

Some Insights into Australian Theatre Education : The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts

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Abstract

Australia and Japan have forged a cooperative relationship in education as well as in other fields such as economics, tourism, and cultural exchange over the decades. However, up until today little is known in Japan about Australian theatre education. This paper will introduce some aspects of theatre education in Australian higher education and will examine characteristics of Australian theatre education and its potential for Japanese higher education. The paper contains a case study of the theatre education in the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University (WAAPA@ECU), one of the major institutions for professional theatre training in Australia.

Keywords: Australia, Theatre, Education, Acting, Performing Arts

1

Australia and Japan have forged a cooperative relationship in various fields such as economics, tourism, and cultural / educational exchange over the decades. The Japanese language has become an extremely popular subject in Australian educational institutions ranging from primary schools to universities, which has led Australia to hold the second largest population of Japanese learners in the world. The sister city project between the two countries successfully celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2003 and sister school affiliations with Australian schools have become common among Japanese schools. Australia has attracted numerous Japanese people for business or study and the same is true for Japan.

Despite these active interactions and the close partnership between Australia and Japan including educational exchanges, up until today little is known in Japan about Australian theatre education. This paper contains a case study of the theatre education in the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University, WAAPA@ECU, one of the three major institutions for professional theatre training in Australia. Some aspects of theatre education in Australian higher education will be introduced, and characteristics of Australian theatre education and its potential for Japanese higher education will be explained.

2

WAAPA offers courses for a variety of art fields ranging from theatre, dance and music to broadcast and visual arts, and the theatre branch itself offers a diverse range of courses such as acting, music theatre, Aboriginal theatre, arts management, production and design for performance and theatre research. Although these courses have individual curriculums suited to help students enhance their specialities, the curriculums are also designed to complement one another in order to help students understand the multiple aspects of theatre production and to develop the sense of theatre as a synthetic art form. Most of the courses place much importance on the practical side of theatre and require students to take various practical workshops during the course of their study, while taking into account the significance of the theoretical background for the comprehensive understanding of theatre. Such educational objectives are reflected in the selection of theatre staff members as well: they generally have rich experiences in the theatre industry; for example, as professional actors, directors and / or playwrights, and there are quite a few teachers who continue to be involved in theatrical productions both on and off campus. For professional acting training, WAAPA has acting and music theatre courses, which are full-time intensive, three-year courses. These courses help students prepare for careers in acting in theatre, film, television and radio as well as in directing, scriptwriting, drama education and so forth, and their graduates include internationally acclaimed actors such as Frances O'Connor and Hugh Jackman.¹⁾

Although there are quite a few Australian colleges / universities that offer theatre courses, both theoretical and / or practical, the most esteemed institutions for professional acting training are: the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in Sydney;²⁾ the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in Melbourne; and the WAAPA in Perth. All of them have university affiliations: the NIDA with The University of New South Wales; the VCA with The University of Melbourne; and the WAAPA with Edith Cowan University. Many of the applicants for the acting courses from these institutions are those who would like to pursue careers as professional actors or who have already worked as actors but hope to have further training in acting for furthering their careers in the field.

Although Australia's eastern states hold a wider range of business in the theatre / film industry than the Western Australia, many people choose to undertake their training in acting at WAAPA for its excellence in theatre education. In their third year, the final year of the course, students make a showcase tour of Australia to present their final theatrical work before agents, directors, and industry professionals.

Each of the acting and music theatre courses at WAAPA requires an intensive curriculum from Monday to Friday, and sometimes on the weekends as well. The classes in the acting course include studies of acting, voice, movement, text and history, and acting for film / television / radio. Training in special techniques such as fencing and karate is also part of the

curriculum. In addition, the music theatre course has classes in music and voice, dance (classical ballet, jazz dance, tap dance, etc.) acting and improvisation, and studies of arts management, dramatic literature and history of music theatre. They also have private singing lessons and Alexander Technique.³⁾

In addition to the general classes mentioned above, both courses place great importance on stage experience, in preparation to become a theatre professional. Therefore, production and performance weeks are scheduled every year in order to give students opportunities to perform in a professional setting. Students in the same year in each course perform together in one production, and students in the second and the third years are given more opportunities to give public performances. WAAPA has a few venues on campus including an amphitheatre, and the performances usually take place in one of them. Admission to these public performances is charged and tickets are sold at a box office located in the Academy.⁴⁾ The Academy publishes a calendar of its events every semester and welcomes the public to attend its performances. The theatre / music theatre students perform a range of works from classical masterpieces to contemporary Australian works and students' original works.

