

CENTRE STAGE 2021

A NEW REPORT INTO DRAMA SCHOOL DIVERSITY



Andrew Lloyd Webber
Foundation

**With Idris Elba, Cynthia Erivo, Kwame Kwei-Armah,
Giles Terera, Madani Younis and Gloria Onitiri**

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Editor Genevieve Fox



ALWF SCHOLAR
GEORGINA ONUORAH
IN DICK WHITTINGTON,
NATIONAL THEATRE



Five years ago, my Foundation commissioned a report on diversity in the theatre, or rather the lack of it, with the conclusion that theatre was 'hideously white'. Five years on there has been change, but not nearly enough. There's been much wringing of hands and concern that more must urgently be done. Excellent initiatives are indeed taking place. Get Into Theatre, the online careers resource funded by my Foundation and produced in partnership with *The Stage*, steers young people from under-represented backgrounds to where they can get help. Nonetheless, I asked my trustees how many theatricals had taken up the Foundation's offer to administer, for free, a scholarship in the name of anyone who wanted to fund one. It's something that I have banged on about when accepting the various lifetime achievement awards that are dished out when it's presumed it's high time you were pensioned off. I was flabbergasted that the answer was precisely zero.

Opportunity in education is the only way to unlock diverse talent so it can succeed in the theatre. Education costs money. My Foundation funds up to 30 scholarships annually. They are awarded strictly on the basis of need and talent. It speaks volumes that 70% of the current scholars are people of colour. Theatre schools need more scholarships, not just for performers, but for every discipline.

I implore anyone who really cares about diversity in theatre to consider funding a scholarship. The Foundation will do all the boring administration for you. It will be in your name, not mine!

You can be involved as much or as little as you want in choosing the candidates. My apologies to all those who are doing great work in making the profession we love fit for our time, but to those who can afford it and perhaps aren't, it's time for a little less conversation, a little more action, please. ■

Andrew Lloyd Webber

ABOVE: ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER PHOTO: REALLY USEFUL GROUP
COVER: ALWF SCHOLAR MORONKE AKINOLA IN THE DISSOCIATION OF SHIRLEY MASON, BRISTOL OLD VIC PHOTO: CRAIG FULLER

CENTRE STAGE 2021

The goal of the *Centre Stage* 2016 research was to identify ways to attract and retain more culturally diverse talent and ensure the widest possible participation in all parts of the theatre.

One of the key recommendations was to encourage drama schools to award more places through bursaries, scholarships and grants to remove the financial impediments that hamper diversity on all levels. A self-imposed target of providing finance so that 50% of their places are accessible to students from low-income backgrounds should be adopted.

The purpose of our 2021 research was threefold: to examine what steps have been taken since 2016 to increase diversity in drama schools; to determine which of those steps had been most successful; and to understand what more can be done to accelerate permanent change in the industry.

The research involved in-depth surveys and follow-up interviews with performing arts school leaders and industry professionals.



PICTURED: ITALIA CONTI SUMMER SHOW PHOTO: GREG GOODALE

1 KEY FINDINGS

- As a sector, drama schools have seen the ethnic, cultural and socio-economic diversity of their student intake increase from **14% in 2016** to **21.5% in the 2019/20** academic year.
- Since 2016, **57%** of drama schools have reviewed and enhanced their access and outreach participation teams.
- Since 2016, **60%** of drama schools have appointed diverse candidates into management and academic roles.
- Since 2016, **64%** of drama schools have appointed special advisors to improve the reach of their audition and application processes.
- Since 2016, **76%** of drama schools have partnered with state schools, regional theatres and other community organisations to reach under-represented groups.
- The *Centre Stage* 2016 report set a target of **50%** of places to be funded by scholarships and bursaries. Three of the drama schools surveyed have since achieved this target.
- Covid-19: the biggest threat to the sustainability of outreach and inclusion programmes in the aftermath of lockdowns in 2020 was the shutdown or diversion of money from donor organisations. Of the 22 UK drama schools surveyed, 15 responded and all said funding aimed at improving inclusion had suffered – in some cases by as much as one third of pre-pandemic levels.

2 KEY CONCLUSIONS

- Efforts to attract talent from the broadest possible pool have reaped rewards.
- Every school surveyed reported an improvement in the number of people of colour attending their courses.
- The adoption of three central recommendations made in the *Centre Stage* 2016 report have driven improvement. These were: fee waivers for applicants from the poorest backgrounds; regional auditions to reduce attendance costs; and investment in partnerships with state schools to challenge perceptions about inclusivity in the theatre.
- Diversity at senior management level is the most important catalyst for change.
- There remains a long way to go: diversity in some student cohorts is in single percentage figures.

3 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Investment: the pool of funds for bursaries, scholarships and other initiatives needs to widen to include producers, including those from TV and film, who demand diverse talent but fail to invest accordingly.

2 Management: the poor representation of people of colour in academic and management positions needs to be tackled as a matter of urgency to create permanent institutional change.

3 Sustainability: pressure needs to be maintained to keep diversity at the top of the agenda in schools of performing arts. Statistics should be made publicly available every year showing the demographic of staff and student intake.

FOREWORD



When I was growing up, it was argued that Black actors couldn't do Shakespeare. Why? Because they couldn't speak the verse or didn't quite comprehend it. Or because when they did, they would have to depend on personality, being unable to carry a great part of state.

You will never hear that argument now. We've seen great progress on our stages and our screens, most recently with the Netflix period drama *Bridgerton*. The notion that there were periods in British history that needed to exclude, rather than include, belongs to a previous century, not to the Britain of here and now.

But diversifying your cast is the easy bit.

The hard part is diversifying your audience so it does not always see things through the prism of the white lens, but through the prism of Britain today. We need age diversity, we need cultural, gender and neuro diversity.

Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation has recognised the need for change in our drama schools and our theatres. According to *Centre Stage 2016*, the UK theatre was 'hideously white'. *Centre Stage 2021* identifies the steps taken to dismantle the structures which enable this cultural hegemony. But for me, the most pernicious influence remains anti-Black racism. Once we break down that, the floodgates will open for everyone and lift every supposed barrier, from disability and gender to neurodiversity.

Deal with anti-Black racism. Promote diversity. This coupling of forces for change is a battle cry for the next five years.

