



Young people learn the backstage skills necessary for making it in theatre

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# Out of the limelight

**Jo Caird delves into the backstage world and learns how Creative and Cultural Skills is making a career in theatre more accessible to thousands**

**T**he surveys we've done are showing that there's a forecast gap of 6,000 jobs needed by 2017 in backstage areas,' says Catherine Large, deputy CEO at Creative and Cultural Skills (CC Skills), the body responsible for preparing young people for work in the creative industries. 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. Fortunately, there are a number of

organisations out there attempting to combat this shortage, offering everything from vocational training for young people entering further or higher education, to workshops, masterclasses and mentoring for schoolchildren thinking about the world of work for the first time.

### A first for backstage careers

The most recent development has been the launch of the first ever National College for the Creative and Cultural Industries. Run by CC Skills on behalf of leading creative industry employers such as the

Royal Opera House and Live Nation, it will deliver specialist technical skills training when it opens at High House Production Park in Thurrock, Kent in September 2016.

CC Skills are currently developing a curriculum 'which will be tied specifically into the needs of employers,' says Large, who has been leading the government-supported project. The college will offer Level 3 (for 16-18 year-olds) and Level 4 (aged 19+) Diplomas in Production Arts, with three areas within the industry forming the main focus of the vocational training. A technical and production strand will cover what we traditionally think of as backstage skills – everything from stage management to pyrotechnics. Audience participation will offer a route to jobs in arts education and community arts settings. And a third strand will prepare young people for roles in venue or facilities management. ▶

## Backstage training

### Stars: Disclosure to Leona Lewis

Crucial to the college's offer is that almost all learning will be project-based, says Large. Courses will take place at the Backstage Training Centre, a state-of-the-art facility large enough to rehearse arena tours, operas and large-scale commercial musicals. It's also used as a location for adverts and music videos and has welcomed a starry list of clients including Disclosure and Leona Lewis since opening its doors at High House Production Park in 2013.

Based alongside the centre on the 14-acre campus are the Royal Opera House's Bob and Tamar Manoukian Production Workshop, artists' studios and a new costume centre, making High House a thriving creative hub. And, located just a 35-minute train ride from central London, it's well positioned for the myriad entertainment businesses based in the capital and the south-east too.

Nearby South Essex College has been running its Production Arts courses at the Backstage Training Centre for the last few years – with students learning on the job from all manner of technical professionals – and Large is excited about opening up these world-class facilities to many more young people when the National College opens for business next year.

### A different approach

'There are lots and lots of jobs that we've identified as wanting to create training opportunities for,' Large says. 'We want our students to have a direct line of sight to work. So when they start with us on day one they'll have a conversation with an industry mentor about their career opportunities and pathways and then what we'll seek to do over the rest of that year is make sure that they've got all the skills and aptitude and characteristics that they need to meet that job requirement. So ours is a different approach to training and development to that of a school or college.'

'The new college will meet a very specific need,' says Large, 'allowing us to fill the gap where you might have an employer in rural Devon with a small business who is unable to take on an apprentice because they are too far away from their local college. What we're trying to design is an approach to that training delivery where the employer can take on the apprentice wherever they are, and that apprentice will then be supported by our network of industry-based assessors and mentors who will support that apprentice through their training.'

The college will offer Level 3 and 4 Diplomas in Production Arts

### Backstage Academy

CC Skills is following a similar model to the one that's been in operation at the Backstage Academy in Wakefield, Yorkshire since 2009. It offers foundation and BA degree courses in Stage Management, Visual Production and Events Production, with degrees validated by the University of Bolton (the National College's diplomas will be awarded by the University of the Arts London).

Like the Backstage Training Centre, the Backstage Academy's facilities enable students to develop and practise their skills on up-to-date equipment used daily by the entertainment industry, whether that be 3D projection systems or lighting rigs. Short courses are also available at the Backstage Academy, in areas including rigging, pyrotechnics and first aid for live events – Large is planning to offer something similar at the National College. 'The full-time courses will all be modular so we can absolutely break those down and offer them in the summer. People just need to come and talk to us about what their needs and interests are,' she explains, adding that CC Skills are hoping to build residential accommodation at the High House Production Park to make it easier for young people from around the country to take advantage of the short-term training opportunities on offer.

### NT Learning

There are plenty of other less formal and shorter-term routes into the backstage sector available to young people these days too. NT Learning, based at the National Theatre in London, runs a programme of masterclasses, short courses and design challenges open to 16-21 year-olds across the country. Technical theatre masterclasses for BTech students, for example, include Lighting Design with Olivier Award-

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winning lighting designer Paule Constable on the set of the Damon Albarn musical *wonder.land* in the Olivier Theatre (February 2016).

Young people can also learn the basics of makeup for performance, quiz stage managers on the skills needed for the role, and choreograph fight scenes with industry experts – just some of the short courses on offer this year. And for those that truly get the backstage bug, the NT runs its own apprenticeships and trainee programme, putting young people on course for a career in prop making, lighting, costume, and more.

NT Learning also seeks to inspire younger students to think about careers in the backstage sector. Teachers can access specially created digital content focusing on technical and production skills and take advantage of Make Theatre Days at the theatre for primary school groups. Children can study puppetry skills or design skills and gain insights into the backstage world more generally with a backstage tour.

### TheatreCraft

Sometimes just a conversation with an expert in a field can be enough to set a young person on track towards a fulfilling career in the backstage sector – which is where industry events like TheatreCraft come in. Last year, 1,200 16 to 25-year-olds attended the event at the Royal Opera House, and even more are expected to come along to the 2015 iteration, which takes place on 20 November.

'I would say the biggest challenge facing young people wanting a career in backstage theatre is lack of exposure for the huge diversity of careers available,' says Harriet Usher, Project Manager at TheatreCraft. 'Being an actor is the route through which most people discover the theatre, often through school or youth plays, but TheatreCraft gives you the chance to discover that you may actually be a puppet-maker, writer, lighting designer or stage manager – and how to go about making a career for yourself.'

The event is free and gives young people access to over 50 exhibiting theatres, organisations and education providers via an all-day 'marketplace', plus up to 70 workshops. TheatreCraft's focus is on careers beyond the stage more generally, so subjects include Producing, Directing and Writing alongside the more technical disciplines of Stage Management, Lighting and Sound. In attendance will be dozens of experts

## Backstage training



taking part in dedicated 15-minute careers advice sessions, and young people can also drop into networking hubs to develop networking skills and meet peers of the future.

Twenty-five-year-old theatremaker Jennie Matthews, who attended TheatreCraft in 2013 and 2014, has only good things to say about the event: 'I have gained so many new friends and contacts. It's a really friendly supportive day which allows you to approach all the exhibitors with your questions and ask for advice. When you're starting out that's really important to be able to do. I am genuinely excited to see what

opportunities this year's TheatreCraft will bring!'

### Creative Choices

The National Theatre runs a broadly similar one-day event of its own for London state schools. Creative Choices

**TheatreCraft gives you the chance to go about making a career for yourself**

will bring 250 young people at KS4 and above to the theatre's recently opened Clore Learning Centre for an introduction to a broad range of backstage and offstage careers through demonstrations and hands-on workshops (4 December). The theatre then signposts students towards appropriate workshops and courses.

These sorts of careers may not be as glamorous as performing for a living, but backstage roles can offer just as much excitement and creativity as a career on the stage – and they're much more sustainable to boot. It's high time that the backstage world took its turn in the careers spotlight. ☺