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# "You are no longer creative when you give up": Technical theatre's creative sleight of hand

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## “You are no longer creative when you give up”: technical theatre’s creative sleight of hand<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University contains vocational education training programmes including technical design courses with broad reach covering arts administration, stage management, stage lighting, sound design, set and costume design. In an unsettling problematic, teachers and students in the broadly themed Production and Design courses often find themselves isolated from the other creative disciplines or battle with the perception that their work is in fact not creative but entirely the technical implementation of ‘someone’s else’s vision’. This approach seems to dismiss the creative thinking required in the development and orchestration of the design and denies the complexity inherent in anything ‘technical’. This paper will address this disparity by drawing from the perceptions of a select number of current staff from Production and Design subjects. We understand that this is a very specific take on the subject from a small number of interested folk, in fact it is deliberately idiosyncratic and narrow in research scope, and in no way indicates the viewpoints of the Australian production and design community at large. Rather, we put forward a particular point of view, given at a particular time, in order to argue that there is merit in addressing what we see as a ‘hierarchy of value’ and seek further conversation about how we may find a way that the technical/mechanical and the creative are not considered as mutually exclusive. By doing so this would not only be a pedagogical shift, but a movement in cultural paradigm.

**Keywords:** Creativity, innovation, design, technical

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the 2013 Australian Education and Training Research Association National Conference by Associate Professor Maggi Phillips (PhD) and Dr Renee Newman. The paper is dedicated and attributed to Maggi Phillips who passed away in March 2015.

## **Introduction**

In the UK Higher Education Academy report, *Mapping Technical Theatre Arts Training* (2012), Anna Farthing suggests that the term 'technical' is often used as a 'catch all' reference to a gamut of design and production orientated fields and that to do this is an injustice to the "complex and sophisticated skills and understandings" that come with these positions (p. 7). In our view, this underestimation of skills is something that arises often in the description of best practice by exceptional designers and production staff and the training of up and coming practitioners. The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) encompasses vocational education training programmes in technical theatre, otherwise known as Production and Design. In addressing the disparity between what is often in our experience considered technical and what is considered creative, this paper draws on the perceptions of three current staff (and their anecdotal experience in both industry and institution) in relation to what they see as impediments to viewing the technical, functional and pragmatic role of technical theatre as equal to a creative vision usually associated with performers and directorial and choreographic leadership. The participants were also asked to envisage solutions or strategies on how training might adapt to nurture perceptions of 'technical' artistry. Taking the Farthing report as an indication of an emerging conversation occurring at that particular time in 2013, we undertook a brief investigation with three WAAPA staff to shed light on their experience and, based on their suggestions and thoughts, to seek ways to meld the technical and the creative, the scientific and the artistic. This paper outlines the background to the research problem, the methodology used and reflections on our initial, albeit small, investigation to point toward the potential for future research for not only a pedagogical shift, but also a movement in cultural paradigm through the following points: addressing what we see as a 'hierarchy of value'; finding a way to decouple Production and Design from the mode of thinking that these roles are merely technical/mechanical; valuing the creativity of these positions, subjects and their people; and asking whether investment in collaborative and interdisciplinary methods of education might be the future for our training institutions.

## **Background**

Teachers and students involved in the broad reach of technical theatre at WAAPA, covering arts administration, stage management, stage lighting, sound design and set and costume construction and design, often find themselves in unsettling locations 'behind-the-scenes', isolated from the other creative disciplines and battling with perceptions that their practices are purely functional and not creative. Dan Rebellato (1999) claims that the rise of the director and playwright in 1950s British theatre significantly shifted power relationships between the various roles within performance and its production, causing the separation of technical and creative functions allocated to theatre personnel. Technical practitioners' contributions are

often perceived as the nuts and bolts implementation of ‘someone else’s vision’. This approach seems to dismiss the creative thinking required which can operate invisibly in the development and orchestration of the production, thus denying the complexity inherent in anything ‘technical’. For the status of the disciplines involved and particularly for the integrity of the next generation in training, it is imperative that WAAPA staff reflect on this disparity and examine how, as a training institution, we might shift this perceptual problem through the behaviours of our staff and graduates.

