Article

A dramatic existence: Undergraduate preparations for a creative life in the performance industries

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Abstract

This article focuses specifically on drama and theatre higher education (HE) programmes and preparation for potential graduate work. The article investigates working in the creative industries and in the performing arts (particularly within acting) and how HE students in the United Kingdom prepare for this life. The growth of the creative industries and successful applied drama in the public and private sectors has also brought business interest in how drama and theatre processes can benefit other workplaces, outside of the creative arts. The article addresses current policy, initiatives and partnerships to broaden inclusion and access to creative work. The research explores drama undergraduate degrees and the university’s role in supporting a successful transition from HE to graduate work. Students perceive the university world as safe and the graduate world as precarious and unsafe. The research findings have resonance with other undergraduate degrees, outside of the arts and the role the university plays in student transitions from the university to the graduate environment.

Keywords

Cultural and creative industries, drama, employability, higher education, theatre, undergraduates

This article focuses specifically on drama and theatre higher education (HE) programmes and preparation for potential graduate work. The first part of the article addresses working in the creative industries and in the per-forming arts (particularly within acting) and how HE stu-dents prepare for this life. Next, the article clarifies the research methodology and presents first- and final-year students’ perceptions of potential graduate work and of preparation for and life in the performing arts. The research sample comprises drama students on an undergraduate degree course in drama in an English post-1992 university.1 Finally, the article considers how the growth of the creative industries and successful applied drama use outside of the arts have increased business interest in how drama and theatre processes can benefit other workplaces. The researchers come from professional theatre and education backgrounds.

(DCMS, 2017; GOV UK, 2017). The creative industries make up 6.1% of all UK jobs (DCMS, 2017). The arts and culture industries in particular contribute £10.8 billion a year to the UK economy and provide 363,700 jobs (CEBR, 2019).

Brown (2007) demonstrates that jobs in the performing arts industries (drama, dance and music) are highly com-petitive. Career trajectories in the performing arts can be different to more traditional career models in other indus-tries; work in all creative sectors can be short contract and project-based, with neither permanent nor even continuous payment. Performing arts work consequently gives uncer-tain employment prospects to its employees (Brown, 2007). Maxwell et al. (2018: 150) evidence actors living ‘precar-ious lives’ with ‘uncertainty of employment, poor rates of pay and challenging workplace conditions’. Unreliable graduate work might seem an unappealing proposition for

The creative and cultural industries

The creative industries in the United Kingdom, which include advertising, marketing, arts, film, television, radio, museums and galleries, are worth almost £92 billion

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students when choosing potential HE undergraduate pro-grammes – particularly as prospective students are encour-aged to link HE provision choice with graduate employment outcomes (DfE, 2019). Surprisingly, this is not the case, and the high demand for drama and theatre HE places indicates that students are not deterred. In 1975, there were 7 HE providers of such courses; by 2015, there were 77 in England and 18 drama schools and conserva-toires (Wilkie, 2015). This increase in provision has taken place at a time when the arts are being squeezed out of the compulsory curriculum in the United Kingdom in favour of core subjects (Barker, 2014).

should be exploited as transferable to the wider employ-ment market (Barnett and Coate, 2005). Wilkie (2015) posits that the current vocational training for actors, in the light of the lack of acting opportunities, is not fit for pur-pose. The curriculum needs to be revised so that it is broader, is appropriate for more diverse employment (in addition to the performing arts) and provides graduates with work-readiness. He argues that although there are too many actors and too few jobs, drama training develops communication skills and soft skills – ‘people’, ‘project’, ‘team’ and ‘work discipline’ skills (Wilkie, 2015: 33). These skills are valued by employers and should be high-lighted and emphasised in programme curricula.

Life in the arts

Maxwell et al. (2018) explore the precarious life of an actor in Australia, in particular researching actors’ well-being and their employment when they are not in creative work. The reflections of Australian actors reveal the precarious-ness: ‘We chose a hard road’; ‘We overcome our arro-gance, and our fears, and fight on through’; ‘This industry neither wants nor needs us. It treats us as consum-ables’; ‘We remain true to ourselves . . . to our self-aware-ness . . . to our self-belief’ (Maxwell et al., 2018: 154). When out of work, actors supplement their incomes by taking jobs in retail, teaching, clerical work and hospitality. These key areas offer flexibility for ‘resting’ actors (Max-well et al., 2018). Maxwell et al. (2018: 173) note that breaks from acting are taken not only because of lack of employment in the arts but also because of ‘intense distress, self-doubt, loss of motivation, and, in extreme cases, clin-ical depression’. They argue that

being an actor, then, is not simply a question of “having” a particular occupation, but is defining, ontological: an actor is a person who has thrown themselves, existentially, into the task of being an actor; more, the contours of this way of being-in-the-world are those of struggle in the face of indifference and exploitation. (Maxwell et al., 2018: 155)

Oakland (2019) investigates performers’ mental health and accepts that anxiety is commonplace; resilience needs to be developed for the tough and unpredictable performing arts career. Maxwell et al. (2018) argue that actors can be trapped in the dilemma between accessing personal and interpersonal support as well as being professional and industry-ready. They reason that actor training should equip graduates to manage the occupational vulnerabilities and risks that come with professional work, arguing that programmes should be addressing anxiety and mental health as well as financial and relational stress.