But, as *Centre Stage 2021* reminds us, we must commit to telling everyone's stories, whether we are drama students, heads of arts organisations or government ministers. That requires investment, a key recommendation of this report, along with visionary management and sustainability. When

we find our way through this pandemic, the provision of the Arts Council needs to increase. The role the performing arts plays in Great Britain plc, not just economically and politically, but in terms of our standing in the world, must be recognised. You grow an extra inch when you say you are from the United Kingdom and that you work in the arts. If America has soft power in terms of the entertainment industry, we have soft power in the arts.

If we combined the level of public subsidies that the performing arts in Europe receives with our own level of energy and innovation, we could create undreamed of things.

But we must also take individual responsibility. One thing I learnt from my time working in America is that people are schooled in the art of personal philanthropy. They don't just give now and then to the charity that shouts loudest on television. Giving is a matter of duty. I do this because I must, not I do this because I can.

The summer of racial reckoning and Black Lives Matter taught us that, whether you have a Black leader or not, an organisation can still be systemically and institutionally racist. We need to start in our primary schools and look at the stories we tell our children, our creative outreach teams and the bandwidth within our curriculum, and follow through to further education.

It is incumbent on drama schools not just to increase intake, but to revolutionise the curriculum so that it is as diverse as the country we live in and the student base it serves.

Drama students must say to themselves: I am not just going to play traditional European roles. They must ask: are you capable of giving me the skills to negotiate this ever-evolving canon? The challenge becomes not just one of entry, but of culture change.

Some of my favourite American playwrights, from Dominique Morisseau to Katori Hall, were actors first, actors who got to drama school and said: there's nothing here for me. What is the culture like inside our own drama schools? Is the aim simply to churn out more euro-centric people of colour? Or is it to understand that they bring us new cultures, meaning staff and the curriculum must therefore be inclusive of everyone?

It is time to enable today's drama students to walk in and announce: I'm here, and I don't have to give up something of myself to succeed in this environment. ■

'DIVERSIFYING YOUR CAST IS THE EASY BIT. THE HARD PART IS DIVERSIFYING YOUR AUDIENCE'

COULD DO BETTER

A survey of socio, economic and cultural diversity in drama schools by [Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation](#) has found that while there have been encouraging steps forward at some institutions, the sector still has a long way to go, reports Danuta Kean

It doesn't take much to understand why the *Centre Stage* 2016 report from Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation demanded UK drama schools improve their intake of students from more diverse backgrounds. An increase in the number of students whose ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds differed from the white, middle-class norm was urgently required to ensure theatre did not become irrelevant to some sectors of the British population and that the brightest talent was attracted from the broadest possible base.

Between June and August 2020, the Foundation surveyed 22 of the UK's leading drama schools to find out if their good intentions voiced in 2016 had borne fruit. Fifteen of those schools provided data and there are some encouraging signs. Not only have some schools more than doubled their intake of students from under-represented groups, but the sector as a whole has seen the diversity of its student intake increase from 14% in 2016 to 21.5% in the 2019/20 academic year. The biggest increases were at west London-based ArtsEd (up 16% to 37% of the student cohort), Bristol Old Vic Theatre School (up 15% to 32%), the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama (up 18% to 32%) and Italia Conti, which increased diversity on its diploma and degree courses from 6% in 2016 to 26% in the last academic year.

Even accounting for the ethnicity data being skewed by the recording of 'unknown/not provided' in the past, across the board the move has been towards greater representation of people of colour at drama schools. The 2020/21 cohort of students was expected to be even more diverse in some schools. At the London Academy of Music & Dramatic Arts (LAMDA), 58% of places offered on the 2020/21 BA (Hons) Professional Acting course were to students of colour. Bristol Old Vic was on course to have 45% of its 2020 intake made up of students who identified from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background. Sadly, due to the pandemic, many students withdrew or declined the offer, and this figure dropped to 30% for the current cohort.

Centre Stage 2016 recommended improved financial support for individuals from the lowest-income backgrounds as the most effective way to attract more diverse students. It set a high bar: at least 50% of places to be funded by scholarships and bursaries in order to actively recruit a greater diversity of talent. Three schools broke this target: ArtsEd (51%), Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts in south London (56%) and Laine Theatre Arts in Surrey (59%).



THE SECTOR AS A WHOLE HAS SEEN THE DIVERSITY OF ITS STUDENT INTAKE INCREASE

Birkbeck's School of Arts is home to over 2,000 students, of whom 61% are from low-income backgrounds. Of these students, only 10.5% received financial assistance, while others took advantage of different student support initiatives offered by the University. The college is something of an anomaly because it has a higher proportion of part-time and mature students than most institutions. Birkbeck told us it is committed to providing support to all students, including those from low-income backgrounds who need financial assistance, especially in the post-pandemic years.

The disparity between the number of students from low-income backgrounds and the number receiving bursaries and scholarships reflected the fact that awards were not always targeted at students from lowest-income households. Only at Bristol Old Vic, LAMDA and The Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA) did financial awards percentages match those of students from this group. In the case of Bristol, scholarships and bursaries were only targeted at those from the lowest-income backgrounds.

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ABOVE: CENTRAL STUDENTS ON THE ACTING (MUSICAL THEATRE) BA PERFORM A CHORUS LINE IN 2018, DIRECTED BY ED HUGHES
PHOTO: PATRICK BALDWIN

64% OF DRAMA SCHOOLS HAVE APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVISORS



PICTURED: AT BIRKBECK

There was some disagreement about what counts as a low-income background. Government guidance states that to be eligible for the means-tested Dance and Drama Award (DaDA) fee contribution, students' family income must be below £90,000. Only students with a family income of less than £30,000 are eligible for a DaDA maintenance award. This means that claims by some schools that they had passed the magical 50% of students from low-income backgrounds are erroneous. In one case, every student eligible for a DaDA was listed as coming from a low-income background, even if that award was only for fees.

Although *Centre Stage* 2016 highlighted the impediments to inclusiveness, it was disappointing to find that only just over half (57%) of schools had reviewed and enhanced their access and outreach participation teams through the appointment of staff from more diverse backgrounds. More encouraging was the number (64%) that had appointed special advisors, such as the Diversity School Initiative and Open Door, to improve the reach of their audition and application processes.

