

## OPENING OF THE PAUL DAVENPORT THEATRE

Paul Davenport

June 16, 2009

What a wonderful evening this is. And what a lovely theatre we celebrate tonight. It is a thrill for me to see so many dear family, colleagues, and friends in this room. Let me offer a few special thanks, on the understanding that I wish I could thank each of you individually for making my time at Western such a happy one.

I must begin with my wife Josette. We will celebrate our fortieth wedding anniversary in Tours, France on July 12. I would not be here tonight without her unflagging support, in good times and bad, while I worked long hours and spent too many nights on the road. Merci profondement, cherie. Our children come next—Eric, Leslie, and Audrey—who have been the greatest joy for me and Josette throughout our marriage. Eric and his wife Karen have four children—Evy, Eric, Vivien, and John--and grandma and grandpa just love having them around.

I am also thrilled that my three sisters could be here tonight: Kathy from Tampa, Florida, Jane from Chatham, New Jersey, and Liz, who lives here in London. Liz is here with her children, Karen and Josh. All three of Kathy's children are here: Jim from Fort Pierce, Florida, and Charlie and Betsy from Muskegon, Michigan. Charlie is here with his wife, Rae and their son, Matt. Betsy is with her husband, Ken. And I have two uncles here from Virginia, Seymour Paul and John Paul. The opening of the theatre has created a mini family reunion, for which I am very grateful.

Our speakers tonight included five people who have been extremely kind and supportive to me. Bob Wood (Dean, Faculty of Music), thank you for allowing me so many opportunities to take part in events involving our great Don Wright Faculty of Music. Michele Noble (Chair, Board of Governors), thank you for the strong support the Board has given me throughout my fifteen years at Western. Fred Longstaffe (Provost and Vice-President, Academic), thank you for leading an administration that has never let me down. Emily Rowe (President, University Students' Council), thank you for leading a USC which has been a strong, positive voice on campus during my watch. And Carol-Lynn Chambers (President, Alumni Association), thank you for all the support Western has received from alumni during my terms here.

I need a special word for my dear friend John Schweitzer, who has been so kind to me and so supportive of Western during my time here. John, thank you for the stunning work of art that graces the entrance to this beautiful theatre. It will stand as symbol of the synergy between the visual arts and performing arts, two areas where Western faculty and students excel.

Let me thank those who have performed tonight, and first and foremost Louise Pitre. What can I say about this magnificent artist, a graduate of our Music Faculty and an honorary doctorate of Western? I saw her on Broadway as Donna Sheridan in *Mamma Mia!* in 2002; she dominated the stage as an actress, singer, and dancer. She and her husband Joe Matheson put on a wonderful production of *Could You Wait?* at the Grand Theatre in the fall of 2007, and they met with admiring fans and colleagues from the Don Wright School of Music after the

performance. She is an international superstar, and yet she has remained purple and proud of her Western roots. Louise, tu est formidable!

And what about the other great Western performers we have just heard:

- our Convocation Brass conducted by Jim McKay, who contribute to the best Convocations in the country!
- a superb student percussion group, showing us the range and excitement of the marimba.
- Stephan Sylvestre, who played a beautiful *Alborada del gracioso*, a piece by one of my favorite French composers, Maurice Ravel.
- Sonia Gustafson, whose beautiful voice I've heard so many times on campus and off, and particularly in Maggie's Jazz Club in downtown London, with John Noubarian and Darryl Stacey, who were with her tonight.
- And Ted Baerg and Mark Payne, who were fabulous as always. Ted and I performed the Barber of Seville together once in Von Kuster Hall. Don't worry—I didn't sing. Ted sang, and I sat on stage while he lathered me up and shaved me with a long dull razor. It was a fundraiser for Music. I lost a pint of blood and we raised a couple hundred dollars. Ted said it was worth it.

I also want to thank all who have worked closely with me over the last fifteen years: the Vice-Presidents, Associate Vice-Presidents, Vice-Provosts, Deans, Chairs, Directors, staff in the President's Office, and senior staff generally. Your leadership on campus is at the core of our accomplishments over the last fifteen years. Working with our faculty, staff, students, and alumni, you have made Western a different place. Your friendship and support of me has been remarkable, and I will never forget you and what you have done. I know that you all will offer that same commitment and friendship to Dr. Amit Chakma as he becomes your new leader.

The American poet Wendell Berry once wrote, "If you don't know where you are, you don't know *who* you are." *Where you are* for some people can be one place; in Berry's case, it is an area of rural Kentucky where he grew up and still lives. Although for many of us in this global society, *where you are* changes over time, Berry's line loses none of its compelling force. Berry rings true for me: the places I have been define in large part who I am. I have lived in New Jersey, Stanford in California, Toronto, Montreal, Edmonton, and Touraine in France, and in each case the physical and cultural place has had a profound effect on me. I want to talk about two places tonight, the wonderful theatre around us, and the beautiful campus on which it sits.