Barnett and Coate argue that the 21st century actor must be oriented ‘towards the world of work’ (2005: 45). Entre-preneurship, problem-solving, reflection, investigation and critical thinking covered in an undergraduate programme

Developing inclusion and access to creative work

In the United Kingdom, drama graduates entering the act-ing profession in 2020 do so at a time of change, amid new initiatives to increase equality of access for actors to audi-tions and to improve working conditions and safeguarding. Scrutiny of casting practices is one of many industry responses to recent questions about inequality of opportu-nity for actors in theatre, film and television raised by influential voices in artistic and political circles. In 2017, Tom Watson, then Shadow Arts Minister, commissioned ‘Acting Up’, an inquiry into pay and employment practices which discriminated against people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic and working-class backgrounds as well as those with disabilities. The resulting report (Brabin et al., 2017) highlighted many issues, including the need for drama graduates to be better prepared for the realities of the outside world:

many respondents to our inquiry felt that drama schools and universities needed to do more to prepare students to be aware, and in some cases resistant to, exploitative working practices within the industry and encourage networking and entrepre-neurial skills that will be vital to future success. (Brabin et al., 2017: 14)

In 2018 Equity, the UK actor’s union created ‘A Man-ifesto for Casting’ and, in their assessment of current UK casting procedures, cited ongoing discrimination on the grounds of race, sexuality, gender, class, disability and age (Equity, 2018). The aftermath of the Harvey Weinstein case in 2017 and other high-profile cases of bullying and abuse in theatre and film have contributed to a review of policy and process in theatre initiated by Vicky Feather-stone of the Royal Court Theatre, London. Following industry consultation, Featherstone launched and published online a Code of Conduct intending to safeguard staff from abusive behaviour. Specific reference is made to the need for a ‘robust conversation’ between drama schools and industry (university drama departments are not mentioned)

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to raise awareness and to take steps (Royal Court Theatre, 2017). One of the first companies to announce a change in its process to increase access was Paines Plough Theatre Company. Michelle Douglass (2018), writing in The Stage, cites James Grieve, Artistic Director of Paines Plough. Grieve explained the Company’s policy of holding open auditions around the United Kingdom: ‘You don’t need to consider yourself a professional actor even, you don’t have to be on Spotlight, you don’t have to have an agent, [and] you don’t have to have had specific training’. The intention was to create wider access for less experienced actors and to increase the diversity of professional actors working in the United Kingdom in terms of class, race and disability. Some companies, such as Pilot Theatre based in York, circulated open invitations to audition for their productions in 2018 and 2019 and used self-taping to ensure equal access (Pilot The-atre Company, 2019). Other theatres currently hold periodic open auditions for actors living in their region or local area (Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 2019; Nottingham Play-house, 2019; Royal Exchange Manchester, 2019) allowing them to get to know locally-based actors.

In the subsidised theatre sector in the United Kingdom, the need to support and develop new talent has been recog-nised and articulated by Arts Council England (ACE) in their published strategy (2010–2020) in which they make a number of pledges, including one to create ‘fairer entry and progression routes in the arts and culture sector [ . . . ] this has resulted in theatres delivering many initiatives to sup-port new and “emerging” theatre artists’ (Arts Council England, 2013: 55).

These initiatives often seek to give recent graduates and early career artists access to resources at theatres such as rehearsal space, mentoring, technical support, support net-works and sometimes small sums of money to cover basic costs. One established example is ‘In Good Company’, an initiative delivered primarily through the Derby Theatre (owned by Derby University), but supported by a consor-tium of theatres based in the Midlands region of England, including Nottingham Playhouse, the Attenborough Arts Centre and the Arena Theatre Wolverhampton. Funded by ACE and other sources, this programme started in 2014 and is designed to help young theatre makers based in the Midlands to find their feet in the theatre industry:

All the arts organisations are committed to the development of artists and, with strong links to educational institutions, they’re perfectly placed to nurture and nourish emerging artists as they establish themselves as artists of the future. [ . . . ] There are a range of opportunities for Midlands artists including; perfor-mance platforms, workshops, commissions, festivals, meet-ups, pitching sessions and bespoke mentoring. (Derby Theatre, 2019)

The language used by ‘In Good Company’, as with other schemes of this type, does not refer to ‘acting’ or ‘actors’

specifically but uses the term ‘artist’ instead. Although not defined explicitly by ACE, ‘artist’ is used as an umbrella term in these schemes to cover a number of different crea-tive skills and relationships to the creative process, includ-ing devising companies, performers, writers and creative producers. Graduates from UK university drama depart-ments are more likely to fit into this broader ‘artist’ cate-gory than graduates from UK drama schools who have trained specifically as actors.

