well and help to clear debts. ... Others go into fringe - self-organised or answering adverts for profit share, which means.. unpaid”.

The fourth also counted television work as a key early destination:

“We have very close links with The Bill and things like that. We've really developed our school to look at what's happening in the industry and our film and television provision has been improved and money put into substantially, because a great many of the student's first destination is now a small part on television. And so we've really looked at that, um, and made sure it's something that they can do if they leave”.

Two providers commented on the difficulty of affording facility upgrades to enhance their television training and stressed the generic nature of their actor training:

“there’s no doubt that our course prepares, prepares actors ... we teach them to be good actors”.

But despite the theatrical emphasis of this course, television still remains the major early employer:

“I’ve got the numbers for the three year course for the last three years of graduate destination data ... the graduates of 2003, the graduates of 2002 and graduates of 2001 and the two biggest employers are television and small scale or fringe theatre there’s an increase in, as one goes through, in the amount that move out of fringe and into RSC, National. So they move from small scale to more professional repertory theatres”.

This provider also commented on television as a growing employment market and theatre as a shrinking one.

Providers saw the ‘fringe work’ as having a variety of benefits. One commented on its offering a further opportunity to be spotted by influential agents and casting directors:

“.. they will see you if it’s in London, if it’s accessible ... and they know the reputation of the fringe theatre and they think that’s worth going to ... It’s a self-financed extension of training, actually. The key people here are casting directors, and they will go to these fringe fair ‘do’s because their job is not to miss out, and it’s the second bite of the cherry. They’ve been to more drama schools than agents will go to because they’ve got to have a real perspective. But they will also follow up, and people are changing and people are getting better cast or whatever..”

Others commented on the opportunity to take on roles that otherwise might not be available to develop acting skills further and get something written on the CV. Two providers pointed out that this small-scale work offered chances to develop other skills including writing, project management, fundraising, directing, designing and teaching/facilitating.

Specialisation within the actor labour market and the increasing tendency of theatre, film and television to “cast to type” were commented on by the providers. One provider acknowledged this tendency but rejected the notion of targeted training, another stressed the need to “know the kind of actor you are” by the third year of training in order to focus the job search into the channels where that type is sought after.

“Well, once it was important to show how different you can be [as an actor in different parts in rep.], how you can transmogrify, but ... increasingly your unique selling point is as important at this industry as it is in any other industry. ... When they talk about acting for camera what they’re really talking about is a unique selling point, which you’re so comfortable within, that you can then concentrate on the moment, you don’t have to do endless retakes trying to get yourself in the skin of somebody who comes from a different culture, somebody from a different background. ... We do an awful lot on casting, cast-ability’s as important as acting ability”.

Musical Theatre

This provider trains singer-actor-dancers:

“... on one end of the spectrum, they’re actors doing musical theatre, and on the other end, dancers, and in the middle is uswe won’t accept people unless we see potential in all three disciplines”.

But:

“Although their training is in all three disciplines and the primary function of the training is to take them for the musical theatre where all three disciplines are required, doesn’t mean that the jobs that they get first of all, or indeed continue to get, are necessarily musical theatre jobs”.

In fact graduates from this school do move into musical theatre jobs but they also work in television and other areas of acting work. They also shift back and forth across these working contexts.

Stage Management

Graduates tend to go into ASM ing and stay for 6-8 months in their first job. They tend to be more static than the graduates from the acting course. This provider commented on the wealth of work available both in theatre (where most of their graduates start) and in television work where:

“ ... there’s definitely been a burgeoning in that whole sector – small independent companies – and they’re desperate for staff .”

So graduates are working across theatre and TV although their first jobs tend to be almost exclusively in theatre.

Not all go into theatre, one last year went as resident stage manager at Alton Towers and that was felt to be a good outcome because it offered fun and money. The relative youth of the graduates, their levels of skill and the high demand for their skills means that they can afford to take jobs for enjoyment in their early years of work.

