

**CARLETON UNIVERSITY
COMMENCEMENT**

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**Speaking Remarks
Peter A. Herrndorf
President and CEO
National Arts Centre**

Chancellor Garneau; President Van Loon; Professor Dornan; distinguished faculty members; special guests; parents and families (who, I suspect, have been looking forward to this day with an unusual combination of pride and relief); and most of all, fellow graduates.

Let me begin by thanking Carleton University for the great honour you've given me this afternoon. I'm deeply touched... and I'm proud to be a member of the Carleton class of 2004.

Secondly, I want to congratulate all of the graduates here today on a major achievement – you've finally made it! You've handled everything that Carleton University could throw at you over the past few years: all of those exams; the countless essays and term papers; those gruelling “all nighters”; the impossible course load; those totally unreasonable professors... and finally, of course, the absolutely exhausting round of graduation parties. I can only say that if you survived all of that, you should be able to handle the so-called “real world” with relative ease.

I've spent a lot of time working with university students in the past few years... and I think that this generation of graduates is the best I've ever met – you're knowledgeable, humane, self reliant, confident... and appropriately skeptical about “conventional wisdom” in all of its forms.

When I attended my commencement exercises as a student, I always cringed a little when I heard speakers delivering the worst kind of homilies and clichés about the “torch having been passed to a new generation”. As a result, I can promise you that I won’t inflict that kind of rhetorical flourish on all of you this afternoon.

Instead, I’d like to use this occasion to say a few words about this remarkable... and somewhat improbable country of ours, and about the seminal role that the arts have played in re-defining Canada as a nation over the past twenty-five years.

Much as Pierre Elliott Trudeau did on the political front in the 1970’s, Canada’s artists have been the “trailblazers” in putting us on the international map. Our artists have had the talent, the courage and the imagination to create powerful and original work... and they’ve had the drive and the energy to compete successfully with the very best in the world.

And all of that artistic success has played a critically important part in changing our international image and reputation: from the Canadian stereotype of a hard working, compassionate but somewhat bland society... to a more accurate and contemporary view of Canada – a country that’s increasingly seen as innovative and creative, quietly entrepreneurial, and tremendously effective when it chooses to compete on the world stage.

Let me start my comments about the arts with a simple assertion. There's more artistic talent... and more creativity... in this country today than at any time in our history. And Canadian artists are doing incredible work the world over.

Our artists are arguably Canada's most important "export product", and increasingly, they symbolize Canada for much of the world.

When many of you in the graduating class travel through Europe, Asia or Latin America this summer, I want you to "test" my thesis. Ask the people you meet what they actually know about Canada. They'll probably tell you that they've never heard of most of our politicians... that they've never heard of our business leaders (with the possible exception of Conrad Black)... or even of our hockey players. But I suspect that they'll tell you that the people who really define Canada for them are almost always our artists – artists from a wide range of disciplines.

They'll tell you about our remarkable fiction writers, who are among the very best in the world... and who occupy shelf space in even the smallest bookstores around the globe. Two years ago, three of the six finalists for the prestigious Booker Prize in Britain were Canadian writers, and Canadian Yann Martel won for his book, *Life of Pi*. Another recent Booker winner, Margaret Atwood continues to write memorable books year after year... and I'm willing to make a small wager that she's going to win the Nobel Prize for Literature some day. For years, Alastair MacLeod's stunning short stories were Canada's best kept secret. But since his first novel *No great Mischief* won the international Impac

Dublin Literary Prize (the world's richest prize, incidently), he's a huge star. He joins such other internationally acclaimed Canadian writers as Michael Ondaatje, who became a literary cult figure after *The English Patient*; Anne Marie MacDonald and David Adams Richards, who have won admirers around the world for their evocative treatment of life in Atlantic Canada; the late Carol Shields, whose gentle but penetrating insights earned her both critical acclaim and runaway best sellers; Mordecai Richler, the wittiest and most original writer of his generation; and, among others, Rohinton Mistry, Guy Vanderhaege, Wayne Johnston, Alice Munro and Jane Urquhart.

And for my money, the best non-fiction work of this decade was done by Toronto writer, Margaret MacMillan. Her book on the Paris Peace Talks – *Paris 1919* – is required reading for anyone who want to understand the tragic roots of the conflict in modern day Iraq.

Take feature films and television. At the Academy Awards in February, Montreal's Denys Arcand won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language film for *The Barbarian Invasions* – a riveting and disturbing look at the way we deal with the terminally ill. Michael Moore's highly publicized documentary assault on the American gun culture – *Bowling for Columbine* – was produced, interestingly enough, by a Canadian: Michael Donovan of Salter Street Films in Halifax. David Cronenberg and Atom Egoyan continue to create quirky and ideosyncratic feature films like *Crash* and *Ararat* on a regular basis. And Canadian actors starred in at least six major US network drama series over the past season – Kiefer Sutherland, as Jack Bauer in *24*; Kim Cattrall, who played Samantha in

Sex in the City (a character described in an American newspaper earlier this week as “sexually heroic”); Victor Garber in *Alias*; Kelly Rowan in the *O.C.*; Jill Hennessy in *Crossing Jordan*; and Tom Cavanagh in *Ed*.

