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# How can Australian actor training be relevant in a world of 86 per cent unemployment?

Gabrielle Metcalf and Andrew Lewis<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Completing a University degree in actor training may have become a practice in absurdity. There is not enough work for most graduates to even pay the HECS debt that they would have accumulated over their three-year degree. What does this signify for the relevance of actor training, when most graduates can only look forward to a future of unemployment or at best, underemployment? This article charts territory for the Academy to navigate in order for actor training to become more relevant and its graduates better equipped to meet the challenges of the high unemployment rates in the arts industry. A starting point is to examine the pedagogical components of Conservatoire actor education and ask the question, “How can we enhance the preparation of students for the industry?” Two main areas of inquiry will be explored: firstly, the new triple threat; actor, writer, producer, where students are given specific tools as part of their training to become creators and producers of their own material. Secondly, we argue that actor training should include professional preparation units of study that teach students entrepreneurial skills and how to transfer their drama training to other areas of industry.

## Keywords

Actor Training; Actor Unemployment; Actor as Triple Threat; Transferrable Skills; Professional Preparation; Actor as Entrepreneur

## Introduction

A personal Facebook post by Jonny Hawkins, an alumni of The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), outlines the reality for many of Australia’s acting graduates. He posts,

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*It's getting harder to put things in perspective. I'd very much like to have a full and realised career in the arts. But without a government that supports the arts, being around a professional scene can feel pretty stitched up, and not knowing of any philanthropic cause to support artists just to get by, I've lost some hope. I've worked hard each time I've been given the opportunity, have won awards, but still can't support myself on my career. My projects have been recognised internationally, but still I'm having to prove that I'm deserving to fill roles here, even very small ones. We work for free. Your tickets pay for sets, lights, sounds, rents and royalties. I once got \$50 for a two-week season; it was mostly sold out. I'm constantly very busy, steadily gaining momentum, but often am isolated by being time poor and live on a few hundred dollars a week. I can't afford my union fees. They call me fortnightly. Each time I feel a little smaller. I feel that in 10 years, my ambition will look more like desperation and it'll stop being cute and I'll still have a huge university debt. (J. Hawkins, personal communication, July 15, 2019)*

Hawkins' post highlights the vagaries that acting graduates face when entering the industry. According to American actor and commentator Brendon McMahon (2012), completing a University degree in actor training has become a practice in absurdity since there is rarely enough work for most graduates to even pay the debt they've accumulated over their three-year degree. In a report about the State of Education in Australia compiled by WithYou-WithMe (2019), the future for Creative Arts graduates is bleak. In 2023 there is expected to be 174,000 Creative Arts University graduates and there will be 23,000 jobs, this means that 151,000 people or 86% won't find employment in their field. The figures are alarming and a call for action is needed. The financial future and mental health of our graduates needs to be addressed, because the sustainability and diversity of the creative industries is at risk if we fail to respond.

This article explores ways in which the Conservatoire model of actor training can be adapted and modified to provide industry ready graduates who are better equipped to enter a profession where high unemployment and dwindling arts funding are a sad reality. Exploratory research was undertaken at WAAPA in a bid to actively respond to the cultural landscape graduates are encountering. Informal interviews were conducted with over twenty alumni of WAAPA and related colleagues to assess what structural changes could be implemented in the curriculum to better prepare graduates. The participants that were interviewed consented to being formally identified in the research and it was decided that this would give the argument greater potency and relatability.

Two methods to combat the current climate are presented. Firstly, the new triple threat; actor, writer, producer, where acting students are provided with the skills to be able to write and produce their own material. Tim Minchin and Eddie Perfect, both alumni of WAAPA, are examples of how the actor can become writer-producer and create work for themselves. Secondly, actor training could potentially include a professional preparation component where students are taught entrepreneurial skills, how to view and manage themselves as a business and the means to transfer their

drama knowledge to other areas of industry. What would the outcomes be for graduates if actor training diversified to include these additional areas of instruction?

## **The new triple threat: Actor, writer, producer**

Traditionally, the Conservatoire is focused on graduating highly skilled actors, trained to gain employment across radio, television, theatre and film. The industry still demands this, however other factors have come into play as the viewing habits of audiences respond to new technologies. For example, digital media, web series, YouTube and online streaming entertainment have opened new entry points for actors, meaning the traditional avenues of performance are shifting. The impact of technology, coupled with continued restrictions such as limited public and private sector funding leads to us asking how we, as a training institution can better equip our graduates to respond to the altering cultural milieu. This shift prompts us in the Conservatoire to seek out strategies to train student actors to be able to successfully navigate these changes. Analysing the data collected from the interviews, it became apparent that there were significant benefits in developing actors who can write and produce their own material. This has led to an argument for the inclusion of writing/producing units in the actor training course at WAAPA.