Range of Dream First Jobs

Acting

All providers stated that the dream first job is paid work, preferably not below Equity minimum rates of pay. That might be in a commercial or a TV part or it might be in a small-scale production. It does depend upon what the graduate wants to do and what they are best suited to: “... . For us there didn’t seem to be an obvious dream job, actually”. It is related to what the graduate wants.

“The question as to whether it’s a, you know, a lead role or supporting role in the West End, or a job in TIE, or a break, or a profit-share, they want to work! They want to actually do what they’ve been trained to do”.

It validates them as performers and gets the CV started. Mostly there is not much choice involved but even so many would choose to take a commercial or a “soap” in order to pay off debts.

One principal listed three dream starts:

“Well, we know what the top is. The top is international film. Not just in purely money terms, but some of the best acting today is in international films, I mean it’s superb... The Bafta awards. I mean, it’s perfectly clear that is a summit now. And the other, the artistic of it is your RSC and your National part, those are the three tops ... and, undoubtedly the major part in the soap. They may not admit it, but they know that, that, if they get a major part or ongoing character in a soap, they’re going to earn a lot of money. We’ve had people going in to a soap at sixty thousand. Can you believe that?!”

All of these offer major career-building potential in that they build recognition with the general public which in turn makes them more employable across the three sub-sectors. However he and the other three providers warned that such a start happened very rarely, was no predictor of future success and could be damaging if the graduate was not ready for such a high profile.

“... we’ve had one or two recent students who’ve had spectacular starts and I think most of them would be a little bit apprehensive of that because, you know, if you’re going to fall flat on your face you don’t really want to be doing it on the National Theatre stage. It would be very nice to get all that done somewhere not quite so noticeable”.

Moreover, such “stardom” could occur later in a career, rather than at the beginning. However talented, actors were dependent not just on luck and fashion but also on having a prime period of maturity during which they might be at their most “castable”. If they do not fit the current model of “juvenile lead” they may have to wait many years until their physical age catches up with their castable type.

The dream job may not be a financial success, it may be career building, or reputation building or creatively fulfilling, as one provider pointed out:

“ [major part in popular TV drama series] XXXX is a good example of what might be a dream job but turns out... to be a nightmare.... not to be in any way fulfilling creatively at all Statistically it is a fantastic job - I mean financially, in kudos, all the rest of it – is great. But, if you hear the feedback from that then it is probably about the worst you place you could start really. Whereas a student who left us six years ago is now...is doing some acting work but is also doing some stand-up work, but is pursuing a writing career and she’s writing shows for the theatre. And her letter that we received yesterday from her, you know, shows that she is absolutely fulfilled. Um, but, statistically, someone could say. ‘well, she’s doing lots of fringe work, she’s not doing lots and lots of acting. She’s doing acting mixed with lighting’, you know, and it’s that dilemma, you know, those sort of two....those are the extremesBut equally I could think of students like perhaps XXXX, who’s just left, who’s been writing two shows and has been working in profit-share because he’s developed two shows. But they’ve been extremely well reviewed – and his acting has been well reviewed. ... for him that’s a dream job and the problem is how can you communicate that? Because working in wherever it was, and it probably was in a pub or whatever, I can’t remember, people don’t see that. But for him to have devised a show and then it to be, you know, well-reviewed in Time Out, and for his acting to be well-reviewed and then to be able to fundraise to do another project, is very very outstanding.... It’s career building, absolutely”.

Jobs which offer a chance to develop and grow in the craft were deemed desirable by three providers and preferably in a good company with a good director.

“... there is almost bound to need to be an element of continued learning if there’s going to be continuing progress. They haven’t the experience of the industry and so they’ve got to find out if they like acting in the profession because, I mean, however much we attempt to imitate circumstance there’s one huge element - which is worklessness - which you have to adapt yourselves to coping with..”

These providers also stressed the desirability of “opportunities to make contacts, networking, so kind of the people you’re working with are influential” and the first job introduces them to other people who might be influential in offering them further work.

Two providers stressed strongly the desirability of opening up work across the sub-sectors:

“... A fairly modest job in all three sectors as soon as possible. They’d just like to have a look around... so that they can come to a proper evaluation of the offers being made to them. I think that’s the thing”.