There was a direct correlation between those schools that used regional auditions, fees for which were waived for the most disadvantaged groups, and those with the highest increase in the socio, economic and cultural diversity of their student intake. However, only 43% of schools responding to the survey offered talent acceleration and training schemes, including free places on summer courses and singing lessons for potential students who showed talent but were not yet of audition standard.

There is reason to hope for improvement. Grassroots community involvement by institutions was high. Three-quarters (76%) had partnered with state schools, regional theatres and other community organisations to reach under-represented groups. Much of this work has been put on hold because of Covid-19, but all schools surveyed said they were keen to increase their outreach into primary and secondary state schools to expand the talent pool from which they recruit.

Centre Stage 2016 also found that lack of diversity among drama school staff and trustees had reinforced institutional bias in everything from curriculum to the handling of complaints of racism. Although all respondents had implemented management training to address cultural bias, attempts to recruit more people of colour to faculties and governing bodies showed mixed results. There was a direct correlation between those that witnessed significant growth in the diversity in student cohorts and those that had addressed diversity among management and academic staff, especially at senior levels.

ArtsEd led the way in terms of appointees at senior management level, with people of colour appointed to senior leadership and teaching roles, including director of the school of acting, head of acting, head of movement, head of film and TV, and acting foundation course leader. It has also appointed two trustees of colour. In general, however, across the sector people of colour were predominantly found in less influential part-time roles and some institutions reported that their full-time workforce was entirely white – a situation that drama schools were trying to rectify through partnerships with organisations such as Diversity in Schools and inclusive recruitment policies, especially addressing racial bias in recruitment panels.

The Black Lives Matter movement put drama schools under the spotlight and all respondents said they had drawn up statements of intent to address issues of bias, racism, reporting procedures and recruitment, as well as specific complaints of racism. In most cases, these had been drawn up in consultation with students and alumni of colour as well as their students' unions. Important measures to be taken included further decolonising of the curriculum (a process already taking place) to represent more diverse creative voices, improved reporting and accountability in response to complaints of racism, and better pastoral and academic support for students of colour.

Respondents recognised that intention needed to be followed by action if structural inequalities were to be dealt with successfully

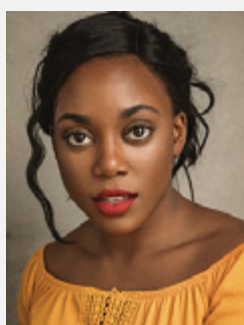


‘We need to be brave’

Jo Eaton-Kent received the ALWF scholarship in 2015 and graduated from Rose Bruford College in 2018. Last year, Jo spent time in Cape Town filming the role of Corporal Cheery in BBC America’s fantasy drama *The Watch*.

‘The conversations we have about race, gender, ability and identity are the stepping stones to equality. We might not be there yet, but we’re far in front of where we’ve

been, and we’re on the right track, so long as we keep talking with one another – because that is the only way we learn. *The Watch* is rebellious in its casting, especially for the fantasy genre. I am the first British trans non-binary actor to portray a trans non-binary main character in a TV series and I can only hope for more bravery from producers, writers, casting directors, executives, show-runners and teachers – the bravery to trust, the bravery to accept and, most importantly, the bravery to accommodate.’



‘The scholarship made me’

Georgina Onuorah received the ALWF scholarship in 2017 and graduated from ArtsEd in 2020. Georgina’s first professional role was as Alice Fitzwarren in *Dick Whittington* at the National Theatre last year.

‘I’m starting to see positive change in terms of diversity. When I performed in *Dick Whittington*, the entire cast and crew was

a melting pot of people from all walks of life. All shows should be representative of the world we live in today. We are seeing more diverse casts across the board, but I believe there is still work to do. Training is so important and you learn so much about yourself and your craft during those three years. I wouldn’t have been able to train at all without the scholarship. I have now graduated a more versatile and agile performer, which is an amazing set-up for such a tough industry.’



‘People are speaking up’

Jemima Scott received the ALWF scholarship in 2019 and graduated from the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama in 2020. Recent projects have included a live-streamed cabaret with her course-mates, which raised money for Acting for Others.

‘Since the Black Lives Matter movement I feel there has been a shift within the industry where

people aren’t afraid to speak up about any inequality that they experience or witness. In terms of providing equal opportunities, a great place to start is with drama schools – which play a vital part in setting industry standards. It is down to them to offer opportunity to all. I’ve seen many more non-gender-specific roles being offered, which shows how we are making strides towards inclusivity. People have become far more aware and that is resulting in diverse and broad-minded casting.’

and the incidents of racism reported in the past not repeated in the future. Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London, which had come under fire on Twitter for a failure to support black students, recognised that top-down change was needed. The diversity of its governing body has since increased to 27% of independent representatives and 19% of the total – a significant difference from 2016 when the figures were 8% and 6% respectively. Central has just appointed Josette Bushell-Mingo, currently head of acting at Stockholm University of the Arts, Sweden, as principal for the 2021/22 academic year.

The statistics reflect that, where drama schools’ leadership has driven the agenda for diversity, there has been significant progress. However, this drive has not been widespread across the sector. Only following pressure from Black Lives Matter have all schools publicly outlined actions to effect change and ensure people of colour are not discriminated against and marginalised within the performing arts community. It shows that accountability is key if diversity of schools’ intake, staff and curriculum is to remain high on the agenda, rather than the preserve of a handful of leaders whose prime concern is the future of their institutions rather than with the industry as a whole. ■



‘TELL STORIES AND INCLUDE EVERYONE’

Actor and producer **Idris Elba** talks to Genevieve Fox about shifting the collective mindset

Risk, says Idris Elba, is one of the greatest obstacles to diversity in the entertainment industry. The award-winning actor, DJ, songwriter and entrepreneur believes that a focus on ratings among TV executives, for example, makes them steer clear of producing a wide range of stories that speak to everyone.

The star of *Luther*, *In the Long Run* and *The Wire* says these stories are still considered ‘niche’ by the industry. ‘But what makes certain stories niche?’ he asks. ‘Any big network or television scenario

is a competitive space. But when everything is reduced to what’s going to make the most impact, culture segregation starts to happen, as in: Oh well, you know it’s only a few people who are going to go for that and therefore it’s a bit risky to put it out at nine o’clock. That’s a real thing.’

