



Graduation 2008

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Dee Evans

This is quite overwhelming; if I was Gwyneth Paltrow, I'd burst into tears and thank my cat and my budgerigar and everybody else but you may be relieved to know I'm not going to do that.

Chancellor, congregation, it is such an honour to share this day with all of you. Seeing each of the now graduates going past one by one, being acknowledged for the incredible work and commitment that they've made and then to be part of that makes this seem more significant and more valuable to me and I really appreciate being here.

I really wanted to say, hope you'll be glad to know, quite a little, as its very hot and you probably want your tea.

I'm very lucky, I'm very lucky to be receiving this degree because all my life, my working life, has been working with something that I love. I love plays, I love what I do and I love seeing the Mercury Theatre Company sharing their love of it and their skills all over this community. I'm going to show off because I'm so proud of them but we had some statistics through only yesterday and this theatre does twice as much, literally twice as much, work in the community as any other theatre of its scale. So it's about 1400, 1500 attendances, if you work that out how much in the day is going on, and it's an incredible body of people who are doing that work. And I love it.

The Chancellor was talking earlier about what do you profess? I suppose, I profess words. It came from a love of reading and Alan Bennett has put it much better than I could, what reading can be about. He says, 'the best moments in reading are when you come across something, a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things, which you had thought unique and particular to you. Now here it is set down by someone else, a person you've never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.' And, that to me, is what was my first experience of what language did as an individual. And then I suppose I just discovered theatre and I started to see that that experience in a theatre is extended out into a community. So as an actor stands on the stage and works with whatever piece of writing he is working with, he is actually extending the hand of the author, the hand of the heritage that writing came from, into the hands of the audience who are then by extension are passing it through. So it's quite cosmic and it's also very immediate and one of the obsessions that I have in my work is that the local and the immediate is vital and that a function of that, if you honour the immediate and you honour the local, then naturally you will look outwards and you will become global. And I learnt that from Tina Packer, that's not me, that's Tina Packer said that.

When we get together, this is the real centre of what we do at the Mercury, it is an acknowledgement of this relationship between an actor or a person making a speech at a ceremony like this and the audience. There's a relationship between us and that's the very essence of it. You don't get it in films, you don't get it from the radio, you get it when you have a live people listening to a live person. And what that does is give whatever is happening an absolute focus and a value. If each of you today had popped into the Chancellor's office and he'd shaken your hand, maybe with your family as well, and everyone had whooped and cheered and you'd shaken his hand and gone off again, that would have been fine. But to share that experience with this group of people actually signifies the importance of what's been achieved. And that's what this group, this communal thing does in the theatre. So when a group of people in a theatre are considering a subject together it gives that subject importance so, as Liz was saying, we have done an awful lot of plays on the theme of war in this town. That's because of the town we live in, very much so, and because it's incredibly relevant in a garrison town to be doing that and addressing it.

So when an actor on the stage say - we've had some quotes from Shakespeare so I'm going to do the very most obvious one of all in a minute – when an actor stands up on stage and starts to soliloquise, in the worst productions, if somebody is just churning away on their own which is not very interesting but when someone playing Hamlet stands up and says, 'To be or not to be, that's the question'. Well, that is the question actually! What he is actually doing, looking at there, is something that we all reflect on from time to time, whether it's because we've been faced ourselves with circumstances where we just looked for the best possible exit, whether we know people that that's happened to. It always comes to us at some point in our lives, that question 'to be or not to be.' That is the question, in that moment. And when we consider that question communally then we become a body of human beings, if we're listening to it on our i-pod that's one kind of process; when we're listening to it together and we share that, we might walk out of the door and pretend we haven't heard it but we all know, it was witnessed.

I suppose the things that come to me through my work are these particular phrases that have such resonance. Another one is Linda Loman who says in Death of a Salesman about her husband, Willy, who has worked all his life, a decent life, he's bought the American dream and it's failing him. And she says to her boys, who are not at all sympathetic, 'attention must be paid.' He's being given the sack, he's being written off and we're there, we have employers and employees sitting in our audience, and that play is saying right in the crux of it, pay attention! Pay attention to the individuals that work for us and that we work for. And it's so important to have those messages going out all the time. And then also it is quite a lot of fun actually to share the skills and the things that go into the making of a piece of theatre.

There's another one which I'm going to tell you anyway, which is another one that always comes back, which is at the end of Habeas Corpus – I love Alan Bennett – at the end of Habeas Corpus, this man who has behaved appallingly in his youth and suddenly it is discovered and the maid turns round to the audience and says, 'Suddenly the air was black with the wings of chickens coming home to roost' and we laugh at that because we've either been there because of some appalling hidden secret from our past has suddenly revealed to all or because its such a joy to see some pompous twit absolutely getting caught. It's those moments that make up theatre so that's what it is.

Its been you know, I profess, a love of language and a sharing of that and pushing that out and finally I'd like to say that actually the theatre cannot, as nothing can work, nothing can work unless there's the kind of ground in which it can flourish and we have a relationship with this University and this is a university that does exactly what I love, its very very careful to take care of the development of what's happening within its own grounds and then it has this unbelievable, this global vision, which goes out into the world. So they are very safety secure and then out go these relationships across the world and thousands and thousands of you going out always having these relationships and always hopefully feeding back into the University and feeding out again.

I don't think that there would be so much good culture in Colchester if this University didn't happen to be there. It's a very very strong support and some of that support is not to do with, you know, talking about it but actually the attendance, the involvement of the people who teach and who go to this University, in the cultural life of the whole of Colchester. It's helping to ground it and root it. Times are always challenging in the arts. We have challenging times always in the theatre; the Arts Council are always changing round, all of those things. But actually, if we had this, this bond of support that happens in Colchester with the borough council, the University, the leading businesses, the health authority, all binding and working and committed to creating a place where people can really thrive, then Colchester is going to be alright no matter what happens in the next two years economically.

I'm delighted to receive this honour. I am overcome and I thank all of you for witnessing it with me and I thank the Chancellor for bestowing it on me.