Musical Theatre

Cruise Ships and pantomime constitute a good start:

“we have cruise companies coming in here to audition our students ... the quality of work now has changed radically ... the industry is shifting and changing and developing all the time and what might have once have been perceived as being not a great first job is now, is a great first job”.

Although it can be difficult to determine the quality of the employer. The quality may not necessarily be obviously related to the status of the organisation.

“ I’ve been out looking at pantomimes that our students have been in, it’s very very hard to actually make this kind of distinction of what’s good. There was, for example, several of our students were at XXXX in the town hall doing ‘Dick Whittington’, and actually the quality of work was very high, much higher than when I went to one of the premier regional touring theatres – XXXXX – where actually the standard was appalling”.

It is the quality of the director and the company that determines whether or not it is a good first job. Equally:

“I mean, we could say, oh, its a great first job because so-and-so’s gone with P&O out to the Bahamas. But it depends on who’s doing the choreography...”

This might also offer the much needed opportunity to build up influential networks for future employment:

“Very often, just getting noticed by, for instance, a very good choreography. Choreographers look after their people. If they’ve worked with people then they will happily work with them again. So getting noticed by a very good

choreographer, from my point of view, is a good thing. Um, you know, that happens quite a lot”.

Neither the organisation nor the casting director offer an indication of “good” first job. “Top flight casting directors” work across the board.

Stage Management

“If they’re working on graduation day – that’s a good start. A lot of them tend to be”.

A good first job is very personal to the wishes and desires of the graduate.

“... there’s some jobs that they’re absolutely thrilled with because it’s...just because they like doing it. And it’s with a great firm and they’re meeting different people all the time and er....”

They are young and highly qualified and in demand so they can afford to enjoy their early years.

Network-building jobs are just as important for stage managers:

“It’s a very small industry. There can’t be more than – I don’t know if anyone’s ever done some stats – there can’t be more than 1000 to 1500 people as stage managers, claiming to be stage managers within the country at any given time. Probably less I would have thought. There are 465 members of the SMA. Say one in two are members, I mean there’s 1000 people out there. It’s a really small...and everyone knows everybody else. It’s, the six degrees of separation is definitely in stage management. You don’t have to go far before you meet somebody who knows somebody that either trained where you did or worked with you...”

Career Progression

Acting

All providers stressed lack of linear development in actor careers and added that just sustaining a working life in the theatre or related sector should be seen as success. As one interviewee said:

“If you have survived in this incredibly competitive world for perhaps 20 years or 15 years, my God you’ve done well just to have survived ... that is very important when talking about how we are measuring success. You know, I mean, it isn’t the one-off star part - that is probably is going to ruin somebody’s career in the long-term anyway, it is about that sustainability, and I think that’s one of the messages we want to get, we must get across”.

All providers talked about sustainable careers as spanning the full range of actor working contexts ie moving across theatre, television, film, radio, commercials, small-scale productions and touring, TIE and so on. For one provider, the key to sustainability was balancing a career profile across all three sub-sectors:

“Well I know the dream career.... I can’t remember how she started, but she moved from playing a tour of XXXX [modern classic production], a good quality tour with XXXX [highly respected theatre Director]... to a very badly-

written television situation comedy.... then she moved back to XXXX [London theatre] ... and did an interesting new play. She went back to a much better situation comedy. ... then she did a tour with XXXX [highly respected theatre Director]... for three months I think it was. She went back into...perhaps a soap. But that, to me, is somebody managing their career very well. They're keeping their feet in both sides. They're not becoming over dependent on being fashionably desirable for the camera, which is fickle but keeping the potential, if it goes quiet, to go to the National and do something super for a not very high wage and give them time to come back in to television."

And if this should not prove possible, the graduate should develop an alternative career perhaps writing or singing which will offer sustainability within the sector.

