

Graduation Ceremony 1
Graduand's Speech
Monday 13 November 2017 at 1600hrs
SIR TEMI ZAMMIT HALL - UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

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B.A. Theatre Studies (Honours)

Chancellor, Rector, Pro-Rectors, Professor Fenech, Members of the Academic Board, distinguished guests and fellow graduands.

I have to start by confessing that the realisation of graduating had not crossed my mind up until a few months ago, when the prospect started to come up in various conversations. Up until then, I had thought of University and education in general, as a means of expanding my knowledge. Working towards a greater goal was most definitely important; achieving satisfying grades and getting promoted to the next year were most definitely two of the aims that kept me up late working for the past three years. Yet the need to learn, to understand the world a bit better, and to open myself up to new ways of thinking, was just as vital.

It was this same need that drove me towards choosing an arts degree three years ago. I had just received my results and the grades that I had been awarded made me eligible for a variety of courses offered by the University of Malta. When the idea of pursuing a degree in Theatre Studies came up, I asked around for advice and the reaction was often: "That sounds like fun, but what will you do once you graduate?"

A reasonable question. Yet it made *me* question whether the only reason I was pursuing a degree was in order to get a job once I was done.

If it were so for others, I did not want that to be my only reason.

Three years later, I look back and I'm proud of the seventeen year old who made the decision to pursue that degree. I look at all of us here today, graduates of arts and humanities, and understand that in our own little way, we dared to take a risk. Some of us will have entered their course because of a passion for a language or a discipline. Others will have pursued a particular degree because they found the prospect of expanding their knowledge in their respective subject, to be an exciting challenge.

All of us here today dared to take a risk, and once we have made the decision of taking that risk three years ago, we must be ready to carry that risk forward and continue to be creative in our future endeavours. Our professions may not always be as straightforward as those of others. Had we taken up medicine, we would have become doctors. Had we taken up law, we would have become lawyers. Instead, we took up degrees that have equipped us with skills that allow us to think creatively about what we want to do next; and in a world that is constantly changing, and where not even the sky is the limit, we are lucky enough to be able to imagine, dream, and create our own future in ways which were unimaginable to our predecessors.

A year ago, during the 7th World Summit of Arts & Culture, I had the honour of listening to Arn Chorn-Pond's keynote speech. Mr Chorn-Pond is the founder of Cambodian Living Arts, and during his speech, he recounted how music saved his life during the atrocities of the Cambodian genocide, when like thousands of other children, he was given a gun by the Khmer Rouge, and told to fight. He spoke of how he overcame trauma by reaching others in disadvantaged situations through music and the arts and he brought all delegates to a standing ovation at the end of his speech, when he suggested that instead of a gun, every child should have access to a musical instrument.

In a situation that was most traumatising, Mr Chorn-Pond managed to use his knowledge of a musical instrument to prevent himself being executed by the Khmer Rouge regime. He ultimately founded an organisation dedicated to restoring the classical music of Cambodia, when this was in danger of being lost forever, after 90% of Cambodia's artists did not survive the regime.

Arn Chorn-Pond's story is inspiring as it is thought-provoking. If this man managed to achieve all that in such difficult conditions, what is there to stop *us* from achieving great things? The only obstacle in our way

is ourselves. If we choose to sit down and worry about what we should do next rather than getting up and taking hold of our future, we will achieve very little.

During my first year as a University student, I founded a students association on campus, together with another six students and with the support of the School of Performing Arts. USPA - the University Students of Performing Arts Association, aimed to bridge the lacking representation and sense of presence that Performing Arts students faced on campus. Two years later, not only do Performing Arts students feel more represented but they enter University and are greeted with the exciting prospect of getting involved in an organisation, of sharing ideals with a team and of creating other brilliant ideals which become actual actions that bring about positive change.

I've been asked endless times why I have chosen to dedicate so much of my time towards student activism and the reason for this takes me back to the very concept with which I started this speech: learning. The people I have worked with, the obstacles that challenged my approaches, the skills that I have obtained and strengthened, the satisfaction of creating something from scratch with limited resources (and sometimes none at all) have shaped the values that I stand for and have been truly enriching in so many ways. In experiencing, we learn, and in learning, our lives are truly enriched. It only takes the initiative or the moment of risk-taking. As T.S. Eliot wrote: *'For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.'*

Therefore, as we reach this wonderful milestone which we worked so hard for over the past three years, let us not forget the willingness to learn which got us here in the first place. May the act of walking up to receive our certificate today, serve as a symbol of the willingness to grow; the willingness we had when we first decided to pursue our degrees, and the willingness we have today to receive that certificate. May we always be willing to learn something new, to work hard, to get past all obstacles, to shape our own future and to take risks in the process of doing so. May we strive towards challenges as opposed to taking the easiest path - because it is when we are most challenged that we are most able to learn and grow.

To the University of Malta - thank you for driving us students forward and for providing opportunities for us to grow. To the School of Performing Arts, particularly the Department of Theatre Studies - thank you for going the extra mile, for imparting knowledge, good principles and lessons that shall remain with us in our personal and professional lives. As the Theatre Studies brochure proposed when I first looked at it three years ago, we can now say that it is *our life*, we have *designed our studies* thanks to the Department's support, and we will now be *making our future*. For this, we are truly grateful.

To my parents and sisters - thank you for instilling values in me that allowed a young girl with endless aspirations to become a woman with a vision which I know now that I can transform into action.

To my fellow students - may we always be willing to learn, to take the risk, and to bring positive change to our societies. To my fellow Theatre Studies graduates in particular, I often referred to us as the loudest bunch on campus. May we always strive to be as loud in our determination, choices and actions - but may we always remain humble in the process.

Thank you.