The Paris Collection: Reflections on an Interdisciplinary Performance Project

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Abstract

Between September 2013 and January 2014, students and staff of the Dublin Institute of Technology Conservatory of Music and Drama and DIT Dublin School of Creative Arts collaborated on the creation of an opera production which was presented at the National Concert Hall on Jan 23rd. The project was implemented within the modular framework from both colleges. The collaboration was both multi and inter-disciplinary and the students engaged at a professional level, working under staff supervision and in tandem with personnel and resources outside the college environment. The performers were required to audition for their roles and the teams of design students had to prepare and present a 'pitch' for their concept to be selected. These same design students also took responsibility for the set construction, while the entire cohort had to respond to the logistical and artistic challenges of taking the production into a major venue on the day of performance and being ready to begin in a significantly limited period of time. The delivery of a public performance in a high profile venue meant that the project culminated in full exposure of public scrutiny, and consequently demanded the skills, intelligence, energy and commitment of all involved.

This presentation will focus on the collaboration as a relevant case-study, exemplifying a modular-based inter-disciplinary project within the College of Arts and Tourism. It will provide an evaluation of the insights, strengths and benefits gained by all who participated. It will also provide an honest discourse on the requirements, resources and challenges such an undertaking demands, particularly with reference to establishing professional demands within an educational context. With reference to future implementation of other synergies, the presentation will provide recommendations as to how these can be realistically and sufficiently facilitated through creative and flexible programme development.

Introduction

Between September 2013 and January 2014, a large cohort of students and staff from the Dublin Institute of Technology Conservatory of Music and Drama and Dublin School of Creative Arts collaborated on the creation of an opera production which was presented at the National Concert Hall on Jan 23rd.The production was called 'The Paris Collection' and was named thus because the two operas featured; Lehar's The Merry Widow and Puccini's La Bohème are both set in Paris. The production which raised 6,303 euros in ticket sales, came in on budget and was enthusiastically received by a paying public. It was short-listed for an award in the Education category for The Institute of Designers in Ireland and subsequently received a Very Highly Commended designation.

The preparation and implementation of the enterprise followed professional practices in most areas of its execution. The project also incorporated collaboration with other educational agencies and as it was performed in a major public venue in Dublin, participants were required to

engage with a range of professional people out with DIT. Throughout the project, we endeavoured to create a rigorous professional working environment. However, on more than one occasion we had to make compromises in order to enable the students to keep up with their other commitments. These compromises gave rise to several questions relating to the implementation of a professional environment within an educational framework.

In this essay, I shall discuss how one might approach these issues and present my evaluation of the collaboration not only in the context of a practical example of a performance project, but also as a case study of an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary project which responds to many of the recommendations relevant to forward-looking programme development in Higher Education today.

Interdisciplinary study

In order to place this in context of music education, it's useful to refer to Ian Horsburgh who was President of the Association of European Conservatoires from 1996 - 2004, and who in 2003, in his introduction to the AEC 50th Anniversary conference, emphasised the significant changes taking place:

> The pull between the traditions of music education and the influences of contemporary life have probably never been as extreme as they are now. The role of the conservatoires, and all those who serve in them, have to contend with significant and demanding issues. (Horsburgh, 2003)

Even twelve years later, common sense tells us that this statement is still resonant today and that the ongoing changes and challenges in the creative professions mean that artists must be highly proficient in their specialist study whilst also possessing a range of skills and resources necessary for a portfolio career. The term 'Jack or Jill of all trades' is not necessarily a pejorative description in the present climate. This point of view was robustly reflected in a section about future graduates in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 chaired by Colin Hunt:

> To address the societal needs over the coming years, increased attention must be paid to core skills such as quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, communication skills, team-working skills and the effective use of information technology. The emphasis has switched from over-specialisation towards deeper and broader disciplinary foundations, with learning objectives that explicitly seek to nurture in students the creativity, enthusiasm and skills required for continual engagement with learning. In this context, the arts, humanities and social sciences have a key role to play. (Hunt, 2011, p. 35)

We are aware that of the importance for students to engage with the professional environment outside the walls of their campus. In the arts, as in other disciplines, this truth is supported by the fact that in order to gain competency, students firstly need to have an understanding of the large

jigsaw puzzle within which their future career may find a place. For classical music students for whom voice is their first study, this includes opera.