## **Methodology**

When approaching interviews with the three staff from Production and Design we prepared a series of open ended questions for an informal interview process.<sup>2</sup> This research design was chosen to encourage as much open conversation as possible without fear of reprisal, judgement or personal censorship. It is important to acknowledge that this paper has been prepared in the humanities tradition of analysis whereby the specificities of an individual, including those of us, the researchers, and the participants, are embedded in the research process, and thereby also involves analogy and anecdotal information from key research sources, which in this case are derived from the interviewees and the researchers’ sense of the interdependence of industry and training institution. The methodology, therefore, concentrates on interpretation and on the participants’ ‘narrative’ derived from a focus group with an “emphasis in the questioning on a particular fairly tightly defined topic; and the accent is upon interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning” (Bryman, 2012, p. 502). Our method involved an informal focus group setting where the three participants shared their stories in response to a series of questions around the topic of the technical disciplines of Production and Design’s intersection with artistry and creativity. This study was initiated as a conversation, the beginning of something more perhaps, which in the future could either continue in this trajectory mapping the anecdotal experiences of Production and Design persons in a narrative enquiry or alternatively consist of a more formal inquiry with a larger and varied participant base surveying the experiences of teachers, students and graduates in a qualitative research analysis. The following section contains our reflections on these responses.

## **Reflections**

These reflections are of a conversation rather than definitive findings per se. They are grouped in relation to industry and pedagogy concerns and notions of the versatile production and design practitioner.

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<sup>2</sup> The names of interviewees have been deliberately withheld. Interviews were conducted in 2013.

We were not surprised when responses dealt with evenly shared views concerning impediments and solutions. The participants overwhelmingly conveyed a sense of pride in the synthesis of creativity and functionality across the technical theatre disciplines but, at the same time, they observed that their assurance was not necessarily met in the training environment or in the professional industry. In fact, the participants felt, either directly or implied, that the overall cultural environment should in fact nourish the creativity of all roles and functions in the performance space but that perceptions, internally and externally, do tend to favour the separation of the two. Common themes that emerged in the discussions centred on degrees of negativity toward certain technical roles, or a lack of understanding of what that role encompassed which could lead to contributors feeling a sense of isolation and a lack of respect for their efforts. Interestingly enough, there was also discussion on how adaptability, flexibility and the capacity to engage and learn from every opportunity that presented itself were the qualities needed for best practice in design and technical operations. Common terms or words used were synthesis, collaboration, hierarchy, barriers, interpretative and, not surprisingly, a recognition of the polarity or binary between creativity and practical or technical which was either intentionally emphasised (“there comes a time when the creative needs to become functional”) or unconsciously implied.

All three spoke of a sense of isolation from the artistic process particularly in being “divorced” from other creatives at the beginning of a project. One staff member spoke of how, at times, the costume maker and fitter, for example, will often be excluded from the other departments/disciplines’ information flow through official channels. Curiously, the failure to be notified about changes or crucial production information is invariably rectified by the costume students’ unique role in relation to the performers—in a sense the students themselves compensated for protocol limitations. This alternative communication channel is established when costume students meet performers (rather than choreographers and directors) on a regular basis to measure, fit and discuss practicalities and pertinence of certain costume features. In that sense, costume people creatively use their particular means of communication in order to stay in the loop.

### **Industry vs pedagogical realities**

Time is a factor, which one participant noted, that limits the skill development range of, for example, costume students. If they are pressured to keep to schedule, to get the show up and running within time constraints, they can become disconnected and inflexible and, thereby, closed to the complexities of creative solutions. This observation ties in with a 2013 barrage of disagreement on the UK theatre education list wherein the two pedagogical positions, university liberal arts’ scholarship and work-place learning (vocational education), were at loggerheads. Intimations that workplace learning stymies critical reflection circulated in the debate, pitching

practicality against a deeper (and by implication more creative) means of learning. Julie Wilkinson of Manchester Metropolitan University commented on the debate surrounding the 'employability' of British arts graduates:

Isn't this division between vocational and academic itself functioning as an ideological tool, to attempt to reintroduce old class divisions between those who had access to knowledge and the ability to generalize, and could therefore run the world, and those who had to roll their sleeves up? ... [We] have been involved in a long and interesting process of testing epistemological distinctions; an incomplete experiment, but one which is capable of more than serving the market. So that our students might bring into existence a world we haven't thought of yet. (Personal communication, February 4, 2013)

