



February 3, 2011

Christopher Plummer

Actor and Author

Gordon Pinsent

Actor, Author and Playwright

CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER IN CONVERSATION WITH GORDON PINSENT

Chairman: **Nona Macdonald Heaslip**

Past President, The Empire Club of Canada

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Introduction by Nona Macdonald Heaslip

Distinguished guests, we are here to celebrate Canadian theatre with two of our eminent actors: Christopher Plummer and Gordon Pinsent. We are honouring also the establishment of Canada's first National Theatre Museum courtesy of the Mirvish organization, located in the heart of Toronto's Theatre District opening within two years.

We will coordinate with archives and regional theatres to create exhibits and events. Theatre is the mirror of society; it involves writers, artists, technicians and actors. Our guests today are part of theatre history. Both have performed in hundreds of stage, film, radio and television productions within these borders and throughout the world. Both are Companions of the Order of Canada and recipients of the Governor General's Lifetime Achievement Award. Both have honorary degrees from Canadian universities—a total of 13 between them. And there are awards galore—Genies, Geminis, Tonys and Oscar nominations.

Yet, in retrospect, the end of the Depression and the aftermath of World War Two was not the best of times for them to risk an actor's odyssey. It took passion and courage and talent. Let's go offstage for a moment.

I'll begin with the young one, Dr. Pinsent, only 80. (Dr. Plummer is 81.) Born in Newfoundland to modest circumstances, the youngest of eight, he joined the Royal Canadian Regiment at 18 for a three-year stint, and then went to Winnipeg. He was a commercial artist by day and an Arthur Murray dance instructor at night. In 1953, the Manitoba Theatre Centre opened and Gordon Pinsent was the first actor to put his foot on that stage.

In Toronto, television and theatre provided more acting opportunities. At the Crest Theatre, Gordon wooed and won his wife, late actor Charmion King, and thus was Leah born. Gordon was a compulsive writer. A stream of stories, many inspired by

Newfoundland, have become plays, film and television series, garnering awards for both writing and acting. Even on location in Vienna, he wrote a play.

Dr. Plummer has Canada in his DNA. His grandfather, Sir John Abbot, was the Prime Minister of Canada in 1891. Chris grew up in Montreal, where his forbears rule a hierarchy at McGill University. He studied music and considered a career as a concert pianist. This musical talent combined with acting makes him the ideal narrator for international orchestras. He'll perform with the New York and London symphonies and here in Toronto with our symphony on the opening night of the season in September.

Life upon the wicked stage was his destiny, spurred on by one rave review in the Montreal Gazette by the late, great critic Herbert Whittaker (a founder of Theatre Museum Canada). He was the 17-year-old Plummer as Mr. Darcy in Montreal High School's production of "Pride and Prejudice." Herbie recalled: "He stood out. He has the air of money, aristocracy, arrogance." That clinched it. Chris ran all the way to the stage door of the Montreal Repertory and to the glitzy Montreal nightlife. This was much more exciting than McGill's lecture halls and what an education!

But it's all in the book. His memoir, "In Spite of Myself," is a romp to read and offers perceptive insights too. After TV took hold in the '50s, Chris forecast: "Television would one day tell us how to eat, dress, live. Its power could dictate policy, swing elections and topple governments." We are delighted he joins us today during his most successful Barrymore run at the Elgin Theatre.

We all know Plummer and Pinsent can shine in any role they choose, but I'm amused that two such "men about town" have been cast frequently as Catholic High Church officials. Chris portrayed a cardinal and a bishop while Gordon is "on the road to Rome" having played two cardinals, a bishop, and three priests. He is currently appearing as the Archbishop of Canterbury in "The Pillars of the Earth" on CBC-TV.

Please, gentlemen, give us your blessing, lead on and confess all.

Gordon Pinsent

I might be wrong, but it's kind of rare, isn't it, for the wonderful Empire Club to allow actors in its midst and we were fed, yes. Feeding time is very special for actors.

