

(props: squeaker & red nose)

AN OPEN LETTER

Dear Tin,

I thought you might not recognize me without my red nose or my squeak, so I brought them along.... *(shows nose, squeaks squeaker)* ...for courage.

My name is Laura. I'm a Clown Doctors
I'm here to fill you in, Dear Tin, on what you've meant, what you mean, on this special day. And not just to me. Like a rolling whatnot you've gathered many howd'youdo's, and in this letter my words are said on behalf of a few. Think of it like a love letter. A postcard winging its way through the years from now to then.

So, if you're sitting comfortably... ?

Tin is....

Picture it. 23 years ago, at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, a tall, pale, strawberry blond man with aspirational spectacles, met a shiny haired dynamic whirlwind with a filthy laugh and a mean fandango when she pushed in front him in the lunch queue. He doesn't like conflict and she speaks her mind, so before long push came to shove and they were comparing their dance moves at the bar so to speak.

3 short years later and the twinkle in their eyes became reality - no not their children, Megan and Bryn, it was you Dear Tin. A dance company. An *inclusive* dance company. Born of love, yes, sure. Love of all things dance. The fun and the graft and the lift and the lean... Love of people too. But more. You were born of a belief in what's fair. A belief that everyone should have the chance to enjoy the wonderful things that sharing in the arts brings.

You took on the world and lent your weight to putting it back on an equal axis. Not through fight or protest, but by looking people in the eyes and saying 'Come on. Come in. Join in. Dance with us. You can do it. **We** can do it.'

So Tin came to be, knitted into the thoughtful man and the dynamic woman's lives. Growing alongside their two long-limbed and sparkly youngstlings, Mega-Megan and Bombastic-Bryn. And more people came. And you grew. And you grew. 'We didn't have a plan as such.' They say, 'Just followed our gut'
Sounds like the very best of plans to me.

My own Tin Opener.

My introduction to you Tin was around a year in. 'Back then we were running out the back of a car' (that's Martin). But already you had earned a reputation in the region for a quality, considered MO and what would become your trademark approachability.

You were known as 'good people doing good things'.

I was lucky to be accepted on an arts in education programme (thanks Tony) mentored by a Martin Wilson. I learnt lots, It wasn't just **what** he said, but **how** he said it, leading by example and appraising without judgment. Like we were all on the same side(!) I was hooked.

My next 'Tincounter' (!) was the life-changer. An Arts Council conference introduced: *Clown Doctoring* and by the end of the day I'd fallen in love with cavorting behind a small red nose and before I knew it there I was, trooping along to audition, hopes clutched tight to my chest, trying my luck at joining the new North East Clown Doctors programme run by Tin Arts no less!

The universe smiled, fate agreed, and from the freelance artists who auditioned, the new Clown Docs were selected, one *Dr Lulu McDoo* in amongst. Hooray.

But weren't Tin a **dance** company?! And wasn't I too... I dunno... **anxious** to be a clown?? And what on earth was a **clown doctor**??!

The answers were 'sort of', 'perhaps' and 'wait and see' in whichever order you like.

Turns out that Clown Doctors are prescribed like medicine and work with hospitalized children and their looker-afterers to keep them company in what can be a traumatic time for all.

Bombastic-Bryn had been one such hospitalized child, still was off and on, and Martin and Tess two such looker-afterers, and the trauma and the boredom and the fear and the frustration of hospital experienced first hand. For real.

Again, Dear Tin, you led with your insides. You rolled up your sleeves and got stuck in.

You determined to whittle away the correct dose of the finest foolery, adding it to the ideal measure of clown, all held together by utmost professionalism to create the **best Clown Doctors programme in town!** fitted snug to the wants and needs of the regions' hospitals. And you listened you listened and you spoke. Using just the right words you championed the programme far and near, promoting this the healing properties of play and the rights of every child to access it even in the darkest of circumstance. You weren't afraid. And you handed us fools your trust... that we would do right... (and that we would have the number of a good lawyer). You armed us with the very best hospital allies and together we followed their lead. Still do. The treasure we seek - not just laughs but connections. Precious engagement to lift heavy medical words from small shoulders for just a second. Spending time. Brightening a moment.

Throughout the 13 years of Clown Doctors you have respected, supported and heard us, standing alongside, tirelessly re-tilting the globe that everyone might access that bit of sparkle they might need to help them through.

When I started clown doctoring they had me believe that this tiny red nose is made of plastic. But now I know the truth. I know that inside this wee thing is precious metal, hammered down into wire, stitched in and woven through. To reflect, protect, connect. That's the science. That's the magic. The very same substance that makes up Tin.

And if you listen, it says 'Come on. Join in. You can do it. We can do it.'
You, Tin, you are pioneers forging ahead and leaving none behind.

That's just my story. Everyone I've spoken with has their own take on how you've changed their world.

Here are some:

'I felt included. I felt like I finally belonged somewhere.'

'TIN have changed the landscape of inclusive arts by providing a home/base for dancers/artists with a learning disability or autism.

'There would be no glitter without TIN Arts. Glitter = magic, unique and miraculous.'

'They've invested in me'

'I want them to know that working for them is still and will probably always be the highlight of my career because they gave me freedom to experiment (and to fail) they gave me ownership of my work and they gave me a good deal of FUN.'

Dear Tin. You believe in us. All of us. And in return, we push to fly higher. Jump further. And we grow to believe in our own capabilities thanks to the nurture and creative nourishment you provide.

From the back of a car to clean bright dedicated rooms packed with *skill*, with *ability*, buzzing with hilarity and concentration. Bodies and souls reaching high and moving together. Good people doing good things.

And Tin you are worth your metal!

In this climate of ruthless cuts you continue to assert the necessity of arts for all. You *are fair*. You clear the stage for *everyone* to get up and dance their truth. Perceived vulnerability transforms into power. Awesome things are achieved and extraordinary talents are unearthed. You challenge people to surprise themselves and others, and to rewrite perceived limitation. You make no bones about it, no soft blurry parameters, you prove time and time again that you can set quality hand in hand with making the world a better place. Participation does not dilute artistic quality. Rather it fuels it. The outstanding work that you make. The rich processes you facilitate. You set the bar high and continue to wait for the rest of the world to catch up.

Tin you've held us, you've energized us, you've challenged us, and you've celebrated us. Us as in we as in me as in they, as in every person you work with, have worked with, will work with in all ways. Too many to name but all carry in common a belief in what's fair and a light in the eye. And we are proud. We are proud to celebrate **you**. And we want to tell you how honoured we are to be counted in your number 20 years on.

Because this community? This force? That started as a twinkle in the eye of that Tess and that Martin all those years ago? Well that grew, without ego, without formal plan, stepping from the heart, it grew up to be this. This gorgeous jumping, wiggling, belly-laughing, true grafting, one-in all-in, horizon lifting, dream building, space taking, gravity defying, unicorn hunting, myth-busting, quality, honest, ambitious, worth its weight, not dilute but concentrate, all you can eat, a million feet, jumping together and shaping the space, dolphin friendly, Tin-Can-and Tin-Do, peach of a thing.

The most excellent people. The most excellent thing. Is you Dear Tin.

Happy 20th blooming birthday!!

Yours sincerely

(squeak)

Me.