Another provider pointed out that securing the first job is often easy since it is usually obtained through the school, it is the second (and subsequent) job/s that are the real test of whether or not a career will develop. This provider offered two graduate work histories to illustrate a good start in terms of career progression:

1. Major agent ... small part in acclaimed TV mini-series 'XXXX' ... just five days filming. Then her next job was XXXX [Shakespeare production], playing Juliet, then a Warner Brothers film ... twelve weeks filming playing a major role in...'XXXX [successful film]. Then an unpaid fringe job at the XXXX [experimental, London theatre]... a rehearsed reading... then a major ITV series: 'XXXX' , then a big role in the new Sunday evening classic BBC drama.
2. No agent did a small scale work for a TIE theatre company ... then went to the National Theatre to do an education department tour of XXXX. Then 'XXXX' at XXXX [regional repertory] and has just finished doing 'XXXX' at [different regional repertory].

Others leaving in 2001 may not have such obviously successful early paths but they are working on "voice overs, BBC radio drama, some small-scale TIE, some profit-share, some student films.... Regional rep One has worked with RSC directors .."

Another provider pointed to the following progression for a number of graduates:

"small scale fringe, freebie, not-paying-very-well work, and they then begin to work out what they do and don't like. And the ones that have got agents, their agents begin to work out what they can and can't do. Although not everyone with an agent works, and not everyone without an agent is a total disaster".

"... they start off with small scale and then they just, if they choose to stay in theatre, seem to go more into mainstream rep.....or bigger shows. .. or directly into telly. Yeah, they'll do a small scale show then they'll get telly and work out that telly pays better".

Of the four providers, three did not make reference to what might seem (to those not involved in the theatre sector) like a conventional theatre career progression ie from actor to actor-writer to actor-writer-director to director to producer. The fourth agreed that this seemed:

"...more of a conventional hierarchical progression But they usually return to acting. Unless they're very successful and then they may stay as a director, or stay as a writer No, there's no ladder with that sort of thing it's

having another alternative thing which might take off ... That's why the catholicity of the training is so important. ... because that will open options as well as develop skills".

Sustainable careers and making a living seemed the key concern of the drama providers and it was interesting that they did not talk about training or developing the next generation of movers and shakers of the theatre. Only one made reference to this:

".. what I do dream for them is that there will be a number of them that are sufficiently successful, ultimately, to call a few shots. You know, to make a difference. I think probably there are four or five in every year where you think, with a bit of luck [they will get into positions of influence] shall we say, an actor or an actress who conducts themselves with particular elegance within the business of choosing what they do, influencing those choices in a good way - artists who manage to say what they want to say as artists rather than being governed by the economics, the biggest price. You know, the Rickmans and the people who are conspicuously choosing and turning things down and can see the quality of things and are making socio-political choices, making those sorts of choices. So there are...you know, one wouldn't wish, one wouldn't prescribe what their choices should be or what their attitude should be, but that they should be prepared to have those attitudes and should think about them".

Stage Management

A more linear career progression was pointed up for stage management graduates ie one which involved positions of increasing responsibility and pay and a corresponding developmental series of posts in larger or more prestigious theatres or cultural venues.

" There are things that I look at and that I find particularly interesting – you know, students going into Salisbury Playhouse, students going on number one national tours, with maybe going in as ASM but after six months having book cover responsibility and thereafter they're a DSM. That's very interesting. I mean I look at that and go, 'yeah, that's someone off and running'"

Although there is a progression ladder, the interviewees pointed out that over time many graduates find that once having achieved it, they make other career choices:

"They get out quicker and they also hit a wall a lot quicker, which is: 'I've done enough here, I've done as much as I want to do. What shall I do next? Oh, I'll start on my own'."

Because their skills are more easily transferable they frequently move out of theatre and into production management, event management within the broader entertainment or corporate sectors.

Notions of First Destinations to be Avoided

All providers mentioned Equity blacklist companies as a source of information about employers who might be exploitative. Pornography was referred to by all as being intrinsically undesirable and also bad for career progression – although two providers were keen to point out the subjectivity of definitions of pornography. One commented on the career of a high profile actress whose career began as a “page three girl”.

