Training in a Cold Climate: Edited Transcript of Roundtable Discussion with Catherine Alexander, Alison Andrews, Tom Cornford, Matt Hargrave, Struan Leslie, Kylie Walsh

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Introduction

Training in a Cold Climate was a roundtable event that took place at the University of Leeds on 30 October 2013. The event was conceived as an adjunct to this special issue and its aim was to open up a space in which those involved in training, as students, educators, scholars and practitioners, could discuss, contest and challenge the present state of performer training as well as imagine its possible futures. In his introduction to the event, Jonathan Pitches identified a number of developments that possibly ‘chill’ the climate and beg for critical thinking and action: the recent proposed ‘beefing up’ of ‘softer’ GCESs, including Drama, and a parallel move away from practice; the absence of creative arts in a list of ‘facilitating subjects’ issued by Russell Group universities; the shift from training to apprenticeship in teacher training degrees; the encouragement of private universities to enter the market.1 Adding to this list the recent rise of university tuition fees, it would be fair to say that decisions and discussions on training are underpinned by a sense of anxiety and what Anthony Giddens calls ‘manufactured uncertainty’ (Giddens 1995 as cited in Levitas 2000, p. 201). What should the aims of a training programme be? How can a training programme be both artistically coherent and financially sustainable? How should a form or programme of training relate to global and local contexts? The event consisted of three parts. In the first, the guest speakers positioned themselves and their work within existing contexts and offered their perspectives on the questions mentioned above. In the second, they were invited to imagine and spell out their utopias; their ideal notions and conditions of training. What could possible futures hold and how can we navigate towards a future that is closer to the needs and ideals we identify in our present? The third was an open discussion amongst the panellists and the audience. This edited transcript follows the order of the event and captures about half of its content.

Part I: Presents

Struan Leslie: I’ve recently completed a tenure of five years as Head of Movement at the Royal Shakespeare Company, a post I came at after 25 years of being a freelance practitioner, working as a movement director, facilitator, choreographer and director in a very broad range of theatrical contexts. My appointment at the RSC was created as a result of Michael Boyd’s vision for the RSC as an ensemble and training...
company. At the time of his appointment as the Artistic Director, he said that he wanted to elevate movement to the same status as voice at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the ambition of the post was that there would be continued professional development within the organisation. As a result of that, there has been a trickle down in terms of the understanding and impact of the role of movement within the ecology of theatre. I come from a dance background. I trained as a dancer and choreographer, and I came to theatre with the desire to explore in a broader context the application of movement. And in some ways, that talks to my feelings about the political, socioeconomic structure of training.

I started dancing at 18 as part of a community dance project in Dundee, Scotland, and then went to the London Contemporary Dance School for three years. That was in 1982, the first year of there being an academic degree validated by the University of Kent. There were two streams of us at the time. There were four people in my year who did the degree, and the rest of us were doing a vocational training. The question I ask myself is why didn’t I do the degree? Well, I wasn’t interested. That wasn’t why I was going. I’d rejected an academic career, probably in the sciences, to enter into dance, a vocational, or, if you like, a technical training. I was driven by enquiry from the beginning. I was being driven by a kind of curiosity.

So my questions concern the value of a degree, in a performing arts context, as a commodity; a measurable, valuable commodity. What was it worth and what was it going to be worth? When I think about what’s happened from 1982 onwards, I think about it as a commodification, i.e. the imposition of a universal degree within dance training. And this has come out of the institutions’ economic need and has been imposed via a government pressure that dictates that we need to make this measurable in some sense. So, then, what are the limits that are imposed on the training as a result of this context?

What I have seen is that it makes training no longer responsive, no longer flexible. And let me temper that slightly by saying, it’s not as responsive, and it’s not as flexible, in a trainer–trainee context, though I know that my artist colleagues in training establishments are working hard to facilitate that as much as possible. My argument is not concerned with the trainers but with the structures currently in place, which limit flexibility. So by saying that we are commodifying or ‘degree-ifying’ the arts and removing them from a vocational context, someone is able to say: ‘we can measure this’, ‘we can evaluate this against a set of criteria’. But this is putting people into a particular type of bracket and my question then is: how much does that limit the possibility of people and these trainees? My question is about the route that we take, and how we arrive at our destination. The current climate, it seems to me, heads us towards a specificity, and making choices far too early on. The cold climate has frozen the fluidity of artistic choice, and limits a more beneficial, holistic practice. It doesn’t allow for flow. The fluidity that once was has become solid, which means that the thinking, the artistic thinking, is stuck in a particular shape too early in an artist’s development.