Christopher Plummer

Yes, I'm going to have to wait until I get to the Granite Club to have my second meal.

Gordon Pinsent

Yes, well, how have you been?

Christopher Plummer

Not bad. Not bad.

Gordon Pinsent

You had another full house last night.

Christopher Plummer

Yes, it was pretty good.

Gordon Pinsent

Does that get boring, full houses all the time?

Christopher Plummer

Yes, a little bit. In the nicest possible way. They were very generous. They've been terrific audiences so far and I hear that the tickets are going marvellously for the rest of the run.

Gordon Pinsent

Wonderful.

Christopher Plummer

Then we're going to film "Barrymore."

Gordon Pinsent

That's right.

Christopher Plummer

Yes, it's going to be sort of like a serial documentary with a lot of the play itself filmed with a real audience there, and then we take the camera into a sort of a surreal memory. We can go outside the theatre and come back in. I think it could possibly work. I think it would be very good.

Gordon Pinsent

I think it would work. It would work. I wondered if I would put together a package where I played both Ethel and Lionel and you could join us and we'd call it "Much More Barrymore."

Christopher Plummer

Well, actually, I think some people, particularly the younger crowd, don't know who the hell Ethel, Lionel and John are.

Gordon Pinsent

Oh, I know.

Christopher Plummer

It's a little difficult because I do painstaking imitations of all three. There's a huge silence when I... I mean, good old Lionel always talked like that, you know what I mean. I'm exhausting myself up there and then nothing. So I think it's better to come on as Drew Barrymore.

Gordon Pinsent

Drew, yes, and Diana.

Christopher Plummer

And then do all four of them.

Gordon Pinsent

Do all four of them, "Much More Barrymore," yes. I think that's good. I once played to two old ladies and a pigeon. I didn't get those crowds when I was...

Christopher Plummer

Aww.

Gordon Pinsent

No, I know it's an aww, but these may not be real. This may be a rare screen and we'll just sort of...

Christopher Plummer

Yes, I know. They're pretty... oh God, they are awful quiet, aren't they?

Gordon Pinsent

They're very quiet.

Christopher Plummer

That obviously shows that they're not real. It's a back-drop and we're alone. It's all right.

Gordon Pinsent

Blue screen, yes. That's what it'll be. Oh my. I first met Christopher, when I think, Macbeth and Cyrano and I were coming out of the side of the theatre on about the first day we were all together. He was lying there learning the sonnet and he was mumbling lines to himself. There was "Macbeth" open on his chest. And I said, "How are you doing?" And he said nothing and I said, "Going over your lines, are you?" Nothing. And then I said, "Want me to hold the book?" And he said two words. The first word was drowned out by twittering birds and the second one was "off." I had a little song to sing in "Macbeth." Do you remember?

Christopher Plummer

Yes, yes, like a Bruegel painting.

Gordon Pinsent

Yes, like a Bruegel painting. We had to come on touching and I had a little song to sing to welcome the King. I sang it once or twice, but during the summer, Christopher said to me, "Are you going to sing that song, because that's my cue to come on?" I said, "No, I don't think I will." I said, "There's a particular actor behind me doing unseemly things to my person."

Christopher Plummer

I don't remember that at all.

Gordon Pinsent

No, because you had a lot of lines to deliver. I had the toughest job. I understudied all the musketeers in Cyrano.

Christopher Plummer

Nobody could afford to get sick.

Gordon Pinsent

That's right.

Christopher Plummer

Never mind. That was your debut in Stratford. The most exciting time I've ever had in this country, actually,

was playing Henry V when I was 26. Michael Langham was the artistic director in his first year and sadly Michael left us last week at the age of 91. He, of all people who ran that festival, solidified and matured that company into a first-rate international company. It was Michael who really did all the marvellous groundwork that has given us Stratford for the rest of the years to come.

