

Roger Gibson's Freedom of the City of Chichester – 23 Jan 2024

- Speech by John Coldstream

Mr Mayor, City Councillors, Roger, Jo - fellow Gibson-philis . . .

On our way into the Assembly Room I expect we all noticed the Council's fine photograph of the late Queen with Prince Philip. She came to this building twice – in 1956 and 1986. I couldn't help wondering what Her Majesty might have said to Roger on this momentous evening. I recall vividly her remark to that eminent gardener, Alan Titchmarsh. 'Mr Titchmarsh,' she said, 'you have given a lot of ladies a lot of pleasure.' She then complimented him on the dimensions of his onions.

There are no prize-winning vegetables in our midst tonight, but as I have been given the privilege – a humbling one - of representing all of us who patronise the New Park Cinema, I would like to say: 'Roger, you have given a lot of ladies and a lot of gentlemen – and indeed some who perhaps haven't quite made up their minds – a very great deal of pleasure.' And when it comes to size, let us consider not only your brain, which contains as much information about film – and, for that matter, jazz – as could ever be contained inside an IMAX auditorium and a Ronnie Scott's put together; we must also be grateful for your heart, which equips you to dispense that knowledge in the most generous, unassuming and disarming way. Nothing, I believe, is more infectious than enthusiasm.

When my wife and I came to live in Chichester about 18 years ago - rather more recently than Clare - we rapidly discovered the odd Victorian building she has just described. It housed pilates, dance classes, martial arts and other strange practices, as well as that spectacularly beamed former school-hall where we could watch movies in a reasonable amount of comfort. (These days, more so.) The quality of the programming, the projection and the sound was hugely impressive, but when we learned that it played host every summer to the Chichester International Film Festival, we thought the claim might be somewhat overstretched. That August, we were swiftly disabused. And every year since then we have continued to be so. It is taken very seriously by those whose opinion matters.

As well as previews, premières and a feast of foreign productions, many of which might well not be seen anywhere else in Britain, there are visits by directors, producers and stars of immense stature. Clare referred to Cate Blanchett. Well, Alec Guinness, Kathleen Turner, Greta Scacchi, Simon Callow, Michael Winner, the Davids Hare and Warner, Sarah Miles, Elaine Paige, 'Gorgeous' George Galloway, Ralph Fiennes, Ken Russell, Hugh Bonneville and, every year almost without fail, Tony Palmer, who is in this room along with Phil Grabsky, producer of the invariably sold-out Exhibition on Screen documentaries . . . all of them have trodden the non-existent red carpet into the New Park Centre. And I believe they enjoy doing so - not least because there is no fuss. Far from it.

Roger's Festival has been run on a shoestring, even a wing and a prayer. I remember that when we attended for the first time, there was a post-screening dinner on the premises. Long trestle tables, artisan food, everyone mixing merrily together: it was like something out of *Clochemerle* or *Jean de Florette* – with none of the excesses or extravagance of Cannes, Venice or Berlin, where Roger goes trawling with phenomenal commitment, sleeplessness and lack of regular meals for festival content. The whole thing, apart from

the astonishingly ambitious choice of movies, was somewhat ramshackle - but at its core was a passion.

And presiding over it all for 31 years, in a completely unpresidential sort of way, was tonight's laureate, usually sporting a straw trilby, occasionally an ultra-cool baseball cap, as he ambled to and from multiple showings throughout the day while handling the many Q&As himself. Here, I should pay homage to Roger's style when interviewing these luminaries once the lights go up. It involves no notes, often a mangling of foreign titles - sometimes even the name of the interviewee sitting beside him becomes scrambled - and frequently there is a battle with an unruly microphone. But the unstructured conversation is always illuminating. Principally because there is a tangible rapport between the guest and this out-and-out man of the cinema, this ultimate cinéphile.

Four months ago, the unfailingly cheerful Walter Francisco, with Anne-Marie Flynn and the rest of the New Park Cinema's minuscule staff, threw a party for Roger and his wife, Jo - who, incidentally, once described herself with great accuracy in the visitors' book as 'the support act'. Both Tony Palmer and Phil Grabsky were among the guests. On that occasion Tony spoke at length and with much warmth of how he was convinced that Roger had been cloned. After all, no conventionally constructed human could possibly be so omnipresent both at home and abroad, while also being so productive. Phil, who could not be at the party, had, meanwhile, sent a letter, which was read out after Tony's speech. 'Roger,' he wrote, 'is an absolute star of cinema and should be **cloned** and sent to every art-house cinema in the country. He is the model for a regional cinema which provides such great culture and community - and, at the same time, is a genuinely nice guy.'

All of that is true and the Roger we are celebrating this evening is, I can assure you, the original. On his creation they broke both the mould and the cloning apparatus.

As we know, there are three cultural jewels in Chichester's crown, all of which - if I may mix my metaphors - punch way, way above their apparent weight: the Festival Theatre, Pallant House and Chichester Cinema at New Park. The first two elicit our admiration and our respect. The third, with its tiny team, has likewise earned admiration and respect and, in addition, that priceless commodity: affection. It is, in its way, *The Mouse That Roared*. Such is Roger's legacy. And the good news is that he remains involved. Doubtless to Jo's resigned acceptance, Cannes, Venice, Berlin and a festival in Czechoslovakia - its name would defeat most of us, but Roger manages to pronounce it with unusual panache - have not seen anything like the last of him.

Finally, it is, of course, Awards Season and, by fabulous chance, today is Oscar nominations day. *Maestro* - the bio-pic about Leonard [Bernstine] - has seven of them (and quite right too). The nomination of our own Maestro, Roger Gibson, for the Freedom of Chichester has been without even a scintilla of controversy. Its bestowal may have involved one overlong speech - for which I apologise - but it will not have backstabbing, hypocrisy, tantrums and certainly no on-stage fisticuffs. It will, I am sure, be applauded without reserve by everyone under this ceiling tonight. So, Roger, as you take away with you something infinitely more precious than a mere statuette, all your punters and your friends offer you their sincerest thanks and many, many congratulations.