**Matt Hargrave:** The publicity image for this seminar shows a bicycle left out in the snow.2 One might describe the bike as being ruined, not only on a mechanical level, but on another level, too, that of the ruin of the relationship between the cycle and the owner. What is ruined is not just the bike, but an informal contract, the obligation, if you like, of the owner to the bike. The image, I find melancholy. The bike that once signalled freedom is now rusting, unfit for purpose, ruined. The late Bill Readings wrote a book, published posthumously in 1996, titled *The University in Ruins*. In it, he argues with exact perspicacity the case that the contemporary university is ruined; that it has ceased to be viable either as a site of emancipation in the enlightenment sense, i.e. it can no longer pretend to free the subject through the acquisition of reason and knowledge, and that it’s failed, also, as a conduit for producing a focussed national identity. The university, that once was a place in which students sought truth, is now a place in which consumers seek accreditation. Well, what does this signify in my own field, what I sometimes uncomfortably refer to as applied theatre? Or, in my role as an academic who is

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2. The image can be seen at the cover of issue 5.2.
concerned with the boundaries of who or what a performer is, and who is excluded from normative actor training mechanisms? My position, then, is rooted not just in a commitment to inclusive practice in theatre training, but, more specifically, in a concern to uncover and articulate precisely how complex and sometimes contradictory the underlying political and ethical issues of diversity are. Today, I want to pursue the idea of training as something in ruins. I want to tease out several elements from Bill Readings’ critical work that I think are useful in today’s discussion of the current cold climate. Firstly, the ruined university is, to be precise, the ‘university of excellence’. This means that what is being taught matters less than the fact that it is being taught excellently. The university of excellence is the proper realm of administrators – rather than academics or practitioners – who operate in strict accordance with key performance indicators; that is, those outcomes that can be quantified.

A survey result that states that over 90% of student-consumers are satisfied with their course proves that the programme of study is excellent, or, perhaps more importantly, is being excellently delivered. The actual content of the course is less and less relevant. Secondly, and leading on from this, excellence is an empty signifier. Like diversity, it means something different to everyone; therefore, it is endlessly replicable and ideologically pliable. Excellence is actually non-ideological, if by that we mean that it is responsive only to international market forces. The third consequence of excellence as an operating value is that thought, once the capital of an academic, becomes marginal. In fact, as Readings (1996, p. 175) points out, ‘thought is non-productive labour, and only shows up on balance sheets as waste’. Readings’ point is that the language of excellence has no vocabulary for addressing philosophical questions – that is, those questions which are not predesigned to produce cognitive certainty. Is a satisfied student a good student? Is the best teacher the one who knows, or does not know the answer to the student’s question? If the interminable questions about value that define the humanities become unpopular with students, may we not scrap them altogether? As the philosopher of our uncertain age, Zygmunt Bauman (2006, p. 222), has said, ‘values are values, in our current times, insofar as they are fit for instantaneous, on-the-spot consumption. Values are attributes of momentary experience’. Or, as Grouch Marx put it slightly more concisely, ‘these are my principle – if you don’t like them, I have others’.

Yet these philosophical questions are precisely the ones that we need to ask ourselves, and our training systems. The ‘student experience’ in the university of excellence is measured via survey boxes, and this experience need not be momentary; the experience of being a student, and, incidentally, a teacher, is not something that ends. Yet it is not just within the contemporary university that excellence now reigns. In a highly influential Arts Council report, Lord McMaster identified excellence as the watchword for culture and the arts. He said:

McMaster’s report enfolds diversity and excellence to the point where they both vanish. Excellence, the new quality, is only apparent if relevant, and relevance is currently diversity. So to be excellent, one must be diverse, and everyone is diverse, and so on, until the criteria collapses in on itself.

From Zizek’s perspective, the neo-liberal consensus, of which the Arts Council is a beneficiary, builds on the inherent contradiction of liberal multiculturalism in that it condones and celebrates the folklorist other, much like an array of ethnic cuisines. Zizek refers to the surface

3. For a detailed discussion on this see Emma Gee and Matt Hargrave (2011).
respect for ‘authenticity’ of the Other as ‘repressive tolerance’, meaning that such a respect maintains a crucial distance. Such tolerance masks the myth of multicultural neutrality, and keeps the other safely to the margin. The power to position the other as authentic, or, in McMaster’s phrase, ‘excellent’, is only made possible by assuming what Zizek (1997, p. 44) calls the ‘privileged empty point of universality’.

Tim Wheeler, Artistic Director of Bradford-based company Mind the Gap, spoke of a rehearsal in which one actor persistently refused to cooperate. Her refusal manifested in a tendency to step away from the ensemble – rather like the archetypal protagonist – to perform other tasks in a corner of the space, and, eventually, to sit and do absolutely nothing. Wheeler’s response was to sit with the protagonist, to try to see things from her perspective. Eventually, the rest of the ensemble stopped what they were doing and joined them. The protagonist, ensemble and director were now one body staring at the empty space, wondering what might happen next. The empty space viewed by the ensemble is the abstract normality made concrete. Far from being a determined content, normal is the point of universal emptiness. That is why the Arts Council’s recent creative case is ultimately a self-undoing project. By arguing for diversity, it is being accepted that there is a non-diverse centre from which to deviate. Such a space does not exist.

So my provocation then is that both the contemporary university and the national funding structures for the arts share a common fate. They are both partly dependent on the recycling of an empty definition of success, called excellence, which has no basis in any actual reality. As a correlation of this, training for the arts in many contexts faces some tough questions. How do practitioners and educators set real challenges for forthcoming generations that amount to more than excellently orchestrated modules, credits and key performance indicators? If excellence is here to stay, then how do we resist it? Or do we, instead, learn to live with it? Is there a way out, or at least a tactical retreat? Furthermore, what are our obligations, as trainers, and do these obligations transcend the institutions we work for?