Western actor Conservatoire training predominantly utilises extant texts. This is an essential part of educating actors, who learn to analyse and perform classic and contemporary scripts to develop a traditional theatre knowledge base. However, as the industry responds to the digital age, hybrid forms are evolving across theatre, film, television and online platforms; there has never been a more important time for artists to diversify. There is the opportunity for the Academy to challenge the long-established methods of training actors and respond to the digital age with diversifying content and broadening the skill base of students.

Enabling the student actor to find an 'authentic' voice, and to be involved in writing and collective creation in their undergraduate years is one response which could have untold rewards following graduation. By offering more diversity in the curriculum, the industry is enriched with graduates who have broader artistic expression and knowledge. Writing can also break the agony of unemployment and offer much needed visibility for actors. Plans to broaden the training that is offered to acting students at WAAPA will include new curriculum to foster the development of the new triple threat: actor-writer-producer.

According to Peter Zazzali (2018), from Kansas University, the key to creating work is that the process relies on students' creative imaginations, which forces them to be entrepreneurial because they are not relying on an existing text. This in turn, empowers them to be an artist with agency, "rather than a commercial entity for material consumption; an actor who sits around waiting for the phone to ring" (Zazzali, 2018, p.18). Developing an actor's imagination and ability to convey ideas through writing can broaden their perspective. Actor/writer Jane Watt (personal communication, July 15, 2019) became discouraged with having to rely on other people to cast her, and so began creative writing as a measure to counter her frustration,

*Writing is enormously empowering. As an actor you are always bringing to life someone else's ideas. As a writer, it feels more like contributing to the conversation, allowing you to bring your own ideas to the table. It also takes away from the all too common feeling of powerlessness that comes from having to wait to be cast in work.*

While Jane identifies writing as an empowering act which inspires her to develop her own ideas, fellow WAAPA acting graduate, Liam Maguire (personal communication, July 15, 2019) finds writing liberates his creativity, “writing my own plays and then creating them really strengthened my perspective as an artist because I was no longer contained by someone else’s imagination so I had to figure out what mine could do”. Maguire’s comments suggest that writing broadens his artistic vision. Michael Abercromby (personal communication, July 15, 2019) flags the same theme, suggesting that by “practicing writing, you realise you are an element of a whole, literally just ‘a part’. I think this has changed how I analyse a scene and approach a character”. These revelations from playwrights Maguire and Abercromby could be beneficial for the student actor, to see themselves as part of a bigger whole.

In a similar vein, Australian playwright Reg Cribb explains that writing allowed him to “appreciate and understand that my character is only part of the bigger mechanism of a larger story. It’s not just about me!” (personal communication, July 12, 2019). Cribb argues that “Actors make the best writers. Character and dialogue are their best strengths. And an innate sense of theatricality”. TV writer and actor Josephine Dee Barrett agrees, stating that the skills she acquired as an actor informed her “understanding of character, objectives, obstacles and provided more depth in creating characters and relationships. It’s also provided me with a good ear for dialogue and understanding of pace” (personal communication, July 10, 2019). Barrett highlights the mutually positive links between acting and writing. By adding a writing component to actor training it may allow for a greater comprehension of story structure.

Playwright and actor, Will O’Mahony positions writing as a skill that can enable the actor to appreciate narrative elements,

*Learning to write gives an actor a stronger understanding of where they may be in a story, how to pace a performance, and perhaps most crucially how to give focus to what is being said rather than the character saying it.*  
(personal communication, July 15, 2019)

O’Mahony believes he is not only a stronger actor for his writing but he is also enabling himself to understand the craft of writing in a more nuanced way. Ian Meadows echoes O’Mahony’s sentiments and elaborates on this theme, “as an actor I’m more inclined to look at how my character and scenes fit into the run of an episode or arc of a play before I make offers. Knowing the function of a character in a piece of work is really important” (personal communication, August 1, 2019).

The connection between acting and writing that Meadows refers to is also on the radar of screenwriter, Sarah Smith. Smith explains her process, “Acting gave me a good ear for dialogue. I always read aloud what I’ve written and if I can’t say it, then I know

there's something wrong" (personal communication, July 19, 2019). Smith clearly describes how her written material needs to be performable. Conversely, Canadian actor, playwright and producer, Sydney Herauf describes writing that she doesn't want to perform, and why that inspires her to create her own material.

