

**Article No. 8**

**APPLIED THEATRE TAUGHT AND CAUGHT: A PROGRAM REVIEW**

**by Tony Millett (Australia)**

**Abstract**

The review of BA Applied Theatre (BAAT) at Griffith University on Mount Gravatt campus was carried out at the end of 2002. The students who responded generally gave the degree a positive satisfaction rating. The article looks at the relationship between the degree program and the concept of applied theatre. It identifies that there is a dissonance between the perceptions of the students undertaking the program and the considered aims of applied theatre. The students' responses indicate that they expect standard theatre training with facilities to match. Although it is important for the students to encounter theatre in order to develop the theatre skills necessary to explore applied theatre, it is hoped that they will be directing themselves towards applied theatre projects on graduation.

**[EDITOR: It is not possible to reprint the French and Spanish abstracts, owing to platform transcription issues. Some of the tables are also not perfectly formatted. We apologise for this.]**

**Author's biography**

Tony Millett worked in the English theatre for twenty years, including repertory and London's West End, before coming to Australia as an English and Drama teacher. He has a background in electronics and has worked as a director, actor, broadcaster, lighting designer, and fight arranger as well as artistic director of a professional theatre company, and a TIE company. In Australia he has directed numerous productions, and performed a number of lead roles such as Iago, and John Gabriel Borkman. He is currently director of studies of the Applied Theatre program at Griffith University.

The BA Applied Theatre (BAAT) at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia had its first intake of twenty-five students in February 2000, graduating three years later in December 2002. The BA Applied Theatre was originally conceived in 1995 on the premise that successful workers in the theatre were perceived to be entrepreneurial, multi-skilled, and did not wait to be called. It had been observed that graduates of acting academies who were still in work after ten years did more than act, turning their skills to a range of theatrically based activities, including directing, stage-managing, production managing, a wide range of performance, and technical skills, as well as applying theatre in a range of contexts and functions. The aims of the program were:

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To develop articulate practitioners who are capable of applying theatre in a wide variety of disparate fields graduates of Applied Theatre could be expected to be career makers and entrepreneurial in their approach to employment (Program submission 1999).

This, therefore, was the original purpose of the degree: to prepare a group of theatre professionals to work in an area of Applied Theatre. When the idea was first mooted, 'applied theatre' as a term had yet to evolve into the identifiable area that is associated with formal centres such as in Manchester, New York or Brisbane. The term 'Applied Theatre' is not so much a qualifying or excluding term, rather it is reactive, indicating that the 'applied' expands theatre activity in an inclusive way. Unlike the dichotomy of 'pure' and 'applied' mathematics - the use of 'applied' in this relation does not imply a binary opposite of 'pure' theatre, notwithstanding the misleading tendency to think of a traditional form of theatre associated with a special place for performing. The term in the context of this degree arose from the pragmatics of needing to describe those activities that by their nature or function do not fit neatly into a 'traditional' form of theatre. In other words we saw 'Applied Theatre' as including activities which use the skill and techniques of theatre for functions not usually associated with theatre (cf. Ackroyd 2000).

At the same time as the planning was underway for the degree, a Centre for Applied Theatre Research (CATR) was formed at Griffith University. Whereas the outcomes of the degree would be dependent upon the students who passed through it, the Centre was a more tightly focussed organisation set up for the conducting of research. It is to the Centre that we turn for more guidance concerning one definition of Applied Theatre. Philip Taylor, the founding Director expresses it as

Applied theatre is becoming a more frequent description of theatre work conducted outside of conventional mainstream theatre houses for the purpose of transforming or changing human behaviour. Applied theatre is characterised by its desire to influence human activity, to raise issues, have audience members problem solve those issues. (Taylor 2002).

In this definition, the important features are that the work is outside the expected place of theatre, and that it is aimed at marginalised communities, who it is hoped will achieve some sort of control or empowerment (Manchester University's Centre for Applied Theatre Research in the UK includes this ethical imperative for social change in *its* definition). Examples of some applied theatre projects of this kind are: community rejuvenation in Northern NSW (Taylor 2002), autobiographical monodrama (Millet, 2001), aids education in Uganda (Frank 1996:108-116), theatre for reconciliation in South Africa (Ebewo 1999:23-36), senior theatre (Bastin 1995:112-131), providing role players for industry training projects such as disaster simulations and police training (Lepp & O'Toole 2000:225-234), theatre projects to assist employees to cope with change, and to introduce management to new concepts and challenges. The range of projects is only limited by the imagination. Applied theatre, although needing the skills of experienced theatre practitioners, requires a type of lateral thinking, drawing the practitioner to recognise needs and opportunities in the community.