Catherine Alexander: I’m now working at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama running a conservatoire actor training. My perspective, the one I will start speaking about, is that too many people want to be actors. That’s a very simple thing to say, but the desire to be an actor is so great that the new fee structure, for example, hasn’t dented application numbers at all [at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama]. I don’t think many of the applicants have even really thought about what kind of training they want. There’s a little bit of the X Factor creeping in: you turn up at the audition, you shine, and somebody plucks you out of obscurity, and suddenly, there you are. By contrast, at a music conservatoire applicants would already have been training for thousands of hours and have a real craft. For actors it’s different, it’s not like having a grade eight in the clarinet or a grade eight in the violin, and you are of a recognised standard. On the other hand, you get a lot of young actors auditioning who’ve taken so many drama exams and have had strange formative training experiences and they’re like 50-year-old rep actors, and that’s also a real problem. So you get a range of people: some with no training but maybe a little sparkle, and other people with terrible habits to unpick. There’s no even ground at that point. And sometimes there is a sort of actorly sheen about drama school actors. They seem too polished to be real, particularly on film. So we are negotiating between the muscularity of a very trained performer against the naturalness of an untrained performer.

There’s also a strange acceptance of the status quo sometimes. I noticed that all the [recipients of] polar bears in ‘The Golden Compass’ spoke in ‘The Golden Compass’ spoke in a deep, fruity RP [received pronunciation accent]. You just think: why are we accepting that actors should sound like this? Is there something about the current drama school training that really crushes what I would call a maverick sensibility and creates carbon copy types that all sound and look alike, for an industry that wants thinner and thinner actors, with impossibly big eyes? I think, perhaps, conservatoires put off potential actors who have a social and political conscience and a
sense of activism. I think conservatoire training may seem ridiculously self-indulgent to someone who is very outward looking. The university acting courses and drama departments offer something of real value here, but can’t provide the thousands of hours of training. So what does drama training give you? Can those skills be gained by a diligent and focussed individual in other ways? Why would you put yourself £50,000 in debt to spend three years of your life in a conservatoire, especially when an agent is already getting you work? When you consider how fat the Spotlight Graduate Book is these days, it’s easy to think, well, we’re flooding an already flooded market. It feels slightly irresponsible to be training as many actors as we are training.

So having said all this, I’m in the surprising position of running a conservatoire acting course. It has a specialism in collaborative and devised theatre, which gives it a slightly different focus. My aim (as a director) has always been to find a really good, truthful actor who can also move, work as part of an ensemble and devise and write their own material. I’ve found that actors coming out of traditional conservatoire settings are often really uncomfortable with improvising and working independently to devise material. Lecoq-trained actors are exciting, creative, great at the ensemble work, but they are lacking in the vocal skills to deal with big theatres, and ill-equipped to deal with script-based work. So in 2006, when the chance came through Central to design a new three-year conservatoire training programme, it was this gap that I wanted to focus on filling. I’m glad that Central had the vision to challenge the status quo and put their considerable weight behind this course. We begin with the devising and collaborative work from day one, so this is woven through the complete curriculum. We equip actors to do the classical work and contemporary script-based work, but also allow them to be free to improvise and devise their own work.

We’re increasingly attracting very high numbers of international students (from about 30 countries). I think the greater the internationality of the training – and by internationality, I really mean non-UK and non-USA – the less the fear and the obsession with traditional routes for actors. The hunt for an agent as the holy grail of conservatoire training seems to be one of the most destructive forces, and one of the biggest selling points of conservatoire courses. But that obsession takes you out of the work, when it’s only doing the work that keeps you sane and purposeful. Curricular decisions across the sector and choices of public productions are all too often geared around what agents and casting directors want, and often agents don’t want their clients to do theatre. They certainly don’t want them to do experimental work, and devised work, which the creative industry loves. And what does their approval really mean? We’re letting these market forces lead artistic policy: like allowing Tesco to decide who is a good actor. I want the drama school sector, as a whole, to be focussing on the work that is being created, investing in original, complex, challenging work. There’s too little attention on delivering something innovative, and I’m not sure if the sector is merely indifferent, or intrinsically reactionary.

So the reality is, the best actors often don’t sign with an agent, because they are young, white, brown-haired women who are over-represented in the industry, and have fewer opportunities for work. So if the work that’s being commissioned doesn’t represent the actors seeking work, the only recourse for them is to make their own work, and that work has to be excellent. My argument is that devising and creating work is an intrinsic part of becoming a better and more radical actor, a more open, engaged, imaginative and confident actor, and incidentally I think that’s the great benefit of the Lecoq training. All education should aim to empower people – the bigger picture shows a school education system that no longer values imagination, creativity and independence. Some traditional conservatoire training almost infantilises actors, as does the industry. We need to be training radical and creative people to become highly skilled actors and theatre makers, who can work together with radical directors to put two fingers up at the industry.

Tom Cornford: I relate to the subject of this symposium from three perspectives: practice, teaching and research. I’m going to speak mainly
about my research here, though, because it provides a context which I have found very useful when I think about both teaching and practice. I'm writing a book at the moment about English theatre studios, which looks in parallel at the work of Michael Chekhov, Joan Littlewood and Michel Saint-Denis, who all ran studios in this country between the mid-1930s and the mid-1960s. Now, their training was a method of binding people together, of creating companies. It wasn’t a drama school training. They weren't training people for a theatre that already existed – they were trying to create a new theatre, and training was their means of doing that, through creating a company. I’ve been struggling with this word, company, because I use it quite a lot in the work and I wonder what it means. The National Theatre Company, for instance, was a group of actors on long-term/semi-permanent contracts supported by a skeleton staff. Likewise, if you look in the early RSC paperwork, the Royal Shakespeare Company doesn’t mean the theatre; it doesn’t mean the corporate identity. It means the actors.