Artists in the creative industries and applied sectors

The growth of the creative industries and successful applied drama use outside of the arts has increased business interest in how drama and theatre processes can benefit other workplaces (Anderson and Donelan, 2009). Davis (2015) records the increase in applied drama HE courses to meet private and public sector business need. Detail of this need is extensive and cannot be fully covered in this article. However, to give a flavour of its diversity, it ranges from training and development of employees in the corpo-rate sector to conflict resolution, policy development and knowledge sharing for participants in prisons, community groups, charities, hostels for the homeless and care homes (Nicholson, 2005; Prendergast and Saxton, 2009; Prentki and Preston, 2009).

Anderson (2014) considers the use of applied theatre as a means of bringing creativity into new spaces and places and to become a right for all. The World Economic Forum (2019) advocates that the top three key graduate skills in 2020 for the global workplace are complex problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity – all skills that are developed in an undergraduate performing arts course (Higdon and Stevens, 2017). As automation comes to many jobs in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, creativity will become an increasingly valuable graduate asset as employ-ers seek ideas, designs and problem-solving that cannot be undertaken by technology (World Economic Forum, 2019).

The Warwick Report (University of Warwick, 2015) and the more recent Durham Commission Report (Arts Council England and Durham University, 2019) argue for pedagogies and practices that cultivate creativity in educa-tion, so that those leaving education (compulsory and non-compulsory) can meet employers’ demands for creativity, resilience, imagination and problem-solving in the future, global work. Both reports argue that creativity, resilience, imagination and problem-solving are also attributes that are helpful in leading a rewarding and healthy life, because, when obstacles are encountered, there is personal agency to facilitate and create possible pathways and solutions.

The world is messy, complex and contradictory; crea-tivity, imagination and applied theatre processes help make sense of the chaos (Anderson, 2014). Creativity allows graduates to move from the predictable HE undergraduate

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setting (possibly the safe/unreal world) to the unpredictable (possibly unsafe/real world) where life is chaotic, disordered and complex, and the graduate needs almost to make a leap of faith. HE programmes in all disciplines, beyond the arts, should be developing creativity to support their graduates in making this transition to work and providing them with the self-efficacy and self-agency to mediate healthily through the chaos and complexity of everyday life.

Partnerships and pathways

Since 2010 there has been an increasing number of partner-ships between higher education institutions (HEIs) and larger arts organisations, including theatres and theatre companies. These partnerships serve many different pur-poses. ACE, in conjunction with University Alliance, has published A Clearer Picture, an advisory document for arts and cultural organisations about engaging with universities (Arts Council England and University Alliance, 2016). ACE subsidises 77 theatres and arts centres in England (2018–2022) as part of its National Portfolio of funded organisations (NPOs) and is highly influential on their pol-icies and development strategies. Partnerships between NPOs and other key organisations in a city or region are encouraged by ACE, and universities are identified as hav-ing a number of aims and objectives that are shared with NPOs. One of these is the need for ‘real-world industry experience’ for students. The first section of A Clearer Picture, entitled ‘Improving the talent pipeline’, suggests that creative businesses find it difficult to recruit ‘the right people’ and are ‘reportedly finding students do not have the right skills when they start work’. This is posited as a reason for theatres and arts organisations to become more closely involved in the delivery of creative degree pro-grammes. A claim is also made about the success of work placements in the creative industries, with the statement that ‘a third of all students who carry out work experience are employed by those organisations following graduation’. The document goes on to present a series of case studies that demonstrate different partnership models for HEIs and NPOs. Although not all based in the performing arts, the case studies demonstrate that supporting students after gra-duation and during the ‘early career’ stage is a key priority for these partnership projects. The first case study focuses on the University of Salford and a graduate scholarship scheme in 2014 that gave selected visual arts graduates access to studio space, mentoring, a £2000 grant and pro-duction opportunities. The arts partner was a consortium of galleries and studios in Salford. This model is replicated in different forms in other HEI–NPO partnerships, effectively offering graduates exclusive opportunities to develop their professional lives in specific organisations partnered with their university. In theatre, Black Country Touring is an NPO that produces and programmes theatre into commu-nity venues across the Black Country (an area of the West

Midlands in England). In 2018, as part of a partnership with Wolverhampton University, it recruited three interns who were recent graduates of the Wolverhampton drama pro-gramme to be shadow artists (i.e. to observe professionals in their roles to gain a better understanding) on a summer production, carrying out research and supporting the crea-tive process (Black Country Touring, 2018). This opportu-nity was available only to graduates from the Wolverhampton drama programme. There are other exam-ples of theatre graduate placements that are tied into part-nership agreements and are designed to offer a step-up for drama graduates. These internships rarely include opportu-nities to work as actors but aim to give the graduates insights into other creative roles in theatre. Arguably, the very fact that graduates may only have to compete with graduates from their course for these opportunities means that, even as graduate interns, they remain within the bub-ble of security provided by their HEI.

Preparing and supporting undergraduates and graduates for a precarious life

Employers, HEIs and governments are keen to demonstrate that the link from HE to work can be measured and can be accountable (Tight, 2018). Cranmer (2006) doubts that the classroom and teaching alone can prepare for the transition. Preparation for work is supplemented through the curricu-lum, career service groups, individual development plans, case studies and work experience (O’Leary, 2017). Research on the transition to work explores the experience of students, the role of the university in ‘smoothing the path’ and the environments in which the transition takes place (Tight, 2018: 66). Institutional research has looked at developing links to employers, the use of internships and placements and the emphasis of employability in the curri-culum (Tight, 2018: 67). Dahlgren et al. (2007) are critical of the emphasis on the curriculum rather than the profes-sion, with preparation mostly confined to the final year of a degree. Guile (2009) reinforces the argument that an HE programme should focus on professional practice rather than the qualification in itself.