One of the clever and quite politically and emotionally motivated gestures he made was to ask the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in Montreal to come and play the French court in Henry V, in French and English both. To me that was the one time that this country, on the stage, was represented in the proper way. The two languages that we have here in this country are unique in the world. He saw that and it was the most magical production for that reason.

Gordon Pinsent

1956.

Christopher Plummer

1956 and I just salute the late Michael. Of course, I was also in that first production in the Maritimes in 1606 when, you know, Lescarbot and all those guys did that trilingual production, which is the earliest stage production in this country's history. See, that's why we need a theatre museum; we deserve one. We go back far enough to have a museum, I think.

Gordon Pinsent

Your name was connected to the museum from the very first time. I remember hearing it a lot and Herbie Whitaker.

Christopher Plummer

Herbie Whitaker, who founded the idea of the museum, we also miss.

Gordon Pinsent

Yes, he was the first man I saw when I came from Winnipeg at the beginning. That's a note of mine, by the way.

Christopher Plummer

Yes, could you read it please?

Gordon Pinsent

No, I don't mean that is a note of mine. Those are notes of mine. If you want it, you can have it. There's nothing in here I can use. Radio and television were quite the thing. You acted in a radio show called "Laura Limited."

Christopher Plummer

Yes, that's a soap opera. It was very famous in this country.

Gordon Pinsent

Somebody said you did one show and bought a lovely cashmere coat. Is that true?

Christopher Plummer

Yes, maybe it is. I was making quite a lot of money. I was 18 years old and on the radio show. It was totally national in those days. National in those days, in the '40s, meant a little past Guy Street in Montreal. The producer, a great radio pioneer called Rupert Kaplan, was also instrumental in telling Tyrone Guthrie, when he came over here to start the Stratford Festival, not to use me as an actor because I was unreliable and a drunk and I didn't turn up and was totally unprofessional. He warned him against Chris Plummer and of course Tyrone Guthrie took him at his word.

The reason for this was that Rupert, who was in love with the leading lady, was absolutely positive that the leading lady and I were having an affair. I was having lots of affairs then, thank God, but not that one because if you'd known the leading lady, you would have agreed

with me. However, that was how I didn't get into Stratford in 1953. That's a lousy, tasteless story, isn't it?

Gordon Pinsent

No, it's a good one.

Christopher Plummer

Just because I'm nervous and I can't think of anything else to say.

Gordon Pinsent

No, no, no. It's a good one. Yes. Television. I did the first live television out of Winnipeg.

Christopher Plummer

Oh my God.

Gordon Pinsent

Yes, momentous, momentous.

Christopher Plummer

It was nothing but disaster, live television.

Gordon Pinsent

It was a disaster.

Christopher Plummer

Television now is a disaster too.

Gordon Pinsent

Oh, I know.

Christopher Plummer

Tell a story about that.

Gordon Pinsent

Do you have a minute?

Christopher Plummer

Yes.

Gordon Pinsent

There was a leading lady. I had been beaten up in the beginning of the piece and I put a lot of extra makeup on and my mouth was full of bloody gauze, strips of bloody gauze. I was stretched out in the jail cell and a beautiful,

loving leading lady came up to the other bars on the other side and said, “Raoul, Raoul, have you seen my father?” I looked over and I crawled across the straw to her. She was a gorgeous girl. And I dried. I froze. I had a whole page to deliver. I looked at her and got farther away from the mic. I didn’t know for what reason. I didn’t know what to do, so I kissed her until I could remember the line. I pulled her head like this and I kissed her. I saw one frightened deer’s eye looking at me. I remembered the line, took her head away again and she still had beautiful eyes, but her cheekbones were a little wider than the bars and there were two stripes freshly painted by the CBC and a bridge, a little bridge had been created from my mouth to hers, beautifully lit by the corporation and I had a great time. I was the only one who went to the cast party. I was as proud as anything. I thought my mother’s going to see this.

