

Learner Driver

Hollywood star Minnie Driver was a wild child from a fractured family – until one inspiring teacher changed her life

The Teaching Awards
Sunday 6.00pm BBC2

MINNIE DRIVER ARRIVES for lunch at Soho House in West Hollywood in a white cotton dress and sandals. She has the carefree outdoors air of a 1970s shampoo commercial, but she's all business today as she settles down to talk about her new-found role as arts education advocate. "I'll talk about it till I'm blue in the face," she admits.

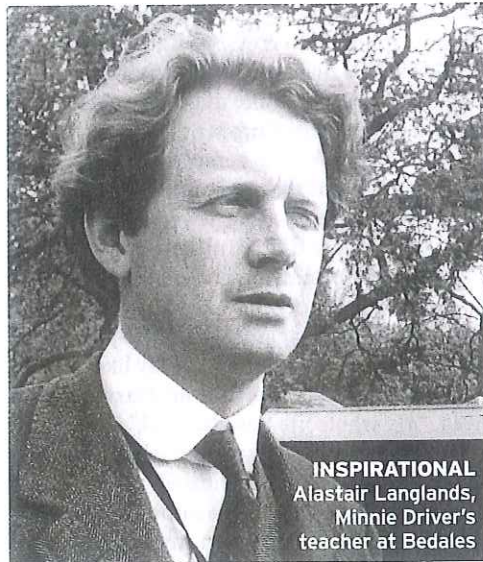
This month, Driver was made an ambassador for the Pearson Teaching Awards – the so-called Oscars for Teachers – and will return to London to help present the awards at the annual ceremony hosted by Lenny Henry this Sunday and televised on BBC2. She says, "Teachers need to be celebrated and valued. I had magical teachers growing up in England. It was life-changing."

Driver was educated at Bedales, the costly but bohemian private school in Hampshire, whose alumni include Viscount Linley, Gyles Brandreth and Lily Allen, and remembers her most influential teacher was Alastair Langlands. "He taught me from seven until I left at 17. He'd take us off to find the Forest of Arden with Ordnance Survey maps while we were studying *As You Like It*. I still have the anthology of poets he photocopied and bound together for us. Everything from Edward Thomas, the local poet, to Spike Milligan to Shakespeare. He said, 'These are poems that you'll carry with you your whole life.' And he was right."

When Driver struggled with maths – "Numbers still give me the shivers" – it was Langlands who steered her to music because they "both use the same part of the brain. He taught me how to look at things from another angle when they get challenging and patiently wait for an opening. It's not just about getting you to an A in French, but really to problem-solve in your life."

"It's so difficult to get people to embrace the idea that you will become a better mathematician if you do a music class. When you call it physics, it has definite utilitarian things you can grab on. When you call it art, it's too amorphous."

Bedales' liberal approach is not without controversy. This year, novelist Amanda Craig



INSPIRATIONAL
Alastair Langlands,
Minnie Driver's
teacher at Bedales

branded the place "Hogwarts on Viagra", saying, "It scarred me deeply." But Driver's experience was nothing but positive: "Bedales supported everything. There was no judgement. It kept everything constant. It was home base for me in a way. It's why I reference it so much in my life."

Driver grew up in somewhat unorthodox circumstances. Her late father, Ronnie Driver, was a self-made 60s tycoon and already married when he started a second family with his mistress, Driver's mother. "It was all public. There was no hiding anything. But it was weird going to be with your wealthy dad one weekend and your categorically poor mother the next," she says. "There was a lot of travelling. He had an estate in Barbados. She had a tiny cottage. It could be pretty chaotic. But looking back now, the galvanising force, which you don't realise as a kid, is that you are loved."

I once interviewed Minnie Driver by chance when she was a teenager in the King's Road, Chelsea,

and got a first-hand look at the Bedales effect I was writing about Emma Ridley and the era of the Wild Child, and Driver was simply the mouthy precocious kid offering up her thoughts. Her precocity and ambition left quite an impression. She was fixed on being a singer then. There was a lot of talk about Carly Simon and nothing at all about acting. When the singing didn't really happen, even after she landed a recording deal she turned to acting. "You go where the work is," she shrugs, even though work led her to Hollywood and a Oscar nomination for *Good Will Hunting* (on Sunday Sky Modern Greats).

WHEN I MEET her again now, at 41, she still lights up with a performer's energy but she has softened around the edges. She's lived in Malibu since she bought a seaside bungalow in 2003. "It's heaven. It helps me get away. Showbusiness in LA is overwhelming at the best of times. It's such a one-business town. And that one business is profoundly 'venerable'. My mum invented that word. 'LA has a venerable disease.'" She gives a throaty laugh.

The biggest change in her is motherhood. She has a son, Henry, aged three, whom she delights in talking about. "Having labradors was the best training for having a boy. They need you to play and tussle with them and run them ragged every day. That's what boys need. Then they need you to turn back into Mummy at bath time and have all of that delicious nurturing and cuddling."

She reads twice a week at his pre-school and introduce him to music with instant result. "I bought him a ukulele and he can play three chords already. By the time he's 14 and shredding his guitar, painting his room black, it'll be second nature." Sean Macauley

MINNIE ME
Driver with her son Henry – "Having labradors was the best training for having a boy"