The resilience and mental health of students in post-compulsory education has been surveyed (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002; Gruttadaro and Crudo, 2012), and the find-ings show that many students undergo anxiety and mental stress in their academic studies and need to develop resi-lience and coping strategies for uncertainty and precarious-ness in their lives. The transition from university to work has been considered in research on HE: it is ‘a complex phenomenon with many intervening factors’ (Biggeri et al., 2001: 303). Nystro¨m (2009) explored professional identity formation; Dietrich et al. (2012) and Sortheix et al. (2013) explored the development of work-related values; and Buhl (2007) explored the impact of work on well-being. Alves and Korhonen stress that education to work transitions

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occur ‘at different points in an individual’s life cycle’ (2016: 676) and can be ongoing. Tight (2018) suggests that the final goal of a job after university should become a redundant paradigm, and students should instead be re-educated to see transitions as recurrent and proceeding in different directions. He argues that all HE degrees should be about preparation for life and having a role in society, rather than the narrow outcome of obtaining a graduate job (Tight, 2018: 68).

In the specific area of creative arts HE degrees, Prior et al. (2015: 59) understand that preparing for a lifetime of work is a ‘vexed issue’. However, interaction between stu-dents, staff, institution and employers should be explicit and should demonstrate a ‘healthier interplay between stu-dents’ developmental needs, course expectations and work-place culture’ (Prior et al., 2015: 59). Woodson (2004: 27) advocates treating young people as active agents rather than observers, claiming that the arts should explore what it means to be an artist in the 21st century and address big questions, social issues and problems. A creative arts pro-gramme, according to Woodson, should promote caring bonds deeply connected to the school and community. Roodhouse (2009) takes this further and argues that uni-versities have a more durable role to play with local com-munities through the development of cultural quarters and the support of creative industries. The aim is to bring reci-procal benefits: graduates have access to employment, and urban areas become more regenerated and enlivened as communities.

Methodology

The researchers chose first- and final-year students to explore perceptions of graduate work, life in the perform-ing arts and undergraduate preparation for work. Research into the student experience can be influenced by prag-matic demands, particularly concerning student satisfac-tion surveys, improving the student experience, increasing student retention and demonstrating learning to work (Tight, 2018: 68).

Tight (2018) notes that a search of Google Scholar and Scopus shows that by the 2010s there over 50 articles on first-year undergraduate experience were published each year, and that research focusing on the first-year under-graduate experience can be found in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Germany, Hong Kong and Japan. Tight cites research on the student experience in the following areas: the importance of cultivating a sense of community among students (Townley et al., 2013); nurtur-ing a sense of belonging (Kane et al., 2014) and bringing academic and social integration (Nevill and Rhodes, 2004). Other salient factors have been the development of social support (Wilcox et al., 2005) and the role of social network-ing (Nalbone et al., 2016).

This article offers undergraduate student narratives (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) and aims to understand stu-dents’ perceptions of work, life in the performing arts and how they prepare for it. It is motivated by the need to find a ‘healthier interplay’ between students’ developmental needs and workplace culture (Prior et al., 2015: 59) and to build resilience for performance (Oakland, 2019), rather than improving student metrics to meet pragmatic demands (Tight, 2018). Interpretative qualitative methods offer the opportunity to step into research participants’ worlds (Charmaz, 2006). The metaphor of the traveller is used (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 49), where interviewing and analysis are intertwined phases of knowledge and construc-tion, with an emphasis on the narrative to be told to an audience. The travellers ask questions on their journey and encourage those they meet to share what is in their heads and to tell their own stories of the lived world and then bring these interpreted narratives back to home audiences (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Knowledge is viewed as narrative; stories are a powerful means of making sense of our social reality and our own and others’ lives (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). This methodology was chosen as the process would be familiar to the research participants who, as performers, are comfortable telling stories to an audience. The interview sought qualitative data to gain understanding of another’s life. Researching private lives and placing accounts in the public domain must be under-taken sensitively, and ethical concerns must be made expli-cit (Miller et al., 2012). Ethical consent for the research was obtained and an ethical process was undertaken. All stu-dents’ names are pseudonyms.

Seale and Silverman (1997) argue that researchers can develop the reliability and validity of qualitative data through transcription, systematic coding and triangulation by comparing of participant stories at different stages. They thus gain trustworthiness in the data. The sample size is nine undergraduates (five first-year and four final-year stu-dents) studying drama in an English Post-1992 university. The students formed a non-probability and self-selecting sample and were as follows (as noted earlier, the names are fictitious):

First-year students: Ed (British male); Finlay (British male); Gail (British female); Helen (British female); Iona (British female).

Third-year students: Adele (British female); Bianca (British female); Cat (British female); Dan (British male).

