

THE ADDRESS

by The Lord Puttnam CBE

As you'll have gathered from his 'maiden speech', Richard was in most respects pretty radical; yet he adored 'ceremonial' - he loved tradition; 'occasions' - the bigger the better.

And he was really good at them.

I'm certain that few things in his long and celebrated life would have given him more pleasure than to be with us here today.

He loved playing roles like Sir William Cecil, and would have relished being just a few yards from the tomb of the Queen that courtier served so well.

In trying to do justice to a man I both admired and loved, and aware that the triumphant peaks of his career, and contributions to public life, are well known to all of you - it feels right to not simply speak about him, but also to try and speak for him, for he was a man who thought and cared deeply - a man for whom there was any amount of 'unfinished business'.

Time after time he tried to draw our attention to things he felt were being misunderstood or overlooked - none more so than the fragility of democracy, and the endless struggle to assert the rights of the citizen, which among other things drove his unfulfilled ambition to breath cinematic life into 'Tom Paine'. It's what drove Gandhi, and 'Cry Freedom'; it can be seen in 'Oh, What a Lovely War', 'The Angry Silence', 'I'm All Right Jack' - and many, many more.

Here are three stories which, in their different ways, offer a glimpse of the effect Richard Attenborough had on people.

The first was recounted to me a few years ago by Michael Grade, and concerns Richard's unique and indefatigable way of extracting support for causes he cared about.

Michael received a phone-call one day from his uncle, Lord Delfont, the theatre impresario.

"Michael, Dickie Attenborough's coming in to see me this afternoon - what do you think he might want?"

"Well Bernie, I know he's looking for support for RADA, so it could be a scholarship - something like that".

"Oh, I see; well business isn't great at the moment, so I'll have to take a bit of a firm line with him."

"Well, good luck with that Bernie, let me know how you get on."

That evening Michael receives another call.

"Oh, hello Bernie, how did it go with Dickie?"

I think I did very well Michael, very well, I got away with a quarter of a million!"

As Michael says, "who could ever say no to Dickie?"

The second story illustrates a somewhat different side to his character.

Richard was very anxious about the reception Gandhi might receive in India. Nothing could have been more nerve-wracking than the press conference that followed the first screening in Delhi.

Initially the journalists and critics seemed a little subdued, waiting for someone to break the silence.

Eventually a well-respected, but rather didactic woman spoke up who clearly had a few 'issues' with the film.

"Why on earth did you make it Sir Richard; for many of us Gandhi is a deity; watching this humble man wandering around in a loincloth can only diminish him".

Richard, a little confused, asked how she would have preferred the Mahatma to have been portrayed.

"As a moving light Sir Richard, a light, a light that illuminates our lives".

Richard thought for a moment and replied, "I think there must be some confusion Madam, I wasn't making a film about bloody 'Tinkerbell'."

The tension broke, the audience collapsed with laughter, and all was well from there on in.

As someone who worked hard to ensure the creation and positioning of the statue to Nelson Mandela, Richard's heart would have leapt for joy last week when the statue to Gandhi was similarly unveiled, across the road in Parliament Square.

The last story concerns an occasion at which I was actually present.

In June 1990, at the invitation of Margaret Thatcher, Richard led a small delegation to Downing Street for a morning seminar on the untapped economic opportunity represented by the British Film Industry. It was the first time we'd had a chance to set out the stall of what we now habitually refer to as the 'Creative Industries'.

A number of us, rather nervously, gave presentations under the watchful gaze of Treasury officials, who rightly guessed that this could be the prelude to an attack on their wallets!

Their concern turned to alarm when, in response to Mrs Thatcher's question: "Why, Sir Richard, has it taken so long for us to get together"; he replied - "because you'd never asked me darling"!

As well as being a wise man Richard was also a wonderful friend. He only wanted what was best for you - and would always go the extra mile if he could ensure a successful outcome.

His passion was of course 'cinema', and were he with us today he'd make clear the high expectations he always had for the medium; of how film has the power to locate our 'inner world', to release our best, and remind us of our very worst impulses - allowing us to experience them through the lives of others - bigger, braver and more illuminating on the screen.

In a sense Richard asked quite a lot of the audience - but he gave back even more.

In Gandhi he encouraged us to remember how noble we can be; in 'Cry Freedom', how courageous; in 'Shadowlands', how compassionate; and in 'Oh, What A Lovely War', how foolish. In 'Chaplin' he illustrated the way in which Cinema discovered it could reflect back our own 'sense of identity'.

As to that 'unfinished business'; he'd certainly have wanted to remind us what a tragedy it would be should we fail to build on cinema's potential to bring a greater sense of 'humanity' to the world, rather than capitulating to the belief that it's 'only about the money'.

So, gifted, loyal, tenacious - but also deeply sensitive.

The bedrock of Richard's life, more even than his talent, was his marriage.

Sheila was the centrifugal force around which the whirl of his life rotated.

Her well-being, and the happiness of the family were his constant priority.

I find that best evidenced in what I believe to be his finest directorial work - 'Shadowlands'.

Anthony Hopkins, as CS Lewis, is utterly distraught as his wife, played by Debra Winger, is losing her final battle with cancer.

Scenes as good and as true as this don't happen by accident, they are the perfect combination of story, script and performance, all serving the instincts of a remarkably intuitive director.

When watching it, if your own heart isn't wrenched to breaking point, it's possible that you yourself have never truly been in love - for me it's one of those moments in which cinema magically fuses art with life - making them indistinguishable.

As Debra Winger says at the end of that scene: "there's no more pretending".

There is no more pretending, we've lost a kind and greatly loved man.

Here is Richard, with a little help from William Shakespeare, speaking of love and life in his own very special way.