

Graduation 2009

Oration for Honorary Graduand Juliet Stevenson

Orator: Dr Michael Fry

Chancellor, the senate has resolved that the degree of doctor of the University be conferred upon Juliet Stevenson.

But there's more, Juliet Stevenson was born in Essex which is why we've claimed her as our own. But she had a peripatetic childhood as the daughter of an army officer and a teacher living in a number of different countries and she sometimes reflected that this geographic of uncertainty may have had an influence on her later choice of career, since all actors are nomads of course. She now lives in London and Suffolk, so we hope that she'll regularly think fondly of us as she zooms past us on the A12. She trained at Rada and was almost immediately taken up by The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) where she played most of the principal Shakespearean heroin's doing a 10-year stint with the company, as well as creating roles in some new and historically significant plays. She has since appeared regularly at The National Theatre, The Royal Court and in the West End. Her stage appearances have been less frequent in recent years but each one inevitably creates an impact, as few other actors seem able to display such a unique combination of passion, integrity and total commitment. An edited account of her stage career gives some indication of the types of roles she's always undertaken and the degree to which she immerses herself in a part.

Already in 1984 in Steven Poliakovs *Breaking the Silence*, she was being referred to as the finest actress of her generation. Her Rosalind in *As You Like It* was a blithely intelligent reading playing her as an inspired sexual experimentalist, full of passion and razor-sharp wit. Her creation of Madame de Tourvel, in Christopher Hampton's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, was a memorizing, tempestuously executed performance. Reviewing Lorca's *Yerma* at the National Theatre in 1987, one critic wrote; "occasionally one witnesses in the theatre, an individual performance so intense, so detailed, so complete, that every moment is engraved on the mind." And I think we can guess who he was referring to there. The *Hedda Garbler* at the same theatre in 1989, "the finest performance of an ever imposing career, full of mystery, revelation, contradiction and concealment; see it for Stevenson's definitive performance".

She achieved the near impossible in not allowing herself to be upstaged by John Malcovich in Lanford Wilson's *Burn This*, and matched him electrically moment for moment. In Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* in 1991, we're told "Juliet Stevenson's shuddering mutation from a damaged but affectionate wife into the obscene sadist of her own nightmares is a perilous exploration of the human psyche, well beyond the usual boundaries of acting." And finally, Martin Crimps *The Country* in 2000, "she acts her socks off"; Daily Express.

Her extensive filmography includes *Drowning by Numbers*, *Emma*, *The Secret Rapture*, the Bafta Award-winning *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, Anthony Minghella's seminal film and *Bend it Like Beckham*. Most recently she appeared alongside Colin Firth and Jim Broadbent in the film adaptation of Christopher Hampton's and *When did you last see your father?*.

Key television roles have included *The Politicians Wife*, in the mid 1990's, the controversial 2003 drama *Hear the Silence*, in which she played the mother of an autistic boy, and last year's *Place of Execution*, playing an investigative journalist unravelling the clues to a 40 year old murder.

She was awarded the CBE in 1999 and has received numerous stage and film awards including two Laurence Olivier Awards for Best Actress, for her work with the RSC and also for *Death and*

the Maiden. And she received a Bafta-award among numerous other film awards for *Truly, Madly, Deeply*.

Juliet Stevenson's commitment to humanitarian causes is famous and manifest and she's a regular spokesperson in particular for injustices relating to children, refugees and victims of torture. Last month during refugee week and alongside Michael Palin, Tony Ben and the Archbishop of Canterbury among others, Juliet took time out of her West End schedule to attend Solesbury World; the country's first centre for refugee children, where she spoke with the occupants and read a Nigerian story as part of the Simple Acts campaign. In 2007 she took over from Sir Alan Ayckbourn as president of the Unicorn Theatre for Children where she's been a highly committed, active and supportive patron. Throughout her career she's spoken forcefully about the position of women in roles and areas of authority in the theatre and more recently about the personal challenges in combining parenthood with the demands of performance. Earlier this year, she returned to the stage after a comparatively long absence to play the part of Stephanie Abrahams; a wheelchair-bound violinist increasingly paralysed by multiple sclerosis and possibly based on the cellist Jacqueline du Pré. In Tom Kempinski's play *Duet for One*, she plays a two-hander between Stephanie and German psychiatrist Dr Feldmann played by Henry Goodman, who shares her passion for music and the play focuses on her unimagined future and her unresolved past. Watching these two perform together, wrote the Daily Telegraph "is a master class in fine acting; there isn't a single moment that feels false or overplayed and Stevenson's performance is all the more powerful for its restraint and palpable intelligence". The Evening Standard said "as with some heroin who shields herself from her past, Stevenson magnificently erupts in a volcanic outpouring of fury and tears and succumbs to hopeless dejection, it is the performance of a lifetime." Although hopefully there will be plenty more of those in both hers and ours. The play opened up the Almeida Theatre in January and transferred to the Vordul Theatre in May where it plays until August, so none of you have any excuse for missing it.

So astonishingly, Juliet will be on stage in London in less than 5 hours and we're especially grateful for her presence here today.

So Chancellor I present to you one of Britain's most distinguished and intelligent artists on stage, film, television and soon to be Doctor, Juliet Stevenson.