Rich and in-depth interviews, lasting 1 h each, aimed to unpack the students’ experience as undergraduates but also to explore their emotions and their attitudes and perspec-tives with regard to professional work. The qualitative interviews sought substantial, nuanced and relevant data to give a full a picture of the students’ feelings and

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experiences. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Coding

Initial codes were attributed to the transcripts and closely stuck to the data (Charmaz, 2006). Coding sought to use the original wording in the script to maintain students’ use of language and linguistics. Line-by-line coding was adopted to identify implicit actions and meaning as well as explicit declarations to uncover any areas that might remain ‘unseen and unstated but shape the participants’ actions and understandings’ (Charmaz, 2006: 20). The codes were sorted into key themes and sub-themes, and data were com-pared across the sample. The key themes became the sig-nificant concepts.

in other industries or to other roles in the creative indus-tries. The language used by students when they spoke about pathways and journeys indicates some confusion, as if the concept of the pathway was clear to them, but actual paths or journeys were not apparent when they came to articulate this. Alongside, confidence in the degree as a way to work out what the next steps might be was an awareness that working in the arts, particularly becoming an actor, was not dependent on qualifications and that therefore as graduates they might not be at an advantage. The reassurance of being able to follow pathways through university is challenged by a lack of clarity about potential destinations, other than pro-fessional acting. The pathways towards acting are elusive, but the narrative of becoming an actor dominates and per-haps obscures other possible destinations.

Discussion and data

This section discusses some of the students’ experiences.

The data have been structured into key themes.

Journeys and pathways

The first-year students talked about the drama journey they had already embarked on, as they had started university with a clear sense that they wanted the journey to continue even though they did not know where it might be going. They talked about ‘the path’ and paths in a number of different ways. Some students at the start of the course suggested that they knew where they wanted to get to but they saw the degree as a chance to work out their route. Looking ahead to graduation, Ed said ‘I will be a lot more aware of what I need to do to get to where I want to go’ and acknowledged that ‘at the moment I have the idea of what I want to do but I’m still a bit lost on how to get there’. Gail was confident that a drama degree would open up a number of possible journeys: ‘I don’t know – I am not quite sure like there are a lot of paths people go down with drama, it’s really flexible’. A number of first-year students inter-viewed saw professional acting as the desired outcome but, like Finlay, did not know the route to that outcome: ‘To become a professional actor is definitely the end point of all paths I am debating to take’. Having certainty about the destination and the pathway was most important for Iona: ‘You don’t need any qualifications or experience as long as you know where you want to go with the acting and you have a steady path to get there’.

A number of times, students spoke with confidence about the different paths that would be open to them at the end of a drama degree, but they were not always clear about what these paths were. They seemed to have most clarity about the existence of pathways in the theatre world – that is, performance, technical roles, stage management and so on – but there were no specific paths mentioned towards or

Love and belonging

In telling the story of their relationship with drama as a subject, the first-year students refer to emotional connec-tions and a sense of acceptance and belonging. This seems to have been central to their experience of drama before university, key to their choice about where to study and also an important aspect of their expectations for their lives as students. The word ‘love’ is used a number of times, even the experience of ‘falling in love’ with drama and with the drama course. Gail said, ‘I did A level and I just fell in love [ . . . ] I loved A level’ and later, ‘I had my interview [for university] and I fell in love with the interview like I just really liked it’. The intensity of this emotion is being cited as a reason for pursuing drama at degree level. The expres-sion of love, which is often seen as being at odds with reason, is effectively being offered by students as an expla-nation. They study drama because they are in love with it, implying that this has taken priority over other, perhaps more rational considerations. As well as love, there are also repeated references to the sense of family and community which participation in drama can offer. All the first-year students interviewed had experienced this feeling of family and community and indicated that it was a factor in choos-ing a university course. In a number of cases, this feeling of belonging and acceptance in drama had started with rela-tionships with teachers at college or school. Ed said, ‘I got on well with the performing arts staff and I valued the encouragement of drama teachers who said “we want the best for you, we believe in you, you can do anything you want to”’. Drama teachers and teaching had made an impact. Iona described her drama teacher as ‘a funny, relaxed kind of person and he just tries to bring out the best in everyone in what they want to do’. Finlay referred to a drama family directly, saying ‘It’s almost like in your class you are part of a big family. That was definitely the case at GCSE and A Level’.

Expectations that this will continue at university are high, according to our data. Finlay said, ‘I knew that the

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place just gave me the impression that I could fit in here’. Helen said, ‘I just felt at home as soon as I came here [ . . . ] here everyone’s just like together and I really, I felt good’. The desire for and expectation of belonging are perhaps connected to a need for support to confront the perceived personal challenges of working in drama-related fields which the first-year contributors talked about in terms of confidence. Finlay cited drama as giving him confidence but felt that this confidence needed to be built up further. A number of first-year contributors talked about the necessity of confidence not just to be an actor but to be taken seri-ously. Ed asserted that ‘you sort of need to be individual in yourself [ . . . ] you sort of need to stand out from everyone else’. This idea was picked up by Finlay, who was con-cerned that ‘the biggest obstacle would be trying to stand out [ . . . ] trying to find those things about myself that give me an advantage over the next person’. Students, then, cite the importance of love and community while they are studying but express fear and confusion about the world and an industry which awaits them and which (as they seem aware) demands a level of competitiveness and resilience.