This debate resonates with Anne Berkeley's overview of the development of theatre courses in the US from 1945 to 1980 and the schism between advocates of liberal education and practitioners' needs for refined and dedicated skills in the profession. Berkeley views the challenge to lie in the construction of "coherent theories and practices that are directly relevant to students of the time and in ways that actively contribute to the process of defining and legitimizing new formulations of liberal education" (2008, p. 67). Such opposing perceptions also ground the observation when institutions such as WAAPA are asked to reflect on the balance between its role as a production house and its obligation as an educational institution. That tension is evident in a participant statement that "creativity is secondary to the practical side" even while she emphatically confirmed that "[production and design students] *are* creative artists: they need to recognise it." Ultimately the challenge for elite performing arts training institutions such as WAAPA will be to support the vocational education training of its students and the needs of liberal education whilst simultaneously nurturing recognition for the technical departments as creative resources.

### **Versatility and creative problem solving**

Another participant's views on stage management places this tension in a more psychological context. She observed that if a stage management student or indeed practitioner in the industry feels that their singular function is to control the show to begin and end on time and for cues to occur exactly as the cue sheet indicates, then they are not engaged in the overall artistic process and instead become a "metronome of correct timing". A performance is like a living being, subject to impulses as much as to accident, so the stage manager's role has to embrace give and take, to anticipate the moment of a lighting change and to work in cohesion with the director's or choreographer's vision. Stage managers have to step in with solutions to small and, at times, major difficulties that may arise in rehearsal or performance. The role asks for sensitivity and support rather than being one of

control. Organisational balance, in this instance, bears the responsibility of personal adaptability.

When asked is there a point when you are no longer creative and become purely functional, a participant responded with “you are no longer creative when you give up”. They did note that, at a certain point, major changes in the operation of a show need to stop in order to breed trust between cast and crew but that this did not mean that technical operators or mechanists should not be open to ‘tweaking’ the show, feeling and listening to the needs of live performance, night after night. Another participant noted that “creativity never stops (if it does creativity is destroyed)” and so a good stage manager, audio/visual designer, or sound or lighting operator will know how to move with the show, feel and grow along with this living, breathing beast.

It was noted that often issues surrounding Occupational Health and Safety come second to the celebration of the artistic vision imagining a trick, or a gimmick. This could perhaps stem from perceptions of stardom, or what we have coined as a hierarchy of value, where significance is given wholly to the external appearances of performance rather than to the behind-the-scenes creativity of personnel. The director commands greater status than the stage manager, yet without the stage manager the conceptual decisions taken by the director could not possibly be realised. Why is the mechanist not thanked along with the actor on opening night? In fact, why are some supposedly non-creative functional roles often congratulated at such moments, such as the marketing officer, while others are not? Where does art meet science or even the common-sense of respect? Perhaps these questions are beyond the scope of this paper but nonetheless they are worth asking.

A participant spoke at length about how creativity moves into functionality at a point wherein this-will-work and this-will-not-work are established and that for the most part the role is interpretative; the interpretation of the vision of the director, choreographer and/or designer are discussed. However, with this identification of the role as interpretative also comes the distinction of creativity in relation to pragmatism, which possibly goes to the heart of what we might consider as a hierarchy of ‘value’ within the creative process—that the Australian cultural context of live performance values the director (conceptual creator) over the interpreter (the implementer of concept). This qualification of creativity was a continual theme amongst the three interviewed, which raises the question of at what point does pragmatism become secondary to the creative contribution, or rather whether on the job problem solving is in fact creative decision making? Or perhaps as designer Beeb Salzaar puts it:

To paraphrase Blanche DuBois, I have always depended on the kindness of techies ... Any designer who doesn’t listen to a technician’s suggestions is foolish ... The designer’s job has now become like a conductor getting everyone to go in the same aesthetic direction. (2012, p. 9)

## **Training solutions**

In terms of training, one participant spoke of an exercise for first year costume students in understanding that the “creative judgement” process is critical to the interpretation of design. The exercise asks the students to develop patterns in response to the design of a ballet bodice in order to demonstrate how people interpret things differently. This allows the students to understand that there really is no right and wrong answer to the task at hand which is to translate an image into the functional process of realising that garment. Their unique interpretation of the design is derived from what is on paper and what they can glean from the designer’s instructions. The process involves listening and observation skills and the all-important activity of research. How did other costume-makers resolve the patterning of a bodice for dancers which allows for movement facility on the part of dancers without feeling uncomfortable or, at worst, leaving the dancer exposed on stage? In other words, identification as a costume constructionist should in fact encompass being creative with both the design concept and the implementation of a fully functional costume.