WAAPA offers theatre classes not only to the students in these intensive theatre and music theatre courses but also to those who belong to other courses in WAAPA or other departments within Edith Cowan University. These classes are taken as electives and are practical workshops that allow them to experience theatre practices in a small class setting. These open workshops cover acting, directing, improvisation, movement, vocal technique, scriptwriting and so forth, which are also usually instructed by professional actors, directors, and scriptwriters. Some students attend these workshops as preparation for auditions to the intensive theatre / music theatre courses in the following year, as those without previous training usually are not accepted into the course the first time around. Class size is small to maximise solo / group practice time.

In the acting workshop, students are given opportunities to learn basic exercises for acting such as voice training, setting-up exercises, improvisations, group work on plays / original works, and so on. The Stanislavski method is commonly used, however, other acting methods such as those by Jerzy Grotowski⁵⁾ and Uta Hagen⁶⁾ are also introduced to broaden the understanding of acting. The vocal technique class allows students to explore their use of voice and language in various manners ranging from simple exercises on abdominal breathing to more complex practices such as reciting Shakespearean sonnets and performing short monologues. In the scriptwriting workshop students learn the basic knowledge of playwriting and are required to write their own play during the semester. The required length of the work depends on the level of the workshop, and students improve their writing skills by getting feedback on their works as well as on short in-class writing exercises. Students also have opportunities to read and critique each other's plays in class. Some of the students even succeed in staging their own plays in public. The actual content of the workshops depends on the teacher, and I have given only a few examples, but they generally provide a large

amount of practical exercises, while also helping students to enhance theoretical knowledge and understanding of theatre.

What I have discussed so far pertains to the undergraduate level at WAAPA. Now I would like to turn to the postgraduate level. WAAPA offers postgraduate study and research opportunities for theatre studies in the Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Arts courses. Here I would like to introduce the course outline of the Master of Arts (Creative Arts). This course is a research degree for students / artists who wish to pursue their investigation in their chosen discipline of performing and visual arts. Therefore, each student specialises in different field of study such as theatre, dance, music, painting, photography, digital video, and so forth. They are also encouraged to pursue cross-sectional art practices. The course requirements for the Master's Degree contain both theoretical and practical approaches to the specialised field. Students are at liberty to choose the proportion of these two aspects between 40 and 60 %. The length of the master's thesis is somewhere between 26,000 words and 42,000 words, depending on the percentage of the practical side. The practical approach is expected to result in a work of art and is often presented in public performances / exhibitions. The examinees for the degree exclude the candidate's supervisor and contain at least one specialist from outside the University. They are requested to evaluate the candidate's performances / exhibitions as well as mark the thesis for examination. Some of the master's students who specialise in theatre studies choose to write their own plays and stage them, while others are interested in some specific aspects of theatre such as acting or stage management.

As we have seen above, the theatre education at WAAPA is very diverse. In the following chapter I would like to examine the relationship between various theatre-related courses in WAAPA to explore the communication and interaction between different divisions of WAAPA, as well as between the Academy and the outside world.

3

One of the characteristics of theatre education at WAAPA is the mutual support between different courses. The above-mentioned public performance provides a good example as a collaborative work between various courses within WAAPA. Students in different majors — acting, directing, stage management, lighting, sound, costume, arts management, etc. — cooperate together to stage a piece of work by putting their own learning to practical use. Music students also often take part in the performances as pianists, jazz players, and orchestra members. The reverse situation can also be found: music theatre students occasionally join opera students in their performances. Such collaboration helps students obtain experience in their own professions.

The interaction between different courses can be found in regular classes as well. A good example is given by one of the music theatre classes called "Performance Practice," a joint

class for all the music theatre students. This class takes place at the auditorium and students are required to perform a piece of music theatre repertoire — mainly a solo piece — on stage. Though some pieces have a strong acting element, usually the focus is on singing. The music theatre course auditions a couple of piano students to accompany the singing every year for this class, which allows the music students to expand their performance range. Accompanists are partnered with music theatre students every few weeks, a couple of weeks before performances, so that they can practice together with the music theatre students a few times. Sometimes an accompanist attends his / her music theatre student's private singing lessons and the teacher supervises their practice.