Christopher Plummer

I went down to New York and did some live television down there. And there were disasters one after the other. I remember they used to have a big studio in Brooklyn.

Gordon Pinsent

Oh yes.

Christopher Plummer

They did westerns with New York actors. Can you imagine a western when they’re talking like that? You know what I mean? None of these guys had ever been on a horse in their lives. There was one particular show starring Lee Marvin, a western. He rode his horse on air. Of course it was live. He rode his horse, that didn’t stop and went straight through a papier-mâché mountain and crapped. That was live television back then. It was absolutely priceless.

I had a terrible moment with Viveca Lindfors, a very beautiful actress. She was playing Maria Vetsera who was the mistress of the Crown Prince, Rudolph of Austria, in

the famous love suicide pact that they made together. I've got all my medals on and the scene is she's pacing up and down in the little house on the estate waiting for me and I come in with all my medals and we have our last love scene together and then we shoot each other. But I couldn't find the entrance. It's live and it's only a half-hour show. There's not a lot of time to be guided around the set.

I tried to look for a stage manager. We used to call them floor walkers in those days and nothing, just blackness. Then way at the end, I saw a little bit of a chink of light, so I headed towards it. Meanwhile, poor Viveca is without any dialogue at all, is pacing up and down in silence. I mean across the nation, nothing is happening at all, and she's walking up and down. There was a piano on the set so she actually sat down and played a little tune. Just at that moment, I saw this light. I had to bend down a bit. With all my medals on it was rather difficult. I went through and stood up and there we were looking at each other. I'd come through the fireplace. The producer, Martin Manulis, who was so insensitive, came to me afterwards and said, "What the hell were you doing coming through this?" I said, "You're so God-damned lucky I came through anything." The stories are endless so let's tell them all.

Gordon Pinsent

They did a black and white series here, "The Last of the Mohicans," and I used to say yes to everything in those days. Oh yes, I can do that, yes. My first director in Winnipeg said, "You've acted before. You have a fairly nice appearance. Have you acted?" "Oh yes," I said. But I've never known how to do small parts. I don't know how people do them. I've only done leads. I've never been on stage in my life. But for "The Last of the Mohicans" they said, "Do you ride a horse?" I said, "Western or English?" I'd never been on one, so I had a friend tie my legs

together under the horse. We had a bit of a river crossing and the other two guys fell off. I didn't, but the water had done something strange to the rope and I passed the camera on the other side and someone said, "Look at that bastard go." I missed lunch.

Christopher Plummer

My turn. We were making the "Battle of Waterloo" in Russia during the Brezhnev period. That was not a happy time in Russia. The set for that was fantastically made by the Russian film people. They really worked awfully hard and marvellously. I played the Duke of Wellington.

Gordon Pinsent

A friend of mine, Rod Steiger, played the...

Christopher Plummer

He was a friend of yours?

Gordon Pinsent

Well...

Christopher Plummer

Rod?

Gordon Pinsent

Until now, I guess.

Christopher Plummer

He played Napoleon, yes.

Gordon Pinsent

Yes, he played Napoleon.

Christopher Plummer

His entire motivation as Napoleon, actually...

Gordon Pinsent

Was what?

Christopher Plummer

He played one thing all through the film, that Napoleon had piles. He based his whole action on that, you know, his irritation. Why was he so angry? Why did he dictate so many letters all at once to his secretaries? Piles.

Anyway, this was a very dangerous film to be on because of all of the explosives. It was extraordinary. The explosives lasted for two miles. Before you did your take, you just had to wait for all these explosives and, of course, all the horses reared. I mean, fabulous and expert stuntmen were being thrown left, right and centre by their rearing horses. I said, "Oh my God, somebody's got to get me a quiet horse." So they got me a police horse from Moscow whose name was Stock. I thought what a wonderful sort of trusting name that is—Stock. He was deaf. That was what was so wonderful because he didn't hear any of the explosions.