Claire Skea asserts that preparation for this world is at odds with the notion of student ‘satisfaction’, which she explores in terms of ‘settling up’ and ‘settling down’ (2017: 367). The ‘settling down’ of students is referred to as a ‘making everything comfortable and homely’, which meets some of the expectations expressed by students in this study. However, Skea argues, with reference to Heidegger, ‘for the potentially transformative value of leaving students unsettled in their education, but also in their lives more generally’ (2017: 369). Perhaps a conscious and supported ‘unsettling’ is more likely to enable a realistic transition from the community of a drama degree to the world of work in theatre or in any other profession.

Passion

Echoing the first-year students’ feelings of falling in love with theatre, all the final-year students said they joined the course because they had a passion for the subject. ‘It was coming to university that really, really like gave us the passion to like start something’, Cat explains, ‘I still feel that passion’. Bianca said that the course had ‘just conso-lidated [ . . . ] this is what I enjoy doing [ . . . ] It’s the thing that captivated me most [ . . . ] I think Uni was good for just cultivating excitement’. Adele felt the course ‘got me exposed to the area that I love and want to be involved with’. Dan said, ‘I don’t know [ . . . ] it was just like a natural thing for me’.

In the first year, most students see graduate work in drama as acting or directing and teaching is seen as some-thing you do if you cannot get work in those roles. Students with interests in the technical side of theatre and drama may take specialist courses after university. In the first year, it seems the students feel secure and comforted by the idea

that work in the performing arts or graduate work is a long way off and so does not need to be a concern. They can immerse themselves in their learning and the curricula and new experiences. Dan said, ‘I didn’t feel ready for drama school [ . . . ] I felt here I would learn more about the entire industry [ . . . ] I think having the wide spectrum has helped me realise what I can use’.

Over time it appears that this security moves towards a fear of what will happen at the end of the course. In the HE experience, the students feel nurtured and safe and develop an attachment to their lecturers, relying on them for feed-back, comfort and confidence building. ‘That support sys-tem is really good’ said Bianca. ‘You’ve got a lot of freedom but you’re in a safe place’, explained Dan. It was a safe place to try things out without too much of an impact, thought Bianca: ‘You’re still at Uni, if you don’t get the placement you do a different module, like you know, not the end of the world’. Adele confirms that university is seen as a ‘safe’ place with her comment that it is ‘just good to have that support there and just a sounding board if I’m really stressed’. ‘I’m really worried’, says Cat, disclosing that anxiety and stress are part of their academic life, but nevertheless she feels ‘safe here’.

Growing up

Among the first-year students, there was an awareness that the teaching process and curriculum in their drama degree course offered opportunities for personal development. This was articulated in terms of ‘maturity’ and ‘confidence’. The demands of drama, particularly group work and academic independence, were seen as challenges that would develop personal skills. Ed said, ‘A lot of it is group work and you are expected to be adult because you’re 18, 19 and above’. This opinion was echoed and extended by Finlay: ‘It’s all left to us and that [ . . . ] sets me up for later life. It teaches us this general idea that we are not children any more, we are becoming adults’. Ed also anticipated the future challenges of the course: ‘It helps you be open-minded and sort of open for criticism and I haven’t really dealt with it yet but sort of come face to face with conflict and how to resolve it as an adult’. Looking ahead to the end of the course, maturity was valued as essential to further progression. Finlay said, ‘After three years at Uni I will be mature enough [ . . . ] to then maybe audition for a drama school or try and audition for a role’. Iona talked about wisdom gained by the end of the course: ‘I kind of hope I get wiser but I don’t know if that is actually going to happen. Wiser as in I have had experiences and I have learnt from those experiences so I know how things should pan out’.

Drama is seen by the first-year students as a subject that both requires and develops confidence. Most referred to their current confidence levels as lower than they would like and indicated that higher levels confidence would be required to progress. Finlay wanted to become ‘someone

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who can talk to people. [ . . . ] Someone who finds it much easier to talk to people than my current self does’. For Gail, confidence was most important in relation to acting ability: ‘Even though I have been like acting for like quite a while like I think my confidence levels are still a bit like low’. This was also true for Iona: ‘You need confidence, which is actually what I am still building up with’. Most of the first-year students talked cautiously and analytically about con-fidence, but for Helen, it was related to self-belief:

To also be so much more than an actress I would like to work behind the scenes like to direct I like to write I would like to produce I would like to do all of that I know it’s crazy but I just know I can do it.

There is an articulacy and awareness about the journey of personal development a drama degree offers. This awareness, or self-reflexivity, could be harnessed as a start-ing point for talking about resilience, a quality related to confidence and, as outlined earlier, key to maintaining a creative career. It also suggests that first-year students are already able to talk about the transferrable skills developed through drama in relation to personal development, and therefore, small steps could be taken to help them make connections to a diversity of professional skills.

Breaking through to the unsafe world from the safe world

‘Outside in the big scary world it’s you’ said Cat. The university programme appears to become a protective bub-ble where students feel cossetted and nurtured.