But now, of course, those companies are brands, and so, in a way, I think it would be helpful to draw heavily on Naomi Klein’s work, from more than a decade ago, No Logo (2001). The book is about the nature of a brand and the emergence of a new model – i.e. close your factories, produce your products through an intricate web of contractors and subcontractors, and pour your resources into the design and marketing required to fully project your big idea. And the result has been a fluid reserve of part-timers, temps and freelancers. And Klein (2001, p. 4) then makes a really interesting point that, if anything, these multinational companies have actually increased their power by not owning the means of production, because if they don’t own the means of their production, they don’t have to take responsibility for them, and therefore can be much more flexible and more powerful. Well, this is the idea promoted by the CBI in a report from 2009 called The Shape of Business over the Next Ten Years.4 They have this phrase in the report, the ‘Flexi-Force’, which points to the development of ‘skills roadmaps’ with clear links to the corporate goals of an organisation. They say that employers will ask for greater flexibility from their workforce, with a more extensive use of annualised hours contracts and zero hours contracts, as companies will have a smaller core of permanent staff with increased use of freelancers, consultants and temporary workers.

The idea of a flexi-force will be familiar to anyone who has worked in the professional theatre, but Sean Holmes [the Artistic Director of Lyric Hammersmith], has recently begun a project called Secret Theatre, employing a core ensemble over a year to produce an evolving season of work.5 He says that normally, when doing a show, a lot of decisions have been made before the first day of rehearsals begins, even if you don’t realise that they have, and he’s suggested that this is – and this is his word – ‘corrupting’ the process of creating things (Holmes 2013b). The idea that decisions have been made before the first day of rehearsals seems to me to centre on a term that came to prominence in the 1990s, which is the ‘creative team’. And if you look in programmes, it often says: the creative team, and then it says: acting company, or the actors, and [these two things] are separate. In the terms of the CBI’s report, the one is required to be ‘flexible’, while the other determines the ‘corporate goals’. So I see Sean’s long-term ensemble as a way of resisting this model: increasing the company’s responsibility for its employees and enabling them to join the ‘creative team’.

But outside of that project, I think there are only a few winners from this process. There’s a super-class of actors, celebrity actors, zooming around, picking off opportunities. And the same is happening with directors. Often, for the directors, training represents a way of developing their brand. And often ensemble companies are gradually boiled down in some way to a leading figure, so the training that built the company becomes the brand of a director-figurehead: a method of product design. So what does training

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4. According to their website, the CBI is the ‘the UK’s premier business lobbying organisation, providing a voice for employers at a national and international level’.

5. Further details on Holmes’ (2013b) project can be found on the Lyric Hammersmith website, http://www.lyric.co.uk/whats-on/production/secret-theatre/. Holmes’ (2013a) rationale behind the project was presented in a speech he gave at the Lyric and has been reprinted on What’s On Stage website, http://www.whats onstage.com/london-theatre/news/06-2013/sean-holmes-maybe-the-existing-structures-of-theat_31033.html.
mean for the actors, for the underclass of actors who have the responsibility of their employer taken away on the equivalent of zero hours or annualised contracts? Their training becomes a way of making themselves fit to get jobs. So the responsibility for training falls upon the actor, who has become a decontextualised product of late capitalism.

Nick Hytner said something really interesting – accidentally I think – about this. He said that in writing his review of drama training (2009), he spoke not as an educationalist, but as a consumer of those who graduate from drama school. The director does not employ or collaborate with his actors, he consumes them. Hytner also talked about vocational craft training, and he said he sees no purpose for theatre theory to be taught in acting schools. But I think the excision of theory from vocational craft training is deeply problematic because it decontextualises training. It means that training is not something which is binding a company together, allowing them to experiment, to create new work, to collaborate over sustained periods of time. And if you do that with your company, as I do with mine, you find that you don’t stick to the preconceived model of training – you come across problems which that model of training fails to solve for you, and you have to innovate. And that innovation is a product of time spent together, and of difficulty. And actually, decontextualised training, it seems to me, reduces difficulty. It places the emphasis on problem-solving, not on what you might call problem-finding, and my work with my company is much more about ‘problem finding’ than it is about ‘problem solving’ (Sennet 2008, pp. 26–27). And I think, for students, this is a real issue, because if you decontextualise training, you make it about employability and selling yourself within the status quo, you discourage experimentation, and you promote conservatism. You train for what there is and not in order to create what does not yet exist. And the problem goes deeper because the means of training also become focussed on self-promotion: on convincing actors that this or that brand of training is the key to their future success. Whereas, I think, training must look for difficult questions, not easy answers; enable an imaginative and radical attitude to our work in the present; and offer a creative eye to the future.

**Alison Andrews:** I’m calling this the Salmon Ladder and it’s a consideration of a broad cultural context for training, and how we encounter that early in life.