*Throughout my time as an actor, I've been in a lot of plays and student films (always, always, always the fucking (pardon my French) student films) with terrible writing. And it pisses me off. I don't think there's any excuse for bad writing, so when my agent sends me an audition where it sounds like the dialogue was written by a team of keyboard equipped monkeys locked in a basement - it's frustrating. But inspiring. Because it lights a fire under my ass and makes me want to create jaw-dropping work that if (as an actor) I was handed, I would be excited to be a part of it. (personal communication, July 10, 2019)*

Herauf takes responsibility for creating her own material and also producing it. She states "I started producing my work in high school, in the eleventh and twelfth grade. I wrote fifteen minute plays - they were my first big opportunity to take something from my brain and put it on the stage" (personal communication, July 10, 2019). In the traditional acting Conservatoire structure this "brain to stage" realisation that Herauf describes is not apparent for student actors if they are only performing pre-existing works. Graduating actors need to be visible and actor/ writer/ producer Michael Abercromby suggests taking personal responsibility for getting your work seen, "As an emerging artist you must accept that no matter how good you think you are, it's easier to open a door yourself than wait for someone to open it for you" (personal communication, July 10, 2019).

Abercromby's call for artists to take action is echoed by actor/writer/producer Emma O'Sullivan who says, "I've always believed that no matter how talented or gifted you may be, this industry owes you nothing. If anything the question should always be, what have I got to offer the industry?" (personal communication, July 10, 2019). As an acting graduate without any formal training in producing, O'Sullivan learnt how to produce on the job,

*A good friend of mine who happens to be a producer offered to produce my first show. By the second and third leg I was doing a bit more producing work than before so it was more co-produced. I just learnt more as I went along and took more responsibility upon myself to get things done.*

O'Sullivan's comments highlight the need for graduating actors to comprehend the commercial, practical and logistical components involved with writing and producing their own work.

The artists included in this research were asked whether they felt writing and producing needed to be taught in Acting Conservatoire programs. This question was met with a resounding 'Yes' from ninety per cent of the respondents. In summary, they all felt it was important to express themselves and believed that the 'act of writing'

helped the actor to understand and appreciate good writing. Further, respecting form, structure, themes and dialogue can be realised by writing but more importantly, the participants suggested that it released their imagination and gave them a sense of ownership over the material. Many understood that not everyone graduating from an acting school would become a gainfully employed writer but that the act of writing could be a vehicle utilised in many aspects of an arts career and in related jobs and tasks, including not only scripts but reports, grants, press releases and pitches. The interviews revealed that the skills of acting and writing enriched each other. It was apparent from the responses that many actors felt empowered by writing and enjoyed the channel for creative expression, whilst also gaining ownership of their own material.

The digital age has provided rich opportunities for the actor, writer, producer where actors can now establish themselves by creating their own material; webisodes, short films, creative videos and even stand-up comedy are examples, which can be posted on YouTube, Vimeo and web-sites. Performers can attract a fan base on Twitter and Facebook. Phoebe Waller-Bridge is an example of this with her Fringe show, *Fleabag* (2016), which was adapted into an award-winning BBC television series. Bonin-Roidriguez (2012) argues for the term ‘Artist-Producer’ which describes the artist as an “individual who makes her work and cultivates the conditions to bring her work to anticipated markets” (p.15).

The advice to acting graduates, according to Glynn Gilliss (2018) is

*Create your own product—play, film, web-series, stand-up. Find a friend with a camera. Get your crew together and shoot. Use social media to publicize and gather 50,000 or a million fans. It’s so much easier than building a theater or going on the road. You guys in this century have it easy!* (para 13)

Whether actors choose to express themselves in theatre or on digital platforms there is enough evidence to suggest that acquiring writing and producing skills in their training could greatly enhance their creative expression, employment potential and importantly, their sense of agency, thus empowering them as artists.

## The actor as entrepreneur

A report into the psychological wellbeing of actors by Maxwell, Seton and Szabo (2015), identifies considerations for performers that require urgent attention. In particular that, “Actors’ financial literacy and capacity to engage in career planning should be addressed as a priority both by training institutions, and by industry stakeholders” (p. 91) and “The urgency of raising actors’ awareness about the industry-specific challenges of depression, anxiety and stress, and alcohol- and drug-use (p.91). That about 80 per cent of the actors in their study are active users of either legal or illegal drugs rings warning bells. How do we as actor training schools respond to these disturbing findings? Higher education, according to Toscher (2019) is calling upon arts entrepreneurship to “prepare artists for sustainable careers” (p. 3). There is an

invitation to training institutions here, to become part of a solution to discover ways to enable student actors to prepare to enter the industry with some hope of sustaining a healthy professional career.