Within the university [ . . . ] we have got such a nice commu-nity here especially in our department it’s easy to be like well, if you are feeling a bit I can’t do this, I can’t do that you can easily come and they will be like yes you can (declared Bianca).

‘I already get quite anxious over little things within the university bubble’ said Adele. Rather than growing in con-fidence to enter into the ‘real world’, the students felt dis-tress at having to move from the safe world to the perceived unsafe one. Adele said, ‘It terrifies me further outside of university because [ . . . ] I really don’t feel ready [ . . . ] to finish Uni and not be left with anything’. According to Bianca, ‘You’re sort of done and released [ . . . ] you’re very much like oh ok, what do I do now?’ Dan asked anxiously, ‘Goodness what do I even do? [ . . . ] courage to go out and apply myself?’ Cat echoed this stress: ‘Even though we have been put into contact with other people we don’t really know how to really get the ball rolling’. ‘The future really scares me’ was how Adele summed up her anxiety. The course, then, seems to constitute a safe zone that students find it challenging and frightening to leave. They seem to

fear the ‘outside world’. Perhaps the HEI that tries to meet all students’ professional and personal needs holistically is, ironically, infantalising students so that they cannot develop the resilience and coping strategies they will need (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002; Gruttadaro and Crudo, 2012) to break into the world outside the university.

Stories and myths are shared in the community which serve further to construct a conception of the outside world in comparison with the inner one. This tendency seems to develop greater anxiety about the discrepancy between the two spaces and what is needed to be successful in the world outside the walls (or shell) of the safe, nurturing place. ‘When you are outside in the big scary world it’s you on your own’ said Adele. ‘Everyone is out to get you’. Accord-ing to Bianca, ‘No one helps you outside’. Cat noted, ‘You’ve got all these other stresses you know, like personal life and stuff like that [ . . . ] with no support’. These com-ments are similar to those of the Australian actors in the study by Maxwell et al. (2018); like those actors, our stu-dents are acknowledging the precarious life of being an artist. Anecdotes and myths about what the world of theatre is like begin in the first year. Finlay paints a picture of those ‘who attempted to become professional actors but got done over by the audition process because they were not specif-ically what casting directors were looking for’. On the other hand, Finlay referred to success stories of patience and hard work leading to artistic roles: ‘people who work in the ticket office [ . . . ] they work their way up to stage manage-ment. And then they audition for a performance at that theatre and then they become actors or directors or even scriptwriters’.

The nature of drama means that interactions, emotions, actions, status, power and spaces are continually reflected in the processes of performance. Reflection and evaluation may be a paradigm that students learn within the discipline, which is transferred to their own lives, so that they analyse and deconstruct themselves and their feelings in relation to interaction and spaces. It seems that students appraise how they feel in a protected community and compare it to an environment in which they feel potentially vulnerable. Bianca says, ‘I’ve just not been in my comfort zone which is always in the end I think good but in the moment terrify-ing’. ‘I’m still as uncertain as I always was’, admitted Adele. The UK’s National Student Survey (NSS) puts pres-sure on universities to meet all students’ needs, both aca-demic and pastoral (Tight, 2018). Universities may thus unwittingly over-nurture students so that they become too attached to the university and staff – which then makes them fearful of the transition to the world outside.

Obstacles

All the final-year students said that money was an obstacle to breaking into performance work: ‘You need money for drama school’ (Dan); ‘There is not much money in the arts’

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(Bianca); ‘It is hard to get funding for performing’ (Cat); ‘You have so much debt [ . . . ] you need money for an MA or director training’ (Adele). In addition, mental health is seen as salient; it is believed that a positive outlook is needed to pursue and find work. ‘There are so many unknowns out there that can affect you and demotivate you’ said Cat. ‘So I had a few problems. Like earlier on this year it really had like knocked me back and demotivated me [ . . . ] I felt I was not strong enough’. Adele reflected, ‘This year I’ve been struggling with anxiety and that’s really affected my work and my general approach to sort of life after Uni’. Dan explained what he felt was needed to get work: ‘courage to go out and apply myself [ . . . ] determi-nation [ . . . ] not let those things step in the way and block everything [ . . . ] is my main what I need [sic]’. Cat said that a ‘willingness to look and ask and face rejection’ was required. All said that contacts and confidence were imperative for accessing work.

whatever they were teaching and knowledgeable [ . . . ] the enthusiasm is contagious [ . . . ] I want to be like that’.

There were positive comments about the support pro-vided: ‘All the tutors are really good because you can go to pretty much anyone about anything [ . . . ] I think the sup-port system is really good’ (Bianca); ‘The support here is incredible’ (Dan); ‘They help me when I am really stressed’ (Adele). It is clear that the third-year students relied on staff to give them emotional support and saw their tutors as supporting their emotional lives as well as their academic ones. But the HEI, in aiming to make the students feel settled and ‘satisfied’, may be disabling them from moving on.

Interestingly, employers did not feature in the students’ narratives. Employment per se is not mentioned in the undergraduate stories; the students seemed to believe that they either had to audition directly for a specific creative project or generate the creative work themselves.