We are on a boat on the Aire and Calder Navigation. Autumn is definitely here. It’s cold. We, year-three pupils from an inner-city primary school, and me, along with my colleague, Matthew, and several teachers, are on a trip that is part of our project, 365 Leeds Stories, mapping a city with seven different constituencies. And this is a strand exploring future visions of the city from the perspective of an eight-year-old. The children from this school are noticeably smaller than their counterparts from the school we’d worked with in the previous week, which was situated in an affluent area of the city. A diet predominant in sugar and refined carbohydrates has resulted in stunted growth of the long bones of their legs, and lack of exercise has left the muscles that should be providing tension to the skeleton underdeveloped.

We’ve had the safety briefing. We know where the fire exits are, and we’ve been told that we can go outside at the bow, but that we must not climb the ladders at either side. We’ve been told to watch for something surprising as we cruise, so we do. Huw is the pilot of the boat, and also one of our guides. He’s Welsh, and he’s a mine of information about language and about wildlife. At the weir, he encourages us to watch the water at its base, where the river falls by a depth of three metres or so. The boiling yellow froth and spray is mesmerising, but of limited interest, until suddenly, we see it – the surprising thing: the leaping black dart of a salmon. As our eyes become accustomed to the speed of the movement, we can see more and more of these creatures, attempting this leg of the journey back to their spawning grounds. Huw tells us that at the weir further downstream, there is a salmon ladder provided to facilitate this uphill task, but not here. The Canal and River Trust has not seen fit to build one at this point.

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6. For a summary of Hytner’s report see Baluch (2009).

7. Details on the project can be found on [http://www.365leedsstories.org/](http://www.365leedsstories.org/).
and so the chance of many of the salmon making their destination is therefore slim. What's the logic of this? To provide a ladder at one point, as if to offer the promise of success, but nearer the goal, to leave the fish without this vital facility?

The word for school in Welsh, Huw tells me, is ysgol. It also means ladder, and is related to the French word for ladder, échelle. Huw and I mull over this, rolling the two words around in our mouths – ysgol, échelle – as we continue to watch the salmon attempt to defeat the weir.

We follow up this exciting morning the next week, in the classroom. Good morning, Mrs Dunderdale. Good morning, Alison. Good morning, Matthew, Good Morning, Everybody. We move on to an exercise about what the children imagine and hope for Leeds, and their lives in the future. We draw pictures of how the city might look in 20 years’ time. The drawings, which the children do, include spaces where people make music in a park, and one girl has drawn a ladder for the salmon. As she works, we talk. She tells me that she wants to be a person who has a job talking to other people, like me.

Formal education to tertiary level, funded by the state, with training in specific skills as the opportunity arose, has enabled me to supply a realistic and practical answer to the question I asked myself at school, and which became not so much 'what job do I want', but 'how do I want to live'. The exercise we've embarked on with the children, in constructing utopia, has a long tradition. The rehearsal of new visions of the world, as vulnerable to destruction as they are to being sustained, is the stuff of performance. The eight-year-old girl drawing a salmon ladder is, herself, at the base rung, but, I hope, with a sense of what the view might be from the top; if, indeed, the fragility of her situation and her slender bones will enable her to negotiate that journey. In terms of a ladder of questions, I hope that, 'how do I get a job?' becomes, 'how do I get a job like yours?' – i.e. the kind of job which aligns with the values she’s identified with today. I hope that the training available in 10 years’ time, for her and her generation, renders the questions ‘how much money can I make?’ and ‘what can I spend it on?’ irrelevant. I hope the Canals and Rivers Trust finds the money for that salmon ladder.

Kylie Walsh: I'm from the Paper Birds Theatre Company, and I studied at the University of Leeds from 2001 to 2004. I did a degree in theatre acting, and upon graduating, I formed a theatre company with my friends, named the Paper Birds. I represent someone who's been trained in this system not too long ago, but it was just before the climate got really cold, as it were. I am director of outreach within the company, and as a result I am working in lots of schools, and running community projects as well, and working on undergraduate courses at universities, but predominantly in schools working with GCSE and A-level students. And I get invited into schools by teachers who want their students to think bigger, and to see some other stuff, apart from what they might see on a trip to the West End.

Teachers identify that their students can gain higher grades if they start to make non-naturalistic work, that actually naturalism is probably one of the hardest genres for a 15-year-old to perform effectively. So, I go in and I try to assist the students in their devising module, and help them make more exciting work. First of all, I used to be able to charge a lot more for workshops than I currently can. Second, I’ve seen a shift in what I’m getting invited into schools to deliver. So I used to be invited to assist students whilst they’re in the process of devising, or at the start of the devising process, to do a launch workshop. I’m now getting asked to go in for an enrichment day, say, at the end of the year. I am also invited to work with year nine. As a teacher once put it ‘I need to get them excited because they’re taking their options next year, and I need to get more kids to opt to take GCSE drama’.

I was also struck by the dramatic decline in the amount of students doing A-levels in drama. It used to be 15 in a standard A-level drama class, and now I’m seeing four or five students, if that, and the teacher’s literally saying to me ‘I can’t get the kids to take my course anymore and I’m worried that the Head's going to clamp down and take it away’. And the reason behind this is – and she actually said these words to me – that parents want their kids to do more academic subjects at A-level, because they want them to go off to university and study academic subjects further. And this, of course, makes sense in this economic
climate. A career in the arts doesn’t seem like an authentic path for young people to take, and parents need to sort of guide their kids into a ‘real job’.