An alternative use of the term applied theatre is as a synonym for practical theatre. The degree provides experience of practical theatre as well as exposing students to applied theatre projects. It is expected that graduates of the degree will be capable of identifying niche markets for the application of theatre, and develop those markets, thus being entrepreneurs, and future employers. This is born out by the placement of the graduates of 2002, out of twelve, three companies have been formed, one graduate is an actor in a well-regarded Theatre-in-education company, and two graduates are in theatre marketing. The students' encounters with the notion of applied theatre start in the first year, and are taken up again at the end of the third year. Throughout the program they take part in applied theatre projects as well as practical theatre, it being important that they have a thorough understanding of the art form, to enable them to apply it to a problem. Thus the students are exposed to the concept of applied theatre as both practical theatre and theatre outside the traditional boundaries.

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theatre, and theatre technologies. The students first experience the concept of applied theatre in the first year, when they are introduced to a range of applied theatre projects in progress.

After completing the first year core courses the students complete an eight course theatre major, selected from a range of courses, including traditional theatre courses, such as a second voice and movement, a further exploration of drama theory through practice, theatre productions, contemporary Australian theatre, dramaturgy, script writing, acting and directing. Their developing understanding of applied theatre concepts is catered for in group-devised drama, community theatre, and for those with postgraduate leanings an introduction to research.

In addition to the theatre major it is possible to do a second major, either from another discipline, or additional theatre studies. Other disciplines selected so far have been music, leisure management, film and media, journalism, social studies, and English. A most valuable major with respect to applied theatre has been found to be Leisure Management, in which students have learnt how to set up community projects, from identifying a need to applying for grants and executing the project.

By the third year it is expected that students will have a clearer concept of applied theatre and will have had substantial experiences in its practice. The core courses in the final semester are designed to take advantage of that experience and help the students focus towards their graduation and beyond. The students are placed in an industry enabling them to spend half of their semester's workload in a placement within the theatre or wherever they feel they may be able to kick-start their career. Placements have been with the State Theatre Company, other major theatre companies, the Performing Arts Centre, various festival programs, conferences, and in Canada.

The other two core courses are Critical Reflection in Theatre and Theatre Direction. Critical Reflection provides the graduating students with the opportunity to hone their reflection skills, looking back at the concepts of applied theatre they have encountered and learned in their program, and foreshadowing their application in the future - it plays an important role in assisting students to prepare for life beyond graduation. Theatre Direction provides the opportunity for the graduating students to bring together three years study into a production which they direct, taking full responsibility for the artistic outcome, assisted by first year student technicians.

The question facing this review, in addition to the usual investigation of the effectiveness of individual courses, was whether the degree was shaping the students towards Applied Theatre as it is understood by the CATR or whether they were leaning towards an understanding of it as practical theatre. The degree having been initiated before CATR and in a wider context does not have the aim to produce applied theatre workers as such, but simply a wide range of workers in theatre.

## **Research Method**

We decided to adopt an open question model of survey instrument, because this was the first review of the program, allowing the respondents to make comment without being prompted or coached by the question. This would also allow identification of the issues that were important to the students, without them feeling that they were being steered towards a particular answer, and would provide the framework for more in-depth interviews later. The survey had six open questions and a scale of response for the individual courses allowing the respondent to select from highly satisfied (HS) to very dissatisfied (VD), HS being scored as 5 and VD scored as 1. Thus an uncertain score would be 3. This form of nominative scoring is best viewed as a frequency count rather than statistical measures such as median, mode or average, which can give misleading results. Finally the respondent was invited to give a score on an overall scale of satisfaction for the whole program.

The survey instrument was distributed to all undergraduates in the BAAT towards the end of the second semester of 2002. The introductory letter invited them to indicate that they were prepared to be interviewed. On receipt of the completed surveys, the letter showing those identified as being prepared for interview was removed and the survey marked for interview when a subject number was assigned. The survey was then separated for data entry with no identification marks on it. Throughout the process every effort was made to ensure that identities were screened from the data.

After the surveys had been received, the interviewees were contacted and interviewed by an independent researcher. The interviews were conducted informally, using the framework of a blank survey form as a guide. Students were invited to elaborate on any of the issues raised, and to raise any of their own. Anonymity of interviewees was preserved through the interviewer's assignment of a pseudonym to each. The information from the interviews confirmed that obtained from the questionnaire, so it is incorporated in the tables of responses to the questions.

The open questions and interview responses were scanned for major issues, which were then organised into groups for detailed analysis.

## **Results**

Twenty students (13 female, 7 male) replied. Although the total active enrolment was 59, there would have been a number away on industry placements, sick or having left the State before the end of semester for family reasons. This means that the available total was nearer 50, giving a 40% return rate. This means that caution must be exercised in generalising from the results.

