

Conferral of an Honorary Doctor of Human Letters on Meryl Streep

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President, Indiana University

IU Auditorium

Wednesday, April 16, 2014

3:00 p.m.

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Friends and colleagues, good afternoon. It is my great pleasure to welcome you on this wonderful occasion.

Today, we honor Meryl Streep, simply one of the greatest actors in the world today, and, indeed, of all time, and a great friend of Indiana University.

As I am sure all of you are well aware, Ms. Streep is enormously distinguished in the worlds of theatre, television, and film and has been featured alongside many other famous and eminent actors.

Beginning her professional life on the New York stage, she quickly established her signature versatility and verve as an actor.

Over nearly four decades, Ms. Streep has portrayed an astonishing array of characters in a career that has cut a singular path from the theater through film and television.

She has received three Academy Awards, eight Golden Globes, and more nominations than any other actor, male or female, in the history of both awards.

Ms. Streep, it is a distinct pleasure to welcome you back to Indiana University.

We are also very pleased that a number of members of the Indiana University Board of Trustees are with us this afternoon. I ask them to stand, and as I call their names, I request that you please hold your applause until all have been introduced.

Please welcome Thomas E. Reilly Jr. of Indianapolis, chair of the trustees, MaryEllen K. Bishop of Carmel, vice chair of the trustees; William R. Cast of Fort Wayne; Philip N. Eskew Jr. of North Webster; Janice L. Farlow of Indianapolis; Patrick A. Shoulders of Evansville; and Randall L. Tobias of Carmel.

Please join me in greeting our trustees.

We are also delighted that Ms. Streep's husband, the distinguished sculptor, Don Gummer, has also accompanied her.

Please join me in greeting him.

2. "WITNESSES INSTEAD OF MOVIEGOERS"

Impressed by a tiny detail in the first moments of the film, *Silkwood*, a seemingly insignificant choice that revealed how thoroughly and completely she had thought through the role, critic Roger Ebert wrote that "[Meryl] Streep... build(s) characters so convincing that we become witnesses instead of moviegoers."¹

Fifteen years later, after viewing scenes from many of her films at the 25th Telluride Film Festival, where Ms. Streep received the prestigious Telluride Medallion, Ebert reflected further on her extraordinary talent.

¹ Roger Ebert, "Silkwood," December 14, 1983, Web, accessed April 11, 2014, URL: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/silkwood-1983>

“What is impressive...” Ebert wrote, “is that although she is, of course, a master of characters and accents, she is above all gifted at getting inside their skins, so that each character is fresh and new.”²

Today, Meryl Streep continues to be held in the highest esteem by film critics and scholars, by her fellow actors, by Hollywood’s leading directors, and by audiences around the world.

Over the course of nearly forty-years in film, television, and on the stage, she has earned nearly ever accolade imaginable, including a record 18 Academy Award nominations.

And, after this year’s Oscars ceremony, she also has the distinction of being part of the most re-tweeted “selfie” of all time.

3. MERYL STREEP AND INDIANA UNIVERSITY

While we have been privileged to host Ms. Streep on our campuses a number of times, some of you may still be unaware of her many connections to Indiana University.

She is, for starters, a Hoosier by marriage. Her husband of 35 years, the eminent sculptor Don Gummer, grew up in Indiana and attended Ben Davis High School before studying at the Herron School of Art and Design from 1964 through 1966. Mr. Gummer has a number of public art installations in the state, including on the Indianapolis and Bloomington campuses of Indiana University. And just one year ago, we celebrated the installation, at IU’s Cyberinfrastructure Building, of his magnificent stainless-steel-and-bronze sculpture, *Basic Action*, which was commissioned to honor the legacy of Indiana University’s 16th president, the late Myles Brand.

² Roger Ebert, “Streep at Her Best Exploring People,” September 7, 1998, Web, Accessed April 14, 2014, URL: <http://www.rogerebert.com/festivals-and-awards/streep-at-her-best-exploring-people>

Indiana University awarded Mr. Gummer an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters in 2009, and with the presentation of an honorary degree to Ms. Streep today, they will join a very small group of spouses who both hold honorary IU degrees.

Ms. Streep and Mr. Gummer have also been remarkably generous in supporting the Herron School of Art and Design over the years, and, in 2010, they were honored as members of the IU Foundation's Presidents Circle.

Also in 2010, Ms. Streep served as the keynote speaker for the IU Bloomington Colloquium for Women. As part of that event, Ms. Streep participated, on this very stage, in an evening of conversation with IU alumna Jane Pauley—also a sold-out event.

