

Graduation 2012

Oration for Honorary Graduated David Yates

Orator: Professor Michael Fry

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon David Yates.

David Yates graduated in 1987 with a degree in Government from the University of Essex, before switching to his current career. This would be the direct equivalent of a student studying theatre at East 15 ending up as Prime Minister. He comes laden with awards and approbation and the list of his television and film credits reads like an inventory of the most significant screen dramas of the past few years.

Born in Merseyside, David followed his Essex degree by training at the National Film School at Beaconsfield and Georgetown University in DC, having had unswerving ambitions in film direction since seeing Spielberg's *Jaws* as a young teenager (seven or eight times).

He began his directing career with an award-winning short film *When I Was a Girl* which he also wrote, although it's not, as far as we're aware, autobiographical. A number of other small, independent films followed, before he switched to television and the BBC.

His television work has produced some of the most iconic series of recent times. He won his first BAFTA for *The Way We Live Now*, a 2001 four-part television adaptation (by the ubiquitous Andrew Davies) of Anthony Trollope's novel, with David Suchet as Auguste Melmotte, a shifty, disreputable banker.

David's Essex degree may have been utilised on his next major production, a political thriller involving corruption at senior government level. Generally acknowledged as one of the finest television dramas ever, Paul Abbott's six part series *State of Play* starts with the murder of an MP's researcher and a drug-related killing. The deaths are investigated by a journalist from *The Herald* newspaper (played by John Simm) abetted by his colleague (Kelly Macdonald) and his idiosyncratic editor – a droll performance from Bill Nighy that finally brought him to national attention – even though he was replaced in the American film version of the script by Helen Mirren. (David didn't direct the film version – and it wasn't that successful).

There followed the rather charming adaptation in 2003 of nine-year-old Daisy Ashford's *The Young Visitors* with a very funny Jim Broadbent, Hugh Laurie and Lyndsey Marshal, and the defiantly less charming *Sex Traffic* in 2004, a hard-hitting and complicated social and political drama about sexual exploitation in Eastern Europe, tied in with immorality, manipulation and American capitalism – often in the same individuals. The film garnered eight BAFTAs and four RTS awards, the Jury Prize at the Reims International Television Festival and a Golden Nymph at the Monte Carlo Television Festival.

Richard Curtis entrusted him with the direction of his post *Love Actually* film *The Girl in the Cafe*, again starring Bill Nighy and Kelly Macdonald. A civil servant in the Treasury takes a girlfriend to a G8 summit, where she accosts the Prime Minister about his lack of commitment to third world debt and poverty in Africa. It won an Emmy for Outstanding Television Movie.

David has commented on why he has sometimes favoured the medium of television: 'It allows for variety and speed. While television productions usually complete in weeks, films take months'.

He subsequently spent the next six years working on the Harry Potter films.

"I hadn't read a word of it or seen any of the other films. It wasn't part of my world,"

However producer David Heyman had decided that the franchise needed a sharper tone and moral compass and David's work on the series was rated so highly that he ended up directing all of the four remaining films – more than any other director and of course working with some of the greatest current British actors.

Another objective in employing him was the performances he draws out of his casts: David Heyman has frequently commented on how "David is a fantastic actors' director", while David himself suggests that 'I like to create an atmosphere where actors feel safe enough to take risks. I certainly don't believe in being a macho bully; I'm not interested in frightening good work out of people.'

Even his first film, *The Tichborn Claimant* in 1998, based on a true story about the disappearance and apparent reappearance of a wealthy nobleman, had just a modest first cast that included Stephen Fry and Sir John Gielgud.

Because we have some of our filmmaking students in the audience, we should also refer to his early independent short films, which include *The Weaver's Wife*, *Oranges and Lemons*, *Good Looks* and *Punch*.

At the end of last year David acknowledged the rumours that, not content with his work on the most successful children's novel ever, he was about to start developing a film based on the most successful children's television series, and next year he will direct a film version of *Doctor Who*, commissioned by Jane Tranter, Head of BBC Worldwide.

First up however, in typically unpredictable style, comes a film version of the victorious, though now slightly unacknowledged St Nazaire raid by the British Commandos against the Nazis in 1942, which earned five Victoria Crosses, the largest number ever awarded for a single action. Most things connected with David Yates – now even his subject matter – seem satiated with superlatives.

In 2010 he received the National Film and Television School's Honorary Fellowship for Outstanding Contribution to the British Film and Television Industry, joining the likes of Richard Attenborough, Alan Parker and David Lean.

In 2011 he won the BAFTA Britannia award for Artistic Excellence in Directing.

In 2012 he became a Warner Bros-based film producer through his own company.

And now – this.

At Essex he set up the *Film and Video Society* having been awarded a small arts bursary by the University, so we've decided to take most of the credit for his career.

Which is why, Chancellor, I now present to you, David Yates.