

Graduation 2009

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Juliet Stevenson

Thank you Chancellor, fellow students - if that doesn't seem cheeky, ladies and gentleman, Michael. I actually never went to University so this amazing ritual and ceremony here today is all very new and strange to me and I can't help feeling that I'm having one of those odd professional dreams, you know where you're sort of trying to do your job but everything is happening in an unfamiliar order. So I'm on stage, under lights in front of an audience, in costume but I don't remember having any rehearsal. I'm not sure what the play is and I certainly don't recall auditioning for the role and strangely the curtain call happens before the show.

But anyway I am very, very delighted and honoured to be here today and to be receiving this doctorate from the University. Particularly this University and actually Michael has stolen my thunder because I was going to choose this moment today to reveal a little known fact that I am, the original, Essex girl.

As he told you, I was indeed born in this county in Kelvedon – a few miles down the road. And although we left there when I was just about 3 months old, its significance as my birthplace has always been important to me. I'm an army child and I went on to have a very peripatetic childhood; moving from one army base to another all over the world. So from Kelvedon to Singapore to Germany to Australia to Malta back to Germany again and numerous other army bases. And I've always felt rootless, conscious that I come from nowhere in particular, so Kelvedon and Essex have always offered me some sense of belonging and even of home.

But on the other hand I'm not sure I should be here at all really. I am aware that as an actress, I come from a long tradition of rogues and vagabonds and ladies that don't perhaps belong in learned and respectable institutions, ladies for whom the height of their ambition might be to find themselves ending up as the King's mistress. An ambition which I should quickly add, I have yet to fulfil. But I don't want to belittle our profession because I'll leave that to The Sun and The Daily Mail, not forgetting The Times and its more fragile moments.

In fact, over the last 30 years of working in a culture that is increasingly obsessed with celebrity and more and more patronises, personalises and trivialises actors and the work they do. I have sought in every way I could, to have the potential seriousness, the power and the value of the work we do, understood and recognised. So I'm particularly grateful to the University for this degree in the weight and recognition that it offers that particular pursuit.

And on that note I just want to say a few words to the students of the East 15 Acting School who are here today and we all know where because they are the rowdiest lot, wearing their hats at very crazy angles. Coming here I find myself thinking of that moment in my own life where I stood, as you do today, on the threshold of the profession.

When I began at 21 years old, I thought that theatre could change the world and that it should, 30 years later I might have to admit that it hasn't but as the Chancellor said in his opening address, actors are relentless optimists and I am too, and I hold on to a deep conviction that we can change peoples hearts and minds. And that by bringing our own truths to bare, with as much rigour and imagination as possible to the telling of other peoples stories, that we have the capacity to generate greater understanding of the human condition and in small but significant ways, to build tolerance and compassion; that has to be our dream.

So to those of you who are about to step into this profession, I just want to say this; hang on to your own sense of value and don't allow the profession and its vagaries to decide your worth. Take

yourselves, as actors, seriously. Be ambitious for yourselves and your careers but also for your aspirations in what that work can be; to move people, to lead them towards greater understanding, to enlighten, to reveal and to humanise; to make the world a better place.

Good luck to you all and thank you very much indeed; it's a great honour to receive this degree.