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Convocation Address by

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One of the reasons I refuse to be interviewed by newspapers or on television is that they always ask inane questions like: what is your favorite book? How is it possible for anyone to pinpoint a favorite book – or for that matter a favourite film? You can nominate your favorite dish which may be bangers and mash because you have a partiality for it. By nominating it you wish to convey that given an option you would rather have bangers and mash and not fish and chips or *biryani*. But when you declare, let us say, Brothers Karamazov to be your favorite book, you are saying that given half a dozen books to read, you would rather read Brothers Karamazov.

Books are for me, pure magic, festive, curious, and full of other lives and voices and quiet existences raised to the point of exuberance and excitement. Books portray and unearth characters who are perfectly ordinary to begin with and become extraordinary, books reveal to us the world as it is and, sometimes, as it ought to be. I pity those who are getting into the habit of reading a book on a computer. They do not know the pleasure of savouring the type faces and the binding and the feel of well-made paper. When you read a book there is no danger of seeing green pixels against a black background, nor mushrooms tumbling out of the upper margins of the screen.

Books in the words of Ackroyd, are the only testament to the humanity of human beings. My favorite book is the last excellent book that I finished, which if you must know was Anthony Sher's "Beside Myself"



I am frequently dubbed as a classicist. I do not mind this even though I know that the implication is that I belong to a breed, conservative in taste, thoroughly insensitive to all modern endeavors and blind to the wonders of the computer age. It speaks volumes for the anti-intellect culture which has spread all around us that the 'Classics' is regarded as something terribly old-fashioned, appreciated only by fuddy-duddies.

What is 'Classics'? What is 'Classicism'? Why are these words off-putting? The fault lies partly with ordinary dictionaries which tell you that it pertains to ancient Greek and Latin literature and art. I like the simpler definition that 'Classics' and 'Classicism' relates to objects of acknowledged excellence, outstandingly important.

I would like to submit that any creative work of the past – be it sculpture, painting, architecture drama, poetry which stimulates the depth of your imagination is 'Classics'. Needless to say that all things ancient are not 'classics', just as 'classics do not necessarily belong to an ancient world.

And so I find the Discobolus and the Parthenon, Michelangelo, Shakespeare and Lope de Vegas and Ghalib and many other works of prose and poetry to be 'Classics'. Except for the environment in which we live today, the terms 'Classics' and 'Classicism' when applied to anything from painting to music, from novel to drama, are normally terms of approval and admiration. The debates that 'Classics' initiate are only about which works of literature and drama are the very best.

The Greek mythology is one of the most common ways that 'Classics' first come to our notice. A great deal of theorizing has gone into the accounting of this mythology, especially in the 20th century. The story of Oedipus gave Freud a life-line. He announced to the world that the working of the human psyche was largely rooted in the incest of Oedipus with his mother, after killing his father. He gave us the term 'Oedipus complex' and a substantial part of the western world has since, looked upon familial entanglements in the light of Freudian terminology. Other terms such as 'Narcissism,' 'Epicureanism,' 'Bacchanalia' and their interpretations have proliferated throughout the world.

The Greek tragedies (classics already as far back as the 4th century BC) show us that unless there are norms and limits, which human society must fight to maintain, it will burst into chaos and ruination. From the time they were written (25 hundred years ago) these tragedies have been enacted not only in Greece but in far-flung places from Macedonia to Egypt.

And why, you may well ask? What is the fascination of these plays that depict the implacability of the gods and the stubborn – sometimes justified – defiance of the mortals? The answer is that they manifest the indomitable courage of men and women who choose death and destruction for their convictions. It is the human spirit that these tragedies glorify; the audience is ennobled through a process of Catharsis.

After the fall of the Roman Empire classicism, more or less, died. It was not until the Italian renaissance, centuries later, that it made reappearance. Renaissance classicism introduced a lot of new elements into European culture. What was considered to be classical was now more orderly, more structured. Trade – and contact – with Islamic cultures had a lot to do with it. The Muslims brought a flood of knowledge about and from the ancient Greeks plus their own contribution to mathematics, geography, physics, medical sciences, logic and celestial mechanics. The period also brought revival of

ancient art forms like the Greek tragedy. It is always worth bearing in mind that Shakespeare was a product of Renaissance classics.

Classics are not just a highly scholastic three years course for a degree at Oxford or Cambridge. This is the definition offered in the new collegiate published in Lahore. Classics are the calm restraint exercised over a savage and grisly world. The trouble is that we are always taught Classic as ‘High Moral Purpose’ and this is what alienates us from the ‘Classics’.