Opera training: Preparation for a multi-skilled career

One may question why such a reputedly high maintenance art-form is deemed to be relevant here. The answer is that, in spite of its expensive reputation, opera continues to sustain a position in the market-place. A brief scan of the web-sites of the major international conservatoires would reveal that vocal departments strongly promote their opera programmes. Statistical surveys reveal that in the United States, adult audience numbers were higher in 2012 than in 1982. Even between the recession bound period from 2008 to 2012, numbers increased marginally. (National Endowment for the Arts, 2008, 2012)

In the UK, where there is less private sponsorship, the range in the loss of attendance figures between 2006 and 2012 was 0.6% which is only marginally higher than the average range across all the art forms surveyed during that period, which was 0.5%. While it cannot be denied that there have been casualties during the recession, opera has appeared to survive and provide employment. (Department for Culture, Media & Sport 'The Arts', 2011, 2012)

Four years ago, Opera Ireland, one of Ireland's major national opera companies ceased to be able to present their seasonal productions. The loss of such a full-scale repertory company was significant. However, in the country, the art form has continued to evolve and thrive, and in 2014, approximately 80% of Dublin Institute of Technology senior vocal students would have had some form of operatic professional or semi-professional experience outside college. For the majority of classically trained vocal students aspiring to a performance career, opera will still represent a significant source of employment, and it is therefore important to train and resource students to succeed in this highly competitive environment.

Operatic performers need to be adept as singers, actors, dancers and even occasionally as acrobats. They need to be musically accomplished, possess vocal expertise, physical expressivity, convincing fluency in languages, and the ability to deliver spoken text. In many instances, they need to use these skills simultaneously. Mounting a full production in order to give students practical experience is logically part of the answer to these challenges. If that is the case, it would be prudent to do so in a way which benefits as many as possible, making the project relevant to a range of future careers.

Having recently conducted a body of research about what the profession requires of fledgling opera singers, I sent questionnaires to a broad spectrum of directors, performers, conductors, teachers and other practitioners working in opera both here in Ireland and internationally. In response to a question about what qualities these professionals look for in aspiring artists, the replies were similar and included creativity, broad range of cultural reference, receptivity and individuality. These qualities echo those graduate attributes recommended in the Hunt Report on the National Strategy

for Higher Education: "creativity, enthusiasm and skills required for continual engagement with learning."

How can we approach the inculcation of these qualities? The challenge is not only to identify the means to address all these requirements but also to establish ways to help young musicians understand why they will be important. Many of these young people do not arrive at college with what interviewees described as "an armoury of culture reference" or "wide-life experience." (Hamilton, 2015)

Opera projects: Vehicles for collaboration and synergy

From the results of my research, the responses emphasise artistic breadth of vision and experience. It is obviously the corporate responsibility of educators to help students to develop these qualities. Collaborative projects respond to that challenge philosophically, economically and practically.

In the publication Collaborative Learning in Higher Music Education, the singing teacher Arming Zanner states that "vocal music is on almost every level a collaborative art" (Zanner, 2013, p.23) and in an essay about the future ethos at Harvard College, Julie Buckler, Harvard Professor of Slavic languages asserts that:

> Multidisciplinary work draws upon knowledge from more than one discipline, but preserves the disciplinary identities of these multiple disciplinary elements. Certain objects of study—opera and the city, to give two of my favorite examples—seem naturally suited to multidisciplinary investigation. (Buckler, 2004, p. 2)

As opera is a synergy of art forms, participation in a production facilitates the exploration of a range of subjects and disciplines.. Involvement in an opera can include the study of history, style, interpretation, languages, musicianship and authentic performance practice. While it is particularly relevant to singers who aspire to be performers, its function can be much wider than that. For example, any director, designer or stage manager needs to acquire and develop a good understanding of music in order to be able to conceptualise or facilitate the running of an opera production. In order to wear a period costume with style and credibility, it is important that a performer has an awareness of the socio/historical circumstances prevalent when that particular fashion came about. In order to be able to design a stage set, a designer needs to have a practical understanding of the logistics of getting numbers of performers on and off stage in time to be ready to pick up a musical cue, or indeed to be able to see the conductor when they arrive there. These varied examples illustrate the cross-disciplinary awareness required of participants in opera.

