Star power: Emilia Clarke set to ‘shine a light’ for nurses

The RCN ambassador tells Nursing Standard her character in Game of Thrones would approve of her campaigning for nurses

When the RCN announced in April that Game of Thrones star Emilia Clarke would be its new ambassador, the news caused quite a stir. One of the most popular young actors in the world was lending her star power to the college, and pledging to be a champion for nursing.

It was a coup for the RCN, but not everyone was impressed. There were comments on social media that a multimillionaire actor was hardly a great fit for nursing. Some questioned why the college was buying into celebrity culture.

But watching Emilia Clarke at the RCNi Nurse Awards 2018 ceremony in London in early July, it is clear she is well-informed about the problems facing nursing and takes her ambassadorial role seriously. In an awards speech she wrote herself, she condemns the axing of the student bursary in England and cuts to training budgets, and vows to help nurses and support workers gain the recognition and money they deserve.

Her personal motivation for taking on the role is apparent when she praises the ‘awe-inspiring skill’ and ‘emotional intelligence’ of the nurses who cared for her father before his death from cancer. ‘Nursing is about more than just medicine,’ she tells an audience of more than 500 people. ‘It’s about engaging with another person on a human level – like hugging a daughter who knows that she is about to lose her dad.’ It is only a few days before the second anniversary of his death.

Ms Clarke stays to the end of the evening to present the Andrew Parker Student Nurse and RCN Nurse of the Year awards and pose for what might be a world record number of selfies. Our awards have never seen anything like it – the excitement in the room is palpable.

A few hours before the awards ceremony, an RCN staff member tells me Ms Clarke is having an ‘incredible impact’ as an ambassador. Since the appointment, her university student daughter and her friends have become more aware of nursing and the RCN. These young women are discussing nursing on social media, something they have never done before.

To understand why Emilia Clarke matters, why she has influence with young women – and 17.7 million followers on Instagram – you don’t like Game of Thrones. If you’re not a fan, then it is just a lot of nudity, violence and dragons. But the memorable description of Game of Thrones as ‘the Sopranos with swords’ is a nod not just to its adult themes and violence but to its quality.

Formidable
Like the mafia drama before it (another show from HBO), Game of Thrones has raised television’s game, taken it into new territory, and it wouldn’t work without a credible Daenerys Targaryen, the character played by Ms Clarke.

No one knew television could be this big.

Seven series in (the final season airs next year), she is firmly at the show’s centre. It’s creators, David Benioff and D B Weiss, told Vanity Fair in a recent interview that Emilia Clarke was the only actor they saw – and they saw hundreds – who could carry the full range that Daenerys required: ‘Young actors aren’t often asked to play a combination of Joan of Arc, Lawrence of Arabia and Napoleon.’

This is who the RCN has secured as an ambassador. She could turn out to be a formidable communicator.

Actors who are extremely watchable on screen tend to wear their emotions close to the surface, they let the camera in. With Ms Clarke this translates to an almost startling expressiveness in person. You see a flicker of the thought, the feeling, before she speaks or laughs – and she laughs a lot.
Next to her, everyone else in the room seems to be on a lower brightness setting.

When I ask her why she thinks young women relate to her, or to Daenerys, she looks delighted – and gives all the credit to the character.

‘She is just, as a character, incredibly self-sufficient and powerful, and doesn’t shy away from things that would in many other shows be perceived as just for masculine or male roles. For young women, it is “Whoa – I’m a girl, I can follow this character and get behind her!”’. She doesn’t shy away from power.’

My meeting with her takes place in a basement room of the vast Westminster Park Plaza Hotel, just before she takes to the stage in the ballroom to give her speech.

A second later, as though to undercut anything that might sound preachy, she jokes: ‘It’s the dragons. They like unicorns and they like dragons.’

Mother of dragons
Daenerys’ rise from the chattel of powerful men to their ruler may be part of it, but it is also about the woman who plays her. Ms Clarke’s warmth as an actor humanises what, on paper, is an almost impossible role.

Daenerys Targaryen, mother of dragons, first of her name, breaker of chains (and so on) acts like she was born to rule the world (I mean this literally), and uses her dragons to incinerate people who refuse to ‘bend the knee’. Ms Clarke takes all this on and makes Daenerys likeable.

‘And the amount of training they have far exceeded any stereotypical thoughts I had about what a nurse was. I was genuinely taken aback by how much knowledge they had – and how much multifaceted support they could give my dad and me. They were able to tell me everything that was happening and, also, have a care that went beyond medical training.’

Does she see her role as political, is she trying to use her celebrity to exert pressure on the government? She hesitates, closes down a fraction, choosing her words carefully.

‘I think the role should be to shine a light where there might not be one.’ She hopes the people ‘who can make decisions’ notice the issues she is attempting to highlight.

Force for good
In playing Daenerys, Ms Clarke gets to inhabit a character who isn’t careful, who is gloriously uninhibited about taking what she wants. But Daenerys sees herself as a force for good; she wants to make her world a better place.

In this, if nothing else, Ms Clarke is like the character she plays. She tells me Daenerys ‘absolutely approve’ of her campaigning for nurses.

We are out of time, her people are ushering her out the door, but I can’t let her go without mentioning the dragons. Would she like them at her side as RCN ambassador? Would a bit of direct action, Game of Thrones-style, help deliver a better deal for nurses? She laughs, looks a tiny bit tempted for a moment. ‘I’m not sure how much good they would be,’ she decides. ‘They might cause havoc.’

With that she is gone, and one of RCN’s biggest and most memorable awards ceremonies gets under way.

This year’s awards – and Emilia Clarke’s call for better funding for nursing – are reported on by BBC news, the Daily Mail, the Independent and the daily London paper, the Metro. On the night itself, the awards are trending on Twitter.

Celebrity at Emilia Clarke’s level has value. For the socially aware A-lister, celebrity is a platform they can use to make a difference, or a form of currency – and Ms Clarke has decided to spend hers on nursing.

‘She is self-sufficient and powerful, and doesn’t shy away from things that would be perceived as just for masculine or male roles’

Emilia Clarke on her character Daenerys Targaryen