Over the last 15 years I have had dozens of wonderful experiences watching Western students and faculty perform music and drama. Let me refer to three such experiences in Talbot Theatre. In the late 1990s Josette and I attended a performance here of *Orchids*, a play written by Dr. Jeff Nisker of the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry. The play explores the complex ethics of using genetic testing to reject embryos with genes deemed to be undesirable. The disease at the heart of the play is Tourette's Syndrome. At the heart of the play are two women, one who has the disease and wants to get pregnant, and another who does not have the disease but wants her embryos checked to eliminate any that have the Tourette's gene. There are a great many Canadians with Tourette's syndrome who lead happy, productive lives, but if the

genetic testing had been used on their mothers to eliminate all embryos with the gene for Tourette's, they would never have been born.

Nisker's play shows, perhaps better than any textbook presentation, why we need to be extremely cautious in using the growing array of medical technologies available to us. This creative approach to education and learning, the blending of art and science, the emphasis on the ethical dimensions of society, all are part of what make a Western education special, and in this case and many others that remarkable experience occurred in this place, this extraordinary theatre at the heart of our beautiful campus, home to so many outstanding University productions for over four decades.

My other two Talbot Theatre experiences can be told more briefly. In March of 2001 I saw the musical *Blood Brothers* here with my daughter Audrey, who was then acting in London and would be named the following year as Best Supporting Actress in London theatre in the first annual Brickenden Awards. *Blood Brothers* is a remarkable musical with book, music, and lyrics by Willy Russell, produced and directed at Talbot by a Western student, Michael Rubinoff. It was a fabulous production and made me very proud of the students, on stage and off, who had put it together.

Three years later I was back in Talbot with a cameo appearance as Max in *Cabaret*, a wonderful student-faculty production that showed again that great creativity we have come to expect of Western students. It was the Saturday of March Break Open House, and I have told the story of the day in a short piece entitled "A Day in the Live of the Best Student Experience," which is on my website. After the cameo appearance, which included an unscripted kiss from Emcee, I took my seat in the balcony and a voice behind me said, "Lucky thing you've got a hot shot producer here tonight to look after your career." Without turning my head, I responded, "Call my agent." At intermission I learned the voice was that of none other than Michael Rubinoff of *Blood Brothers* fame, who by then had a Western Law degree and was producing theatre in Toronto, showing me once again that the creativity of Western students does not end when they leave our campus.

This marvelous theatre is part of Canada's most beautiful campus. Our physical campus, and the 45 acres around Gibbons Lodge, including the 25 acres of forest to the east of the house, have inspired me for all of my 15 years here. In my first term I cut three kilometers of trails through the forest and since then I have walked them on a regular basis, at times with faculty, staff, students, alumni, and my grandchildren. Main campus is a joy to me—I feel a spring in my step whenever I am here. Our buildings, trees, and green space in the lovely valley of the Thames River create an ideal setting for academic collegiality and excellence. I distributed a paper in 2000 entitled *Preserving Canada's Most Beautiful Campus*, asking our community to think about our physical environment in all the major decisions that we make.

The University of Western Ontario is fundamentally a group of people, present and past, who have created an outstanding institution of education and research. Our University has been transformed over the last 15 years by the hard work and talent of faculty, staff, students, and alumni, and tonight I want to thank those four key groups that make Western what it is. Working together, we have much to be proud of:

- we have raised our entering undergraduates grades from below average in Ontario to grades that are among the highest in the country
- we have increased our retention and graduation rates to levels competitive with the best North American public universities
- we have created the *best student experience in a leading research-intensive university in Canada*, celebrated in our Mission Statement and confirmed each year for the past seven in the Globe and Mail survey
- we have increased Master's enrolment by 65% and PhD enrolment by 150%
- we have increased research expenditures by over 300%
- we have raised over a half a billion dollars in private funds in support of our academic mission, including student aid and faculty chairs
- we have increased full-time faculty positions by 23 %, and staff by 17%
- and we have seen an extraordinary renewal in our full-time faculty and staff: over two-thirds of our current faculty, and over two-thirds of our current staff, were appointed since 1994-95

The University *is* its people. And yet these people gather, and have gathered in the past, in a particular *place*, which as Wendell Berry reminds us, helps define who they are. As we face the challenges of limited budgets, pressures to expand, and competition to be the best, we must never forget the importance of preserving the beauty of the place we occupy. Our alumni understand this: they gather in Canada's largest alumni reunion every year to see each other, and to experience the beautiful campus which played such an important role in their lives.

Western's faculty, staff, students, and alumni can take great pride in what they have accomplished over the last fifteen years. As I stand before you tonight, two wishes rise in my heart. May this wonderful theatre remain a place of bold and innovative creation where faculty, students, and staff come together to make great music, drama, and dance. And may this theatre always be at the heart of a great University founded on creative thinking and free expression, where the arts and sciences are celebrated in equal measure in education and scholarship which inspire us all to be our best and to seek the common good.

Thank you all for fifteen wonderful years. I will miss you, each and every one.