Before I am accused of being Westernized – or more pejoratively – a Westernized Oriental Gentleman, which is what the term Wog stands for, let me hasten to add that ‘Classicism’ is not the sole prerogative of the West. In art as well as architecture, in poetry and pottery, we have an enormous heritage of classics. In India the Sanskrit drama established itself as a distinct art form about the same time, if not earlier, than the birth of Greek tragedy. It was a form in which the spoken word, poetry and heightened prose remained subservient to the music and dance, central to the dramatic concept. The most enduring and enchanting classical art of the sub-continent is the raga-based music which is still pursued and practiced with great flourish.

Our experience of ‘Classics’ is invariably influenced by those who have gone before us. We experience Classics in the light of what previous generations have said, thought, and written about the ancient world. The classic cultures of Athens and Rome were themselves influenced by the Semitic and African cultures that were their neighbors. Part of the contemporary appeal of ‘Classics’ lies in the way that ancient writers confronted traditions of their world. In their works we see them debating what we now call ‘multi-culturalism’ of their own societies.

‘Classics’ do not simply enlighten us; they also jolt us out of our erroneous perceptions of certain epochs. A perfect example is that of Sultan Mohammed Tughlaq, who ruled India for twenty six years between 1325 and 1351 AD. We learned through our texts books that the Sultanate of Delhi attained its maximum size under Tughlaq. Not until the reign of Akbar, the great, – two hundred years later – would so much of India be again united under one ruler.

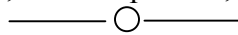
Tughlaq was a highly cultured and generous king, a most accomplished calligrapher, well-versed in Persian poetry. He also had a thorough knowledge of mathematics, logic, physics and Greek philosophy.

We were taught all this, but when we read Ibn-e-Batuta (Classics) whose antecedents as a historian are as valid as Herodotus, we discover that contrasting with all these brilliant qualities was a dark side which made him terrible and incomprehensible.

Describing his court, Ibn-e-Batuta records – and I quote:

“To reach the interiors of his palace one had to pass through three doors. Outside the first door was a number of guards and also trumpets and flute players...Outside this door were also the platforms where the executioners sat. When the Sultan ordered a man to be executed, the sentence was carried out here, and the body left lying for three days and three nights. Thus anyone approaching the palace would come first on corpses; heaps and mounds of them were always lying there. Everyday hundreds of people, chained, pinioned and fettered, are brought to this hall and those who are for execution are executed, those for torture tortured and those for beating beaten.”

Thucydides too, has given us a powerful account of the failure of Athenian democracy. He denounced Athens as a ‘Tyrant city’, fed on extortion and responsible for wholesale massacre of fellow Greeks and, when expedient, cynical genocide.



I have spoken at some length about ‘Classics’, because your school, (too your university I should say) is actively engaged in studying classical art and its influence on the present. Your faculty inculcates not just the importance of imbibing the best of the classical traditions of the past, but forging a new, synthesized future of aesthetic disciplines. The work of your alumni – and your students bears me out.

You know that the standard of architecture, not just in this city, but throughout the country is dismal, yet you studiously pursue the task of teaching Art and Architecture. I know that the standard of acting in our county is abysmal and yet I insist that theatrical arts must be studied and practiced. We cannot give up what we think and believe is right.

There is no denying that we have talent in our county. I have always maintained that talent needs talent to blossom. We at NAPA are trying our best to make those, who seriously wish to pursue a career as performers to gain sufficient confidence and a sense of pride in their profession. Our society has a lingering suspicion that actors – and musicians too, for that matter – do not have a proper job and therefore do not do any real work. We still regard an actor to be a vagabond and a wastrel. Pray allow me to talk a little on the nature of performing arts.

The visual arts include painting, etching, architecture and sculpture; the performing arts are drama, music and dance. Film is a different art form (and it partakes of both the visual and the performing arts). The visual arts deal solely with what we can see and feel and they exclude sound.

The performing arts have several characteristics in common. They require interpreters as well as creators. A playwright writes a play but actors perform it. A composer scores a piece of music, which is performed by singers and instrumentalists. Another quality shared by the performing arts is that they require an audience. When an audience watch a film in a cinema there are no performers on stage; there are only images on a screen. As a result there is no interaction between the audience and the performers. No

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Guests; students of Indus Valley, Parents, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I would certainly not have been presumptuous enough to stand here and deliver what is frighteningly known as the keynote address, had it not been for the persuasive charm of Noorjehan Ara Bilgrami. When I glance at the list of redoubtable intellectuals who have Addressed you in the past, I consider myself fortunate to be included amongst such august worthies. Where do I begin?

