

GRADUATION ADDRESS OF MS LYNETTE MARAIS

**Thursday 16 April, 18:00 –
Faculty of Commerce (other than PDEM)**

RHODES UNIVERSITY GRADUATION 2009

I stand before you this evening to be awarded with the greatest accolade of my life because I was fortunate to have access to the arts as a young person. I'm grateful to my parents for having the wisdom and the insight to allow me to take on a career in the arts, which in 1962 was considered "high risk"!

I am honoured to be conferred with a Doctorate by Rhodes University in recognition that the arts sector in which I worked has been vital to growing the economy of this city, and at the same time growing the cultural fabric which has endowed South Africa with such a rich and diverse legacy.

Words don't come easily to me so I can only express my gratitude in simple terms to the Chancellor, Vice Chancellor and the Senate by saying "thank you".

My life as a passionate supporter for the growth of South African arts and the many talents of this country have endowed me with a precious legacy that has allowed me to recognise the public value of the arts for this remarkable country which we all call home.

The arts have a tremendous public value because apart from entertaining and stimulating audiences, the arts promote broad social and economic goals, which help to develop our societies. The arts become the "instrument" through which our artists are able to draw our focus to our consciousness, to our humanity, to our flaws, to our joys, to our fears, our hopes and our aspirations. Through the arts, cultures are preserved and the history of the times recorded.

John Ruskin said – 'Great nations write their autobiography in three manuscripts; – the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. No one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others; but of the three, the only quite trustworthy one is the last.'

I came into Arts Administration through a kind of "hands on" progression. Starting first as an actor, then stage manager, publicist, company manager and then "Arts Administrator" somewhat by default!

The Administrative Head of the drama department of the then Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT) was leaving and a suitable replacement, a male I might add, had not been found. From reliable sources I subsequently learnt that to tide the company over I was to be appointed in the interim and was sure to have a nervous breakdown within the first three months by which time a suitable male replacement would have been found.

Needless to say I did not have a nervous breakdown and began to thrive as the first woman to be appointed to a position of this level, within the four Performing Arts Councils, a position I held up until 1988.

A phone call asking me whether I would consider taking up the position of Festival Director of the then Standard Bank National Arts Festival presented an opportunity to work with all the arts disciplines. A daunting thought but certainly very challenging. So with my few goods and chattels I came to Grahamstown in 1989, back home to the Eastern Cape.

I arrived in Grahamstown at a turbulent time in our country's history. I had hardly touched base when I was asked to attend a meeting of the National Cultural Desk in Johannesburg. As a result many more meetings ensued and together with the Festival Chairman Professor Alan Crump and Professor Guy Butler and with the help of numerous concerned Grahamstown activists we formed an alliance with the National Interim Cultural Co-ordinating Committee. In October of 1990 the National Arts Festival was the first mainstream cultural group to back the cultural boycott in recognition of the imbalances in our society.

The following years were not easy but with the dogged determination of the Festival Committee and incredible support and encouragement from our sponsor Standard Bank we started on the road to change with the aim of making the Festival, through various programmes and initiatives, begin to address the imbalances of the past striving towards making the Festival accessible to all. This we continue to do and will do for many years to come.

Participation has certainly broadened and the programmes on offer have an aesthetic balance meaningful to all sectors. Broader audience participation, though greatly improved, is a long-term process that the Festival has no real control over. Until such time as there is an upturn in the economy, a redistribution and creation of wealth among disadvantaged sectors plus arts education for all, the numerical ratios of our audiences will not truly reflect the country's population.

Of course there were other challenges, ordinary practical ones like upgrading the technical facilities of the venues, trying to uplift the Festival to an international professional standard, thereby giving all artists a fair opportunity to present their work on the professional level they deserved.

This is an ongoing challenge as the National Arts Festival is the only festival in South Africa that does not practice any selection criteria for Fringe participation. Young emerging artists need a national platform where they can present their work in any one of the arts disciplines. How do they learn if they are not afforded the opportunity to try their wings in the national market? We all learn by our successes as much as by our mistakes. The opportunity to see, observe and work with experienced directors and artists is how one begins to learn to hone your skills.

Raising the funds / sponsorship required to support the operational and infrastructure required is a killer of a job! Without sufficient funding it is impossible to mount a festival of this nature.

But the good times certainly outweighed the challenges. I have loved working with the artists of South Africa, many I knew when I came here and have got to know many more. Something I will remember forever is how the arts community rallied when they knew the Festival was at the edge of a "financial" precipice in 2002. They gave generously of their talents at very little cost to the Festival, as they wanted it to continue and showed their appreciation for what it meant to them.

I will always be indebted to the members of the Festival Committee, both past and present, whose input and willingness to share their expertise and knowledge in their individual disciplines has been an ongoing educative and pleasurable journey.

Nobody can organise an event like the Festival without a team of dedicated people. How fortunate I have been to work with so many wonderful people all giving of their time, expertise and talents way beyond the call of duty. They together with the artists, technicians and the caring and supportive citizens of this very special city have made the past 20 years a labour of love.

I have truly had an exciting and rewarding career and I now wish to congratulate all of you graduating here tonight – may your dreams and ideals for the future become a reality. You have one firm foot on the ladder, climb it slowly and steadily knowing that hard work and sound business principles will take you to the top.

The worldwide organisation of Rotary has a four-way test that I have found useful to reflect on both in my business and personal life, which I would like to share with you. When you come to a crossroad ask yourself these questions to help guide you on which road to travel.

Of the things we think, say or do:

1. Is it the truth?
2. Is it fair to all concerned?
3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?
4. Is it beneficial to all concerned?

Good luck and God Bless

I thank you