

EMBARGO

2.00pm

April 12 1986

TOAST TO HONORARY GRADUATES

Graduation Luncheon

Saturday April 12, 1986, Kimberley Hall

Mr Chancellor and honoured guests, I rise to propose a toast to our distinguished honorary graduates. At first sight they may appear a disparate trio, and I could have been wishing that arrangements had been made for three separate toasts but closer inspection, however, shows up several areas of common ground.

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Let us start with simple identities. Our three honorary graduates all play with names - for different reasons, however. Ezekiel Mphahlele changed his first name to Es'kia, in order to sharpen his African identity. Norman Bailey - who takes sobriquets as often as others change their shirts - has rather surprisingly stuck by his given name for his stage and usual identity. And Raymond Ackerman - well, if we are to believe what we were told this morning, he seems to be trying to get rid of names for everything.

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The most significant of these men's similarities is certainly the importance each gives to the art and practice of communication. What is particularly noticeable is that each of our honorary graduates has a clear philosophy to propound.

If I read him correctly, Professor Mphahlele sees African humanism as a major force that is distinguished by its inclusiveness. It likes to include others.

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He writes that the basis of Africa's traditional religion lies in social relationships, in action among other people, in the continued contact between people and external nature through the spirits of the ancestors. He believes that black writers are not expressing personal pain but a shared condition. They speak on behalf of their people.

Dr Ackerman's business philosophy was described by the Public Orator this morning.

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He takes extreme care in communicating his ideas to the public, and he does it very successfully. He even communicates with the government. He believes that businessmen have an important role to play in establishing liaison with both the black community and the government. He has been quoted as saying, "We (meaning South Africans) need the world. We need investments and jobs". Again this is an inclusive philosophy.

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Norman Bailey may spring to mind as the most obvious communicator of the three - certainly the most audible. What may not be so widely known is that he too has what he has described as an all-accepting faith, the Baha'i Faith, which he took up in 1955 just before his final examinations at Rhodes. He believes music is a spiritual experience; that successful performing is very much like holding up a mirror to the audience which reflects the audiences' memories, stirring up emotions which they have within themselves and which are not necessarily those of the artist.

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In a recent interview Dr Bailey indicated that his approach to music comes from his belief that work is worship, a concept of his faith which he says attracted him because it was all-accepting.

He says, 'The whole of the singing world is really something that strives towards this universality; music itself is an international language'.

Although they start from such very different viewpoints, our three honorary graduates do have a common purpose, to bring unity to people.

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I think we can all applaud them for that and, in our turn, say that Rhodes is honoured by the acceptance of its highest degrees by such distinguished gentlemen.

Sometimes the woman behind a man is forgotten and I hasten to avoid such an oversight. Apart from being the main trustee of a Pick 'n Pay bursary scheme for employees' children and of a family bursary trust that is open to all, Mrs Wendy Ackerman is a director on the main board of Pick 'n Pay and has a full time post with responsibility for personnel liaison.

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Mrs Rebecca Mphahlele is a highly qualified social worker, who studied an advanced course in Community Organization at the University of Denver, Colorado, after an initial three-year diploma from the Jan Hofmeyr School in Johannesburg. She has practised her skills in many situations, and is called "Unsinkable" by her fond husband.

Norman Bailey is married to the American soprano, Kristine Ciesinski, who cannot be here today because she is singing Chrysothemis in Richard Strauss's opera "Elektra" in Bremen, West Germany.

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The final common trait of our special guests is the inability to remain in one place for very long. If, for instance one wants to read all the reviews of Norman Bailey's work one would need to understand German, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Russian, Finnish and English, and various approximations to it from all over the globe. The Penguin Guide to records in fact refers to Dr Bailey as "a magnificently noble wanderer".

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Professor Mphahlele who was described by his early mentor, Miss Norah Taylor, as living life on many levels, has written a book entitled "The Wanderers'. You have heard a limited description of his movements over the last few decades. Among his domiciles was a brief sojourn at our Institute for the Study of English in Africa. Amongst other wry comments he wrote of the ghosts of the 1820 Settlers being 'all over' and even residing 'in the spiders that abound in the houses'.

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The Ackermans do not move their domicile so often, but with 80 businesses spread over this sub-continent, a store in Brisbane - but, because of the plumbers and gasfitters, not in Melbourne - and plans for expansion to north America, Dr Ackerman also cannot escape the description of wanderer.

Etymologically wanderers and vagabonds have much in common. The House of Commons on December 5th, 1656 debated a Bill on rogues and vagabonds. Members pressed for the inclusion of musicians.

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As Mr Robinson said: "These minstrels do corrupt the manners of the people, and inflame their debauchery by their lewd and obscene songs". There was support for encompassing harpers and pipers.

Sir W(illiam) Strickland then suggested that the general word minstrel would be best; "for if you go to enumerate, they will devise new instruments". Mr Highland threw in, "Add singing as well as playing". Mr Speaker commented that "singing is a natural, playing an artificial music", but apparently musicians were added to the Bill on rogues and vagabonds.

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Ladies and gentlemen, I have to leave you to draw your own conclusions as to the likely fate of our three wandering doctors in 1656, but I am proud that in 1986 I am part of this company paying honour to Raymond Ackerman, Norman Bailey and Es'kia Mphahlele. I ask you to rise and drink the toast "Our honorary graduates".

Dr D S Henderson
VICE-CHANCELLOR