

Women in business**Faye Ward, the film producer capturing east London's teen spirit**

Inspired by the suffragettes, she wanted to tell the story of life for young women now



'Sometimes you have to give something away to make things better,' says Faye Ward © Charlie Bibby/FT

Emma Jacobs OCTOBER 2 2020

The inspiration for a hit film about 21st century Hackney schoolgirls was women who hail from a different age.

After making *Suffragette* in 2015, which told the story of the Edwardian women's movement, and starred Meryl Streep as Emmeline Pankhurst, Faye Ward, producer, and Sarah Gavron, director, began to discuss what it was like to be a young woman now.

The result is *Rocks*, a [luscious film](#) about a group of teenage girls in east London, directed by Ms Gavron and produced by [Fable Pictures](#), Ms Ward's company.

"It can take a while to just turn into something," says Ms Ward. "Some ideas come and go quite easily. And some ideas end up staying with you and every time you see each other, or have a cup of tea, you sort of scratch at it and you continue scratching at it until it becomes something a bit more substantial. And that's exactly what *Rocks* was."



na: a scene from 'Rocks'

The central story follows Shola (whose nickname the film takes its title from) navigating Instagram, friendships and school.

Ms Ward wanted to focus on the dynamics of a group of teenage girls. “We didn’t want it to be about boys. [It would be] a distraction from what we were trying to do, which is capture a spirit.”

Rocks’ life changes suddenly when her single mother, who has battled mental health issues, leaves home as she can no longer cope. Rocks finds herself having to contend with school, make-up and dance routines as well as look after her younger brother, all while keeping below social services’ radar.

Ms Ward, 41, is at pains to emphasise that while many productions are necessarily hierarchical, *Rocks* was a collaborative process, between the director, producers, writers Theresa Ikoko and Claire Wilson, and the schoolgirl actors. “This was about bringing young people in, to share their creative voice,” Ms Ward says.



The film is the third made by Fable Pictures, the company Ms Ward started in 2016 and later joined by creative partner Hannah Farrell. Previous films were *Stan & Ollie*, starring John C Reilly (Oliver Hardy) and Steve Coogan (Stan Laurel) for which Ms Ward was nominated for a Bafta, and *Wild Rose*, directed by Tom Harper and starring Jessie Buckley.

Ms Ward was previously at Ruby Film and Television, where she worked on television programmes including *Toast*, the biographical drama of British chef Nigel Slater, as well as the films *Brick Lane* (based on the Monica Ali book and directed by Ms Gavron), *Jane Eyre*, which starred Michael Fassbender, and *The Other Boleyn Girl*, with Natalie Portman and Scarlett Johansson.

She launched Fable Pictures because she wanted “to tell stories that deserved to be told”. Sony Pictures Television bought a 25 per cent stake in the company in 2016 and will distribute its television programmes. “I don’t really know about those big corporations so do not want to be presumptuous. They are really creative and up for getting their hands dirty.”

Setting up her own company was anxiety-inducing. “I felt nervous. Me and Hannah are still nervous, daily,” she says. But the Sony partnership has given her some reassurance.

“I’ve seen lots of lovely, brilliant production companies really struggle with cash flow. I wanted to build something that is a bit more concrete and had longevity. And that could make films or television.”

She has seen peers fixate on retaining full control. “But sometimes you have to give something away to get things to make things better.”

Film is very precarious, she says. “You can have worked around a film for years and suddenly an actor gets [a role in] a Marvel film and disappears.”

Nothing could have prepared her for the “total nightmare” of coronavirus. It was an upheaval in her personal life because she was still “technically” on maternity leave with four-month-old twins.

“I basically went back full-time to keep everything afloat while having the babies and that was really difficult.”

She furloughed the majority of her staff and *Rocks*' cinema release was also postponed. “Three years of [work and then] a pandemic — who could have predicted that?”

Fable recently sold the film to streaming service Netflix, which [released it on October 1](#). “We needed it just in case we went on lockdown again.” Yet television cannot replace the power of the big screen. “Cinema means a hell of a lot to the girls [in the film and] young women in our audience.”

But she also likes the longevity that streaming services give films and series: “It doesn't have a shelf life.”



‘Cinema means a hell of a lot to the girls [in the film and] young women in our audience’ © Charlie Bibby/FT

She is currently developing a television series based on sisters Jackie and Joan Collins, the former the prolific author of romantic thrillers, the latter a Hollywood actor. “Jackie was a really big author and I feel like because of the subject matter, I don't think she ever really got the accolade of being this humongous writer.

“The women were always on top. Joan [has had] such a varied career and varied life. They are survivors, you know, they are survivors of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s.”

While the company's eight employees are predominantly female and the crew for *Rocks* was too, she is keen not to ghettoise the sexes. “Women shouldn't just work on all-women films. All sets should be 50/50. Because, I think, if men did not work on films that are essentially about women it would not work. The whole point is that everybody's equal.

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“So I would like to find an equilibrium. Basically, all of our stories lean to female stories and the fact is creatives [are] very passionate about story. And most people gravitate to work on things that they have had a real connection with.”

Filming, with its long, intense days, is not family-friendly, she says. “You need family [to help] or, or very deep pockets for a very expensive nanny.”

It demands creative thinking, she says, such as job shares in television and film roles. “If studios had nurseries, it could be easier [for parents], particularly if they are on set.”

While social distancing restrictions and regional lockdowns will inhibit opportunities to visit cinemas, she believes the pandemic will make people more appreciative of seeing films on the big screen. “People have really missed that.”

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