It was the parodist Calverly who said, "People in the west are always getting ready to Live; people in the East are always getting ready to die." Most of the estimatable Speeches and address begin with a similar pseudo-profundity. It may have been a truism once but nowadays it isn't. Still it is a fairly smart topic for an inter-varsity debate. I can draw no significant inferences from it except to say that, for me, life has edge over death if only because it is only in life that you can taste uncanned escargots at chez francois on the left bank of paris.

matter how closely a film follows the story of a play, no matter how involved we are with the people on the screen, we are always in the presence of an image, never a person.

If we pause to consider how often we use theatre as a metaphor to describe our activities in daily life, we would be forced to believe that the theatre is the liveliest of human activities. Everyday we think or say "so and so is highly theatrical" or, melodramatic, or he behaves like a prima donna. When we are unable to enter children's world we say they are play-acting. We refer to battle grounds in which war is fought as its theater. Indeed, theatre is an activity that we use to describe how we live.

In the performing arts a performance occurs only when the event takes place – not before not after. All the performing arts are like an electrical connection; the connection is not made until positive and negative wires touch each other and complete the circuit. A performance is half the connection; the audience is the other half.

And yet an audience does not participate physically in a performance; it does so vicariously. (I am, obviously, not speaking of pop-music concerts). So real become the events on stage that in a sharp and believable performance the audience forgets who we are and where we are. As an audience, we imaginary world we see before us. We can be transported to another country, to another century. The experience comes about because of the phenomenon that Coleridge called "willing the suspension of disbelief". We want so much to believe in what is happening on the stage that we put aside all literal and practical considerations in order to enter into the world of drama – drama not just as in

drama, but drama inherent in music, in words, in speech and in movement. This is what makes art. This is what gives the performing arts the ability and the power to enrich our lives. This is what makes us more human, more accommodating, and more tolerant.

Theatre is an art form with its own characteristics, its own quality, coherence and integrity which a concert by a rock or pop star – can never aspire. Theatre is simply what cannot be expressed by any other means, a complexity of words, movements, gestures that convey a vision of the world inexpressible in any other way.

And what is the focus of the theatre? The actor.

Ever since history began men and women have mimicked other people and have told stories, imitating the voices and gestures of the characters in these stories. But not everyone who mimics well is an actor. The process of acting involves much more than a capacity to reproduce another man's speech pattern, gestures or a facial tic.

The cast of our amateur productions on the stage is mostly made up of producer's favorites or those who are good at mimicking. The audience is made up of the friends and relatives of the cast and crew with a few stray play-goers. Judging from the notices in the press written either by columnists – whose forte is economics or sociology or politics – or written by reporters who are normally engaged in such duties as covering a seminar on pollution or a convention of steel manufactures. Every amateurish dramatic production is hailed as “enthraling”. We are one of the very few countries in which mediocrity has become scintillating.

On the opening night of my production of Chekhov's ‘The Seagull’ a great play if ever these was one accosted by a reporter who had been send by his editor to review the play. I shall not name the newspaper. He wanted to know the name of the writer as he put it. Was he an American? He enquired and had he written any other plays? I ask you.

Most people in our country have been exposed to seeing the so-called DRAMA shows on Television where a receptionist or a model, a seamstress or a housewife is launched on to the screen as a leading actress. In some of these shows D.R.A.M.A, in bold capital letters, appears on the upper right corner of your screen throughout the programme to keep reminding you that you are watching a dramatic presentation and not a cookery programme. I cannot imagine a bigger insult to a viewer's intelligence. Be that as it may, watching such bilge leads us to the question, “Can anybody act?”

If the only required skills were walking, talking and looking right, then the answer could easily be yes. “Then why bother training?”. The answer is that the skills of acting go way beyond walking, talking and simply looking right.

The technical demands of incarnating a stage role night after night along with the challenge of interpreting and understanding all manner of characters from widely differing styles and media –require skills far more extensive than people credit.

Actor-training has a diverse history. Many Asian and Oriental performance styles (including the Indian Kathakali and the Japanese Kabuki) have what is known as vertical traditions. That means the skills and repertoire have handed down for centuries from one generation to the next, and the training focuses on students learning physical gestures that encode specific cultural and social symbols.