Making the leap from university to work

‘Uni is so full on nowadays’ said Cat. ‘You need energy to handle the outside world’. Cat talked about how she would make the leap from university to work: ‘I just take baby steps to get there’. Bianca used the same language, ‘taking baby steps’. Adele said, ‘I must try and like have at stab at doing it myself and getting on with the real world’. The language used is revealing, taking safer ‘baby’ steps gives reassurance and is perceived as a cautious but successful way to make the move into the ‘real’ world. Managing emotions with resilient and outward-looking perspectives seem more important than accumulating talent and skills in the performing arts. This is consistent with Fredrickson and Joiner (2002), who argue that a positive outlook and a problem-solving approach to stress and distress develop resilience.

By the third year, students seem to view the world of work with more complexity. ‘I’ve had a lot of different people with different styles’, Bianca reflected, while Adele had realised that ‘There may be other routes outside of only performing and directing. I’ve now learnt about how broad drama is’. Drama therapy was also seen as an interesting area of the discipline. Teaching was perceived as an another option by the third-year students, as was the use of drama processes for children and adults with special needs. ‘Lecturers are always trying to help you, like giving you ideas of what you can do after university’ said Cat. It appears these were areas that had been introduced into the curriculum by the lecturers – that is, that the lecturers were influential and were leading the students to consider areas where they could explore applied theatre/drama practice or skills. ‘There’s always emails going out in terms of employability, career advice, stuff like that’ said Dan. According to Bianca, ‘Everyone is so passionate about

Conclusion

There are similarities between the published literature and the first- and final-year students’ experiences recorded here. Oakland (2019) investigates performers’ mental health and finds that anxiety is commonplace – a finding reflected in the narratives of both our first- and third-year students. The students in the sample also agreed that resi-lience needed to be developed for the tough and unpredict-able performing arts career (Oakland, 2019).

Maxwell et al. (2018) reason that actor training should equip graduates to manage the occupational vulnerabilities and risks that come with professional work in the creative industries. They argue that programmes should be addres-sing anxiety and mental health as well as financial and relational stress. University programmes acknowledge that pastoral and academic needs must be addressed for stu-dents; however, a balance needs to be found to ensure that students do not become over-supported and thus afraid of making the transition from the perceived ‘safe’ world to the precarious ‘unsafe’ world. Woodson (2004: 27) supports treating young people as active agents rather than as observers – they should not be passive consumers but involved and dynamic. Interaction between students, staff, institutions and employers should be explicit and should demonstrate a ‘healthier interplay between students’ devel-opmental needs, course expectations and workplace cul-ture’ (Prior et al., 2015: 59). Developing further partnerships between arts organisations and HE pro-grammes will help to achieve this healthier interplay between student needs, expectations and work culture. ACE’s subsidy of theatres and arts centres in England (2018–2022) and the partnerships between NPOs and other key organisations in a city or a region for ‘real-world indus-try experience’ should be continued and augmented. Greater involvement of arts practitioners in the delivery

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of creative degree programmes, as promoted in A Clearer Picture (Arts Council England and University Alliance, 2016), will help students to envisage a more realistic tran-sition from HE programmes to creative work.

Barnett and Coate argue that the 21st century actor must be oriented ‘towards the world of work’ (2005: 45). Entre-preneurship, problem-solving, reflection, investigation and critical thinking covered in an undergraduate programme should be exploited as transferable to the wider employ-ment market. As Wilkie (2015) suggests, the curriculum needs to target more diverse employment (in addition to the performing arts) and to give graduates work readiness. Drama training develops communication skills and soft skills (Wilkie, 2015: 33). This creativity is valued by employers (World Economic Forum, 2019) and should be made explicit in programme curricula. Such overt reference to the valued skills that arts graduates can cultivate will help students to perceive their graduate assets in global work outside the performing arts.

In degrees outside of the arts, there is evidence that universities should embed creative processes in teaching and learning pedagogies and practices, so that undergrad-uate students can develop the creativity, resilience, problem-solving, reflection and communication skills that employers seek in graduates. Such embedded creative prac-tices also develop the personal agency to navigate the inconsistencies, complexities and precariousness of mod-ern life in a healthy way (Arts Council England and Dur-ham University, 2019; University of Warwick, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2019).

A final point may be contentious. In a bid to meet all student needs and provide complete student satisfaction through the NSS, could universities be doing a disservice to students by over-protecting them with holistic support? Are universities providing an extension of compulsory edu-cation, rather than facilitating transition into a successful, independent graduate life? As Claire Skea argues, prepara-tion for the world outside the university is at odds with the notion of student ‘satisfaction’ (2017: 367). The ‘settling down’ of students and ‘making everything comfortable and homely’, which meet some of the expectations expressed by students in this study, seem also to make students frigh-tened of leaving the safe, university bubble. Perhaps a con-scious and supported ‘unsettling’ is more likely to enable a realistic transition from the community of the undergradu-ate degree to the world of work.

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Note

1. A post-1992 university is a former polytechnic in the United Kingdom that was given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Post-1992 universities may also be referred to as ‘modern’ or ‘new’ universities (Read et al., 2003: 263).

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