It is based on the assumption that the general public is of ‘a certain persuasion’. The same goes for ‘small stories’, which has become synonymous, to some minds, with ‘Black stories’. ‘We have just to remind ourselves that a story is a

ABOVE: ELBA AS NELSON MANDELA IN THE LONG WALK TO FREEDOM
PHOTO: 20TH CENTURY FOX

story is a story,' says Elba, OBE. 'We don't call stories centred around English culture "white European culture stories". We just call them stories.'

'Luther was not designed as a Black character, he's just a detective,' says Elba of the eponymous BBC psychological crime drama TV series. 'The stories in it are niche, in that they are all centred around East London. But that show has travelled across the world as a story. It has audiences in areas where they don't even see Black people, let alone Black detectives.'

'It took Neil Cross, who wrote *Luther*, and the BBC, who bought it, saying: we're going to tell viewers a story and we don't care if the actor playing Luther is Black or white. We have to unpick a little bit of our thinking about what is culturally specific, versus what is just a story.'

It behoves us to be open to all cultural offerings, he says, 'just as younger people are. My daughter is 19. That generation hasn't seen race the way we have. They watch stories that resonate with them – and what resonates with them is a raceless, almost genderless society of storytellers.'

Such freedom of thinking works hand-in-hand with innovation in the digital space to tell their stories. 'YouTube, TikTok, they're all forms of expression.' Netflix, he says, looks at how they can 'speak to a generation that is brown, grey, that's not one or the other.'

'If the tradition of risk versus the need for change is not really addressed, you're going to lose audiences anyway. You just have to tell stories and include everyone.'

A shift in our collective mindset won't happen in isolation. 'It sounds so elementary,' he says, 'but, essentially, you are really bringing it back to brass tacks: it takes a village to bring about change.'

Centre Stage 2021 calls for inclusion and diversity at management and executive level. In 2016, the year of the first *Centre Stage* report, Elba talked to parliament about the need for greater screen diversity. 'I said that, as a company, we had to find ways to offer opportunities to young people,' says Elba, who founded his production company, Green Door Pictures, in 2013. 'But it's really hard because there's no village incentive system where we are all looking around and going, I'm helping, I'm doing my two bits, I've got a couple of kids coming in from that school, are you? All that is the stuff that feeds the mechanism of change.'



That mechanism includes the cogs and wheels of education. Elba grew up in the East End of London in the Seventies and Eighties. 'My school was well positioned, and willing, to open up opportunities for us to get into drama.' It helped, he says, that PE and drama were the 'best' classes because he didn't have to sit in a classroom. 'If I were to offer any recommendations [to educationalists] it would be, listen guys, how much are we offering when we are doing careers classes? What interesting options are we giving the kids that are about to leave school and getting ready for a life, especially kids that show talent and enthusiasm for our industry?'

'They should be encouraged, they should be sent to the headmaster's office and told: listen you're really talented, I've heard you sing, I've seen you act, I've heard you play the guitar really well. I want you to know there are some really interesting options for kids like you. Bring your parents in and we'll have a chat.'

'Get them really early, get them thinking about it.'

Further education, including drama schools, needs to be ready for them. 'My daughter wants to be a film director and an actor, and you know, her dad is in the industry. She really respects the idea of learning and being educated [into the industry].' What students need, he says, is 'perspective' and a range of means of expression.

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'WE HAVE TO UNPICK A LITTLE BIT OF OUR THINKING ABOUT WHAT IS CULTURALLY SPECIFIC'

ABOVE: ELBA DIRECTING BRITISH CRIME DRAMA YARDIE
PHOTO: STUDIOCANAL LTD

PROFILE

Regrettably, the pandemic has seen funding to outreach and performing arts initiatives cut or put on hold. For Elba, the youth workshops offered by the Theatre Royal Stratford East were formative. Outreach, he says, is part of the mechanism of change, along with mentorship. 'The artistic director at the time, a lovely man, was really keen on youth empowerment programmes and so he connected with the schools and said, look, I've got a little 16-18 drama school on Saturdays; educators, put the word out. Any kids you know who've got a little bit of skill or talent, let them come and see me.'

'I was there! I remember going to that club on a Saturday, super-excited to be going to the Theatre Royal Stratford East. Wow! It was one thing my teacher saying, hey, you could get a career in acting. This was tangible. I was actually going to do a workshop in a real working theatre. Not only that, I was excited to come because my teacher said I was good in school.'

When Elba left school in 1988, his music teacher sent him off with a cache of instruments. 'He said, listen, we can't do music in the school anymore because cuts are happening. At an educator's level, that person's outreach was clipped.' Elba went on to become Driis, his long-term DJ name, and he's collaborated with Fat Boy Slim and Skepta. Fast forward three decades and cuts in arts provision in schools means that doors will remain closed for children whose socio-economic background often means they don't even know those doors exist. Not good enough, says Elba. 'It's at the really basic level that you implement change.'

Another teacher pointed him towards the National Youth Music Theatre, for which he was awarded a £1,500 Prince's Trust grant. He is unequivocal about the importance of scholarships and bursaries. 'They are beacons. They are prizes. They symbolise the opportunity to go for something. They are a shiny piece of fruit on the tree.'

'When I got my grant, I thought, there's hope for me, massive hope right now, because my parents couldn't afford to subsidise me.'

The scholarship model, he suggests, could be more 'innovative', with corporations partnering drama schools, for example. But, he cautions, he's no expert. 'I'm an ideologist.' Young people are too, but he urges them to be proactive.

'It is for the young people themselves to seek these opportunities out, knock on doors and ask to be heard. Producers are super-conscious that



'IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PEOPLE WHO WANT CHANGE TO FORCE CHANGE. THEY'VE GOT TO PUSH THAT DOOR OPEN'



they want to offer opportunities, but they say it's sometimes really hard to get people motivated and to get them in the doorway. They'll ask, who wants to be in the film industry, and not many people are putting their hands up.

'But you know that people want to see more diverse storylines and it is for the young people to bridge the gap and say, you know what, I'm up for making that journey to wherever I've got to go twice a week to have that class, to have that opportunity.'

'It is the responsibility of people who want change to force change. They've got to push that door open. Do you have a story you want to tell? Tell us that story. Or tell us how to allow you to tell your story. Tell us something.'