Poor quality productions were seen as undesirable for career progression by all, as one provider said:

“... a second-rate tour, commercial tour, which is tacky ... Anything which isn't done well ... there are some things which are thrown on”.

Even if the actor was not responsible s/he can become associated with the lack of success. Two other providers were clear about some work taken for financial reasons only can be damaging to reputations:

“Dressing up as fruit on the Earls Court Road like those... Three strawberries running up and down the A4 dual carriageway giving out fruit... That's fairly humiliating we wouldn't want them to get into mediaeval costume and serve up feasts and things like that, would we? ... Telemarketing. ... These are not good on the CV: “I don't think anyone's going to give you a job because you've done that!”

“And I think they are very wary – about taking, being very prominent in advert in a way that gets them kind of stamped... I think everybody recognises the dangers of that” ...although it is not always easy to predict the chances of an advert turning out that way.

Reality shows were seen by two providers as potentially damaging to careers. But opinions were divided on the damage potential of “evil parts” one school cited a graduate who turned down a role as a paedophile in the Bill:

“he just kind of felt that he couldn't do that. And, you know, one would respect his decision”. Taking the part would have been bad for his image. But he is playing “a nasty police guy in Coronation Street”.

Another felt that:

“Evil parts wouldn't worry me at all. Really really duff parts in terrible soaps might be, but they're not evil necessarily. They want to book you for....It's interesting...there was that, there was an obituary for a black actor in today's paper that said he'd never quite lived down playing Judas in one of the Jesus films”.

All agreed that there are agents, directors and producers to avoid.

Three providers pointed out that unlike in dance, with its potential for injury, there is not the same concern with basic terms and conditions.

Musical Theatre

Pornography – “out of morality of choice, out of a sense of possible danger, there’s all sorts of ways in which we might think that would not be a good idea. I know – although they don’t probably know that we know – that some of our students do lap dancing.....as a way of helping to, you know, live”.

This would be left off the CV. The definition of pornography would not include show girl work such as Moulin Rouge or topless shows.

Stage Management Course

Working for free - it is very rarely necessary for CV building.

“I don’t say that you have to avoid it. I just think that people start to wonder why you keep doing it.”

Ways of Securing First Work

Acting & Musical Theatre

There are a number of ways in which the drama providers assist their graduates in finding their first work. All invite agents and casting directors to their final graduation shows.

“...I mean agents are hugely - and casting directors - instrumental in the first job, and that’s where they get them from”.

But as one provider points out, securing an agent is not a guarantee of work:

“Agents come here. .. agents are the key because they’re the network. And obviously through that – it doesn’t mean you’ve solved everything because the agent will only [pass on] the business that producers give to them, and you’ve still got to make a career and you’ve got to make your jobs, you know.”

Providers were ambivalent about agents. The fact that they invite them to showcases shows that they think them important but on the other hand they felt strongly that it was better to have no agent than the wrong one. The right agent was one who would work hard to promote the actor’s interests:

“We really don’t advise the very big ones. Because the very big ones often have, well, a) you’re at the bottom of the pile, in the big agents, you know, top agents, you’re at the bottom of the pile. Whereas middle agents, they’ve got to work for you, because they’ve got to find out that, you know, the niche, person, about, they’ve got to really work at it. Well, the big agents - I’ve seen them do it - they take on six very tall attractive girls. And out of the six one will emerge at the end of that six months and they’ve got rid of the other five, and so we’ll say: ‘be very careful of a big agent’.... There are enough nice, middle ranking agents, on the ball, 45 on their books or something... who will work for you.”

They pointed out that it might be wiser to do without an agent in the early stages and then when the reputation started to build, to have more choice about who to select.

“ Students do leave without agents. Or they leave with agent interest but they want to see how their career pans out before they do it...they really do get work much more through contacts with visiting directors or networking or, um, some of them go into co-op agencies.”

One noted that there is panic among the students in the final year about securing an agent but the agents who come to see the final year shows tend to

“choose on the shallowest of criteria ...they see a five minute duologue and sign them up .. so it’s based on looks and hunches and sniffs and, you know... it is fairly disruptive and I don’t think there’s much evidence to suggest that people who leave without an agent do any worse than people who leave with”.

