

COMING to England

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Baroness Floella Benjamin talks to Fergus Byrne about the stage show based on her early life, and the importance of never letting the negatives dominate.

Speaking with Baroness Floella Benjamin about the stage show of her 1995 award winning book *Coming to England*, a story of her young life, it is easy to see why those who have worked with her have been swept along by her energy and commitment to making the world a better place for our children. Her infectious laugh sits comfortably beside a powerful and confident delivery of profound truths born out of an extraordinary life. *Coming to England* is at the Lighthouse in Poole in February.

Part of the Windrush generation, 10-year-old Floella arrived on the shores of Southampton in 1960 and, along with her parents, two sisters and three brothers, lived in a one-room flat in Chiswick. Floella's first memories reflect the shock at how little people knew about the county she had come from. 'Yet we knew everything about Britain,' she exclaimed. 'We knew all about the Queen and British history'. She recalls how, in school in Trinidad, the children would sing *God Save the Queen*, and she felt that England was her 'Motherland'.

Named after Ella Fitzgerald by her jazz-playing father, Dardie, she was soon to learn about the lack of racial diversity and the challenges of encountering racial prejudice and discrimination. For some time, she physically fought against bullying and racial abuse. 'But after many years of being spat on and verbally abused, I had what I call a "spiritual moment"', she says. 'I heard a voice in my head; maybe it was my mother's, but I realised that my physical retaliation was not the right response.' She recalls the words that she so often repeats: 'You can't change the colour of your skin, and if that's a problem for someone, then it is their problem, not yours.' From that day forward, she determined that she would 'fight with my brain' smile and use the power of positivity and love to rule her life.

In her autobiography *What Are You Doing Here*, she talks about her mother, Marmie, and the strength she offered as a guiding influence: "I reckon that my mum's wisdom gave me my staying power all through my life. If you don't give in, everything comes good in the end."



With her mother's words, 'Education is your passport to life' ringing in her ears, Floella decided to make her smile her 'armour'. She studied hard and got a job in a bank. However, she soon found her real calling, working as a presenter on the children's TV show *Play School*, eventually launching her own production company with her husband, Keith Taylor and going on to make and star in many TV programmes and films.

Fast-forward more than sixty years, and Baroness Floella Benjamin, a Lib Dem peer, is now one of the most powerful voices standing against racism and speaking for children all over the world. Her resume of achievements is so vast that it's hard to imagine one person could have done so much. From singing *God Save the Queen, Land of Hope and Glory* and *Rule Britannia* 'with vigour' as a child in Trinidad, she eventually met that same Queen who appointed her to the prestigious Order of Merit and even participated in the recent King's coronation.

'I still get letters and messages from adults telling me how much they loved my children's shows', she tells me. 'I call them my *Play School* babies. Some are now government ministers or party leaders in the Houses of Parliament.'

So, has life changed for immigrants, or even for people in general? I ask her. 'Yes, it has,' she says. 'There are now many more mixed marriages and increased awareness and conversations around diversity and inclusion'. She cites the many support systems and initiatives to help immigrants integrate into society. Most of all, she sees how children are educated to understand more about diversity and the world around them. She sees greater representation of different cultures in media, politics, and public life, with many people providing role models for new generations. 'There is still more to be done but we are getting there.'

But she is aware of social media's 'wild west' nature and its potential danger to children and looks forward to legislation that will protect young minds from misinformation and disinformation.

One of the vice presidents promoting Barnardo's, she highlights what she calls the 'Three Cs, which are consideration, contentment, and confidence.' She believes these principles guide her in how she treats others and herself. 'Consideration', she says, involves being thoughtful and empathetic towards others. 'We need to understand their needs and feelings'. Contentment, she explains, is finding happiness and satisfaction in what you have and who you are 'without constantly seeking more'. While confidence involves 'believing in yourself' giving and loving unconditionally. She says: 'I believe that children need to grow up knowing that they are loved and appreciated and important in the world.'

Floella, who is played by of Julene Robinson in the show, urges people to see the stage show *Coming to England*. She is delighted with the spectacularly talented cast. 'Our cast and creative team bring with them a wealth of different experiences and skills to a show that is packed full of lessons for families to engage with, all set to an upbeat soundtrack of fun musical numbers and songs.'

Despite her story being one of struggle against adversity, it represents hope. Floella strongly believes in the power to change and describes the show as exciting, uplifting and exuberant, but, most of all, she says it represents a story of 'what it means to never give up.'

Coming to England is at the Lighthouse in Poole from Thursday, February 13, to Saturday, February 15. Tickets are on sale now at <https://www.lighthousepoole.co.uk/event/coming-to-england/> or by phone at 01202 280000.



