

## **Opening Remarks: Sunday 22 June 2008**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Oxford and to the first international conference on Fred Astaire. I wish particularly to extend a warm welcome to our special guests, Ava Astaire Mckenzie and her husband Richard. On behalf of us all, Ava and Richard, may I express our enormous gratitude to you for being here and for taking part so graciously in this celebration of Fred's artistry. Thank you also for what you have done, and continue to do, to keep alive and share with us so generously Fred's memory.

Before we begin proceedings, allow me to tell you briefly about the conception and purpose of this gathering. The idea was to create a unique forum for serious Astaire researchers and enthusiasts from around the world and from a variety of disciplines, as well as a unique creative interchange between scholars, writers, and performers. It was also intended to afford a rare opportunity to evaluate Fred's remarkable achievements well beyond the usual parameters of popular entertainment. The conference has been designed to promote a deeper understanding of Fred's legacy not only within his own field and on subsequent generations of dancers and choreographers, but also on contemporary scholarship and the history of ideas.

When I first proposed the idea of staging an Astaire conference in Oxford, I'm sure it had the same ring of naïve fervour one associates with Mickey and Judy's perpetual battle cry: 'Let's put on a show'. Early on I enlisted the help of Chris Bamberger, who, as many of you know, moderates the largest and longest-lived discussion list on Fred Astaire in the history of the Internet. It says a lot for her commitment to the subject that she gamely took this leap of faith with me. For both of us the organization of the conference has been very much a labour of love. I must confess that, as pressure mounted in the last few weeks, I began to regret embarking on this enterprise. But then I was watching a draft version of the Astaire-Rogers compilation we commissioned for the panel discussion tomorrow afternoon and suddenly any doubts evaporated. I rediscovered the excitement with which I first approached the task. For, as noted in your programme, Fred has left us not only a legacy of supreme artistry, invention and dedication, but also a great legacy of joy.

The conference was not planned to coincide with any specific anniversary but, as it happens, 2008 marks 75 years since the beginning of Fred's film career and 50 years since his first groundbreaking television special, both events having revolutionized the presentation and promotion of dance within these media. Today, the 22nd of June, marks the twenty-first anniversary of Fred's death. It is a fitting occasion, therefore, on which to commemorate, but more importantly to celebrate, an extraordinary life and legacy. It is, of course, a huge sadness that Fred is no longer with us, but we are fortunate that so much of his life's work has been captured and preserved on film. Moreover, we are fortunate that his legacy is something more profound than the immortality conferred by this medium. As Jerome Robbins once said: 'He infused our souls with the visions that he made.'

I remain in two minds as to whether Fred himself would have approved of this

conference and the scholarly scrutiny to which his achievements are being subjected. In view of his well-known self-deprecatory instincts, his aversion to artistic pretension, and his reluctance – or indeed genuine inability – to analyse his work, perhaps he would have been appalled at our efforts. I hope, however, he would at least have been pleased to know we were acknowledging a great deal of hard work and conducting our analysis, not with grim academic resolve, but rather with the joy, passion, and sense of wonder that are the essential foundations of true scholarship. Respectfully, then, I ignore Fred's likely protestations and misgivings, and declare unreservedly – and I suspect without too much dissent from those present – that what Fred Astaire produced was great art, and that the achievements we have come together to celebrate are more than worthy of recognition in these ancient and hallowed halls of learning.

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