Graduates who do not secure agents tend to be pro-active in taking on “fringe” or small-scale work, either, as one provider said to get agents and casting directors to see their work or as another said to make their own opportunities for doing the work they want to do.

Three providers stressed the importance of using directors on their courses who are currently working in theatre and therefore have an up to the minute knowledge of what is required for employment. They also have sufficiently good reputations within the sector to be a trusted recommenders and sponsors for graduates who have impressed them:

“Because that’s what - in the drama school particularly – that seems to be one of the things that always gets them the most work because a lot of our visiting staff may have agents themselves and so they’ll recommend the student to their agent”.

One provider makes cds to help the graduates to secure voice-over work.

In one school, the third year tutor had been a casting director and she helps all the acting students with their agent choices and job choices:

“They are also quite proactive in writing to people themselves that don’t come here. So they do...they get results from that. They also look in publications like PCR (Performers Casting Review?) and Stage and they write with encouragement from us because they run stuff past us. And occasionally people write in or contact us with casting requirements and I can - or Peter can – choose people that go along for the auditions”.

All schools have a student notice board on which to post vacancies and casting information. One provider has just set an electronic notice board for all current and ex students.

The students are prepared to be entrepreneurial and pro-active for going into small scale work.

Stage Management Course

“There isn’t a norm. There are lots of ways people gain their first employment, through all sorts of mechanisms ... Certainly word of mouth, people they may have met, [through the course] ... I think my kids get their foot in the door because they are a graduate [of this institution].

Vacancies are advertised on the school noticeboard.

Conclusion

It is important that participating DADA schools are able to provide clear and objective evidence that they are successfully preparing their graduates for good starts in their respective employment sectors. However it is clear from this and the companion Dance study (see technical paper 035 1st Interim report October 2003) that establishing the evaluative framework against which the DADA schools’ performance would be measured presents difficult challenges. Any such framework will need to recognise a diversity of credible career starting points for actors/musical theatre performers and make allowance for the prevalence of under employment, even in the most “successful” acting career. Obvious (but crude) measurements such as target percentages for agent representation and/or percentages of major roles secured in West End productions would not be accurate performance measures because neither of these are, necessarily, predictors of career success. Graduates moving into small-scale theatre or a small television part might be making a better start for a satisfying, sustainable career.

Nevertheless, the study has thrown up some interesting pointers for what constitute good starts for actors:

- Providers are less concerned about “stardom” than they are about sustainability of career.
- Early success with a high profile first job in Television, film and/or Theatre might indicate the start of a high profile career but most likely it will not.
- A modest but broad-based start across all three sub-sectors would be more likely to indicate longevity.
- Working contexts such as cruise ships and pantomime with a good company and director offer the musical theatre performer good starts in terms of professionalisation and network-building for future employment.
- Soaps and drama series with their need for a constant supply of previously unseen actors in small parts offer a similar role in television. They enable essential access to television casting directors for future work.
- Graduates are sub-contracting freelancers and having a unique selling point by which to distinguish what they have to offer helps them to market their service.
- Graduates need experience in many areas of work so that they can come to a sensible evaluation of offers that are made to them in terms of work satisfaction and career progression.

- DADA providers acknowledge the need for specialisation but also broad based training to allow for sideways movement into tangential work contexts, both to support sustainability and to accommodate choice of diverse career opportunities.
- The development of related skills such as writing, design, teaching, management would enable the underpinning of more “risky” acting work and so enable longevity.
- Early career development is unpredictable but balancing reputation-building and financial security is key.

The interview with the DADA stage management course provider would seem to suggest that the evaluative framework for stage management graduates is simpler. Unlike the performance labour market, it appears to be under-supplied and moreover, the principle employers are organisations – either theatres or production companies. Stage management graduates appear to move into employment rather than freelance work as a first job and then (sometimes) into freelance work, from a position of relative strength as established professionals to further their professional interests and career goals. The course providers felt that there was little concept of undesirable work: all constitutes building blocks for their choice of direction.