The other thing that I’ve seen a lot of is that GCSEs and A-levels are often getting scrapped by drama departments themselves, in favour of the B-tech, the vocational route. This is great, because it allows students who are not as academic to continue into the subject, but also poses problems for the very same reason. So traditionally, A-levels are followed by the more academic students, whereas B-tech and all the other vocational courses are promoted by the schools as less academically demanding. So I wonder whether this has a knock-on effect on undergraduate training, because if the students who are academically able are opting to take other subjects, then what does that leave the undergraduate theatre and performance programmes with? And how might that affect the dynamic in a group context? Have we got less able students holding back proceedings? If we’ve got young people who are training to be performers but aren’t maybe as able at understanding the political and the theoretical things that come into play, what does that mean for the future of the arts? I think we do need to equip our students now to make their own work, and to understand what is going to be expected of them when they leave. It is a cold climate; not everybody is able to get an agent and a job at the RSC. What are we doing for students, if we’re not preparing them for sustaining a career in the arts?

Part II: Futures

Matt Hargrave:

1. Teaching is a set of obligations

As such, it’s not a transaction or commodity that can be concluded or its value precisely determined, rather it is deliberately open-ended. Readings’ rationale for this is rooted in the idea of education as a search for justice rather than truth. Rather than view knowledge as something that can be known and thus transmitted from the teacher to the student, knowledge is precisely unknown, or, as he puts it, ‘we must seek to do justice to teaching rather than know what it is. A belief that we know what teaching is or should be is a major impediment to just teaching’ (Readings 1996, p. 154). Rather than consider teaching as being about ‘finishing’ something – a module, a degree, a conversation – it might be defined as the holding open of argument, debate: failing to finish; not knowing; a module that did not know itself.

2. We are all Eastern Europeans now

Vaclav Havel expressed the ‘power of the powerless’ as the capacity to act as ‘as if’ the public rhetoric of an oppressive regime was in fact true; to act as if the rhetoric of democracy or free speech was real, to speak as if one were free to do so, thus calling the bluff of the incumbent regime. Similarly, are we not all Eastern Europeans now? Must we not now act ‘as if’ the rhetoric of excellence was truly excellent? That the discourse of the key performance indicator was a true reflection of quality? More transgressively, I argue, one might attempt to act as if the site of teaching was one of moral obligation, in which the call for definitive answers should be continually suspended.

3. We inhabit the ruins

I like the idea of places we work in, the systems of thought we inhabit, as ruined sites. Ruins, that archetypal tourist destination, are built on firm foundations: if nothing else, they have lasted. Ruins are creative sites because they encourage the site-seer to fill in the gaps left by the absence of the original. To accept that we live in ruins is not to relent unquestionably to the logic of such empty tropes as excellence or diversity; nor is it to dwell in nostalgia. The challenge for the future of education and the future of performer training is like that of the rest of the higher education system – how to exist in an institution which makes thinking more and more difficult.

Alison Andrews: I’d like to see a less Anglo-Saxon centric model. I really would like to see the universities standing up and saying, no. You know, we’ve lost sight of democracy as a thing...
that we can all do. We all know that capitalism functions better when democracy is disabled, and I think we need to get it back. I would like to see us paying attention to the margins, those people who are on the margins, I'd like those kids that I'm talking about to get fed properly, I'd like to see them housed properly, and I know that the arts cannot be responsible for doing that. We have to work more in partnership. But also I think that the margin is a really powerful place to be, because it means that you've got a perspective on the centre, you've got the right to speak about what you see in the centre. I'd like us to be working more with those people on the margins, those diverse people, and stand with them like Tim Wheeler did, at the edge, and look at the empty space and go, yes, okay, now we'll step into it together. I'd also like us to be brave enough to go, you know what, do you know that thing we just tried out, it doesn't work, junk it. Let's have the bravery not to keep on with sunk cost just because we've invested. Universities are hugely powerful, there's loads of them, there's loads of us within it or engaged in it, we can speak, we can re-engage with democracy and give capitalism a slap in the face.

**Tom Cornford:** I think that a utopian training would be founded upon the process of collaboration, and would allow people to adopt numerous roles in relation to the making of theatre and not simply to specialise in an, effectively, permanent way. I personally think that too much power has been centralised upon the director, and increasingly the role will be replaced by different patterns of collaboration. These should be explored and developed through training. In most of my work as a director, I've been trying to enable the actors that I work with to become co-creators, and actually that's a really significant challenge. I've often found that actors do not think of their role as fundamentally creative or themselves as responsible for the process of creating what they perform. I think it's a crucial aspect of any utopian vision of training that you enable people to think of themselves and approach their work as artists.

**Catherine Alexander:** I would say that the thing I would like to change is having more time. Three years in a conservatoire setting as well as university is just not enough. And we're seeing that students are having to close their minds in the second year, really, before they get into the public production season, which is very stressful for them, and they get switched into an industry break before they're really ready. So I think there's this golden point at the beginning of the second year where they still have a desire to be brave and to make experimental work, and they have just enough training and tools to do that, and then it starts to close down again. I think four years would allow one to try and fit all these things in; lessen the stranglehold of agents; and genuinely explore what widening participation means. I've only had one parent who's taken my course, and that really disturbs me because at the moment it's impossible to do a conservatoire training if you've got children. Another thing I think would be great to look at is providing repeated opportunities to play to real audiences, not audiences of parents and friends. And that's costly financially but so, so valuable in terms of experience. And I say a complete overhaul is quite controversial, maybe, but UK Drama, which is the accreditation body, is incredibly out of date, and that is the stranglehold that's being held on conservatoires – i.e. that we have to meet these criteria that are outdated.

