

Graduation 2008 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Dee Evans
Orator: Dr Elizabeth Kuti

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Dee Evans.

Earlier this year The Guardian described Colchester's Mercury Theatre as having 'bounced back from the dead with a wily energy.' The source of this 'wily energy' is Dee Evans, who has been the Artistic Director and Chief Executive of the theatre since 1998.

When she took over ten years ago, the theatre was in danger of closure with audiences struggling to reach even ten per cent of the theatre's capacity. Today the Mercury is thriving both financially and artistically – described by the Daily Telegraph as 'a hive of artistic excellence' and again by the Guardian as 'one of the best small reps in the country'. The Mercury has become a major cultural focus-point for Colchester and for the region. As well as its in-house productions, which have travelled to London, the Edinburgh Festival and to New York to great critical acclaim, the theatre's activities include three youth theatres, small-scale touring work to rural and community venues, collaborations with other local theatres, and educational work in schools and with groups of all kinds, including many of our drama students here today. However, the artistic centre of all this is a company of actors, described in 2007 by the New Statesman as 'a first class theatre ensemble'; and a policy of producing the very best theatre writing, from the classics to new plays. These two commitments – firstly, to staging a serious, challenging and inspiring repertoire; and secondly, to community involvement – very much reflect the personal experience and passions of Dee Evans.

Born in 1954 in Plymouth to a naval family, Dee Evans initially trained as an actress at LAMDA. She worked in rep, in children's and community theatre, and then spent a year with Tina Packer's renowned Shakespeare and Company in the USA, fundraising and, she says, 'learning about the power of spoken language.' Dee Evans was inspired by Packer's insistence on putting the actor's voice and the writer's text at the centre of the company's work, but she also saw how an equal commitment to training and to community involvement led to a theatre that was, in Dee's words, full of 'passion and drive and magic.' She brought this knowledge and experience back to the UK and worked in Plymouth with the Theatre Royal running an extensive community and education programme. This led to producing and directing, whilst also raising her two children, Claire and Charlie, before coming to the Mercury in 1998. She continues to direct – most recently Julius Caesar, but other work includes The Provok'd Wife, Devil's Advocate, The Tempest and Twelfth Night. However, in her ten years living and working in Colchester, Dee's energy has not only been poured into the Mercury. In 2002 she was invited to join Colchester 2020 Local Strategic Partnership, which she chaired for two years, championing such major projects as the firstsite:newsite arts facility and the new Colchester stadium; and she remains the joint lead partner for Culture and Heritage.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Dee Evans' passion for theatre remains the motor that drives all these other activities. Defying the Arts Council's gloomy pronouncement in 1998 that 'there's no audience for classic plays out there', the highly successful repertoire programmed by Dee Evans has not only included Brecht and Beckett and Strindberg and Chekhov, but has also taken artistic risks. Her old mentor Tina Packer of Shakespeare and Company came over this year from the USA to direct an all-male Coriolanus while Dee herself directed an all-female Julius Caesar. Staging two Roman plays in the Roman town of Colchester made obvious sense, but furthermore,

as Evans pointed out, 'In Julius Caesar they tumble a dictator and they don't think what they're going to do after it.' In a military town such as Colchester, the moral problems and consequences of war are not just poetic themes, they are matters of urgent and palpable significance. The Mercury's production of *The Pull of Negative Gravity* by our own Jonathan Lichtenstein, which portrayed with agonising intensity the plight of soldiers returning disabled from the war, surely had particular resonance for audiences here in our town. The Mercury, as the Guardian commented in 2007, 'has never been afraid of bold programming'.

The mission statement of the Mercury is 'to inspire, entertain and engage through theatre.' That the theatre has been achieving this under Dee's leadership has been proven to me on a regular basis, as I have asked of students here, 'What did you think of Arturo Ui last night? Or *Death of a Salesman*? Or *Road*? or *The Seagull* or *Journey's End*? And more often than not the answer has come back, 'Amazing. It was absolutely amazing. It was brilliant' and I have seen our undergraduates, as they were then, clearly moved and energised and excited by what they had seen at the Mercury the night before. The mission statement of the Mercury is clearly being fulfilled, for many of us here today, for audience after audience, night after night, season after season. We have Dee Evans and her wily energy to thank for this. Long may it continue.

Chancellor, I present to you Dee Evans.