In Michael Kennedy's book about the Royal Manchester College of Music, it is evident that Frederic Cox, the principal of the RMCM had the vision in the early 1950s to establish operatic training skills from first year, not only for all vocal students, but additionally for instrumental students, who were equally able to participate in many of the collaborative performances and supporting classes in speech, drama and presentation skills. (Kennedy, 1971)

Cox has been credited as being one of the first figures in Higher Music Education to take this holistic approach. (Hamilton, 2010, p. 4) My recent research through interview with directors and conductors reveals that today, sixty years later, classes in these same practical skills and resources still feature highly in the recommendations for study in the contemporary conservatoire. (Hamilton, 2015)

Opera and the visual arts

Now that Computer Generated Imagery has opened up almost limitless possibilities in cinematic and theatrical design, opera audiences have an even greater expectation to feast their eyes as well as their ears. Design companies such as Fura Dels Baus or Ex Machina who created the recent Wagner Ring Cycle for The New York Metropolitan Opera are prime examples of this. For students interested in a career in theatre design, there are potential employment opportunities. There are 79 Irish theatre companies listed at present in the Ireland Actors Guide of which 15 are on the Irish Arts Council list for receiving financial support. There are at least five opera companies working in the country presenting professional productions, all of whom however operate on a seasonal basis. (Ireland Actor's Guide, 2014) (Arts Council of Ireland, 2015)

This would suggest that in the present climate, opportunities for aspiring theatrical designers come with strictures and challenges. Therefore, student designers need to train to be multi-skilled, adaptable and possess the ability and imagination to work economically without compromising creativity. In the following guide-lines from the Society of British Designers web-site, it's interesting to note that the possible pathways into training include other disciplines: "Some people choose to enter the profession via post-graduate training or an MA having completed a degree in a related subject such as Fine Art or Drama or other spatial disciplines such as architecture." (Society of British Designers, 2015)

Opera can function as a vehicle for the exploration of many other skills and career-paths including stage management, event management, lighting design and technology, set construction, prop making, costume design, film, marketing and promotion. The scope of the synergy is wide enough to embrace all these elements and an educational institute which offers a wide range of studies is in an ideal position to facilitate collaborations which incorporate training for these careers.

The Paris Collection project

With reference to all of this, 'The Paris Collection' production was both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. The remit of the enterprise necessitated that the students engage at a professional level, working under staff supervision but also in tandem with personnel and resources outside the college environment.

Over 170 students participated in the project. While every effort was made for the collaboration to be as inclusive as possible, the realities of the competitive elements inherent within the creative professional environment

were also acknowledged and the set of conditions demanded that the performers were required to audition for their roles and the teams of design students to prepare and present a pitch for their concept to be selected.

The production was conducted by DIT Continuing Education/Trinity College Dublin under-graduate Killian Farrell, directed by DIT Conservatory teaching-staff member Jennifer Hamilton and performed by vocal and instrumental undergraduates and post-graduates. Under the co-ordination of Barry Sheehan Assistant Head of School of Art Design and Printing, the set, costume concept, publicity and promotional material were designed by teams of students from that same school. These design students also took responsibility for the set construction. The entire cohort had to respond to the logistical and artistic challenges of taking the production into a major venue on the day of performance to be ready to begin the performance three hours later.

The delivery of a public performance in a high profile venue meant that the project culminated in full exposure of public scrutiny, and consequently demanded the skills, intelligence, energy and commitment of all involved. Student feedback and de-briefing sessions have revealed that the vast majority of participants found the project to be highly rewarding and stimulating. Feedback forms reflected the fact that well over 90% of the vocal students felt that with reference to the Ensemble Class that year, they had a greater understanding of the demands of the operatic profession and also felt that they had increased confidence in their abilities in this sphere.

