

**Kevin Spacey's Speech Accepting the  
2009 National Pell Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Arts  
Awarded by Trinity Repertory Company  
June 20, 2009**

I want to first tell you how honored I am to come here to this beautiful setting and to have be given this extraordinary honor in the name of someone whom I admire so much, Senator Claiborne Pell. I want to thank Ira and Suzanne for that very generous introduction. It's a bit of a strange thing to receive an honor that is for one's lifetime of work, when I feel that I am just getting starting with all that I wish to accomplish; but I am deeply moved by this event and thank all of you for having taken the time to come along and share this evening. I want to begin by thanking Nuala for opening up her home and allowing this years celebration to take place right in the heart of where she and Senator Pell shared their life. I've been thinking about the remarkable efforts that Senator Pell made – not just here in Rhode Island – but his influence across this country. At this moment in our history – this challenging and exciting time, I am particularly grateful for being given the chance to come talk about some of ideas about arts where Senator Pell's and my beliefs aligned and why I'm going to do my best keeping his outstanding legacy alive and kicking.

I still have to pinch myself – even as I celebrate the end of our 5th season of work at the Old Vic Theatre in London - to fully accept that this kid from South Orange, New Jersey, has found himself as the Artistic Director of one of the oldest and most famous theatres in England. I'm often asked how in the heck did I end up living and working down near Waterloo Station on London's South Bank, for the past six years, instead of lounging around some kidney shaped swimming pool in Beverly Hills, sipping cocktails and collecting residual checks.

For me it all starts with education and opportunity. I grew up at a time when arts in schools were well supported. Raised in Los Angeles, I was quite lucky to have found acting at an early age and my luck continued when I then found some teachers & mentors who encouraged my first tentative steps toward becoming an actor. I know how life changing it can be for a young person to stand on a stage in a workshop, a seminar or a school program in the arts, and how these kinds of experiences can add to a young person's growth and prospects; and even help in how they value themselves; because you're looking at someone who was given those experiences as a youngster.

When I was just 13 I attended a workshop with my drama class, led by one of my idols, the great actor Jack Lemmon. I cannot begin to tell you what it meant to me after I finished performing a scene from a play, when Jack walked up to me, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "That was a touch of terrific. This kid's got talent. You ought to think about becoming an actor". Well, I was thinking about becoming an actor and 12 years later, I got cast as Jack's son in the Broadway production of Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night. We formed a close friendship and Jack became perhaps the most important mentor I have ever had. Through his example he taught me more than any book I could have read. No matter how successful he became he never allowed Hollywood glory to go to his head. His ability to create an environment that was open and filled with laughter was unparalleled. His generosity had a way of rubbing off on everyone he came in contact with. I acted with him in 3 other films, ending with Glengarry Glen Ross. Which Jack used to love to call GeneBarry/GlenClose.

So when I'm asked why I've turned the focus of my life toward our efforts at the Old Vic and my efforts to drum the beat for arts and culture, the answers come tumbling out. I think what makes

these programs, and certainly all the work Trinity Rep does in this area, so unique for kids, is that theatre creates a sense of family; and through these experiences we can teach young people to better communicate, whether they have an interest in pursuing a career in the performing arts or not. If it weren't for school programs I wouldn't have been blessed with the career I have had. Now all these years later I am privileged to be in the same position as those who gave me opportunities and trying to bring similar opportunities to those starting out their careers and lives, through our Old Vic/New Voices programs, our educational work, as well as our main occupation to produce seasons of plays. But it is our educational and outreach work that has become the core of who we are as a company. So I believe, without reservation, that young people should be candidates for our encouragement and that the arts must be supported.

Amid the never-ending talk of credit crunch, downturn and recession, it is inevitable, the doomsters and gloomsters say, that there will be less money for arts and culture. So the question then becomes - does it matter? Some say, surely these are luxury items that we can do without when times are tough? As strongly as I can, I would argue no. I believe in arts and culture and I believe that, far from being luxury items, they are a necessity in our lives, as individuals and as nations. Culture provides the magic of our experiences and is the strongest ambassador of the human condition we exchange around the world. Countries may go to war but it is culture that unites us: the words of a great writer, the style of a legendary dancer, the brilliance our favorite actors display in bringing life to their roles, a Mozart piano concerto, the endless mystery of Mona Lisa's smile; the flickering images on celluloid and the countless stories they have told. Certainly here in O'Neill, Scorsese and Tracy/Hepburn country, this should be understood more clearly perhaps than anywhere in the world – the arts inspire, uplift, challenge and stimulate.

What I have come to appreciate – in my six years of fund raising efforts is that we have not used the economic impact of the creative industries as the centerpiece of our appeals as much as we should. I believe at this time – in this moment - we should shift our focus. Instead of apologetically holding our hat in our hands we should cite the economic success of what is – after all - called show business. I think we can make an argument for raising more funding and support for the arts by recognizing how much our cultural life contributes to the health of communities across our nation, and indeed around the world. Those who enjoy culture should be made more aware of the financial contribution arts institutions make to their communities.