Her connections to Indiana University also include her friendship with Dennis Reardon, IU professor emeritus of playwriting, a friendship that dates back to the late 1970s when both worked with the legendary producer Joseph Papp in New York's Public Theater.

And, of course, she has worked memorably on stage and screen with IU alumnus Kevin Kline, who began his acting career in this very building, in IU's old University Theatre, now the home of IU's fabulous Cinema.

4. A CAREER THAT DEFIES HOLLYWOOD CONVENTIONS

Ms. Streep will, for many years to come, be celebrated not only for her timeless performances, but also for a film career that has defied Hollywood conventions.

Through her diverse roles, she has helped to broaden the range of subjects and the types of women portrayed by major stars in mainstream films.

Later in her life, by playing romantic leads in highly successful films like *Mama Mia* and *It's Complicated*, she has shattered film industry conventions about the kinds of roles women can play once they are no longer considered ingénues.

And, as film critic and journalist Karina Longworth points out in the introduction of the splendid new book, *Meryl Streep: Anatomy of an Actor*, “the sleight-of-hand that Streep performs on-screen also tends to obscure her extraordinary involvement behind the scenes. Without ever receiving a writing or directing credit,” Longworth continues, “Streep has unquestionably shaped her career and the roles within it as an auteur, breaking the mold of the actress as a passive vehicle for dialogue and direction by creating many characters, in whole or in part, through improvisation or by contributing her own dialogue.”³

5. EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF WOMEN

Off the screen, Ms. Streep has been engaged for many years in efforts to improve the lives of women.

She was one of the first women to integrate Dartmouth College, among 60 young women on a campus of around 6,000 men.⁴

For more than a decade, she has been a strong supporter of Equality Now, an international human rights organization that works to end violence and discrimination against women and girls around the world.

³ Karina Longworth, *Meryl Streep: Anatomy of an Actor*, (Phaidon Press Limited under license from Cashiers du cinéma SARL, 2013), 12.

⁴ Streep, Meryl. Commencement Address delivered May 24, 2003. University of New Hampshire. Durham, New Hampshire. Web, accessed April 11, 2014. URL: http://www.unh.edu/news/news_releases/2003/may/lg_20030524commencement.html

In late 2011, while on a press tour for *The Iron Lady*, Ms. Streep revealed that she had personally donated \$1 million to support the construction of a National Women's History Museum in Washington, D.C.

In Ms. Streep's words: "history until the 20th century was written by one member of the human family, and it wasn't the mother. It was dad. ...[A]nd what was important?" Ms. Streep asked. Again, in her words: "Movements of armies, sovereignty of nations, all sorts of things. But women were there all along, and they have incredible stories that we don't know anything about."⁵

Thanks to Ms. Streep's extraordinary career and her unparalleled artistry, there are, fortunately, scores of stories of incredible women that we do now know about.

To borrow from the wonderful video shown when she received the Kennedy Center Honors in 2011: "By disappearing into her roles, Meryl Streep has made the world visible to us."

And all of us are truly grateful.

6. CONFERRAL OF DEGREE

It is now our great privilege to formally recognize our candidate for an Indiana University Doctor of Humane Letters degree, Meryl Streep.

The honorary doctorate is the highest academic recognition that Indiana University can bestow.

⁵ As quoted in Rebecca Keegan, "Meryl Streep's Next Project: A National Women's History Museum," *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 2011.

While their accomplishments vary, all recipients of honorary degrees demonstrate the utmost in personal integrity and sincere concern for the public good.

I now ask Jon Vickers, director of the Indiana University Cinema, to escort Ms. Streep to the podium. Grand Marshal Mikel Tiller will assist in the conferral of the honorary degree.

Meryl Streep, Indiana University salutes you.

Throughout your lifetime, you have dedicated yourself to becoming a groundbreaking and masterful artist of unsurpassed quality, and you have shared your matchless skills with millions of fans throughout the world.

Your commitment to philanthropy, and especially your tireless efforts on behalf of women, are truly inspirational.

Thus, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Trustees of Indiana University, I am proud and deeply honored to confer upon you, with honor, the degree Doctor of Humane Letters with all attendant rights and privileges.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in recognizing Ms. Streep.

I would like to thank everyone who has joined us today.

I now ask you to please remain seated for a conversation to begin momentarily with Ms. Streep, moderated by Professor Barbara Klinger of the Film and Media Studies Program, and soon of the new IU Media School.

Now would you please join me once again in a round of applause for our newest IU alumna—Dr. Meryl Streep.