

Graduation 2011

Oration for Honorary Graduand Chris Mullin

Orator: Valerie Fraser

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Ignacio Durán Loera.

I think the best way of describing Ignacio Durán's field would be 'cultural diplomacy', cultural diplomacy not as a career, but as a way of life: building bridges between people, helping to generate ideas, finding ways of turning ideas into reality. Using the arts to foster understanding between peoples and cultures, in order to make the arts a vital, meaningful part of our lives and of society: this is what he does.

Born in Mexico City, his father was an important figure in the Mexican film industry so the family home was always full of film stars – I imagine this is the origin of his particular brand of cultural diplomacy: he learned early on that a hospitable context can encourage informal conversations (and in this family home we're talking about conversations with people like Luis Buñuel); and conversations oil wheels in ways that formal meetings in offices cannot. Food must have been a topic of conversation: I understand that Ignacio's wife Luz Elena learned a particularly good recipe from one of the heartthrobs of Mexican cinema. [Pedro Armendáriz]

The young Durán turned his back on the cinema for a few years, studying and practising law, but in 1970 he came to study at the London Film Institute and worked for the BBC and ITV before returning to Mexico to set up a production company producing feature films, documentaries and TV programmes. This flurry of activity in the early 1970s sets the tone for his future career.

In 1976 he was appointed Deputy Director of the National Institute of Fine Arts. This was an exceptionally lively time for the Institute, a time when governments still believed in the social rather than economic benefits of culture, as typified by Durán's introduction of a remarkable arts journal, the *Semana de Bellas Artes*, published weekly in editions of 300,000 and circulated as a supplement in the major national dailies.

In 1988 he was appointed Director of the Mexican Film Institute, where he generated what is now known as the 'new' Mexican cinema. He helped launch the careers of several young directors who are now Hollywood superstars [eg Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón]; and under his stewardship *women* directors emerged as a significant force in Mexican cinema. He was himself also a practitioner, working on several films including Arau's *Like Water for Chocolate* of 1992.

I've got to skip over a great deal – spells abroad as a cultural attaché, his Vice Presidency of one of Mexico's TV giants, TV Azteca – to allow time to mention his UK and especially his Essex-related activities.

Since Durán took up the post of Minister of Culture at the Mexican Embassy in London in 2004 it would be hard to have missed Mexico's cultural presence in the UK: the big Frida Kahlo exhibition of 2005, for example, which marked the beginning of a new interest in Latin American art at Tate Modern. Then more recently - when the British Museum proposed the last Aztec Emperor Moctezuma as a subject for one of their Great Rulers series, Durán immediately recognised the potential. Moctezuma arouses ambivalent feelings in Mexico – overseeing the defeat of the Aztec Empire doesn't quite fit the image of a Great Ruler – but Durán persuaded the Mexican government to come on board, and it was a huge success. With this as with other major events

organised under his watch, associated activities – films, poetry, concerts, cookery demonstrations – all help to create a buzz and attract new audiences.

And so to Essex – and just a selection of the many events facilitated by Durán: in 2004 the heart-stopping performances, the first in the UK, by superstars of Mexican wrestling Hijo del Santo and Blue Panther (I remember the then-Vice Chancellor, Ivor Crewe's white knuckles as he watched the performance in the students' union); Kahlo's Contemporaries in the university gallery – an exhibition of little-known works by Mexican women of Kahlo's generation, for which Ignacio's wife Luz Elena designed a magnificent Day of the Dead altar for the gallery window. Appropriately, given the surrealist-leaning art exhibited inside the gallery, the gods arranged for some unseasonably hot sun, and the candles on the altar slowly melted down the altar steps. And then to mark the bicentenary of Mexican independence Durán funded the artist Felipe Ehrenberg to do a performance in the lakeside theatre. Another generous Mexican, complete with similarly generous moustache and rich sense of humour, Ehrenberg blended together contemporary performance and ancient Mexican iconography in a way that fitted perfectly with Essex's distinctive take on Latin American culture.

And, not surprisingly, Ehrenberg turned out to be an old friend of Durán. Friendships, networks, contacts, all fostered through sociability: for Durán there is no distinction between business and pleasure: it is in the social sphere that ideas are generated, where connections are established and friendships grow. This is where his cultural diplomacy really begins – not in the office or by email but over a plate of guacamole and a glass of tequila.

Chancellor, I present to you Mr Ignacio Durán Loera.