

October 21, 2000

## **Dalhousie University Commencement**

**Halifax, Nova Scotia**

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

Chancellor Day; President Traves; Distinguished faculty members; Parents and families; Fellow graduates.

Let me begin by thanking Dalhousie University for the honour you've given me this morning. I'm deeply touched... and I'm proud to be a member of the class of 2000.

I'm also tremendously pleased to be back home at Dalhousie, where I spent three wonderful years in the mid-1960's. I received a superb legal education... but then much to the consternation of my parents... and the surprise of my classmates, I decided to chart a completely different career course as a journalist, as a broadcaster... and ultimately, as a performing arts executive.

And now more than three decades later I return to Dalhousie as perhaps the only graduate of the Dalhousie Law School who has ever received a Doctor of Laws degree... for not practising law.

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 Dalhousie University could throw at you over the past few years all 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 that 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 morning.

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 since the 1960's.

Much as Pierre Trudeau did on the political front, Canada's artists have been the trailblazers in putting us on the international map. They've had the talent and the courage 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 an important part in changing our international image and reputation: from the stereotype of a hard working, compassionate, but somewhat bland society... to a more accurate picture a country that's increasingly seen as innovative and creative, quietly entrepreneurial, and tremendously effective when it chooses to compete on the world stage.

I graduated from Dalhousie during the "heady" early days of ferment and change in Canada, and it was an exciting time for all of us. We had a new flag... as the symbol of an increasingly proud and independent nation; we were getting ready for our centennial celebrations in 1967; and our country was clearly developing a new sense of self-confidence.

A new generation of political leaders was also emerging with Pierre Trudeau at the forefront, bringing glamour and sophistication to his role. He, of course, would go on to dramatically re-define the way the world thought of Canada... at the very time that two influential Canadian thinkers Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye were changing the way the world thought about culture and communications.

And a new generation of Canadian artists were also doing their part to change Canada's image around the world. Two pianists were already regarded as the world's best Glenn Gould in the classical field and Oscar Peterson in jazz.

Mordecai Richler, Margaret Laurence and Robertson Davies were writing provocative fiction that set new standards of excellence.

In Quebec, the quiet revolution was producing remarkable artists like Jean Gascon, Monique Mercure and Jean-Louis Roux... and Gilles Vigneault was already singing the haunting lyrics to "Mon pays".

Celia Franca, Betty Oliphant and Ludmilla Chiriaeff were beginning to develop a stunning array of young Canadian dancers, and Jon Vickers and Louis Quilico were singing at opera houses around the world.

The Canadian popular Music scene was bursting with new energy poet songwriters like Leonard Cohen, Gordon Lightfoot, Joni Mitchell and Neil Young were just beginning to dazzle Canadian audiences. South of the border, the music industry wondered what we

were putting in the water up here. How could a small country spawn such a remarkable array of creative genius?

Many of us thought we were living in a golden age of Canadian culture. Even today, some of my friends still look back at that period through rose coloured glasses.

But I have news for all of you. The golden age of Canadian culture is only just beginning. Year by year, decade by decade, the Canadian arts community has grown stronger and stronger, and our artists have become even more gifted.

Today, there is more talent in this country than in any time in our past. And make no mistake about it, Canadian artists are renowned the world over.

Our artists have become our most important "export" product... and they symbolize Canada for much of the world.

Take feature films. Norman Jewison is the king of mainstream cinema, and his film on Hurricane Carter last year was the best film of the year... no matter what the Academy Awards voters concluded. David Cronenberg has created a global market for his unique brand of highly intelligent, quirky films like *Crash* and *The Fly*. And Atom Egoyan has been hailed as one of cinema's great young geniuses, with films like *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Felicia's Journey*.

What about comedy? Well... many of you are probably fans of Tom Green's form of "shock" comedy... and you'll know that he's hosting Saturday Night Live on November 18<sup>th</sup>. He'll be just the latest Canadian name on an illustrious Saturday Night Live roster that includes Producer Lorne Michaels, Mike Myers (of Austin Powers fame), Dan Ackroyd and Martin Short. Michael J. Fox and Jim Carey have become major box office forces in Hollywood.

And here in Nova Scotia, the Donovan Brothers at Salter Street Films have unleashed the cast of *This Hour has 22 Minutes* on Canada and I can hardly wait to see how Mary Walsh deals with Stockwell Day over the next few weeks if a federal election is called tomorrow.