Major issues related to theatre, facilities, development of artistic skills and an artistic career, use of practitioners from the theatre industry, the quality of teaching, support, industry links, personal growth and acting. Other issues considered the link with education, assessment, the range of courses, the content, and theory.

For ease of organisation each question will be dealt with in turn.

### 1. What did you expect to get from this program when you first enrolled?

The main points that were made were linked to the theatre, the development of skill entry into the industry and acting. There were three responses indicating that pleasure was a main motivator and two were interested in community theatre.

ISSUE	RESPONSE
Theatre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a job in the theatre industry</li> <li>• a chance to be in more plays</li> <li>• a sound base of theatre knowledge</li> </ul>
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• theatre education including stage management</li> <li>• acting</li> <li>• voice, stagecraft, script analysis, characterisation</li> <li>• learn more about directing, acting, writing</li> </ul>
Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ability to sell ourselves to agents and be marketed</li> </ul>
Acting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• enhance my ability in acting</li> </ul>

**Table 1 - sample responses to Question 1.**

### 2. What have you got out of this program so far?

The interviewees perceived the rewards for being in the program to be linked to theatre, but more importantly respondents have identified the development of artistic skill and an artistic career along with personal growth. Some respondents considered that the people and the personal feedback were what they had got out of the program.

**Table 2 - sample responses to Question 2**

ISSUE	RESPONSE
Theatre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• technical side of theatre</li> <li>• variety of areas in the theatre industry</li> </ul>
Artistic skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• acting techniques</li> <li>• technical aspects and understanding of script analysis</li> </ul>
Artistic career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• career options which I never expected</li> <li>• performing is not the only career</li> </ul>
Personal growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have been forced to grow up and become a stronger person</li> <li>• working at what I love and do best</li> <li>• patience</li> <li>• there is more to this profession than being the best actor</li> </ul>

**3. What do you consider are the program's strongest points?**

These responses once again included theatre, but also considered the use of practitioners, the level of support, and the range of courses. There were one or two comments about the balance of theory and practical, and one comment applauding the lack of age discrimination.

**Table 3 - sample responses to Question 3**

ISSUE	RESPONSE
Practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• theatre practitioners from the real world</li><li>• lecturers who work in the industry</li></ul>
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the amount of support you get from your peers and especially your lecturers</li></ul>
Range of courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the diversity of courses offered</li><li>• the variety of teachings - lights, sound, history, dramaturgy</li></ul>

**4. What do you consider are the program's weakest points?**

The issue at the head was facilities; there was some comment about support, teaching, and some strong statements about the program's link with teacher education. Students who are enrolled to become drama teachers do six courses in common with the BAAT students. More links with the industry and the need for more practitioners are noted, whilst more comments on the range, content, and assessment of courses are made. The issue of profile emerges, although only four respondents made reference to this. Two respondents were unhappy with the selection process, feeling it needed to be more stringent.

**Table 4 - sample responses to Question 4**

ISSUE	RESPONSE
Facilities [NB Every student returned a negative comment on this issue]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• lack of facilities and funding</li><li>• room space and availability of rooms for rehearsals</li><li>• more books in the library</li></ul>
Link with teacher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• teacher education students do subjects with us and are not dedicated or focused on the subject. They do not have the same love and appreciation of theatre as Applied Theatre students.</li><li>• too many classes with education students</li></ul>

**[EDITOR: This table is irrecoverably damaged, owing to platform transcription issues. We apologise for this]**

Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little industry contact</li> </ul>
Practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of permanent performing art lecturers</li> <li>• lack of professional input</li> </ul>
Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of profile</li> <li>• lack of public knowledge of the degree</li> </ul>

**Questions 5 to 29** showed level of satisfaction with individual courses. A total of 18 courses showed a positive level of satisfaction, compared with only 3 showing dissatisfaction, and 4 undecided. Overall satisfaction with the program is shown in Table 5. The majority of respondents showed that they were satisfied with the program.

**Table 5 - frequencies of overall satisfaction with the program**

SATISFACTION	RESPONSES
Highly satisfied	8
Satisfied	11
Unsure	3
Dissatisfied	1
Very dissatisfied	0

The last question allowed room for general comments about the program and any other issues the respondents wished to raise.

### **30. Please add any further comments you have about the program**

High on the list of general comments (Table 6) was the issue of facilities. There were a number of notes of satisfaction and personal growth, although the link with education, need for more industry contacts and theatre practitioners were further emphasised. There were a few comments about a perceived lack of University support, the need for dedicated teaching, and a glowing testimonial for the drama technician.