Those members of staff with major responsibilities in this project, found it to be in the final analysis, hugely gratifying, interesting, exciting and profoundly stressful. While all agreed that it was a very good thing to do, and that it should be repeated in some form in the future, it is significant that the same staff members didn't leap to repeat the endeavour the following year. There are reasons for this, and these factors may prove insightful for others wishing to embark on interdisciplinary enterprises.

Conundrum

The dilemma for teachers and facilitators is to what extent should we embed rigorous professional demands within such projects, or to what extent should we be content to create a virtual professional environment, which is underpinned by the safety net of accepting that the venture is an educational exercise, and may be subject to compromise. Various situations occurred during our project which in a real professional company would probably not arise.

- **Availability and non-availability**

The rehearsal schedules were often, by necessity, devised around the singers' NAs. There were many more of these than would normally be permitted in a professional opera company, and this put final rehearsals under increased pressure. However, students needed to be able to undertake evening work and even to attend their exams. Although the project was scheduled at an optimum time in the academic year, the realities of the

curriculum and domestic life still prevailed. Consequently, many scenes, the choreographed sequences particularly, had to be rehearsed towards the very end of the project, which left much to chance. While this can happen in a professional situation, such scheduling would not be considered ideal practice.

- **Unrealistic autonomy**

With the final presentation of the promotional graphic design material we encountered another dilemma between educational and professional remits and we consequently faced a potential impasse with the students concerned.

As each team made their pitch for their concept to be chosen, we were particularly taken with one team's design which took their inspiration from the architecture of the French New Wave of the 1960s. The staff panel felt that their stage design concept was elegant, adaptable and looked from a logistical point of view, as if it could be re-fitted in the venue in a short space of time. This was a critical part of the remit as we had approximately three and a half hours of get-in, fit-up and rehearsal time in situ before the show began at 7.30pm. We were equally pleased with the team's graphic design and although, due to other academic demands, the text work had not been completed, we signed off on the entire package.

However, when the team came back with the completed posters, colleagues from the conservatory were unhappy with the choice of font for the publicity because they felt that the information was too difficult to read and to recognise. The design students had a very interesting argument to justify their choice. They felt that the cutting-edge image of the publicity would attract a younger demographic who might be curious to investigate what the publicity was for. On the other side of the debate, it was felt that the text was too obscure and would deter the older generation who constitute the core audience for these type of DIT events. The students were also very reluctant to compromise their artistic vision. These were all valid points of view.

What is the ideal solution to this dilemma? We want our students to understand the realities of professional life where he or she who pays the piper, calls the tune. Also, for financial and promotional reasons, conservatoires want to attract a substantial audience to corporate events, and publicity is therefore critically important. Equally, we are strongly encouraged to support the belief that it is vital that students today develop a sense of their own autonomy or agency. In an essay in the publication 'Teaching Creatively', Ian Shirley feels that agency is an essential educational component:

> Agency is about providing and managing autonomy. Like pocket money, *agency* allows for real decision making, within controlled parameters. Some decisions will prove wise, others foolish ... Autonomous activity can ... Develop a spirit of perseverance, where challenges and disappointments can promote creative invention and resilience. (Shirley 2009, p 51)

Oscar Odena comments further on Shirley's idea and proposes that agency requires "A careful mix of autonomy and support, opportunity and challenge,

knowledge and empowerment, and flexibility within clear objectives." (Odena, 2014, p 130)

In the event, we luckily reached a compromise about the promotional material for The Paris Collection which included printing and displaying the largest posters as the students had originally designed them. We were in the fortunate position of being able send out substantial additional promotion for the event through the conservatory web-site and with the support of that, we avoided confrontation with the students over the graphics.

The conservatory, who was in this scenario the 'client', needed to attract not only new audience members, but also to ensure the loyalty of its current supporters. Most of the staff assumed that this was understood. However, in the light of this debate we the staff acknowledged that we could or should not make assumptions about what is already known or understood. These were not Business Studies or Marketing students but fledgling designers and this part of their learning curve informed our own discoveries.

