



Nicholas Barter
Principal
Royal Academy of Dramatic Art

Data

RADA

The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, established in 1904, is one of the most distinguished drama schools in Britain. Select students receive a broad range of training for three years in areas such as classical theatre, radio, television and advertisement. RADA has produced outstanding actors like Sir John Gielgud and Juliet Stephenson. Since Nicholas Barter became the principal, RADA has been regularly associated with Japan, conducting workshops in Japan and producing modern plays such as *Fuyuhiko* by Nozomi Makino and so on. Mr. Barter has also helped in the setting up of Performing Arts Japan and is planning to put up another modern play soon. He also hopes to start running workshops for Japanese actors at RADA again from 2007.



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Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー

This interview explores the actor education system at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, an institution with a 100-year history

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100年の歴史をもつ王立演劇アカデミーの俳優養成システムとは？

The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, which is located on Gower Street in the academic Bloomsbury area of London, was established at His Majesty's Theatre in the West End in 1904 by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the actor manager who became known for productions of Shakespeare's plays. The following year, the school moved to its current address and for over 100 years since it has helped to produce famous classically trained actors, such as Sir John Gielgud and Kenneth Branagh, as well as technical staff for the theatre. When Nicholas Barter became principal in 1993, RADA started a unique collaboration by accepting Japanese students with, running workshops in Japan and asking Japanese directors to direct modern Japanese plays with their students. We talked with Mr. Barter about today's theater education in Great Britain and more. (Interviewer: Shinko Suga)

First of all, can you tell us how actors are trained in Britain? As you know, in many countries actors are trained by different theatre companies and not by a drama school. Where do the British actors get training and develop their career?

In Great Britain, there are numbers of drama schools, which are specialized places for training actors, also for stage technicians, for directors and for designers. There are 22 schools that belong to an organisation called the Conference of Drama Schools and every school sets high standards for all its members. Of course, there are a lot more small schools outside this conference, but these 22 schools are generally recognised nationally as being good places to train. Most of them have a three-year course. Over the last ten years, many of them have moved from further education to higher education, so they have some link with universities, but basically the training remains vocational. It's not an academic course.

In 2001, we created the very first Conservatoire for Dance and Drama, which has never existed before. There have been such programs for art and design, and for music, but never for dance and drama. There are three drama schools, four dance schools and one circus training school in this Conservatoire. The students receive funding from the Higher Education Funding Council.

Now in Britain, most actors who train in a drama school are able to work with other actors who trained in other drama schools, because they receive the same kind of training.

Can you tell us about the courses at RADA?

We have a three-year degree in acting, a two-year diploma in so-called technical theatre arts, which is basic stage management. Then we have five shorter courses, one year and one term, in prop making, in wardrobe and costume, in set construction which is wood and metal work, in scene painting and also in lighting design and stage electrics. We also have a one-year course in directing and a two-

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year course in theatre design. These are quite small courses, only two or three people on each course.

RADA does not have a script-writing course. In Britain where do they train a scriptwriter?

There is no standard way, but some playwrights come out of university drama departments. It is interesting to tell you that we also have an MA course, which we teach with Kings College London, London University, where we have been teaching for thirteen years. This MA course also has a script-writing element in it. Also, in our contemporary text class we encourage students to write. We are actually developing some new plays in the school, although we do not actually have a script-writing course.

Roughly, how many students do you take for RADA every year?

We take about 160 new students every year. Last year we auditioned 2,300 people for 32 places and took 16 women and 16 men for the acting course. It's a four-stage process which takes us from November until June every year to choose the students. They are a very wide mixture, anywhere from eighteen to thirty years old and we choose them through a system of two stages of audition. In the first stage they do a Shakespeare and modern speech and receive a short interview. They are seen by two people, an actor and a director or actor and teacher. The second stage is a recall where they do again a Shakespeare and a modern speech and sing a short song unaccompanied, and they have a longer interview. They are seen by four people, one of whom is either myself as principal or our dean of studies. In the third stage they come as a group of eighteen and they break into three groups of six. They spend one hour doing Shakespeare, one hour doing Chekhov and one hour working on an audition speech. So they are seen in a workshop situation, in a small group of six people. In the fourth stage, that is the last stage, they come in groups of sixteen, they spend a whole day at RADA. They do a movement class, voice class, scene-study class, improvisation class, they work again on a different audition speech and at the end of the day we are all together, both students and staff. We watch the speeches and then we make our selection from that.

How do you train actors at RADA?