This is why we see stock characters rather than people. The villain would leer in a certain manner because this is how villains are meant to leer, the hero would assume a prescribed heroic stance and the comedians would adopt grotesque postures to be comical. We still see examples of this in our cinema everyday.

In Western actor-training emphasis is placed on individuality, with students learning about the psychological ways to interpret characters rather than inheriting a specific repertoire. In the last fifty years or so, we in the sub-continent, too, have tended to follow this training pattern.

Whatever route an actor decides to take, he faces one challenge not shared by other artists. He does not have a blank canvas or a block of wood (or marble) or a neutral lump of clay as the starting point of his creative expression. His lump of clay has already been half-moulded and half-baked with social, physical, cultural or personal peculiarities which can act as obstacles: Am I talented enough? Am I pretty enough? Am I tall enough?

To address this accumulation of blocks many training grounds begin with the principle of 'unlearning'. The first step that an actor has to take is to eliminate his personal blocks before he can acquire new skills. Unlearning requires an awful lot of patience and humility.

An actor needs to be trained not just because he may be required to tackle classical texts but because he will find it a lot easier to play everyday, ordinary or extraordinary characters with a greater facility.

But in order to do classical work, an actor has to breathe it.

What do I mean by it? Let me explain. When we speak in normal life it is second nature. Like breathing. We don't think about that either. We can make short, polite conversation or conduct long screaming rows without stopping to think or breathe. A classical text needs to sound the same-as natural-as though this is how you talk every day. You think up those astonishing Shakespearean or Marlowian images just as a matter of course. They are part of your imagination, not Oliver's or Gielgud's or even Shakespeare's or Marlowe's but yours and that's when the speech, the text sounds right. That's when your voice takes off and flies.

But to do all this you need a variety of resources. You have to work months on your diaphragm so that you are never out of breath; you have to learn to speak on resonance rather than using your vocal chords. In real life the private conversation of two friends,

or a man a woman involved in an intimate conversation, would be barely audible even to people only a few feet away. In a theatre, however, every word of such a scene must be heard by the entire audience – and yet they must believe that it is an intimate conversation. But that is not all. You need enormous technical ease to phrase, shape and finally breathe the language like normal speech.

You need great curiosity about human beings and you need to sharpen your observation about how people behave in stressful situations. The whole essence of an actor's art is to speak his lines-classical or modern,-written beautifully or crudely-as though he is speaking them as HIS thoughts, for the First time.

Acting is not being emotional but being able to express emotions.

Acting is perhaps one of the most difficult artistic endeavors requiring not only arduous training in vocal and movement techniques but ability and a facility to create believable characters. The extraordinary part of acting lines in its simplicity and economy so that everything an actor does becomes a direct expression of his feelings.

When John Gielgud, arguably the greatest 20th century classical actor, was asked what he thought was an actor's greatest asset, he said, "The ability to have the option of making yourself better."

Students and New graduates of Indus Valley, forgive me for dwelling so much on the complexities of my own profession. I did it only to point out that your work is not all that dissimilar to mine. You, too, have to go through research, and you, too, stand all alone when creating, devising, designing, and conjuring up your blueprint.

There are feelings, emotions and ideas that cannot be expressed in any way other than through art. The beauty of a haunting landscape may be impossible to convey in words but it can be revealed in a backdrop of a dramatic production. Our joy, our anguish can often be communicated most directly and completely through music, poetry, dance, drama – architecture. I am very often moved by architecture. Architecture gives me a sense of solace I feel a touch of diversity when I stand on the site of Sanchi's Stupas

I admire the Taj Mahal not for its marble or the romance attached to its location but for its Palladian qualities: balance, geometry, perfectly proportioned domes, niches, its restraint and the overwhelming sense of clam it exudes.

Without these modes of expression that is without art we as human beings are as impoverished as we would be if we tried to live without language.

I am aware that our efforts – yours and mine – can only bear fruit in a less intolerant society. I see no way out of the mediocrity, which currently rules our perceptions and our imagination, unless we give up making compromises. And so we have to go on plugging and working, no matter how despondent we feel or how woebegone the state of affairs.

This much I know: The vigour and vitality of a nation and the mark it makes on people's
Consciousness-and the rest of the world- is only gauged when its artistic and cultural
expression comes to the fore.

I thank you for your patience. ———○—————