The cross-sectional cooperation is active not only among undergraduate courses but also between undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Such interaction is often found in the research projects taken during the Master of Arts (Creative Arts) mentioned above. Since this course covers a wide range of art fields and each student's research method is different, the Academy deals with students' needs individually when necessary and gives support to the students at various stages of their research. For instance, if the students need to enhance their understanding in a specific field, they are allowed to take part in many of the undergraduate classes and to receive supervision from various staff members in other courses. Some students go one step further and ask for collaboration with undergraduate students as a part of their research project. It is not rare to see undergraduate students voluntarily taking part in the master students' original works, and such collaboration often results in public performances.

WAAPA encourages interaction with the outside world on multiple levels. Various theatre professionals are invited to the Academy and occasionally special workshops / lectures are held. Many of them are open to all students so that they can broaden their understanding of the performing arts. Some of the staff members are actively working outside the University as directors, actors, and / or scriptwriters, some even in an international setting. Cross-cultural communication is also present on campus. The members of the Academy welcome students and staff members from various countries including not only English-speaking regions but also non English-speaking countries. This includes not only dance and music courses but also theatre courses despite the fact that theatre is far more dependent on language than other performing arts. WAAPA has also developed relationships with overseas institutions such as the University of California and the Purchase College of the State University of New York. It also has affiliations with The Julliard School in New York, The London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA), the Royal Academy of Music and the Amsterdam School of the Arts.

As we have seen, WAAPA's theatre education covers numerous fields and multiple

aspects of theatre and the teaching includes both highly professional theatre training as well as general performing arts education. It is comparatively flexible in answering individual students' needs through small-sized classes and individual tutorials. It offers abundant practice-based learning opportunities in a diversity of forms supported by theoretical understanding, which helps the graduates to pursue careers relevant to their specialisation at the Academy. In fact, more than 60 % of the graduates engage in their chosen profession within the arts industry.⁷⁾ This kind of comprehensive and interactive theatre education may offer a lot to Japanese higher education, particularly when considering that many arts colleges / universities in Japan are focused on classical music and visual arts, and that many of the theatre-related courses in Japanese higher education do not yet have the comprehensive educational system to cover multiple aspects of theatre practices.

Some of the characteristics of WAAPA's theatre education seem to reflect those of the Australian society and culture themselves. One particular aspect is its multicultural,⁸⁾ or more accurately, its multi-lingual nature. Of course it is partly attributed to the multicultural population of this immigrant country. However, there seems to be a significant difference between multicultural and multi-language in the field of theatre. Theatre is often said to be one of the most difficult art media to cross national boundaries owing to the weight of language in itself. However, the Academy's theatre education takes into account an individual's abilities other than language, and welcomes even those from non English-speaking regions. This might also be a reflection of Australian society where people from all over the world with various language difficulties have job opportunities in the professions that require English competency. Sometimes students' different language backgrounds are used in theatre workshops in a positive way and help to enrich the learning process. There are exercises which require students to express themselves with a limited use of language in order to explore one's ability of expression without the help of language. Thus, those students who cannot speak English as fluently as others are also led to expand their creative potential.

This kind of broad-minded theatre education might have considerable potential in the internationalisation of theatre media and theatre education as well as in other kinds of education such as English language. It is said that theatre education could be effective when applied not only to theatre training but also to other disciplines. Theatre education in English could then offer a variety of exercises to various classes such as English language, communication and presentation. For instance, acting methods could offer various techniques for effective presentation through experiencing practical communication exercises including vocal technique, facial expression, posture and gesture, and English articulation and intonation.

Australia and Japan have achieved a mature trade partnership over the decades. However, educational exchange is still growing and developing.⁹⁾ Now is a good time to expand the trade partnership to the field of education and to import / export the educational achievements of each country. In an age when Australia and Japan are both interested in further fostering a collaborative relationship, theatre education provides a good start.