**Kylie Walsh:** I was actually trying to problem solve what we need to do on these training courses to prepare students for the outside world, as it were, and what they might achieve when they've left. So I was just trying to think of strategic stuff that we could be implementing, and I feel students, who are undergraduates on all performing arts courses around the country, don't see enough work. And I know we shouldn't be holding their hands, but maybe we need to nudge them in the right direction and make it compulsory for them to see things. And the other thing is that students should get to make more work. So we might want to implement larger projects which take place throughout the undergraduate course and could allow students to hook up with a group of people in the first term and they have got all these points to hit as they go through. For example, they will have to present up to three performances a year and
they would need to write reviews on each other’s work.

**Struan Leslie:** A place where process is at the fore not product.

A place where on-going learning is embedded and it is focussed on the training of people as artists.

A place that’s based around the spirit of enquiry and curiosity.

A more fluid structure based around developing practice, based around fundamentals of performance.

A place with a minimal core faculty, and thereby a small student body, that develops that practice, in response to the needs of the group.

A place that’s connected to a building, a producing house.

It’s a model, similar to Bauhaus and Black Mountain College, where a number of disciplines are explored, and the point at the end of each period is that you’re able to work eloquently in any one of those things, and then you make a choice.

**Part III: Comments and discussion**

**Matthew Kieran:** I’m at the University of Leeds and I’m employed as a Professor of Philosophy. So I’m interested in how people respond to the following: when people think about training they tend to naturally focus on things like abilities and capacities, and the right kinds of abilities or the good kind of capacities or abilities to have for whatever, whether it’s a certain kind of more creative and collaborative work, or whether it’s more traditional. But I was very struck by the fact that in different ways some of you were emphasising not capacities or skills but worries about the lack of certain attitudes or what we might think of as kind of characteristics, in other words worries about people not being curious enough, worries about people not being about problem-seeking enough, or worries about people being driven by fear and anxiety rather than being courageous enough. That’s a character attitude orientated way of putting things. Now one response to that is to say, well, training should incorporate cultivating attitudes and character not just capacity and skills. I’m just kind of interested how you might respond to that.

**Simon Murray:** I wonder if this is about the incredibly unproductive distinction that we seem to have, I was going to say in Britain, but probably elsewhere as well, between so-called ‘hard skills’, the technical skills of voice, of movement, of listening, of delivering Shakespearian text, and the so-called ‘dispositional qualities’ that one requires to be a theatre maker; such as collaboration, generosity, how to be critical without being mean; so all those things that seem to me as much muscles to be developed and exercised as voice delivery and all the rest of it.

**Matt Hargrave:** I think in response to what you were saying, Simon, this notion that by reducing the so-called ‘soft subjects’ we’re introducing more rigour into the curriculum is the most absurd thing you can possibly imagine, because I can’t think of anything more rigorous than a rehearsal process. I can’t think of anything more character building and more character revealing than a rehearsal process. I just think that there’s a sort of an uncritical acceptance of the government language here.

**Mark Evans:** I’ve just listened to what’s been said and it strikes me that training could be understood as an activity of ‘becoming’, it’s the process of becoming something. The problem that seems to be sort of creeping out of the woodwork at us, and I suspect it’s a recurrent problem, should be understood as a proper crisis, and it’s the crisis that happens when the process of becoming becomes detached from the questions of what you are becoming and why. You could analyse the problem that we have at the moment as a sort of capitalist/post-capitalist problem, where that process of becoming has become detached, individualised and, as a result of that, some people enter [training] without real depth of thinking about what they want to become and why they want to become it. It’s held up as something that will fulfil them in some way, but they’re not being encouraged to consider how or why. Then the challenge is how do we create an activity of training, a process of training, that has the ontological integrity that takes us
through that process of learning to become what we want to become, and that helps us to understand what it is we want to become and why we want to become that, and to appreciate what meaning that has for us and for the world around us. So it’s a process of moving from the training of the individual to the training of the individual within the collective, if you like, and that seems to sort of expand and contract as we go through periods of history.

Tom Cornford: If you want to universalise and globalise and economically maximise the benefit from your training you base it in something that seems universal, so you base it in the body, in the voice, in anatomy and physiology, because supposedly no one can argue with that. But what you cut out is the relationship between all of that and the society that we live in, so the challenge is going back to thinking what voice, where, why, whose voices are we recreating, whose voices are we representing? There is a danger that in order to sell a training programme, you package it in a way that actually attempts to universalise it, attempts to make it a global commodity, and you lose the local voice, you lose the fact that training actually ought to be taking people out to the streets and saying ‘listen’, ‘watch the people around you’, ‘listen to the people around you’, ‘move like the people around you not like the people that you want to see on stage’.