What about theatre? Director Robert Lepage regularly stages new productions around the world. Luc Plamondon took Paris by storm two years ago with *Notre Dame de Paris*, while this month Michel Tremblay, George F. Walker, Morris Panych and Daniel MacIvor are all doing plays in Washington, D.C. the biggest Canadian invasion since the war of 1812. And Cirque du Soleil has created a new theatre art form, by completely reworking our ideas about circus. They started out performing acrobatics in tents in communities in Quebec and Ontario. Now you can take in their multi-media shows when you go to Las Vegas... Disney World or the Far East.

And in music? Well... Shania Twain and Terri Clark have cornered the market in country music; Sarah MacLachlan and Alanis Morissette have done the same in alternative rock;

and Lara Fabian, Roch Voisine and Bruno Pelletier are huge stars in Europe. In most parts of the world, people line up for blocks to hear a Ben Heppner concert. And last week in Berlin... a city with five resident orchestras, Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra received a number of standing ovations, played two encores... and generated rave notices in the German press.

In architecture, Moshe Safdie and Jack Diamond have been transforming the look and skyline of Jerusalem... and dozens of other Canadian architects are doing commissioned work around the globe.

How about literature? The book-makers in London are laying two-to-one odds that Margaret Atwood will win this year's Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin*. It's the fourth time she's been nominated. And I'm willing to put money down that she's going to win the Nobel Prize for literature some day soon. Michael Ondaatje continues to enrich and beguile readers with each new book.

And Anne Marie MacDonald, Alistair MacLeod and David Adams Richards have won admirers around the world for their evocative treatment of life in the Maritimes.

Around the world, Canada is known, not for our politicians, nor for our business leaders, not even for our athletes. We're known and admired because of our artists, echoing the Indigo Bookstore slogan "the world needs more Canada".

Increasingly, it's also becoming a part of our approach to Canadian foreign policy. Let me illustrate that by telling you two anecdotes.

The first involves foreign officials lobbying our government. When Canadian Cabinet ministers travel abroad, it's often an occasion for high-level diplomatic negotiations. Both sides hope to use the minister's visit to open new doors, create new opportunities. Two years ago, Heritage Minister Sheila Copps went to Beijing. Sure enough, senior people in the Chinese government used her visit to ask for a very special favour. It seemed that Céline Dion was on a world tour that included Hong Kong. The Chinese officials asked the Heritage Minister if, please, please, please, would she use her good offices to convince Céline to perform in the rest of China as well.

Céline Dion never did get to the rest of China on that tour... but I can think of a couple of hundred Canadian business leaders who wished they had that kind of pull in China!

The other example involves our government using Canadian stars to pursue its own goals. When Prime Minister Chrétien brought together world leaders for a symposium on federalism last year, he invited President Clinton, who quickly agreed to come. And he invited President Ernesto Zedillo... but the Mexican President replied that, unfortunately, he had prior commitments.

The Prime Minister really wanted Zedillo there. He asked his office for advice, and was told that President Zedillo is probably the world's biggest fan of the Canadian jazz singer

and pianist, Diana Krall. The Prime Minister arranged for Diana Krall to provide the entertainment at the symposium, and phoned President Zedillo once again. "OK, OK, OK. Done!" said the Mexican President, "You've just closed the deal."

You know that the world can't be such a bad place... when affairs of state can be influenced by our ability to produce a talent like Diana Krall.

Canada and Canadians gain great strength from the arts. In our international reputation certainly. In terms of economic impact definitely. Domestic revenues of \$1.2 billion in the film, video, and audio-visual sector; \$1.1 billion in records and CD's sold; and \$400 million in theatre tickets underline that point convincingly.

And it clearly enhances the quality of our lives. Last year, 13 million Canadians went to the theatre, for example. And there were more than 40,000 theatre performances in Canada. That says something about how we spend our time, what we value, and what we seek in our lives.

It says something, as well, about what our national priorities and our governments' priorities ought to be. Every one of us supports Canadian culture through our tax dollars. This is the investment that makes talent development possible in a sparsely populated country, next door to the biggest cultural exporter in the world. It lets Canadian voices be heard... telling Canadian stories. And it's the artistic equivalent of leading-edge research and development.

But there's a much more important reason why I wanted to talk to you today about the Canadian arts. Canadian artists from every arts discipline provide a lesson for all of us. It's a lesson I hope you will take to heart as you prepare for the next phase of your life.

Each of the artists I've mentioned has had the audacity to dream big dreams. They've had the courage to pursue big 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. Aren't you?

It's just not true any more. 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 Canadian. It's a wonderful time to be graduating. And it's a wonderful time to dream big dreams. Go ahead. Have the audacity. It's time that Canada became known as an audacious nation.

As I've indicated, it's already happening in the arts. Let's make it happen, as well, in every facet of our national life and let's make sure that the careers each of you choose is shaped by your willingness to dream big dreams. This country deserves no less.

Thank you very much.