

CLASS: TIME TO PLAY OUR PART



ETON STRESS:
Tom Stocks near
public school

Acclaimed film and Q&A in Eltham

DOMINIC West, Eddie Redmayne, Benedict Cumberbatch, Damian Lewis, Tom Hiddleston... they're all fine actors and loved by the great British public for their dazzling performances.

But why are so many of our stars from public schools?

And why are so many actors from working class backgrounds being squeezed out of the profession?

An acclaimed new film – being screened in Eltham this month with a Q&A session – looks for answers, **writes GAYNOR WINGHAM.**

The Acting Class explores how rising costs of education and training, the difficulty of juggling paid employment with long spells of not acting, stereotyping and the London-centric nature of the business filters out the less well off.

Research appears to back up the theory.

The Sutton Trust found that while seven per cent of the population attend private school, 42 per cent of BAFTA winners went to private school.

Two-thirds of UK Oscar winners in the main categories were also privately educated.

Research by sociologists suggests only 10 to 16 per cent of actors come from working class, manual-labour backgrounds.

The movie interviews successful actors who want things to change – including Northern stars Christopher Eccleston, Maxine Peake and Julie Hesmondhalgh.

And it hears from Samuel West who acknowledges how his family connections made it easier for him to succeed in the industry but wants to see a more egalitarian profession with affordable, accessible training.

But it is also an angry, passionate film full of stories of opportunity denied.

One young man from Bolton – Tom Stocks – was so angry that he could not afford to go to a drama school, that he set up a campaign, Actor Awareness, to highlight the problem. In the film he

visits Eton, where actors like West, Lewis, Hiddleston, Redmayne and Hugh Laurie had access to some of the best drama training, facilities and industry contacts money can buy.

According to Maxine Peake exclusion is deliberate: "They have never wanted the working class to have any power."

"They don't want us educated, they definitely don't want us to have any artistic inspiration."

The film laments the way drama has been sidelined from the curriculum of state schools and why it is important for everyone to access the skills and confidence which creative play can foster.

Co-director Michael Wayne said:

"There are important social justice considerations for individuals with acting aspirations but there are also broader implications for the capacity of film, television and theatre to represent society in its full range and complexity."

Fellow director Deirdre O'Neill said: "It's really important to gather the testimony and experiences of working class people."

"What's happening in the performing arts is happening across the media, politics and other professions. The voices and representation are getting more and more homogenous."

The Acting Class – directed by Deirdre O'Neill and Mike Wayne – is being shown at Eltham's Bob Hope Theatre on February 21 as part of Eltham Arts Walls project.

After the show there's a discussion with the movie's directors and members of the cast.

The Acting Class, Bob Hope Theatre, Eltham.
Wednesday February 21 (7.30). Tickets are £5 from
www.bobhopetheatre.co.uk
Info: www.elthamarts.org

WHERE
Bob Hope Theatre,
Eltham
WHEN
Weds February
21 (7.30)