**Table 6 - selection of general comments**

ISSUE	RESPONSE
Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the facilities are substandard. We don't have a properly designed theatre. No rehearsal space, no wings, no proper change rooms</li> <li>• the University needs to wake up and see the need for the degree and fund it properly</li> <li>• we have worked hard and passionately, despite the lack of facilities and funding from the University</li> </ul>
Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• this course has the potential to be fantastic, I believe in this program and feel fortunate to be part of it. I understand it is in its very early stages and there will be teething problems to overcome</li> <li>• I would not speak derogatorily about Applied Theatre as this is a course which is doing great</li> </ul>

	things for me. • overall this program has clearly achieved its aims in educating students in theatre skills both on and off stage
Personal growth	• this course is great for Applied Theatre and encompasses everything you could/would possibly want. It has taught me a lot and I've learnt a great deal from this course already in the 1st year. I've grown up a great deal and I feel I'm such a stronger person with a lot more confidence. • it's giving me experiences in places I never thought would interest me.
Link with teacher education	• please let us not be so involved in Education!!! We are not in education, nor drama in education!! • could benefit from more theatre lecturers than education.

Which completes the results of the survey and interviews.

## Discussion

The 40% return rate may or may not suggest that a majority of the students are satisfied enough with the program not to feel the need to return the survey. However it does make it difficult to make any kind of generalisations from these results. This should not detract from the quality of the responses or the value placed upon them.

The answers to Question 1 leave no doubt that the respondents initially expected to learn about acting and theatre. This is not surprising as most young people interested in the theatre come to it through acting. Although we might see a change in this through clearer publicity, it is doubtful that young people will make much of a distinction, until they have had more learning in the area. This point is borne out when we look at the answers to what the students have got out of the program.

Responses to Question 2 contrast with those to Question 1 showing that the program is working to widen the students' focus, guiding them to greater insight into the range of activities that are linked to theatre. The recognition of the wider range of career options and the emphasis on development of skills shows a growing maturity. A most gratifying result was the number of responses identifying personal development as an important issue. This showed insight and maturity.

The responses on the program's strongest points reiterate much of the previous question but add insight into other areas. The level of perceived support from lecturers and peers is high and suggests good working relationships throughout. The use of outside practitioners is considered a plus, as is the range of courses. However, responses about the program's weakest points suggest some contradiction with the previous responses particularly with respect to range and content.

The comments about support seem to indicate that the respondents have had varied experiences with lecturers and administration. Industry contacts and the use of practitioners in the teaching team are important and are being incorporated as much as budgeting allows. In the year 2003, there has been an increase in the number of theatre practitioners employed to teach some of the courses. Comments about the quality of industry links need to be read in the context of a broad, developing relationship with the local State theatre company, and the local State-run theatre complex. The need for a higher profile for the degree is one of which the University is very aware and a number of strategies need to be devised to improve it.

Levels of satisfaction with individual courses and the program overall show that the respondents are mostly happy with the program, with some minor exceptions. Generally, the problems have been a result of a mismatch between the perceptions of the individual lecturer and the perceptions of the students as to what the course means or what it might be meant to achieve.

dissatisfaction with the facilities, something with which the staff agree wholeheartedly.

The link with teacher education is seen to be a disadvantage, mainly because of the different focus of

the students and some lecturers. In fact the core, continuing teaching staff have all had previous professional experience in theatre in various roles. The fact that they have also developed skills in education tends, in some instances, to obscure their past. This is a pity because the students are making assumptions based upon surface appearances rather than facts. The misperception by students of staff is easily remedied by publishing a summary of biographies and interests for the consumption of students. There is also a perception that only theatre practitioners should teach the BAAT, and only teachers teach the teacher education students. This is of course a simplistic and erroneous view, which has been put into perspective somewhat this year with the employment of a distinguished theatre practitioner who has frustrated the students by an inability to teach. The relationship between teacher education students and BAAT students is unfortunate if it prevents them from learning from each other. Simply having a different focus or goal should not prevent them from understanding each other's point of view. Recognising differences and similarities in course planning may help a little.

## **Conclusion**

The degree is considered by the students to be of some worth and may be seen to be successful in its first three years. A particularly interesting result of its first three years of operation is the limited view that the students have of its purpose. There is a strong dissonance between the aims of applied theatre as espoused by CATR and that perceived by these students. Their focus upon the importance of facilities, and a separation from teacher education show that there is still a sense of theatre in a 'special' place. They are clearly interpreting applied theatre as practical theatre. Considering that many applied theatre projects have developed from education, and that many of the skills needed for applied theatre are those needed for education, it is a pity that students feel negatively about this relationship. The students of the degree generally do not adopt the aims of applied theatre as practised. There are still some undergraduates who have their sights set on the 'traditional' acting career, hoping for work through an agent, or to move on to a professional acting school. We can hope that as the degree becomes known for what it stands for, the focus of entrants will be more in tune with applied theatre as we understand it rather than simply practical theatre. Future studies will track this to see if there is a change in focus of students over time.

## **Acknowledgments**

Maureen Owen and Professor John O'Toole

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