The need for cross-disciplinary learning in collaborative approaches to the artistic process was agreed by all as being valid and useful. One participant insightfully spoke of a reciprocal relationship/collaborative process, where a ‘good’ director might suggest “I want something,” with the emphasis on *something* leaving open the opportunity for a dialogue between director and designer, enabling, for example, the lighting designer to offer a possible solution (to a problem) or to suggest a lighting state that might encapsulate the particular atmosphere the director is seeking. This collaborative approach breeds a sense of trust in working toward a shared vision. This interchange also means that all involved are not closed to discussion and to the changes that inevitably occur as a production moves from concept to closing night. Perhaps part of the solution derives from the training: mixing with other disciplines and learning from their unique set of skills and from being a part of the evolution of the process. It is also interesting to note that on the job industry training is critical when it comes to learning how something functions in opposition to what a student might think is the most ‘correct’ way to run things. Learning how to be adaptable or, as one participant suggested, how to not antagonise fellow workers but, rather, to read the signals for cooperative interpretation is a vital skill. Such expertise might be something that can only really happen when one is thrown into the mix and has to learn how to adapt to different needs, situations and personalities.

The participants continually stressed the complementarity of the parts to the whole, of the vital input of each cog in the machine. The participants argued that the strength of a production’s artistic vision should rely on a notion of equity across the production and design department—these lecturers will not allow the students to



imagine anything less than the understanding of the crucial role they play in the collaborative and creative act that is theatre.

However, a balance between creativity and technical precision is also necessary. This balance is perhaps sometimes missing, especially in the instances where the voices of creative persona are more audible. Innovative creations rely as much on directorial know-how or technical expertise as on imaginative experiments in the unknown. According to one participant, directors who rely solely on their “best capacity to imagine” can operate in the dark, as it were. So if there are creative decisions that are heavily reliant on the technical infrastructure then there needs to be a synthesis between the creative and the functional, although we recognise that this synthesis requires a rethink of funding models to promote longer development periods. The set designer, the lighting designer and the production manager along with the mechanist and the lighting engineer need to be in the rehearsal room earlier or more frequently than they might normally be, such as can be seen with Robert Lepage and *Ex Machina* or, closer to home, with the Malthouse and Perth Theatre Company’s co-production of the original work *On the misconception of Oedipus* (2012) which teamed (from the beginning) scenographer Zoë Atkinson with writer Tom Wright and director Mathew Lutton. While this is an example of an industry relationship could this type of extensive dialogue exist in the training environment?

The most effective and full creative experience depends on a mutual respect for the various roles. If the designer is in the workshop modelling a particular option only to discover when that feature is placed in production it will not work, leading to all manner of disappointments not the least being the waste of resources, but perhaps this problem could be resolved far earlier by working in tandem, from the beginning, with the entire creative team. Cathy Anderson (2016) in ArtsHub speaks of the growing trend in the Australian performing arts industry for actors to be more resilient in their skill set, to become more entrepreneurial and to take on myriad roles in the production process in order to have a greater sustainability of career. This paper is not advocating any particular educational model in which to do this but rather draws attention to the conversation that is occurring on how to diversify in the performing arts. The training of our graduates needs to come into this conversation. One option is to develop the skills for the traditionally ‘functional’ roles to be considered as creative in their own right and to upskill these students in how to work as a team of creative agents. Commonsense suggests that the creative decision-makers need to collaborate from the beginning and continually brainstorm together to gain the best possible results.

The effectiveness of long-term collaboration, specifically in an educational environment, is encapsulated in Ming Chen, Ivan Pulinkala and Karen Robinson’s (2010) description of the practice they call “polyphonic dynamics.” Essentially, polyphonics refers to a production process of many voices where “the co-creators

commit fully to a juggling act of sorts: one that honors the interchangeability of all theatrical signs” (p. 127). This approach can be used to “cultivate inventiveness, initiation, collective responsibility, ownership of creative product, flexibility, relinquishing disciplinary control, and confidence” (Chen et al, 2010, p. 127). The authors acknowledge that the process:

[Can] be more time-consuming and stressful than the traditional production approach; its success depends upon careful planning, flexibility with deadlines, positive relationships between theatre artists/educators (including a trust that undetermined creative solutions will emerge—albeit it later in the process), and more intensive group participation in the production and rehearsal processes. Should these conditions be in place, however, the educational benefits outweigh the challenges. (Chen et al, 2010, p. 127)

This practice-orientated research appears to resolve or, at least, accommodate the tension noted above between vocational work-place training and the critical creativity of liberal education indicated by the participants’ concerns with the limits production demands place on the development of students’ holistic skills. However Chen et al appear to have the luxury of concentrating all efforts on one production at a time, in contrast with the multiple and therefore more complex production schedule framing WAAPA’s operations.