In the first year they do mainly class work. And each student has their own voice teacher they stay with for the three years of training. They do speech, dialect accents, they learn to speak Standard English as well as their own regional speech, they do Alexander technique, stage movement, stage fighting, and both unarmed and armed combat. They do singing, with their individual teacher, one to one singing lessons for three years. They do choral singing as well and then these individual courses are supplemented by acting classes, in the Stanislavski system. As the course develops they begin to do a project. They do a realist project at the end of term two. In term three, they do a dance project and Shakespeare project. In term four they do two text projects, usually a poetic text, presented internally. In term five, they do a Jacobean project, and they also do stage fighting and practice for working for television and radio. In term six they continue the radio training and do a Restoration period play for an internal project. At the end of term six, the end of the second year, they do their first presentation for a public audience, quite often a young people's play to a young audience.

Then in the third year they move into a different regime, whereby they do two productions each term directed by a fully professional director from outside the

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school and designed by a professional designer from outside the school. So, they will do two plays in the autumn term, two plays in the spring term, and in the summer term they do first of all an agents presentation where they do a two-minute speech or four-minutes scene to an invited audience of theatrical agents, casting directors, regional theatre directors, anybody who can give them employment or help to get them employed, and then, they do a final production on stage before graduation. This is the basic curriculum.

Are the students mostly British?

In the acting course, we do have foreign students but most are British. Normally, we have two students each year from abroad. They are usually from an English-speaking country like America, Canada, or Australia. On the technical course we can be a little bit more generous, because it's not so important for them to have perfect English. So, we have trained Japanese stage managers, a Japanese prop maker, we have had students from Norway, Holland, Switzerland, France, Germany, and South Korea. The stage management course is a much more international course.

How often do the students get a job immediately after the graduation?

Eighty-five percent of our students will be in work within three months of graduation. We would expect them to be working soon professionally but it's not like the Japanese system where you join a company. It's a freelance world, so they might be doing one television, one radio, one stage play, and one film.... That's why an agent is so helpful, because they are moving from job to job. According to the recent survey we have done, 75 percent of our actors are still working regularly after five years. So, we hope most will be continuing as professionals.

How do you finance RADA?

Well, it has been a very difficult, with very varied ways of financing the school over the first hundred years since it was established in 1904. But now, since we created the Conservatoire, all students receive a grant from the Higher Education Funding Council for England, so they are funded exactly like any other university student. Above that, RADA, as an independent organisation, has to raise its own money .We do not get a block grant from the government, we only get money for each student. We run a number of short courses like RADA in Tokyo, in Japan, and also we run two courses with New York University. Every year they send 32 students to us for classes in Shakespeare. We run an eight-week course of our own in the summer. We have a 160 people from 23 different countries for the short courses like Shakespeare or a contemporary-drama.

We have a relative organisation called RADA Enterprises, which runs courses for young people; we have RADA youth theatre in the Camden area of London. We do cabaret on the Queen Mary II on their cruises. Also in collaboration with local organisations all over England, we give them a weekend taste for drama training. RADA Enterprises also works in the business community, working with business leaders, with big corporations and particularly with local authorities, in training their staff by using acting skills, presentation, speech skills, developing their confidence, helping them to do presentations. There is a whole portfolio of different courses we run under the banner of RADA Enterprises, which make money to pay back to school.

Can you say something about the graduation production? Who chooses the script

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and directs it?

We do not have just one graduation production, the whole of the third year really is for a graduation production. We have three theatres and all are licensed for public performance. I choose the plays, directors and cast the plays, so principally I am the artistic director for the third year. The agent presentations, which we call "The Tree" after our founder, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, are agent showcases that RADA started. We were the first school to do them. I think it is the best way for most of our students to pick up an agent.

As a drama school, what is unique about RADA's education?

It is very hard to put your finger on what's unique about RADA. There is, no doubt, rather classical training rooted more in Shakespeare, Jacobean, Restoration, in text, in Alexander technique. These things have been taught in RADA right from the beginning. The small groups in which we teach students are very, very important to us. For example, Alexander lessons, singing lessons, many voice lessons are one to one, and even the largest group lessons are quite small groups of up to ten students. So there is very personal tutoring of every student. Every student has a personal tutor, including myself and the dean of study, as well as professional tutors such as actors and directors from outside of school. So there is already a very strong professional connection with the theatre profession at RADA. We do work on contemporary theatre but I think the root in the classical tradition helps numbers of actors to get employed by the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and by the National Theatre. I think that is clearly something special to RADA.

Can you explain about the Alexander technique? Why is it important for actors?

FM Alexander, who founded this technique, was an actor himself. He lost his voice while he was acting, particularly when he was doing one-man shows. So he started to experiment using mirrors to look at the head/neck relationship and how that affected his whole posture, how he sat, stood and walked. What happens when he became nervous as an actor? What happens when he projected his voice? So it is a technique for freeing habitual tension in the body. Our founder, Mr. Tree, took lessons from Alexander himself. Now it's been basic at RADA for very long time and a very important part of the training.

Can you tell us a little about yourself? Before you became the principal of RADA, what did you do? What was your initial interest in theatre?

