

# Bristol School of Acting

In UK's newest drama school, the mission is to reimagine actor training for the 21st century. Bristol School of Acting's founder Stuart Wood explains why they are focusing on acting for screen

Bristol School of Acting graduating students' production of *Fefu and Her Friends* at Bristol's Tobacco Factory, directed by Bristol Old Vic's new artistic director, Nancy Medina



CHELSY CLIFF

Does the world need another drama school? As we built the foundations of Bristol School of Acting, sometimes those words have echoed in my ears. With the closures of the Academy of Live and Recorded Arts and the Musical Theatre Academy in the last year, as well as the impact of Covid, the industry backdrop has been volatile.

Despite this, what we are doing has never felt so right. In the 1990s, I remember being astonished that many schools didn't teach Drama as part of their curriculums. Even today, our curriculum is still based around white British theatre history – with the Greeks thrown in for classical good measure. Most

students will spend their time focusing on plays by Plautus or Restoration comedies. When 80 per cent of a young actor's work will typically be in film and TV why do we spend so little time training them for the camera?

Things are finally beginning to change. Unencumbered by the baggage of history, Bristol School of Acting is at the forefront of that change.

## A different approach

So how is what we do different? We start from the premise that the actor – far from being the tool of the director – is an autonomous artist who creates using their own lived experience.

They are not a blank but technically proficient canvas on which to paint a living breathing human being, who uses the well of their experience and the roots of their story to shape the characters they play.

We don't use Stanislavski as the benchmark for our teaching. We prefer his star pupil, Michael Chekhov, who found his mentor's approach to be too dry and theoretical. Chekhov develops the imagination of the actor and locates emotion in physical impulse rather than psychology. He became almost as big a star teacher as Stanislavski, taking his technique to Hollywood, where he taught film stars including Ingrid Bergman, Clint Eastwood and Marilyn Monroe.

## Shifting the lens

We bring a new approach to camera training. Just weeks before the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in 2019, I was in New York seeking out Matthew Humphreys. He had co-created the first Acting for Screen degree in the US and was leading the programme at Pace University. Together with our patron Charlie Cox (of Netflix's *Daredevil* fame), we have created a new Acting for Screen programme. BSA is the first drama school to develop such a programme at BA level, in recognition of the new reality of the industry as it is today.

Our spirit of reinvention doesn't stop there. Pioneered by companies like Complicité, Kneehigh and Frantic Assembly, original, boundary-pushing theatre-making has become a vital part of the British theatre industry. It is rare to find a degree that investigates this practice in such an in-depth way. We have teamed up with the award-winning Bristol-based Wardrobe Ensemble and Nottingham's inventive theatre company Rapsallion Cage to deliver two new degree programmes that address this deficit.

## Start them young

The root of this lies in our Extended Diploma in Professional Acting, which we teach under a subcontract from Cabot Learning Federation and River Learning Trust. It is an RSL qualification in Performing Arts that we have harnessed to create a drama school model for 16 to 19-year-olds. At a time when drama in school is vanishing or under real threat, the model has revitalised interest in the subject.

We'd be interested in sharing our practice or even partnering with schools and colleges to explore how we can use our model to revitalise drama for students aged 16+. **D&T**

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