'If I was 16, I'd be like, if you are offering, I'm coming for it. It's an important two-way street.' ■

TOP: SAMMY KAMARA, MADELINE APPIAH, JIMMY AKINGBOLA AND ELBA IN SKY ONE'S IN THE LONG RUN
PHOTO: SKY UK LTD

ABOVE RIGHT: ELBA DJ'ING

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Drama schools have reacted to the **Covid-19 pandemic** with online innovation and outreach but, as Danuta Kean discovers, reduced funding threatens the long-term future of diversity programmes



‘LOCKDOWN IS NOT AN EXCUSE TO EASE UP ON DIVERSITY’

CHRIS HOCKING
PRINCIPAL, ARTSED

LEFT: REHEARSAL AT
BRISTOL OLD VIC, 2020

Covid-19 threatens the sustainability of initiatives aimed at improving diversity and inclusion within drama schools. That is the stark conclusion from Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation’s *Centre Stage 2021* report.

Students hardest hit by the pandemic are those from the poorest backgrounds, especially those that intersect with other under-represented groups, especially disability.

The first national lockdown, between March and June 2020, led to a downturn in institutional support for drama schools from foundations and charities, which closed outreach programmes in state schools and marginalised communities. Meanwhile, the move to online delivery of curriculum and auditions has made it difficult for students who do not have access to Wi-Fi and other technology.

The biggest threat to the sustainability of outreach and inclusion programmes in the aftermath of the first national lockdown was the shutdown or diversion of money from donor

organisations. Of the 22 UK drama schools surveyed, 15 responded and all said funding aimed at improving inclusion had suffered. At Mountview, the Judi Dench Fund for Access to Drama Training is aimed at those unable to afford drama training. The fund’s launch had been ‘significantly impacted’ by the coronavirus, according to Sarah Preece, executive director of the Peckham-based drama school.

‘Covid-19 has had an impact on all areas of fundraising, with personal incomes and endowment portfolios significantly impacted by the pandemic,’ she says.

Poor returns from investments hit charities and other institutional investors hard. While some trusts and foundations paused their giving entirely until their portfolios stabilised, others redirected funds to health and welfare causes on the pandemic frontline. ‘This has meant the pool of prospective funders for scholarships, bursaries and inclusion programmes has been drastically reduced,’ says Preece.

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INVESTMENT

‘GRADUATES HAVE LOST OPPORTUNITIES VITAL FOR EARLY CAREER DEVELOPMENT’

Drama schools reported mixed results in filling holes in their funding. At Birkbeck, part of the University of London, they continued to work with their community of alumni, philanthropists, corporate partners and foundations to ensure students were supported throughout the national lockdowns.

The income raised has been essential to helping all students in need across the college, including those in the MFA in Theatre Directing, to ensure the negative impacts of the pandemic are lessened. Although no drama school reduced the number of scholarships awarded, they reported that the pandemic had highlighted that the pool of theatre, film and TV producers investing in drama school diversity programmes needs to be bigger. ‘Producers can’t just expect us to meet their demand for more diverse talent,’ one school director says. ‘They need more than ever to put their money where their mouth is, so we can support more students from more inclusive backgrounds to enter the profession.’

All respondents had implemented programmes to support 2020 alumni, including masterclasses in entrepreneurial skills, job leads and coaching, but they expressed concern that future uncertainty meant graduates had lost opportunities vital for early career development.

‘Recent and current graduates are being disproportionately affected by Covid-19 as they have shorter CVs than more established directors,’ says Birkbeck’s Professor Rob Swain of graduates from the MFA in Theatre Directing. Swain cites two people of colour, recent graduates who lost significant directing opportunities – one with a major production of *The Glass Menagerie* and the other a UK tour and Australian production of *Ghost Stories*.

‘Both of these were opportunities at important stages in their development and progression – unfortunately due to Covid-19, these productions seem unlikely to happen now,’ says Prof Swain. Ben Leventhall, access and schools/colleges liaison manager at The Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, echoes the view that new graduates are suffering a double blow from lockdown. ‘The impact on our graduates has been difficult across the board, particularly for more recent graduates – who may also have been more likely to be ineligible for any government support schemes,’ he says.

The costs associated with accessing courses online have acted as a barrier, according to Dr Jennie Henley, director of programmes at the Royal

Northern College of Music. ‘As an institution we are collecting information to see how many of our students are relying on phone data to access course content, because that is a considerable cost,’ she says.

Those whose backgrounds intersect a number of under-represented groups have been worst hit. A shortage of personal assistants, who support disabled people living independently, meant online modules were inaccessible to those who need support at home. Among inclusion programmes to suffer was a course in theatre-making and leadership delivered by Rose Bruford College in partnership with the Graeae Theatre Company. Aimed at young deaf and disabled students, it had to be cancelled.

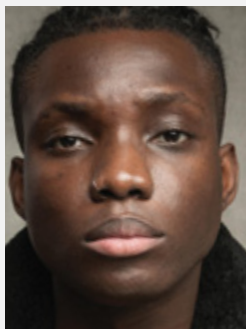
The uneven distribution of technology and affordable access was highlighted by a drop in attendance when Mountview placed all its Generation N*xt courses, for young people aged six-24, online free of charge. Preece believes the drop may have been down to technological availability as well as privacy concerns.

Despite this gap, drama schools agreed that the move online had extended their reach into a wider community of talent, which went some way to make up for the cancellation of UCAS fairs, which have previously acted as a platform to access hard-to-reach communities. ‘Auditioning on Zoom has had a democratising effect. You can audition from anywhere in the world,’ explains Anna Lyttle, trusts and foundations manager at LAMDA. ‘It enables us to cast our net far wider.’

OUTREACH ON HOLD

Centre Stage 2016 highlighted the need for improved outreach into state schools to attract more people of colour into theatre. Over the past four years, outreach has flourished, which makes the fallout from school closures noted by higher education institutions particularly disturbing. Across the board, partnerships with secondary schools have been cut. ‘Sadly, all connection with schools in the immediate future has stopped and we are currently not planning to tour as we would normally,’ says Paul Clarkson, head of acting courses at Bristol Old Vic.

The significance of this change is spelled out by Bristol Old Vic’s own statistics. Usually, its students play to 12,000 Key Stage 1 pupils over 36 venues and it was planning to grow its outreach work. That is now on hold. Particular concern was expressed by drama schools about



‘Mental health’s a priority’

After receiving the ALWF scholarship in 2011, **Emmanuel Kojo** graduated from ArtsEd in 2014. His roles in *Oklahoma!* and *Show Boat* have seen him nominated twice for Best Supporting Performance at the UK Theatre Awards.