If we include financial literacy and career planning as part of Conservatoire training then changes must be made to the current curriculum. A study conducted by Beckman (2007) into arts curricula and program development in the US, revealed that the development of innovative career strategies for arts students is a growing priority in higher education. According to Beckman (2007), empowering students to self-develop new and innovative outcomes as practitioners is an outcome of teaching arts entrepreneurship. Traditionally there has been resistance from the Academy to business-based training for artists, which lies, according to Abbing (2008) with the longstanding romantic notions of the sacred, high-minded artist who is inspired to create and who shouldn't be concerned with the economics of art production. However, Essig (2009, p.119) argues that to "teach arts entrepreneurship *to artists* means to teach them to recognize or create opportunity, manage and direct their careers, and launch their artistic "enterprise".

While four out of five Australian actors are represented by an agent, acting graduates can become frustrated by the lack of audition opportunities and many reach out to their own networks of industry colleagues to find or create openings for themselves. This has led to actors needing to manage themselves and their finances, as a business. Thus, teaching students' basic business skills like the value of having an Australia Business Number, invoicing, tax, Goods and Services Tax, superannuation, worker's compensation and insurance, would give actors more agency over their careers. This allows them to acquire the necessary skills required for dealing with their finances and encourages them to consider how to economically sustain their career over time. For example, a WAAPA graduate who was cast in a television commercial for a bank - their first job out of acting school, was paid \$30,000. This sounded like a huge sum of money for a newly graduated student. However, this was the only paid acting work he had for the next 18 months. Teaching students how to manage the sporadic payments and lump sums they may receive and what the implications this has for taxation would be part of improving the financial literacy of acting graduates.

## **Redefining what an actor does: The 'actor-facilitator'**

If the actors that are graduating from our Universities and training institutions are going to have a life that does not revolve around unemployment, depression, substance abuse and feelings of rejection then understanding what an actor does, needs to be appreciated in much broader terms. How we define an actor is largely based on a narrow understanding that the person performs in theatre, film, television and advertisements. However, this definition fails to take into account the enormous contribution and capacity that actors have to make in areas not generally associated with being an 'actor', such as leadership and communication training.



Many organisations are recognising the value that actors can bring to professional development programs. The attributes an actor has in terms of presentation skills and delivery, are transferrable and can be utilised to develop the leadership and communication competencies of staff. Further, actors are used in role-play scenarios to simulate situations and conversations that employees may find themselves in. Role-playing offers them the chance to practice ways of communicating and interacting so that they feel better equipped to deal with the 'real' scenario. The term we have used to describe this role is 'Actor-Facilitator', where acting skills are used to create a character and then proficiency in facilitation helps the trainee to gain insight into behaviours and communication styles that may or may not be serving them in their role. We asked eight 'Actor-Facilitator's' all who had some degree of actor training, how they felt about using their acting craft for the training and development of others.

All the respondents reported that they enjoyed their job and got satisfaction from "helping others to learn" and "stretching their acting muscles" (M. Carpenter, personal communication, August 4, 2019). David Mitchell describes how the work he does as an actor in the corporate training space forces him to "stay present in each moment. Because you are a part of somebody's training, it is the ultimate reminder that the scene is not about you as an actor, but rather about the learning of the client, similar to how a play's understanding relies heavily on the audience's understanding" (personal communication, August 6, 2019). Charlotte Dee notes that she gets to "practice creating interesting characters with rich back stories" and that she is able to utilise her acting skills by "presenting various characters to participants and then being a very real part of their learning" which she finds satisfying (personal communication, August 5, 2019). Barbara Calligan enjoys working with a creative team to develop and produce a scene or play for a training program. She also describes the "versatility of the work" as something she gets satisfaction from (personal communication, August 7, 2019). One participant summarised the benefit for the actor working in training and professional development, "This can be a wonderful job – performing not for an audience waiting to be entertained, but for an audience that values the learning they receive from their interaction with the character you are playing. This role involves another skill set on top of being an actor, for example being able to give evidence based, informed feedback" (n.a, personal communication, August 1, 2019). It is apparent that for trained actors, working as an 'Actor-Facilitator' can have many positive outcomes.

An essential part of actor training is learning how to communicate using the voice, body and imagination. Effective communication techniques also form part of many job descriptions. Providing opportunities for student actors to understand how to train others in communication skills in a variety of contexts would add to their employability. Being an 'Actor-Facilitator' would require students to feel confident to conduct a workshop. This is an important skill that can be applied to a wide range of situations and contexts. Acting graduates gain a lot of experience being a participant in workshops yet few have the underpinning pedagogical skills needed to be the facilitator of a group. This part of their training would investigate fundamental pedagogical practice, such as,

- Structuring a workshop: introduction, setting goals, the teaching points – and what associated activities are going to allow participants to acquire the skills being taught.
- Motivation – how to keep participants motivated and engaged in the topic (depending on the age, behaviour management can also be taught). Students could do practical application of these skills during school holiday and public workshops.