(This is partly based on a paper presented at the December regular meeting of the Society for the Study of Modern / Contemporary Theatre held at Osaka University on 21 December 2002.)

Notes

- 1) Frances O'Connor's recent work includes the film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2002) directed by Oliver Parker. Hugh Jackman is featured in *X-Men* (2000), *Kate & Leopold* (2001), *Swordfish* (2001) and *X2: X-Men United* (2003) among others.
- 2) Mel Gibson is one of the graduates from NIDA.
- 3) The Alexander Technique is a method that helps to change movement habits for a better balance between mind and body. It helps performers such as actors, dancers, and musicians to improve their abilities, too. WAAPA has a room specially designed for the Technique and students have tutorials with an expert to work on their individual problems.
- 4) The same system is also adopted by other performing arts courses of WAAPA such as music and dance. The ticket price ranges from 7.70 dollars to 22.00 dollars depending on the kind of performance and concession.
- 5) Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999) was a Polish director, teacher and theoretician of the theatre. He established the Theatre of Thirteen Rows in Opole in 1959 and moved the group to Wrocław under the name, the Laboratory Theatre. He became an international leader of the experimental theatre, working actively both in and out of the country. His proposal included the concept, "poor theatre," which eliminated from theatre all nonessentials (i. e. costumes, makeup, sound effects, lighting, sets) in an attempt to redefine the relationship between the actors and the audience, while strictly defining the performance space. His productions, theories, radical theatre concept and acting training have had a profound influence on world theatre. A collection of his seminal theoretical writings is found in his book, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968)
- 6) Uta Hagen (1919-2004) was an American actress, director and a teacher. She was born in Germany and moved to the United States in 1921. She made her Broadway debut in 1938 as Nina in the Lunts' production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* and acted in various productions since then including Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) as Martha. She started to teach at a drama school, the Herbert Berghof Studio, in 1947. Despite her talent for acting, she gave priority to teaching and directing and became one of the most important acting teachers in the United States. Her method derived from Stanislavski like most American teachers'. She wrote *Respect for Acting* (New York: Macmillan, 1973) and *A Challenge for the Actor* (New York: Scribner's, 1991) both books on acting.
- 7) The data is based on the WAAPA's prospectus, *Imagine Inspiration*.
- 8) The issue of multiculturalism in Australia is argued from various aspects in Adam Jamrozik, Cathy Boland, and Robert Urquhart, *Social Change and Cultural Transformation in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and in Lois Foster and David Stockley, *Australian Multiculturalism: A Documentary History and Critique* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1988) among others. The arguments include some discussion on the monocultural aspect of Australian education and on the development of Australian multicultural creative arts.

See again, for example, Jamrozik, Boland, and Urquhart 134-135, 220-221. The relation between Australian migration and education is also discussed in Don Edgar, Leon Earle, and Rodney Fopp, *Introduction to Australian Society* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1993) 330-331; and in Lois Foster, *Australian Education* (Tokyo: Keisoshobo, 1990). Yasue Arimitsu examines the relationship between multiculturalism and the development of Australian literature and film. See Arimitsu, *Australian Identity: Struggle and Transformation in Australian Literature* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2003).

- 9) Masami Sekine points out that the study of Australian multiculturalisation could be significant to the minority issue in Japan as well. See Sekine, *Multicultural Australia* (Tokyo: Seibundo, 1989) 506-507.

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オーストラリアに於ける演劇教育への一考察

西オーストラリア・パフォーミング・アーツ・アカデミーを中心に

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要 約

オーストラリアと日本は、ここ数十年の間に経済、観光、文化交流等の諸分野のみならず教育面でも協力関係を築いてきた。しかし、オーストラリアの演劇教育に関しては、日本ではまだ殆ど知られていないように思われる。本論文は、オーストラリアの高等教育に於ける演劇教育を一部紹介し、オーストラリアの演劇教育の特徴と日本の高等教育への応用の可能性を考察するものである。また、ケース・スタディとして、プロの演劇人を養成するためのオーストラリアの代表的な教育機関の一つであるエディス・コーワン大学附属西オーストラリア・パフォーミング・アーツ・アカデミー（WAAPA@ECU）に於ける演劇教育を取り上げる。

キーワード：オーストラリア，演劇，教育，演技，パフォーミング・アーツ