

Building blocks for training

Jo Caird discovers that tackling risks is a skill as she goes backstage at the National Skills Academy for Creative and Cultural's new training centre.



Pauline Tambling
Photo: James Fletcher

The main space at the National Skills Academy for Creative and Cultural's new Backstage Training Centre in Purfleet is unpainted, has a rough concrete floor and is still full of building site detritus. But even in this unfinished state, it's an impressive space. Measuring 35 by 25 metres, with a technical grid bearing 100 tonnes at 15 metres, it's large enough to rehearse arena tours, operas and large-scale commercial musicals. The 16 to 19 year olds that will come here to take part in backstage training once the building is finished won't know what's hit them.

I'm being given a tour of the site by Pauline Tambling, Joint Chief Executive of Creative and Cultural Skills, the sector skills council for the creative and cultural industries. CC Skills set up the NSA in 2008 in response to a call by the industry for an employer-led network to address the issue of training. Tambling is the organisation's Managing Director. Also with us is NSA Operations Director Robin Auld, who has been part of the team leading the development of the

Backstage Training Centre from the very beginning. When the building opens to the public as a rehearsal and training space in September, Auld will manage it.

As we pick our way across piles of cables, duck under ladders and squeeze past heavy lifting equipment, the pair tell me about how the project came about.

When the Royal Opera House began looking for a new home for its scene-making studios after being given notice on its existing East London premises in the run-up to London 2012, the Arts Council realised that this represented a wonderful opportunity to create not just a new workshop for the ROH but a hub for the creative and cultural industries in an area undergoing significant regeneration. They settled on a 14-acre piece of derelict land in Purfleet, Essex, and an ambitious £60 million plan was set in motion.

High House Production Park – which so far includes the ROH’s Bob and Tamar Manoukian Production Workshop, a cafe, gardens and children’s playground, and will eventually also be home to artists’ studios and workshops for small businesses – is the UK’s first national centre of excellence for technical skills and production for the performing arts and live music industries. The NSA’s £13 million flagship building is a key piece of the puzzle.

Rigorous industry-based research published in 2008 by CC Skills found that by 2017 there will be a shortfall of 30,000 members of skilled backstage, offstage and technical staff in the sector. While performing arts and academic theatre courses are wildly oversubscribed, the backstage professions are finding it difficult to attract skilled staff because too few young people are aware of the opportunities in this area. The NSA aims to redress the balance.

The idea behind the Backstage Training Centre is to give young people studying these skills a taste of the backstage sector through access to professional rehearsal processes. “Whether that be theatre, opera, live music or any other large-scale live event,” Auld explains, “it’s about offering students something they can’t get in a college environment.”

The Backstage Training Centre will be open to students from any further education (FE) college, but the first young people to make use of the state of the art facilities are likely to be

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those enrolled at the NSA’s 20 FE college partners. These 16 to 19 year olds will be able to receive training on industry equipment and software and observe professional practice in action. As well as the main rehearsal space, the Backstage Training Centre contains adaptable multi-use

training rooms, a recording studio, a wet room, an AV suite, a dance studio, a theatre laundry and a stage door (complete with “grumpy” stage door person, Auld tells me with glee). Every aspect of backstage training will be covered.

Arguably those with most to gain from the centre will be the young women and men doing apprenticeships in the sector. While FE students can only watch rehearsals “from a safe environment”, apprentices will have the opportunity to work with professional technicians and other backstage staff, playing an active role in the rehearsal process and gaining valuable industry experience.

CC Skills only launched the Creative Apprenticeships scheme in 2008, but there are already over 1,100 young people taking part. Passionate about the system’s potential to “uncover the talent” of young people who, for whatever reason, do not go into higher education, Tambling is keen to expand the scheme further to offer high level creative apprenticeships. “Our aim,” she says, “is that you would be able to get into the industry by doing a wholly vocational course.”



A computer generated image of what the finished building will look like | Photo: Robin Auld



CC Skills Creative Apprenticeships scheme has been running since 2008 | Photo: James Fletcher

But it's not just young people at the start of their careers that the NSA is seeking to engage in terms of training. In order to ensure that the backstage and offstage sector can respond to changing technologies and adapt to developments in the wider creative and cultural industries, on-going professional development for those already in the industry is essential.

Auld and his team will therefore be offering a series of masterclasses open to professionals employed in the backstage sectors, as well as to students and apprentices. The masterclasses will be delivered by professionals working with the NSA's 230 member organisations and will cover the entire process of bringing in, fitting up, lighting, installing and running



Robin Auld
Photo: James Fletcher

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a big-scale production. “It’s encouraging the industry to take responsibility for ensuring training and skills are developed, with us guiding and promoting that and developing the product,” says Auld.

Training on managing risk will be an important aspect of what goes on at the centre. For many young people, the first step is addressing misconceptions about the sector. Tambling describes how when the NSA takes students from its founder colleges on ‘production day visits’ to allow them to observe backstage at live shows, they are often shocked by the “absolute order and discipline” of what goes on. “It’s getting that message out that when you talk about the creative sector, you’re not talking about [something] airy fairy,” she says.

Once that message has been received, the process of training people to assess and understand risk, from how to work safely at heights to how to look after yourself while touring, can begin. “It is absolutely mission critical to making our industry safe,” believes Auld.

The team will also offer “high level management training” as part of the masterclass series, as Auld explains: “the financial systems the sector works with are much more effective and efficient than they used to be. You have to train for that... How do you work with creative teams? How do you analyse a creative production and get the risks to the production clearly identified?” If the creative industries are to continue to grow, now that funding is tighter than ever, these are considerations that must be taken into account.



The turning the turf ceremony at the site in May 2011 | Photo: Robin Auld

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But what of the risks posed by the Backstage Training Centre itself? Auld acknowledges that the NSA is “going into territories unknown” with the venture, but is adamant that the organisation will be able to deliver on its promises in terms of what the centre will mean for the industry.

“Ultimately we’re building a building that is being asked for, so it’s not speculative. It’s come out of an industry need following rigorous research. We’ve got 230 industry members; they know us; we all know each other. That is offering a certain level of mitigation of the risk of doing a new endeavour like this”.

The centre will need to pay for itself, however. The Homes and Communities Agency, Thurrock Thames Gateway Development Corporation and the Skills Funding Agency have together put £13 million into the capital project, but once it is open, the building will be run as a business. As an Arts Council national portfolio organisation, the NSA

receives annual funding of £400,000, in addition to further funding from a number of partners; even so, Auld will still depend on income earned from hiring out the space and running training programmes to make the building work financially.

As yet there are no agreements in place, but Auld isn’t worried: he is in promising talks with plenty of major industry players, he says, and is confident that when people see what the centre has to offer, they’ll be champing at the bit to hire the space.

Flexibility is key to how the building will be run. The space, of course, is itself extremely flexible – “basically every venue type in Britain will be covered by what we offer here,” says Auld – but the team will also be responsive when it comes to meeting industry demand for both hires and training. “At the moment we’ve given ourselves enough slack to try lots of things out in year one and two... When you’ve got a space that’s operating you can develop all sorts of additional opportunities.”

Her ambition, ultimately, is that the NSA – with the Backstage Training Centre as its flagship enterprise – might play a decisive role in putting the UK at the forefront of delivery of training internationally.

“I think the sector, whether it’s events, theatre or music, is perceived as world class, but if we could also project that group of industries, companies and individuals as world class trainers as well, the potential we would have in a place like this – and with higher education partners – to be able to create a sort of platform for that world class training would be extraordinary.” ■

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