‘The scholarship changed my life. My mum was working as a cleaner and the drama

school fees were more than she was earning. Without the scholarship I wouldn’t have been able to attend; it’s allowed me to study and build a career. The most important thing I got from lockdown is that looking after myself physically and mentally is my number one priority. I’ve seen how the pandemic has devastated people’s mental health. We need to create a society within the arts where it’s okay not to be okay and where people know they are not alone and can reach out.’

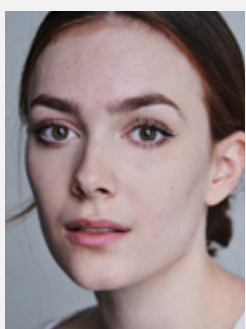


‘Don’t get disheartened’

Nimshi Kongolo received the ALWF scholarship in 2017 and graduated from Bristol Old Vic Theatre School in 2020. Last year, he was awarded the Spotlight Screen Prize, following in the footsteps of Jodie Whittaker, Jim Broadbent and Judi Dench.

‘The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that I’ve had to pass up on some really exciting

opportunities, but like most people I have done my best to get on with things. It has provided me with the space to realise how, when similar opportunities come knocking again, I will be able to truly relish them. I am optimistic about positive change regarding diversity, but it’s a steep mountain to climb. My hope is that young people don’t become too disheartened on their journeys because the more people who actually make the journey, the more chance of a fairer and balanced industry.’



‘The work starts now’

A recipient of the ALWF scholarship in 2015, **Lydia White** graduated from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in 2018. Last year, she stepped in at the last minute to play Cathy in *The Last Five Years* at the Southwark Playhouse – only for the production to be postponed as the UK went into lockdown.

‘Like everyone else, I have found the pandemic extremely hard. In March 2020,

it felt as if everything I had worked for had just gone – my acting work and my teaching business. But as the year went on, I was able to perform in *The Last Five Years* again and transition my teaching online. Most of the time, the arts is a beautifully accepting community. However, we cannot hide behind a facade of liberalism when there are unfair processes happening in front of our eyes. The work starts with challenging our own beliefs and championing equality – only then can a solid future begin to be formed.’

the revamped curriculum during lockdown. ‘It has been much trickier to engage with schools as they were already juggling significant changes,’ says Lyttle.

Pupils have been overwhelmed by online content and that has weakened the ability of online outreach initiatives to match the depth of connection created by a real-life presence in primary and secondary schools. ‘School closures made it harder to reach pupils for continued wider inclusion initiatives, such as targeted summer school programmes,’ says Leventhall. ArtsEd principal Chris Hocking is even more

forthright. ‘There has been no dance or drama training or performing arts in state schools this year and that is going to come back and bite us,’ he says.

Despite the severe financial pressures created by the pandemic, those drama schools who responded to the survey recognise this hiatus as an opportunity to rethink their programmes, their post-graduate support and their engagement with 21st-century students for whom technology is central to their lives. As Hocking says: ‘Lockdown is not an excuse to ease up on diversity.’ ■

SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

Tony-award winning Cynthia Erivo, star of *Aretha* and *Harriet*, talks to Genevieve Fox about RADA, speaking out and broadening the curriculum



'IF WE KEEP SEEING THE SAME STORY, WE BEGIN TO BELIEVE IT'S THE ONLY STORY THAT CAN EXIST'

What was your route into drama school?

Drama school is not really something you hear about when you are living in south-west London and aren't a well-to-do family, but I did different youth programmes, one with the Young Vic, run by Rae Mcken, who happened to be a Black woman with a passion for Shakespeare.

Rae was the one who told me to go to drama school; she took me to auditions and got me through the audition process.

I don't think many drama schools considered racial or economic diversity when they were first set up, which was reflected in both admissions and curriculum. Due to a lack of understanding of people who came from different backgrounds, Black and Brown students often ended up playing characters that fit into stereotypical tropes, rather than characters that suited their strengths as actors.

I was lucky enough to be put with an incredible teacher, the coach Dee Cannon, now passed, who really helped me find out what I needed in order to do my best work. I was falling into playing the strong Black woman trope, and she went against the grain and said: that's not what you are meant to do, vulnerability is going to be your key into playing these characters. She was more right than I could ever have imagined. This is the thing I still rely on today, really and truly: finding out what makes a character vulnerable and what this character wants.

PHOTO: TERRELL MULLIN

What is the significance of RADA decolonising its curriculum?

Broadening the syllabus is great – the more difference in it, the better. The language of Shakespeare is very important, but we must expand the idea of 'the classics' to include writers like the American playwright August Wilson. If we keep seeing the same story, we begin to believe it's the only story. If people like *Aretha* [Franklin] and *Harriet* [Tubman] don't continue to have stories written about them and movies created about them, younger generations may never know their names.

Last year I did a piece called *The Outsider* [Richard Price and HBO's adaption of the Stephen King novel] and played a character named Holly. Holly is a young Black woman who has Asperger's. We rarely see Black women on the spectrum, but it's important to show these stories – to represent the countless women who identify with these characters and ensure that the world knows they exist. There's a hunger for these types of characters.

RADA has reduced its audition fees. Is that a step in the right direction?

A reduction in audition fees means there is more access for those who otherwise wouldn't have a look-in. That's a huge move in the right direction. If you don't have the money to pay your fees, or support at home, you have to double up on work. It's hard to concentrate. When studying at RADA you're so busy with your coursework that it's difficult to take on a paying job, and it's not encouraged.

When I was a student, I worked on Saturday and Sunday nights and went to RADA Monday through Friday – I was exhausted by the time Monday came round again.

What can be done to improve inclusivity in the industry?

Change needs to start with executives and producers making a conscious decision to start casting and telling stories differently. I'm in a particularly lucky place where I've just started a production company, called Edith's Daughter, so we've made this a priority. I always try to look for a new angle; to shine a light on those stories that haven't been told much before. I'm asking: what if this love interest was a woman? What if this love interest were differently abled? Are we getting a Black director?

I also make an effort to have Black team members and include them in my projects.