What about comedy? The best ongoing comedy show on North America television – *Saturday Night Live* – has been produced by a Canadian (Lorne Michaels) for the past twenty-five years. And the *Saturday Night Live* roster of Canadians in recent years tells you how gifted (and funny) our comedians can be – Dan Ackroyd of *Ghostbusters* fame; the endlessly peripatetic Jim Carrey; Eugene Levy of SCTV; Martin Short (who’s about to do a one-man show on Broadway); Ottawa’s own “shock Jock” Tom Green; Rick Moranis; Eric McCormack (from *Will and Grace*), Matthew Perry (from *Friends*), Michael J. Fox... and of course, the incomparable and irrepressible Mike Myers. The man who created the comedic characters in *Austin Powers* that almost all of you have tried to imitate at one time or another... and whose current movie *Shrek* (he’s the voice of *Shrek*) has grossed \$313 million in just three short weeks.

And closer to home, the wickedly funny Rick Mercer of *22 Minutes*; Montreal satirist Yvon Deschamps, and the political comedy of Roger Abbott and Don Ferguson of the Royal Canadian Air Farce.

And in music? Well, Avril Lavigne and Alanis Morissette are so hot that the Sunday New York Times did a major profile on the two of them last month. And USA Today ran an entertainment section cover story on Lavigne just two weeks ago. Diana Krall is the best

known jazz singer in the world, and is in the middle of a sold out, six-month world tour. Shania Twain and Michelle Wright have cornered the market again in country music. And k.d. Lang is back in a big way as well, kicking off the Canadian leg of her North America orchestra tour in Vancouver on Monday of this week. As the Globe and Mail said on Wednesday: “She bookended (her homage to her fellow Canadian artists) with Neil Young’s *After the Goldrush* and Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah*, instilling them both with a pure, simple reverence that lifts these classics into a whole new stratosphere”.

In most parts of the world, audiences line up for blocks to buy tickets to an Angela Hewitt piano recital, to attend a Pinchas Zukerman performance with the National Arts Centre Orchestra... or to hear a Céline Dion, Joni Mitchell or Oscar Peterson concert. And Americans are just beginning to discover the blandishments of the Bare naked Ladies.

What about theatre? The cutting edge Quebec director Robert Lepage regularly stages new shows around the globe. The Stratford Festival’s production of *King Lear*... starring the legendary Christopher Plummer... took Broadway by storm this season... and was up for two Tony Awards last weekend. And Cirque du Soleil has created a new theatrical art form, by completely reworking our ideas about circus. They started out performing acrobatics in communities across Quebec and Ontario. Now you can take in their multi media shows when you go to Las Vegas, Disney World or the Far East.

Over the past few years, the NAC's Denis Marleau has opened new productions to rave reviews at both the Avignon Festival in France... and the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland; singer Louise Pitre generated the same kind of notices in her smash Broadway hit, *Mamma Mia*; Luc Plamondon's stylish productions of *Notre-Dame-de-Paris* and *Roméo et Juliette* were big hits in Montreal and Paris; and Ottawa's Pierre Brault took his one-man show, *Blood on the Moon*, to Ireland last year.

If we had a little more time, I'd love to tell you about some of our other arts disciplines. We have great dance and theatre companies like the National Ballet in Toronto, La La La Human Steps in Montreal and the Shaw Festival at Niagara-on-the-Lake... and we have a number of superb orchestras and composers. We're fortunate to have the Canadian Opera Company and singers like Ben Heppner and Richard Margison in this country, bringing originality and great professionalism to their work. We have world renowned visual artists, and half a dozen internationally acclaimed museums and art galleries across Canada. And CBC Radio is arguably the best radio service in the world.

We've also produced some of the great cultural impresarios in North America: City TV's Moses Znaimer, who completely redefined the concept of local television over the past twenty years; Mark Starowicz of the CBC, who produced the brilliant seventeen-part Canadian history series on CBC Television... and instinctively understood that Canadians had a real hunger for learning more about their roots; Garth Drabinsky, who brought such passion, showmanship and controversy to the theatre; producer Robert Lantos, who makes feature films that matter... and make money; and Toronto's David

Mirvish, who proves year in, year out that Canadian commercial theatre can be both successful and adventurous.

My point in all of this is that we live in an amazing time for creativity in Canada... and all of us should be very proud of that.

The artists... and the arts organizations... that I've mentioned all have several important characteristics in common. They had the audacity to dream big dreams. They've had the courage to pursue those dreams. And they've had the tenacity to keep going until those dreams came true.

I'm tired of hearing people talk about Canada as a bland place, full of timid and diffident people.

It's just not true anymore. It wasn't true when I was graduating. It's certainly not true now. And it sure as hell won't be true after you've had your turn. Each of you can help make this country even more dynamic, even more adventurous, even more of a player on the international stage. Each of you can contribute your creativity and your spirit of innovation.

This is a wonderful time to be a Canadian. It's a wonderful time to be graduating. And it's a wonderful time to dream big dreams. Go ahead! Be bold. Have the audacity. It's time that Canada became known as a "risk taking nation".

I hope that the Canadian artists that I've talked about today will serve as role models for all of you – to encourage you to avoid the comfortable, the safe and the predictable... and to inspire each of you to pursue your individual dreams with passion and great single-mindedness. This country deserves no less.

Thank you very much... and have a wonderful graduation.