Senator Pell knew this, for as we all know, he was the author of the National Foundation of the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965. That legislation paved the way for the National Endowment of the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, which channels federal money in literature, history, language and philosophy, among other fields. Senator Pell was involved with these organizations from their inception through many, many years of service. And he always was quite specific about the qualifications of who would run the Endowments. I particularly love the story during the Nixon Administration in 1973, there was search for a new Chairman for the National Endowment of the Arts and the Nixon Administration landed upon their choice – a Mr. X, we will call him. So the Nixon White House sent Mr. X in a limousine, over to Capitol Hill to be introduced to Senator Pell. After some formalities, Mr. X mentioned that he was looking forward to working on behalf of the National Endowment and that it would certainly be the focus of his efforts, along side his duties of running his numerous department stores and his being head of the Boy Scouts of America. Senator Pell looked at Mr. X and said, “Excuse me?” And Mr. X repeated that he was the head of the Boy's Scouts of America and ran his own department stores. Senator Pell looked at Mr. X, incredulously, then picked up his phone and in one sentence doomed the nomination by saying,

“With all due respect, I like to pick up the phone at least 5 times a week and get the Chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts on the phone and have him in my office in 20 minutes.” So much for that nomination. Senator Pell then gave the Nixon administration his choice of candidate and sent his name over the White House. A few days later a brief sentence from the Nixon White House doomed Senator Pell’s candidate with the simple phrase, “He’s a democrat.”

The creation of the National Endowment for the Arts did much over the years to foster avant-garde styles and techniques that made American artists renowned worldwide for work that Senator Pell personally disliked. He may have thought that grants given to certain artists were mistakes, but he never would intrude on the process of selection. For him arts investment was not about his own specific tastes but about the enrichment and advancement of culture in the United States.

I was encouraged to see that President Obama’s stimulus package included an additional 50 million dollars toward investment in the arts, through the National Endowment - despite efforts by some to remove that amount before the Senate was to vote on it. I mean, come on - you’ve got to really hate culture to want to take out a measly 50 million from an over 700 billion dollar stimulus bill. But it passed. Why? Because at a time when economic issues dominate and where some try to frame culture as less important, even The President was able to conclude that culture should not suffer and I believe that if we highlight the economic arguments more forcefully, we might sway even the most hardened opponents of support for the arts.

We must do everything we can to ensure that our cultural heritage is protected; for we abandon the arts at our peril. Let’s shout louder to make sure those in positions of power and influence, realize their value to our economy, as well as to our collective soul. To paraphrase a famous son of your neighboring state, “Ask not ‘what the economy can do for the arts, but what the arts do for the economy?’

Why the Old Vic? Why education for young people? Well, I believe if you have been successful at what you dreamed of doing with your life, then it is your obligation to spend a good portion of your time sending the elevator back down. That was a phrase that Jack Lemmon used to say to me all the time and is something that I have now adopted as my own. Sending the elevator back down. All of us can ‘send the elevator’ back down because it doesn’t matter what floor you’re on; in life there is always someone below, just waiting for the chance to be invited up. Our job is to make sure the floors we live on are not so high we no longer hear the voices of young people crying out for opportunity and experience that will help shape a better future.

The Senator Pell’s mantra was one we must carry on - "translate ideas into action and help people". He was largely responsible for the creation of Pell Grants in 1973, originally known as "Basic Educational Opportunity Grants". The BEOG. Once the Senator was asked why the Pell Grant, a collegiate funding source that has been utilized by millions of college students, was named after Pell. The Senator retorted, “Because my dear man....there is no Senator BEOG!” I was particularly moved to discover that at Senator Pell’s funeral, two members of the six Coast Guard Honor Guards, who laid his body to rest, had received Pell Grants. And in his eulogy that day, former President Bill Clinton said of Senator Pell, “He was the right kind of aristocrat; a champion by choice, not by circumstance, of the common good, our common future, and our common dreams. This remarkable man cared about people, who, unlike him, could not afford to go to college without a little help from their government.”

There are those who would argue that if you looked up the words Public Service, one of the definitions would be Senator Claiborne Pell. I hope the fight for increased funding for the Pell Grants will be seriously considered; by the current leaders in the House & Senate. The erosion of the size of the Pell Grants has not been matched by a reduced size of the costs that young students have to pay for college. We should do all we can to continue the great work the Pell Grants in offering the full education that Senator Pell believed all young people should have the opportunity to have. It would be the finest way to honor his public service.

I believe in the arts. I believe in culture. I believe in kids. I believe we can accomplish all that we set out to achieve; and while I realize that having a positive attitude won't solve all our problems, it might just annoy enough cynical people along the way to make the effort worthwhile.

I appreciate this opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts and for having made me feel so welcome and been so attentive. The fact that the great Jason Robards – whose birthday I shared - received this award a few years ago, humbles me completely. I am overwhelmed to stand along side such remarkable figures and deeply honored. I will continue to fight the good fight on behalf of our beloved arts and culture. As long as we all do what we can to advance education and enrich our cultural lives, the glow and the challenge that Senator Pell left this world will continue to shine brightly.

Thank you all very much and goodnight.