

Graduation 2006

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Stewart Till CBE

Thank you for that very generous oration and obviously, more importantly, thank you Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, and the University of Essex for this, this wonderful honour which you've bestowed upon me today. The abridged version of my address, which is aimed primarily at the graduands, is to be lucky and work hard, and then you can enjoy the sort of well paid and fun career that you might find in the film industry. The only slightly longer version goes something like this.

The creative industry in general, and film industry in particular, is the new black. The creative industries in the UK now account for over 11% of the gross domestic product, with a growth that is twice the national average. In 2005, the creative industries in this country employed over 2 million people. Last year, worldwide, the consumer spent over \$70 billion consuming films, with an annual compound growth, over each of the last five years, of 6.5 % and there is, I believe, no other mature industry in the world (and film has been going, cinema has been going, for over a hundred years so it certainly qualifies as mature) that generates such a high annual compound growth rate. In the UK alone, the consumer in the last 12 months has spent over £6 billion watching films in the cinema, on video or on television. And, as in the main Britain can no longer compete in many of the traditional manufacturing industries, as the Orator said, it is in film, television, fashion, music design and computer software where we can lead Europe and the world. So, if you want to hitch your career to this particular economic bandwagon or, if for just equally valid but more shallow reasons, like going to Cannes film festivals, premieres in Leicester Square, flying upper class on Virgin, having your own Blackberry and generally hanging out with Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, here is my advice.

Work hard, don't compromise and never accept second best. It's no coincidence that Richard Curtis, wrote 18 different drafts of the Four Weddings and a Funeral script before it was filmed. Or Tom Cruise arrives in Leicester Square two hours before a premiere so he can meet his fans and sign his autograph. Or in the last Superman film there were over 1,300 different special effects, each one painstakingly set up and executed. Or the last King Kong movie, which as you'll know ran for well over three hours, every single frame was drawn and storyboarded before a foot of film was shot. Or while hundreds of animators are currently working six or seven days a week producing next year's Shrek 3 (in which Shrek discovers the young Artie, who turns out to be King Arthur) Dreamworks are already writing the script for Shrek 4. Incidentally it was the head of Dreamworks, Jeffrey Katzenberg, who once said to his executives, "If you don't come in on Saturday, don't bother to come in on Sunday."

The two other things you'll need, apart from hard work, are talent and luck. But I believe you can personally develop and grow both. There's a famous sportsman, Gary Player, who once said "It's a very strange thing but the more I practice, the luckier I get". Similarly I don't think you are born great at something, I think you learn skills and talent through hard work and application. As Will Smith once said "I love what I do. I take great pride in what I do and I can't do something half way, three quarters, nine-tenths. If I'm going to do something I go all the way." Or, to go back over one hundred years and quote Thomas Edison, who not only invented the light bulb and the record player, but also the movie camera, he nailed it (and if you want to move into the film industry you should learn phrases like, "he nailed it," it's sort of very Hollywood) he nailed it when he said, "Genius is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration". Now I know this, I was not particularly successful at Essex, I struggled to match the intellectual capabilities of many of my colleagues when I did my Masters degree here in '74 but I was fortunate at the same time that in various summer holidays I did some desperate jobs, I worked in a laundry, I delivered the post and I worked as a cleaner in a children's home. And I realised that I had no automatic right to fame or fortune, or perhaps even more importantly, to a job or career where I could look forward to Monday morning instead of dreading it. And this is where luck comes in.

It is the spring of 1974, Essex was by far and away the most political university in the country, the students were standing arm-in-arm with the miners, picketing the power, picketing lecturers, our football team that I played in lost our star centre forward as he was arrested by the police for picketing. Chaos was around, it was a very political environment, almost hard to imagine. And I was just about to finish my postgraduate degree and, probably like many of you, had no idea what career I wanted to follow. I went to the Essex Careers Advice and they asked me to fill in a form and one of the questions was, "If your village was putting on a play would you: a) organise the chairs; b) write the play; or c) sell the tickets?" Now most of the students at the time filled in 'other', which was "burn down the hall" as a gesture of solidarity with the proletarians but I ticked, "sell the tickets" and the careers advisors who were, you know, steeped in the politics of Essex at the time, were so appalled, that they said, "Go sup with the devil, go and work in advertising!" And I did, and my career from then took off, and certainly well enough to the extent that I've had the privilege of addressing you today.

You probably haven't noticed it but most films come in three sections or acts. The first act is where the character forms and develops, and their situation is set up. The second act then takes them on a journey as the plot unfolds, and finally there is a third act that pulls everything together and produces a resolution. Let me quote one example, in next month's Miami Vice. In the first act, some of you may remember on the television series, in the first act we meet our two heroes, the Miami detectives, Crockett, played by Colin Farrell and Tubbs, played by Jamie Foxx. We establish their character, they're tough, they're smooth, as Jamie Foxx says, "Smooth is how we do it". They come across the evil drug baron and the set up is they have, as you would expect, to wipe him out. The second act they go undercover, they go to Hawaii, Colin Farrell falls in love with Gong Li, as happens, and they encounter and engage the baddie and of course in the third act is the resolution and the film comes out in a couple of weeks. There is the most highly recommended shoot-out at the end of the film. I mention this for two reasons. One, it allows me to put the expenses I've incurred against the company and secondly, because my suggestion to you, ladies and gentlemen of Essex University who have just graduated, that you are at the end of your first act. And looking forward, this is now, you have established your character and you have to now, establish your journey. And you have to decide whether your life is going to be a comedy, a thriller or a drama. I also hope, for your sakes, the plot of your life is more decipherable than the plot of Miami Vice, but that is something else!

Finally, Winston Churchill, when he was 81, shortly before his death, spoke at a university graduate ceremony. He tottered forward, in very poor health, and said "I'm going to say nine very important words to you, which you should always remember." He leaned forward and said, "Never give in, never give in, never give in". I have today said a lot more than nine words, and undoubtedly with a lot less impact than Churchill, but nevertheless I hope some of my advice makes sense and helps you follow your dreams.

Thank you for your time and perhaps even your attention.