A report by the Australian Council (2017) into the economic position of professional artists describes how the average total incomes for artists remains 21% below the Australian workforce average, and income from creative work has decreased by 19% over the last seven years. WAAPA acting graduate, Alex Steffensen acknowledged the implications of the limited financial earnings of the artist, “You are going to have to have another income source. Make sure that it is something you enjoy and is stimulating and nourishing for you as an artist. I worked in a call centre and as a barista but as I moved into my early 30’s these jobs were not feeding my creative soul” (personal communication, 31 August, 2018). The ‘Actor-Facilitator’ is a way for actors to have another income source where they are still using their craft and developing their skill set.

## **The impact of diversifying actor training in the Academy**

Including professional preparation units in an actor training degree would consume time that may otherwise be spent in acting classes. However, in the Conservatoire teaching structure, there are a large amount of contact hours which far outweigh most other degree courses. While these hours are necessary to develop the highly skilled actor, introducing writing and arts entrepreneurial units of study could actually provide the students with a way to consolidate the skills they are acquiring in acting classes and realise how these skills can be applied in real world contexts.

The reality of the industry they are going into is, if they sit and wait for the phone to ring, they will most likely be part of the 86% unemployed actors. They may not even have the opportunity to use the craft they have applied themselves to mastering over the course of their degree. While most acting students ‘know’ that actors spend a lot of their time unemployed they have no lived experience of it. As one graduate notes, “I came down hard after showcase. I knew the stats but they only seemed like something everyone said, when I moved to Sydney and the phone didn’t ring and my agent didn’t respond to my calls, this was difficult” (n.a. Personal communication, April 2, 2019). The arts academy has a responsibility, according to Beckman (2010) to “support the efforts of future generations” and argues that teaching professional success cannot be considered separate from the teaching of the production of art” (p. 297). If we are serious about graduating students who are not going to suffer from substance abuse, depression, poverty and 86% unemployment then we have an obligation to adequately prepare them so they are able to transition from University to the Profession with a plethora of skills that are going to give them the best chance of sustaining a career.

Professional preparation will counter “longstanding romantic notions of artists as creative geniuses who are unconcerned with commerce” (Bonin-Rodriguez, 2012, p. 9).

## Implications for the future of the Academy

Taking into consideration the exploratory research outlined in this article, WAAPA has begun to implement changes to many of their performing arts courses. Self-devised/actor-written works will be created by acting students in their third year of training. Titled *New Voices*, students will develop, direct and produce their own creative work. A Professional Preparation: Business Skills unit will be introduced so that Acting students learn how financial and business skills such as writing grant applications, seeking sponsorship, developing and producing theatre and on-line content can assist them. They will also learn how to transfer the skills they have acquired as part of their creative training, to other contexts such as corporate training and facilitation.

The education that acting students receive has the potential to be very relevant and create a generation of artists who are empowered with the knowledge that they can be a triple threat; actor-writer-producer, create and produce their own work, have a degree of business and financial literacy to manage their economic life and harness an entrepreneurial spirit that will enable them to reach their artistic goals and sustain their artistic practice.

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**Gabrielle Metcalf** holds a PhD in Theatre Directing from The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts where she currently lectures in Acting and Directing and provides intimacy coaching for students. She has a special interest in leadership methodologies and processes for directors which she has applied to her directing and teaching practice. She has used an autoethnographic approach in her practice-led research to interrogate the position that a director holds in the rehearsal process and has just completed a book, *Teaching Drama*, commissioned by Beijing Normal University, outlining how drama can be taught in Chinese schools. Gabrielle also works with a variety of corporations across Australia and Asia training leaders in effective communication styles.

**Andrew Lewis** is currently completing a PhD investigating the need for devising and collective creation practices to be taught within Conservatoire Actor training. He has extensive experience in directing film, television and theatre and has directed numerous stage plays and short films. He has also written and produced documentary and magazine programs for the ABC. Andrew is a directing graduate of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) and holds two Masters degrees – one in Film and TV Directing from The Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) and the other in Film and Theatre Studies from the University of New South Wales. Andrew is currently the Associate Dean - Performance at WAAPA, responsible for the Acting, Music Theatre, Performing Arts, Dance and Aboriginal Theatre Courses. He is also Associate Director of the WA Screen Academy.