Concomitantly, the polyphonic approach points to best practice within the industry, which is more closely associated with European theatre-making than with its counterparts in the US and Australia. It is a ‘cultural failing’ in Australian performance both in industry and in training models that this long-term collaborative process does not happen more often, especially within the Major Performing Arts organisations where the funds to do this are more readily available.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this situation arises because of financial restraints or time restrictions that prevent technicians from contributing to the creative process and safe production decision-making early in the process? Or perhaps a more relevant question is what can we learn more generally, or more philosophically, from blending art with science, of exchanges between the conceptual with the functional, to conclude that, ultimately, both are creative practices interdependently reliant on technical know-how. One would think that such collaborations could enable a trickledown effect to ensue, meaning that our elite training institutions such as WAAPA might lead the way in supporting technical practitioners’ convincing claims to creative status and perhaps lend support to a cultural shift in the industry at large.

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing the major performance arts companies are known as Australian Major Performing Arts Group.

Perhaps a cultural overhaul is what is required, an epistemological shift that is able to recognise that creativity and pragmatism, or perhaps controversially to put it another way, rules, are not mutually exclusive. In a paper on the relationship of creativity to rule making, Anja Kern remarks on the historical standard of the separation of repetition from creative innovation in organisational management contexts and notes that while “it is widely agreed upon that it is critical for an organization to find a balance between exploitation and exploration ... [between] stability and change, or repetition and creativity, most studies, however, analyse these concepts separately and overlook their interdependence” (2006, p. 64). We wonder if this failure to understand the interconnectedness of areas of action lead to assumptions that repetition reliant disciplines (technician driven, occupational health and safety and so on) lack innovation or ingenuity or, vice versa, that the ‘creative genius’ model is thereby absolved from having to negotiate this way of thinking, moving, doing. It would seem that the discursive paradigm underlying this mistrust of creativity and rules/repetition is at its heart the familiar story (in our experience) of the distinction of thinking and doing that raises its head continually in the academy as the distinction between academic thinkers and real world doers. We also see this manifesting between the thinkers of the ‘Artist’ and the doers of the ‘Technicians’. There are problems with this way of *being* which surely prevents us from being the best arts practitioners we can be:

This separation hinders a deeper understanding of the relation between creativity and rules .... The cognitive-rational model of action bears several epistemological problems for the analysis of the relationship between creativity and rules. The separation of thinking and doing leads to the idea that one can separate “creative” from “repetitive” elements or types of action. (Kern, 2006, p. 64)

Perhaps the solution is to collaborate more and to find people and spaces which are open to enabling learning from each other and to creating a genuine dialogue between creative ingenuity and repetitive action, where we all require the skills of thinking differently and cooperatively. Further investigation might point toward not only a pedagogical shift, but a cultural one by confronting face to face a historically embedded ‘hierarchy of value’, to find ways to decouple Production and Design from the thinking that separates the technical/mechanical from the artistic or the creative, so that we can truly value the creativity of these positions, subjects and their people.

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**Associate Professor Maggi Phillips** (PhD) was the coordinator of Research and Creative Practice at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, a position that enabled daily access to the integration of artistic innovation and research. Her life path crossed many disciplines and worldviews, from dancer (trained in ballet, she travelled the world initially with Casino de Paris and then with works by Dois Haug of Moulin Rouge) to a world literature doctorate (the comparative analysis of postcolonial African and Indian literature), circus ring (a year with Swiss National Circus Knie where she developed a lifelong love for elephants), community arts development and dance in the top end (Brown's Mart Community Arts and Feats Unlimited in the Northern Territory) to the university boardroom where the imperative to advocate for practice as research for Artist Researchers was paramount. Maggi sadly passed away in March 2015.