Immediately before I became the principal, I was the deputy principal for five years. I started directing as guest director at RADA in 1971, so I have quite a long association with the school. I am a theatre director and from 1963 until 1988 I directed things from commercial theatre in the West End to fringe experimental work. I ran a regional theatre called Theatre Royal Lincoln and I worked for the Royal Shakespeare Theatre running their theatre-go-round unit, which toured around Great Britain. I then worked for the Ipswich Art Theatre in the east of England, and for ten years I was the artistic director of the Unicorn Theatre for children, which is the biggest in London. I always had particular interest in work for young people, and also strong interest in training.

In the 80s, Mrs. Thatcher announced that the number of actors in Britain was far too large and she tried to reduce the number of actors here. Has the number of actors actually reduced since then?

I do not think so. The work for the media and television is still there but the difficulty

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is the amount of work. Particularly in the theatre, the amount has decreased, because for many years the funding for our regional theatres fell behind the rate of inflation. So it was not so easy for the regional theatre network to employ actors for two to three months, or even longer. In the past, there used to be a chance for actors to grow and develop by working there. Now that does not exist so much. On the other hand, there has been a growth of fringe theatre, particularly in London. There are opportunities for actors to work in pub theatres or some of these old buildings that have become new theatres, like the Southwark Playhouse. These theatres have given actors a chance to work, but they are very badly paid. So in terms of profession, they are really semi-professional, although the standards of work are often high.

We are now in the era of the Internet, which now takes up a lot of people's time. There are some concerns that younger people are not coming to the theatre. How do you regard the role of theatre now?

What we are doing with our actors really is to say that you need these skills, such as voiceovers, Shakespeare dramas etc. We prepare them for the industry that exists. We give them skills but they have to go out and re-make the theatre. They have to find their own generation of audience. In the 1960s, my generation tried to find new audience. We had a passion to encourage a different kind of people to come into the theatre. Now they have to find the tastes of the young audience and find how to keep the theatre alive. We try to make students aware of what's outside the theatre. That's what interests the audience. How does the theatre reflect the world outside and give some meaning for people's lives.

Could you tell us about RADA's connection with Japan?

RADA's connection with Japan is my connection with Japan, actually. In 1997 I began to host some of the early Bunka-cho (Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs) scholars, who came over for the first time while I was at the Unicorn theatre. Then, when I moved to RADA, many other people came over to study here with us. And, soon after I came to RADA, the director of Subaru came to study. He became interested in the idea of creating a workshop for Japanese professional actors in his training studio. So in 1993, the same year I became principal, I went over to run a workshop in Subaru in Japan. We have a link now with Furano-juku for regional workshops.

Which Japanese modern plays has RADA shown here?

Tomodachi by Abe Kobo and *Fuyuhiko* by Nozomi Makino. We invited Japanese director, Masaharu Yoshiiwa, to direct *Tomodachi* with RADA students here. *Fuyuhiko* was directed by Ganshi Murata as a part of the Japan Festival 2001. It is not easy, however, as the cultural context is different. They both know our work well and I spend a lot of time talking with them about the training work at RADA, so they were able to work with our actors very well. Also, they could explain to the students about the cultural context of these family dramas in Japan. The audience were very interested. Students find it is difficult to begin with, because they have to think in a different way. They have to try to get into the thinking mode of a Japanese person, where particularly family relationships are very different. Also, reflection in the father of *Fuyuhiko* is quite difficult for our actors, especially to have that calm inner centre. In the end, they were really fascinated and it was very good training.

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Can you tell me about the theatres at RADA and what your management policy is for them?

RADA has three theatres. There is the the Jerwood Vanbrugh Theatre, which is the largest and seats two hundred. Then we have the GBS Studio Theatre (80 seats) named after George Bernard Shaw, who was a great benefactor of RADA. Then we have a small theatre (60 seats) named after the distinguished Shakespearean actor John Gielgud, who was a RADA graduate.

The policy is that during the term time, the theatre is there not only for the acting students but also for the technical students. But, when we have space in the vacation we are open to hiring out the theatre. Motoya Izumi hired out a few years ago for his Kyogen production.

Have you got any other involvement with Japanese theatre planned in the near future?

We have seen traditional work but there are not enough contemporary Japanese plays seen here. I hope that soon we can do another contemporary Japanese play. Mike Bradwell of the Bush Theatre has had a play reading of one of Ai Nagai's plays. I got to know Mr. Tsuchida from "Mono" Theatre Company in Kyoto very well. He is a very interesting young writer. I saw one of his plays in Shimo-kitazawa. I have one or two ideas and also I am looking at a number of different contemporary plays. But, I do not want to say which ones yet.

From 1995 to 2000, we ran a four-week course for Japanese actors in London, but we had to suspend that course for five years because we were rebuilding the school and we did not have the space. I hope to start that again in 2007 when we have the new building.