



Letter to My Teachers

Fiona Evans

FLASHING THROUGH our school yard...
like a creative comet,
a force of nature...
flamboyant...
daring...
bold...
Mrs Green!
Thank you!
Thank you...
For lighting up our school...
For sparking my love of drama...

St Anthony's. Sunderland. 1982. In our staid convent school, you seemed subversive, unconventional, daring. You weren't supposed to be teaching drama...and yet you did. In history and religious studies, you used drama as a tool to capture our imaginations. The first thing you said to us was: 'Throw away your exercise books.'

It seemed like heresy; you seemed to break every rule.

Our half-full exercise book belied your skill.

You taught empathy, possibility, opportunity.

I was dozing in second-year seniors when you blazed into our lives... You



taught through storytelling, through compassion. Getting us to act out our stories, allowing us to connect with characters from history and religion.

On that rainy afternoon in O'Connell Building, surrounded by my classmates, my love of drama ignited. You tasked us with devising a dramatic scene: recreating Joan of Arc's last night on Earth. So there I was, trying desperately to put myself in Joan's saintly shoes. Would she be scared, defiant, brave? Maybe some of her rubbed off on me that afternoon.

Surrounded by classmates, hunched on the floor, incarcerated in Lyon... weeping and wailing, ranting and railing — no doubt overacting! Then I stopped. And the applause started. And I thought: *Oh my God, I'm good at something?! I'd never been much good at anything... I wasn't sporty. I wasn't academic; but I was clearly good at drama.*

That night I was buzzing. I bounded down to my mate Nicola's. Nicola lived on the same estate, just down the road. Her mam Sue was getting a perm. She was sat with tiny curlers nipping her head. The hairdresser asked me: 'What do you want to do when you grow up?' Usually, I would have said 'hairdresser'. It seemed like the only creative-job option. But today I didn't. Today, I still had applause ringing in my ears. 'Actress,' I said. 'Wooooo,' said Sue in a high-pitched voice. Suddenly, I felt a bit special. Different. Excited. *Hopeful.*

A few years later, another teacher, a careers teacher, asked the same question: *What do you want to do?* I'd thought about it by this time, done all my research. I'd go to college, do my A levels and then I'd head to drama school...if I wasn't accepted, or I couldn't afford the fees, I could apply to university and do a degree (they were still free in those days!). None of my family had ever been to university...but then again, none of them had ever wanted to act. When I told my careers teacher this, she laughed out loud...in front of the whole class... She said I'd better apply to the local clothing factory early, otherwise I'd miss the Easter deadline. I was so furious at being dismissed. I wasn't stupid. I'd seen *Educating*



Rita; she was a hairdresser and she'd went to university. My voice trailed off as the teacher moved on to one of the A grade pupils who wanted to be a doctor.

I became more determined after that.

Because Mrs Green, you lit a fire; created a desire.

You *screamed* drama, embodied drama, dressed drama...

You strode through the schoolyard with purpose and pace: skirts billowing, flashing red and green, like some brazen Irish queen.

We hardly wrote a word in your classes, and yet we learned; we passed our exams with flying colours.

You won't remember me, I was one of many grateful, admiring faces in the year you returned to our school. A chance arrangement, a result of another teacher's tragedy, a fleeting, precious year, that changed the course of my life. You gave me an opportunity...to act...to shine...to show that I was good at something. Thank you, Mrs Green. What a star!