Maria Kapsali: It is just a comment with regard to this distinction between systems of training that make some sort of universal claim, and the realisation of the need to go back and put training within specific local, cultural, social, political contexts. I just want to draw a parallel with the business world. We saw that there was this drive from New Labour towards the start-up of small businesses and, the implication was that everyone has the access and the ability to do that. But really the idea behind it was that at some point that small business has to become bigger; otherwise it is going to close down. I mean, this is the logic of capitalism – isn’t it – a business has to become bigger and bigger and bigger. So I think by saying an actor training programme or an actor should engage with this very contingent and local and precise context is going very much against the grain. It’s making, maybe, the actor a bit too specialised. And then it’s all about not only how you package an actor training programme but also how do you ensure that this person will be able to get work, and what will they do, once they get this sort of very specific understanding of the context in which they have been trained.

Mark Evans: I disagree. I think we’re redefining what enterprise means within the cultural sector. I think the old enterprise model, the old business mode, if you like, more or less collapsed in 2008, and there’s been a lot of people pumping hot air into it to keep it going, but I think most people still see through it, still see banks behaving like banks and global politicians behaving like global politicians. But I think what performance offers, and what the kind of training suggestions we’ve been making here offer, does present a different model. Without going away from the importance of young people who train in theatre knowing what to do once they’ve left, and, you know, you can’t just say go off and train to be radical and it doesn’t matter that you might not be paid a penny to put food in your mouth, you can’t do that. But you can offer alternative ways of thinking about what money means in relationship to the work that you make. And I think that’s a really interesting time to be in, because I suspect that if things work the way I would like to see in my utopia, I would suspect that we [within the performing arts] will become a model for how things should work, rather than the business people. That’s how I would like to see my utopian future.

Struan Leslie: And I disagree, also, Maria, with this thing about people being trained for a job; I just don’t buy into that at all. But I know that there are only six of us out of my year (1982–1985) at the London Contemporary Dance School that are still involved in the performing arts. But everybody else who was involved in it, whatever they are doing now, value that experience. It’s not always about the pay cheque equalling the training for me.

Matt Hargrave: And I suppose we need to attack that logic of debt and repayment, and of commercially justifying what we’re doing, if we’re
going to get anywhere. And, I agree with Sam West when he stands up and says every pound invested in the arts gets you back however many pounds it is, and that’s great. But that logic has also a sting in its tail, which is very dangerous I think and we need to be careful of that.

**Unidentified Male:** I was wondering if you have thoughts about what Paul Roseby [the Artistic Director of National Youth Theatre] was saying about the value of drama schools and about how you can either act or you can’t and you should learn how to market yourself.

**Tom Cornford:** The logic is absurd on many levels, you know, this idea that you can either do heart surgery or you can’t. That’s plainly wrong and plainly serves a proportion of the population who have the opportunities in early childhood, at school and so on, to learn these things, and get ahead of the game, and then sell themselves. Although on one level it’s true. Paul Roseby said actors don’t need to train they need to learn how to sell themselves (Merrifield 2013). But that’s the route only to a particular kind of career. And this is the problem, I think, of actor training as a discipline: learning to sell yourself as an actor is also quite like learning to sell your discipline of training as a discipline of training. And there’s a danger that we become another branch of the study of great, white males, which is made universally packageable, and is sold. And I think actually someone like Joan Littlewood is a fascinating example because it’s very difficult to recreate her practice, because she didn’t write packageable things and guides and come up with terms and concepts. And she is really interesting because in a way her training was absolutely only there to serve the needs of her company and its aims.

**Catherine Alexander:** I was lucky enough to meet Joan Littlewood before she died, and she was my heroine, and she said to me effectively ‘I’ve failed’, and, ‘I never went there, I never achieved what I wanted to achieve’. And I was thinking about the great, white males who managed to say ‘I could set down my ideas in a coherent way’, and ‘I can pass it on to the generations’. But there’s a sort of untouchable arrogance about that. This woman [Joan Littlewood] basically never got to the point where she’d even started to approach the problem, let alone solve it. That’s really hard to market, and that’s the kind of actor I want to meet but it’s not the actor I very often encounter. And I think that’s my brief answer: it’s just that good work is not marketable.

**Mark Evans:** We’re faced with the possibility that GCSE Drama and A-level Theatre Studies are going to disappear. Is that a terrible thing or is that potentially the best thing that could possibly happen? My first reaction was outrage, until I remembered that I didn’t do GCSE Drama because it wasn’t on offer, and I didn’t do A-level Theatre Studies because it wasn’t on offer.

**Unidentified Female:** I’d really quickly want to disagree with what you are saying. I think that training and drama is a journey not only for self-belief and learning about yourself as well as the techniques. I think in school this is the place where you don’t have to sit in a maths classroom; you don’t have to sit in a science classroom, not knowing the answers. I’m not a very academic person but I sat there [in the classroom] not knowing what I was doing, until I got into this space, a theatre space, and I could be myself, and I could learn about things, which potentially I was going to use in my work, or I could bring my personality to a classroom where I wasn’t going to be criticised because I didn’t know the right answer. So I think it is so important for students who aren’t academic to be able to feel comfortable in an academic setting, and I think it sets you up for later on in life.

**References**


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8. Sam West is the chair of the National Campaign for the Arts. In 2013 the organisation produced an Arts Index, which aims to provide a ‘health check’ of the arts. The headlines of the report as well as the full report can be found at: [http://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/dec/05/arts-index-2013-download-nca](http://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/dec/05/arts-index-2013-download-nca).