People in my position, and those who are further along in their careers, have responsibilities to start making different choices now – because we can.

What advice do you have for aspiring actors?

Be yourself. Come into the room and don't apologise for being yourself. When you're unafraid to be seen, you're unafraid to be taken notice of.

It's something I noticed a long time ago. When I was finally too tired to be anything but myself, it unlocked something for me. I got the part.

My second piece of advice is to remember that your peers can be your greatest assets. I had this really cool friend at RADA called Michael Peavoy and we would sneak off to a rehearsal room and sing. We then started working together to put on cabarets. Ultimately, one of those cabarets ended up getting me an agent. What I was getting from RADA wasn't serving me in the way I needed and Michael helped me find something that could creatively. We are often led to believe that our peers are our competition, but they are our partners in this business and sometimes our biggest champions.

You have said that Aretha Franklin was unafraid to speak truth to power. How does that resonate with you?

I'm terrible at lying – and very bad at hiding what I feel. When something happens and it doesn't feel right, I can't help but speak on it. It's important to speak your mind and utilise your individual power to continue growing professionally and personally. That is the thing that has helped to propel me in my career. I am unafraid to have those difficult conversations and ask for what I want and deserve. ■

'DIVERSITY IS LIFE'



Hamilton's award-winning Giles Terera tells Genevieve Fox why theatre needs to reflect our multicultural society

PHOTO: MATTHEW MURPHY

When Giles Terera received the Olivier Award for Best Actor in a Musical in 2018 – for his performance as politician Aaron Burr in *Hamilton* – his acceptance speech didn't pull any punches. 'It's been the joy of my life to be part of the most diverse company I've ever seen,' he told the audience at the Royal Albert Hall. 'Diversity is not a policy: it's life.'

Three years on, Terera is no less fervent in his belief that the arts should reflect society and appeal to more diverse audiences. 'You are not changing anything unless you really reach out to people who might not necessarily go to the theatre,' he says. 'That's the power of something like *Hamilton* – getting people into the theatre who've never been there before. Seeing themselves up on the stage. Hearing their music up on the stage. That's how we are going to reach diverse communities.'

Terera says it is vital that theatre is a welcoming environment for audiences, actors and administrators alike. It's an approach, he suggests, that should start at drama schools. Having trained at Mountview, he admires how his former school is reaching out to young people from marginalised communities – something he will be able to champion in his new role as its deputy chair.

'Mountview will actively go into schools and try to get young people interested in the theatre,' he says. 'Drama schools and institutions have a responsibility to de-mystify the industry. If you are a young person of colour wanting to get into different areas of theatre, you have to be made welcome. Otherwise you assume it's not for you.'

The closure of theatres has been a catastrophic consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, but Terera sees the crisis as an opportunity to affect real change in terms of audience diversity and inclusion.

'I know lots of young people who would walk through the West End and not even see the theatres. Those places are invisible to them,' he says. 'The pandemic is a real opportunity for us to ask: "Who are our audiences and how do we bring them in?" Theatre needs to change and adapt in these most difficult of times. There's a massive appetite for great theatre out there – you just need to put something on that speaks to people.' ■

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Danuta Kean reveals how leadership and a **top-down approach** are key to improving the diversity of drama schools

One thing is clear from the research undertaken by Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation: diversity in drama schools starts with senior management. Organisations that have implemented change at the top are now also those with the most students from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background. Visionary management understands that diversity is not just a goodwill gesture towards inclusion, but future-proofs the performing arts for the 21st century.

‘Diverse students need a diverse structure – they need to feel safe and welcomed, they need to have someone to talk to about racism and they need to be recognised in the culture of what is being taught,’ says Steven Kavuma, who with fellow drama students founded the Diversity School Initiative (DSI) in 2017.

DSI aims to break down barriers to people of colour highlighted by the *Centre Stage 2016* report by campaigning for better representation of people of colour throughout every layer of drama schools. ‘It is clear there has been a shift in the diversity of student intake over the past four years and this is great to see,’ says Kavuma. But, he notes, the sector has been slower to adapt curriculum or appoint more teachers of colour to cater for the increased diversity of student intake. DSI has partnered with six drama schools – ArtsEd, The Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA), Bristol Old Vic, Guildhall, Mountview and LAMDA – to instigate organisational change at every level. ‘The six schools are recognised centres of excellence,’ says Kavuma, ‘and once they make positive changes and the benefits are seen, I believe others will follow.’

Dr Jennie Henley, director of programmes at the Royal Northern College of Music, together with director of development Suzie Thompson, is overseeing a raft of measures including professional training in unconscious bias and dignity at work, and a revision of its recruitment



processes. ‘We want our students to go out and be leaders in what they are doing,’ says Henley. ‘We want them to be agents of change.’

ArtsEd, meanwhile, is actively seeking out staff from broader backgrounds to sustain change within the student body. Principal Chris Hocking has overseen a 16% change in the diversity of intake since 2016, which means 37% of the 2019/20 cohort was not from the white middle classes, which have traditionally dominated drama schools. Hocking wants academic and administrative appointees who reflect the changing student profile. ‘People see they are represented throughout the senior staff as well as the junior staff and it makes a difference to their wanting to apply here and feeling welcome,’ he says.

Hocking is strongly critical of schools that claim sourcing teachers from the BAME community is difficult and points to a raft of senior appointments at ArtsEd, including Kavuma as foundation acting course leader. ‘You have to go out and find people,’ he says. Kavuma was approached directly by Hocking. ‘He hadn’t thought about teaching and I asked whether he would like to do it.’

At Bristol Old Vic, where graduates of colour rose from 17% in 2015 to 32% in 2019, appointments of people of colour across teaching staff, including writers, dialect coaches and directors,

‘DIVERSE STUDENTS NEED A DIVERSE STRUCTURE’

STEVEN KAVUMA
DIVERSITY SCHOOL INITIATIVE

ABOVE: STUDENTS AT LAMDA



was also increased. However, head of acting courses Paul Clarkson admits that the full-time staff remains exclusively white, an issue the school is addressing as a matter of urgency.

REACHING OUT

Every school surveyed reported an increase in the number of people of colour attending their courses, reflecting the widespread adoption of three key recommendations made in *Centre Stage 2016*: fee waivers for applicants from the poorest backgrounds; regional auditions to reduce attendance costs; and greater investment in partnerships with state schools to challenge preconceptions about inclusivity in the theatre.

