

Pearl Mackie

ELLA GAUCI speaks to the star of Ballet Shoes about queer representation, chosen family and childhood dreams

Dinosaur bones, fossils and scientific sketches overflow on the National Theatre's stage. As the lights dim there is a delighted buzz in the air, aided partially by the ballerinas which have popped up throughout the theatre. Around me there are women of all generations sitting in wait for the story to begin. Regardless of your age, there is something spellbinding that takes place – a kind of magic that fills the air – when Pearl Mackie comes on stage as 12-year-old orphan Sylvia.

Taking on the role of the hardworking guardian Sylvia in Kendall Feaver's adaptation of Noel Streatfeild's classic book Ballet Shoes, Pearl is returning once again to the National Theatre for yet another knockout performance. She previously appeared at the iconic London venue to perform the powerful verbatim play Grenfell: In The Words Of Survivors. You may have also seen her in Netflix's hit show The Diplomat last year, or remember her trailblazing role as Bill Potts in Doctor Who – the first lesbian companion of any Doctor.

Under the stage lights once again, Pearl is helping to bring the beloved children's book to life. Published in 1936, Ballet Shoes has been inspiring generations of young girls to pursue their dreams for decades. It follows the story of three adopted sisters – Pauline, Petrova and Posy – as they navigate life in the Fossil household, under the watchful eye of Nana and Sylvia. Pearl tells me that the book was a childhood favourite, especially as a young girl who wanted to be a performer.

Reading the book as a child, Pearl related to the aspirations and grand dreams of dancer Posy and budding actor Pauline. But reading Feaver's script gave her a new appreciation for Sylvia, and the sacrifices and challenges that she has to face in raising these three children. "She basically became a mother to these children from the age of 12!" Pearl exclaims. "I didn't realise how desperately she was trying to hold the house together. The house is literally falling down around her and she's just trying to protect the girls and make sure that they have an opportunity at a childhood that she didn't really have."

Much like the dreams of the Fossil children, Pearl's early acting memories were born on her

primary school's stage. Her first role ever was Nancy in Oliver, and while the stage was only some blocks pushed together in her school hall, to Pearl it felt like it was the West End. As she sang the classic ballad As Long As He Needs Me, 10-year-old Pearl's eyes pricked with tears, much to her mother's surprise. When asked whether she was ok afterwards, she replied that she was fine, and had been staring at the stage lights at the back to evoke the tears needed for the performance. It was then that Pearl's mother knew she had an actor on her hands.

While Ballet Shoes occupies a special place in the canon of children's literature, it has also held a particularly magical place in the hearts of many LGBTQIA readers. In the original text, people have often read sapphic undertones in the relationship between two of the house's borders Dr Jakes and Dr Smith. In Feaver's play adaptation, Dr Jakes identifies as a lesbian, and speaks about it with a freedom and "frankness" that Pearl admires. At the heart of the story is the idea of chosen family and its universal and unconditional love. For Pearl as a queer actor, this concept is utterly powerful.

"Found family is something that we really relate to within the queer community," she explains. "Noel Streatfeild was a lesbian herself as far as history tells us, and so I think she would really enjoy that happening at the National Theatre in the centre of London."

After coming out herself in 2020, Pearl has been providing stunning visibility for the LGBTQIA community ever since. In 2024, she tied the knot with her partner Kam Chhokar, and the pair have cemented themselves as a sapphic power couple. Pearl hopes that by

unapologetically showcasing their love, it might reach LGBTQIA people who are not yet comfortable in themselves.

"I just hope that visibility and representation can help other people with their own journeys," she says. "I hope that people can see me, and see us, and see that it's ok to be who you are – even if that's a nerdy actor who is queer and loves to dress up and look completely ridiculous at events."

When I ask about her wedding, Pearl gushes excitedly about how it was the best day of her life. She cites Kam as her greatest supporter, and says that together they are able to express themselves more openly than

they ever had done before. "We've grown together and found happiness and pride in being visible in our relationship," she adds. "I think as a mixed race and Indian couple in the public eye, we can demonstrate that it's ok to be yourself despite cultural differences and many other things telling you that that's not what you should do. I enjoy being quite loud about it." **D**

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You can see Pearl Mackie in Ballet Shoes at the National Theatre until 22 February. For more information, check out: nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/ballet-shoes

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