- **Commitment and engagement**

During the course of the project, several performers dropped out of the ensemble because they became anxious that they would not have enough time and energy for their other studies. Equally, in the Design department, the textile students, having made a concept pitch to design and produce the costumes, decided with great regret, that they would not be able to follow through with the project because it was not possible for them to gain credits for any further work. Therefore they had to concentrate on the completion of their other course-work. In a professional situation, the loss of the costume department would be profoundly consequential, and in our situation, was also not without its challenges.

How can such setbacks be avoided? These ventures can ill afford to support any student disengagement and the consequences of a project coming adrift become even more serious from a financial angle when it is planned to take place within the public domain. One obvious answer would be to ensure that the collaboration is comprehensively implemented within the academic programme as a substantially credited module. If such modules could encompass academic as well as practical subject matter, this could mean that students are less likely to be faced with the dilemma of finding that so much other course-work is competing for their time and energy while they are immersed in the project.

In our instance, the collaboration was implemented within the modular framework of the Masters in Music, Bachelor of Music, Bachelor of Arts in Visual Merchandising & Display, BA in Interior Design & Furniture, and BA in Visual Communications. However, we discovered that in order to do the project properly, much more energy and time needed to be devoted to it than appeared in the module descriptors. We all believed in the enterprise and were prepared to give many extra hours to it. This however created an insecure set of circumstances. What is the answer to this? We cannot pressurise students to work extra voluntary hours (even though this is a professional reality) and ultimately, they are likely to prioritise their time

towards those modules which carry the most credits. Does this mean that we should not embark on such ventures?

My answer to this is that if we believe that these collaborative projects are of value, then provision needs to be made within programmes for them to be adequately resourced in terms of allocation of time and credits. We were fortunate that our individual programmes had the flexibility to embrace this project and that the students were at least able to receive basic credits for their work.

At present in the DIT Conservatory, as we review the Bachelor of Music programme, we are creating options and electives which might include involvement in these interdisciplinary projects. My main recommendation is to ensure that collaborations can be truly supported within undergraduate and postgraduate academic programmes. It is also likely that more numbers of staff would be prepared to participate in these events if their time and commitment could be reflected more realistically within their allocated teaching hours. I would surmise that large-scale collaborative projects will usually require extra allocation of staff time. However, there is a better chance of embedding these enterprises within a collegiate culture if their execution doesn't depend exclusively on staff good will. In an ideal world, it would be tempting to hope that all students would be happy to be involved in such events as part of their extra-curricular activities. However, the demands of academic life do not make that easy.

Conclusion

My recommendations would be summarised as follows:

- With reference to any project which has a competitive element; when formulating the criteria and objectives, take extra time to consider the issues which may seem obvious to staff, but may not be so obvious to students. Bear in mind that one can never be too pedantic.

- If it is too risky to rely entirely on a system of autonomous decision making from the student participants, establish flexible parameters before-hand. It could be useful at the onset to cite professional practice as an ongoing point of criteria, in the event of any divergence of opinion which may hinder the project's success.

- Create workable and flexible contingencies, particularly with reference to personnel.

- Establish collaborative projects robustly within the academic programme. Ensure that students can be awarded sufficient credits commensurate with their input of time and engagement. This final recommendation is supported by Odena:

  Value *collaboration* in the students' projects. In business and in science people work in teams, yet individualised assessment in higher education may limit the opportunities for collaborative work. Practitioner educators need to be creative in their own teaching and assessment

strategies, for example by allowing joint submission of projects. (Odena, 2014, p. 134)

I believe the key word here is value. We are very aware that student recruitment and retention figures today rely not only on academic content but also on the peer-bonding relationships students experience. We also know that collaborative experiences provide individuals with the opportunities to develop confidence, communication and inter-personal skills, acquire deeper understanding of a range of related disciplines and investigate a range of practical skills. Ultimately, if we believe that to be true, then I recommend that we give value to such projects and establish them fully in academic programmes, possibly as cross-curricular modules where realistic amounts of time and energy can be committed to them.

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