In recent years, a number of initiatives have been launched to ensure that drama schools are attracting students from the widest possible community. In 2014, Mountview developed a scouting outreach network with 44 grassroots drama trainers across the UK – including the Octagon Theatre Bolton and Theatre Peckham – to work with young people from marginalised communities. It has also launched partnerships with eight local schools. The number of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students on Mountview’s BA in Musical Theatre has now increased from nine students (8%) in 2016 to 45 students (26%) in 2019.

ABOVE: STUDENTS AT LAMDA
PHOTO: SAM TAYLOR

At LAMDA, the arrival of new principal Sarah Frankcom in 2019 has led to an overhaul of the audition process to make it ‘inclusive, welcoming and fair,’ says Frankcom. ‘The school has removed parts of the process which placed some applicants at a disadvantage, trained up a new cadre of audition panel staff, offered hundreds of free audition places and reduced the UK first-round fee for those who do pay by 75%.’

In 2014, The Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts set up a primary school on the edge of Toxteth. It uses the pupil premium paid by the government to support children from low-income backgrounds with one-to-one tutoring and performing arts clubs. ‘We are breaking down barriers to the arts,’ says headteacher Greg Parker. ‘Our children have been to the theatre, they have links with big LIPA [the main college] and they feel part of it, which is really important.’

Few drama schools have the resources to set up a state school, which is why partnerships have been so important and why school closures as a result of Covid-19 have been so damaging. However, at present, only 43% of the drama schools surveyed offer talent acceleration programmes and bursaries for holiday courses or one-to-one skills lessons. Inclusion is also about the number of roles it affords actors of colour. Decolonising the curriculum – a process of expanding what is taught to include texts that depict a greater variety of cultural backgrounds and experience – is crucial if drama school courses are to be both inclusive and reflective of society.

Mountview’s overhaul of its curriculum has led to formative singing assessments involving rap or other styles and features work by a broader spectrum of writers, such as Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, August Wilson and Bola Agbaje. Received pronunciation has been dropped as the basis for voice coaching. ‘This is the single most ground-breaking and important change for the sector in its history in terms of inclusivity,’ says the school.

Strides are clearly being taken towards establishing best practice in UK drama schools. However, to sustain change, diversity must be embedded in each organisation, from trustees and teachers to inclusive curriculum and student welfare practices to auditions and outreach. ‘We recognise that this is difficult for organisations because it involves talking about race and whiteness and change,’ says Kavuma, ‘but these are the conversations that need to take place for the shift to be permanent.’ ■

SPOTLIGHT



‘We must double down to ensure that this good work is built on’

Madani Younis, formerly Artistic Director of the Bush Theatre and Creative Director of the Southbank Centre, is Chief Executive Producer of the Shed in New York.

‘As our country comes out of a pandemic and we explore questions of cultural identity, it is super-important that this national narrative includes all those who make up the UK. This is the most urgent issue for our times.

‘A lot of good work has taken place over the last two decades, but we are not at the promised land where there is equity, or representation across class, gender and race. This report merely signals to us that yes, there are things we have done, but how do we double down on ensuring that this good work is built on and that we do not regress?’

‘For artistic directors and chief execs, the most important question anyone can ask is: what is the version of the world you want to live in, and create, and what does that involve? Co-creation here is key. We need to build on the idea of the cultural education of our communities, in collaboration with our communities. The old idea that culture is some sort of missionary work, or that people give culture to communities, is long dead and should be buried.

‘The reason our sector is so mono-cultural is that it has been held hostage by the middle classes. The leaders of our institutions have been allowed to exist unquestioned by the communities they serve. We cannot be silent about that.’



‘Be careful who we present as the beautiful, the strong, the good, the bad’

Gloria Onitiri has appeared in West End productions of *The Bodyguard*, *The Lion King* and *Avenue Q*. She will next be seen as the Godmother in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Cinderella*.

‘I don’t like the term “colour blind” casting. I think “colour mindfulness” is better. Unfortunately, a person’s skin colour tends to come with a whole host of experiences. To be “blind” to that suggests you are not seeing all of who they are, rather than embracing who they are. We should be mindful of that.

‘I don’t think I’m unique in thinking and hoping that the actor who best conveys a role, who makes you understand, recognise and feel the character, should get the part. There are always exceptions when it comes to historical content and culture-specific content. But everyone should be considered. That’s a much more exciting palette to paint from, surely.

‘I don’t think about my work in terms of progress, diversity and inclusion. But we should be careful about content for younger audiences – who we present as the beautiful, the strong, the good, the bad. I like the idea of the Godmother being a fabulous, dark-skinned woman who makes dreams come true.

‘If drama schools expanded their programmes to include more scholarships and bursaries, it would create less division and more space for students from all sorts of backgrounds. Also, it opens up the study of the performing arts to so many more potentially gifted students – people who may not have even seen the arts as an opportunity due to the expense involved.’

Thank you to the following contributors without whom this publication would not have been possible

Andrew Lloyd Webber and the Trustees of Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Idris Elba, Cynthia Erivo, David Grindrod, Giles Terera, Gloria Onitiri, Ahmet Ahmet of www.getintotheatre.org, Steven Kavuma, Diversity School Initiative, Madani Younis, ArtsEd, Birkbeck (University of London), Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, Guildford School

of Acting (University of Surrey), Laine Theatre Arts, LAMDA, The Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, The Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts Primary School, Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts, Rose Bruford College, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Royal Northern College of Music, Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, Sylvia Young Theatre School

Methodology

The research involved:

- Twenty-six qualitative and quantitative email surveys and telephone interviews with management and leaders from 15 performing arts schools
- Eight in-depth interviews with performing arts school leaders, industry professionals and educational development directors
- Twelve follow-up interviews with theatre professionals, drama students and actors

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This report is published in conjunction with FirstWord Media

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PHOTO: ROBIN SAVAGE



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**‘IT’S THE
RESPONSIBILITY
OF PEOPLE WHO
WANT CHANGE TO
FORCE CHANGE’**

IDRIS ELBA



PICTURED: ARTSED
PHOTO: ROBIN SAVAGE

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Registered Charity Number:1015468
Registered Office: Sydmonton House,
Burghclere, Newbury, Berkshire RG20 9NJ

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