

Graduation 2010

Oration for Honorary Graduand Griff Rhys Jones

Chancellor, Senate has resolved that the Degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Griff Rhys Jones.

It is a genuine pleasure and truly an honour to introduce this year's University of Essex Honorary Graduand.

It is also fairly daunting to do so, as the custom of beginning such speeches with a friendly joke is made virtually impossible when introducing any figure involved in comedy, especially when that figure is such a well respected comedy actor, writer, director, and producer.

The task of condensing the prodigious talents, achievements and outputs of Griff Rhys Jones into a five-minute oratory is both easy and difficult in equal measure: **easy** because there is such a wide variety of his achievements and accolades to choose from; and **difficult** precisely because there is such a wide variety of his achievements and accolades to choose from.

Griff is best known to most of us through his television comedy programmes such as the groundbreaking satirical sketch show *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, which ran from 1979-1982, with Rowan Atkinson, Mel Smith, and Pamela Stephenson, and the massive hit series, *Alas Smith and Jones*, with Mel Smith, from 1984 to 1998.

However, not only a gifted and celebrated comedy actor and writer himself, Griff (again, with Mel Smith) has been responsible for producing and supporting some of the most innovative and widely acclaimed British comedy of the following generation. Through the enormously successful production company TalkBack Productions, hugely popular television series such as *Smack the Pony*, *Da Ali G Show*, *I'm Alan Partridge* and *Big Train* were brought to almost cult status worldwide.

Griff's new production company *Modern Television*, which is based in Wales, makes arts and documentary programmes, and is currently producing a series on the history of the countryside for the BBC, and he is also currently working on a BBC2 series on ethnographic art, which we very much look forward to.

Other highly regarded television work written, starring and/or produced by Griff has included both one-off documentaries and documentary series, such as *Three Men in a Boat*, in which he rowed up the Thames from London to Oxford with fellow comedians Dara Ó Briain and Rory McGrath, which led to several successful sequels. Other documentaries include *Mountain*, for which he climbed fifteen British peaks in 2006, and in *Greatest Cities of the World*, (2008-2010) over two series he visited a different city each week including London, New York and Paris, and Rome, Sydney and Hong Kong. During the summer of 2009, Griff presented the BBC programme *Rivers*, and as is very well know, he is the presenter of the BBC's *Restoration* programme, which began in 2003 and ran for three series.

Griff is also a highly celebrated stage actor having played a number and variety of both comic and dramatic roles to great success. In 1984 he was awarded the Laurence Olivier Theatre Award for Best Comedy Performance in *Charley's Aunt*, and again in 1994 for Best Comedy Performance for his performance in *An Absolute Turkey*. Griff has recently starred as Fagin in Cameron Mackintosh's acclaimed production of *Oliver!* in London's West End from December last year finishing the run very recently on 12th June earlier this year.

As I am sure you all know, or have intuited, the list of Griff's other marvellous achievements in stage, screen and publishing could keep us here for the rest of the day, if not indeed the rest of the weekend. That's really not an exaggeration.

However, I must move on to Griff's connections with Essex and the East Anglia region, which are both biographical and work-related with charitable work that indirectly and directly benefits this county and its inhabitants.

At the age of eight, Griff's family moved to Harlow and he attended schools in both Epping and Brentwood; indeed the famous Brentwood School, to which he remains a great supporter.

He attended and graduated from Emmanuel College in Cambridge, reading History and English. At Cambridge he joined the prestigious *Cambridge Footlights Club* (of which he became Vice-President in 1976), and was also president of the *Amateur Dramatic Club* during his time there.

Griff's brother and sister both live in Colchester, and their mother nearby in Suffolk. Griff himself also lives and has lived for many years in Suffolk very near the border with North Essex, and since 2007 he has been the Vice-President of the River Stour Trust, which is a volunteer organisation that works to secure the conservation of the flora and fauna along the river as well as restoration of the river as a navigable waterway. This, of course, is of particular benefit to the people of Essex and Suffolk as the River Stour forms much of the border of these two counties.

Also, it has just been announced this week that Griff will be the President of the newly renamed *Civic Voice*, (formerly The Civic Trust), which is a nationwide charity that campaigns for the creation of better places within the urban and rural environments of the UK.

I would also briefly like to mention Griff's long held support and association with the visual arts, as this forms one of the reasons why I was asked to introduce him at this ceremony, as I work here at the University of Essex as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Art History & Theory.

As well as producing television programmes on the arts, Griff for many years has been and continues to be a collector of art, which he himself describes as an amateur pursuit but which of course is driven by the very serious passion of the 'love' of art, as is described by the word 'amateur'. In particular Griff has many art works specifically by Essex and East Anglian artists, and in 1997 organised and curated a special open-submission exhibition with art works by eighty-one Essex and Suffolk artists, entitled *On The Border*, at The Wolsey Art Gallery in Ipswich and Firstsite at The Minories in Colchester. This was undertaken collaboratively with one of the UK's very best contemporary artists, the 1995 Turner Prize winner Mark Wallinger, who is also a son of Essex having been born and brought up in Chigwell.

And finally, I would like to mention another of Griff's passions: sailing. Griff is an avid and accomplished yachtsman who has been sailing the waters off the counties of East Anglia for many years, and his sailing has taken him on many adventures all around the world. Griff is the proud owner of a classic 1953 yacht, a 45ft centreboard sloop named "Undina" that has featured in some of his documentaries. Undina is indeed an appropriate name for a small yacht as it means "little wave", which of course one hopes for when sailing, but also the name Ondine is the name of a mythological water goddess whose story narrates a powerful fable of faithfulness, trust and passion.

To end this oration talking of faith and passion is appropriate in view of the ocean of hopes and dreams that are laid out before our graduates today.

The life and work of Griff Rhys Jones, a life lived by navigating passions, a life of a committed amateur, if I may, shows us that what grows from the days of a university education is a life of

commitment to one's passions. The true value of a university education is not what you 'get', so to speak, at university, it is what is started at university, an ethos we might say, and one must have faith in and fidelity to those passions in navigating towards the life that one wants to make. You must make a life for you, of course, but also more importantly you must make a life to share and a life worth sharing with one another. Whether through the heights of comedy and the dramatic arts, or in the thick of business and the thickets of undergrowth we see in the life and work of Griff Rhys Jones that a life lived as 'an education', as a 'navigation' if you will, can be a continually expanding and surprising series of paths that diverge and converge, which have influence and import both close to home and far afield. Such a life is an inspiration to our graduates this year as they complete the beginning of *their* education.

Chancellor, I present to you Griff Rhys Jones.