

# The Honorary Graduate: Alex Jennings

## The Orator: Paul Crowley

### Alex Jennings is to be awarded the Honorary Doctorate of the University of the West of England

Pro Vice Chancellor, President, Trustees, Principal, staff, graduands and guests. It is my pleasure and privilege as Chairman of Trustees and Emeritus Professor of the University to present Alex Jennings for the award of Honorary Doctorate of the University of the West of England.

In 2013, Alex Jennings recorded a radio programme entitled Inheritance Tracks for BBC Radio 4. He was introduced by the presenter as an actor who graced the National Theatre and the RSC where, I quote, "Oliviers dropped into his hands like kittens shaken out of trees". I'm not sure this image is necessarily the best way to describe his achievements: Alex is the only person to have won three Best Actor Olivier Awards for Comedy (Too Clever by Half in 1988), Drama (Peer Gynt in 1996) and Musical (My Fair Lady in 2003).

In this BBC Radio programme, Alex wanted his children to inherit the song 'Bring me sunshine' sung by Eric Morecombe and Ernie Wise because it reminded him of his childhood, sitting round the television with his family, watching the Morecombe and Wise show and laughing. He remembered that his mother rarely laughed at the show but laughed at the rest of them laughing with Eric and Ernie. Those were happy times that brought everyone together.

Alex was born on the 10 May 1957 and lived in Essex, first in a semi-detached in Upminster and then upmarket to a detached in Brentwood. His mother loved classical music and his father, who we welcome here this afternoon, loved jazz. With such a background, it is unsurprising that Alex learned to love all forms of music: whilst growing up with Tamla Motown and Stevie Wonder, Alex fell in love with a world that no longer exists, the world of Hollywood glamour and from afar, worshipped his complete hero, Fred Astaire. Quoted in an article from the Guardian in 2007, Alex confessed, "Growing up, I loved golden-age Hollywood, British films of that period, too. Those are my desert island movies. You can still learn from those actors: James Stewart, the passion of his acting, never stops astonishing me. I wanted that. I wanted to be Fred Astaire, that's what I wanted."

From an early age, Alex naturally performed on holidays, producing funny voices and acting the clown. Although he was slightly diverted from his future career by reading English and Theatre at a University in the Midlands, it was his training at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School that provided the skills, techniques and platform for his entry into the acting

profession. Indeed, Alex has excelled in every area of a working actor's world: from reading poetry at the Ryedale Festival's truth's disguise series to receiving 8 awards for audio book readings; for working in films playing as diverse a set of roles as Prince Charles and Alan Bennett; for starring in the West End as Willy Wonka in Charlie and the Amazing Chocolate factory and for a huge number of roles in many television series and dramas, including King Leopold in Victoria and the Duke of Windsor in the Crown.

However, Alex appears to find the process of film making not always to his liking. He is quoted as saying: "there's so much sitting around. After your third day of not doing much, you think, 'This isn't proper work'". Similarly, after recording Cranford, the BBC period drama, alongside Judi Dench, Michael Gambon and Imelda Staunton, Alex was quoted as saying, "It was amazing, a hoot, but there were quite a few of us in it who were doing not a lot. That's a sign of the times".

Alex recognises the support he has received from his partner Lesley, here today, his parents and his children, especially when he becomes 'a bit of a nightmare' before a press night or becomes obsessive about chasing work, especially when Alex followed his dream and the family lived in L.A... As partial compensation, Alex in the BBC Radio Programme Inheritance Track series decided to leave his children a track by Prince called 'It's going to be a beautiful night' explaining that Prince was cooler and less complicated than Michael Jackson and a great live entertainer who the family memorably saw at the O2 and fell in love with. And like all good parents, Alex likes to embarrass and please the kids in equal measure and thus is still more than happy to boogie the night away to Prince in front of the children and their friends. Indeed, Alex may grace us with a few dancing moves as he steps up to receive his award in a few minutes' time!

I would like to close by quoting Nicholas Hytner, the former Artistic Director of the National Theatre who was asked to provide supporting evidence for this award and who ranks Alex as amongst the pre-eminent actors of his generation. He wrote: "In July 1985, I arrived in Chichester to direct the Scarlet Pimpernel, a creaky old melodrama by the Baroness Orczy, starring the 62-year-old Donald Sinden as Sir Percy Blakeney, a foppish baronet described as being on the right side of 30. Among the reasons why it turned out to be a joyous experience for us all were that Donald Sinden himself was a massive sport. Up for anything, including having the mickey taken out of him. And that, chief among the group of young actors playing 'as cast', most of whom have gone on to have dazzling careers, was Alex Jennings. Even in the way he carried a tray at Sir Percy's garden party, he made it clear that he wasn't going to be playing 'as cast' one moment longer. You've never seen a tray carried with such authority, wit and style.

"We've worked together countless times since. Next after the Scarlet Pimpernel was The Country Wife at the Royal Exchange Theatre and this time he himself was playing the fop,

Sparkish. He swept on stage wearing a big diamond brooch that spelled out the words I AM RICH and cleaned up. In shows we've worked on together, he's played a chilling Gestapo chief, President George W. Bush, a shattering Leontes, Benjamin Britten, a mercurial Subtle in The Alchemist and Alan Bennett. The only thing they had in common was their excellence. Always authoritative, always witty, always stylish – certainly. Always wonderfully articulate and he can include a thousand people without raising his voice: technically, he couldn't be a better example for his successors at Bristol. But always grounded in truth

"You couldn't be honouring a better actor or a better person".

Pro-Vice Chancellor, on behalf of the Governors of the University and the Trustees of the Theatre School, I present Alex Jennings for the award of Honorary Doctorate of the University of the West of England.