So all these stuntmen were making fools of themselves being thrown right, left and centre and the Duke of Wellington just sat poised, divinely on his deaf horse. One day, this is the end of this story, believe me. One day we had to shoot a scene in which we charged towards the enemy. And the technical crew, the Russian technical crew, had been working for six years under the same director, Bondarchuk, who had made "War and Peace," that marvellous Russian movie. It took six years to make that movie. It was so difficult because most of the older actors had died during the filming. They had to then recast and shoot them all again.

So, of course, the technical crew was paranoid. They were highly strung, nervous and totally incompetent. They made little explosions all the way down this long line with little red flags and I asked through an interpreter, "Excuse me, when does that go off?" He said, "When the horse passes, da, da, da." So when the horse passes that little thing, the bomb will go off, right, all the way down the line. So of course, it didn't. I can't remember the ending. We charged, there was action, and Stock never moved. My dear horse, that was so blasé about the explosions, suddenly got them under its belly. They pushed at the wrong time. So boom, boom, boom and Stock finally said, "I'm no longer deaf; I'm taking off," and boy, he took

off so they all followed Stock. We ended up near Czechoslovakia. When the smoke cleared, which was endless, we rode back endlessly to the crew and the director. All the chairs were empty. They'd gone to lunch. That was an awful story.

Gordon Pinsent

That's beautiful. That is beautiful. How do you stay healthy?

Christopher Plummer

I drink a lot. No.

Gordon Pinsent

Thinking. It's all that thinking we did, yes.

Christopher Plummer

No, I still play tennis a little bit and work out a little bit.

Gordon Pinsent

It's amazing.

Christopher Plummer

Do you really want to know? It's very boring.

Gordon Pinsent

No, that's about it for that question.

Christopher Plummer

How do you stay in whatever shape you're in?

Gordon Pinsent

Well, it's Canada you know. It's Canada. I'm here and waiting for jobs. I have a film coming up.

Christopher Plummer

Yes.

Gordon Pinsent

It may be happening fairly shortly, but there are gaps in this country between jobs, you know. My next one after that will be Santa Claus for the Hudson's Bay, I think. I draw the line at the Easter Bunny, but I'll do anything.

Christopher Plummer

Is this one you've written?

Gordon Pinsent

No, it's not, and oddly enough, it's good.

Christopher Plummer

That's great. You know he is such a marvellous writer. He wrote a wonderful play called "Easy Down Easy."

Gordon Pinsent

That's it, yes.

Christopher Plummer

He offered it to me years ago and then obviously changed his mind. I've always wanted to do it and lately I said, "You think I could do it now that I'm 81?" It's about a young married couple. To hell with him, but it's so clever and he's a great writer. He's a wonderful writer.

Gordon Pinsent

The theatre in this country is kind of important, so important that we have to mention it to some degree. I mean, you've always been a champion of it and I believe in it as well. I think the museum's going to help enormously as far as the inner parts of the business are concerned and how we feel about it all.

Christopher Plummer

It's awfully hard to start here. I mean, there were some marvellous people in Montreal. I remember Martha Allan and the people who ran the Montreal Repertory Theatre, but it was mostly amateur. The French were the first to really be professional and do wonderful things. It was hard for a young Canadian to start.

Gordon Pinsent

What about being received and so on. I mean, from your standpoint, you just simply drove on, didn't you. You kept on pushing and if we do, then it's going to be all right.

Christopher Plummer

But we had to go away to other countries in order to get some sort of name and then come back which I've been doing all my life—and you too.

Gordon Pinsent

Were you ever badly received?

Christopher Plummer

No, of course not.

Gordon Pinsent

I did a play in Winnipeg. I wrote it as well as being in it and I got badly received. The rejection was just unbearable and I wondered why I was so hurt by it. It doesn't matter what age you are, I suppose, but a lovely, elderly woman who was now bedridden at this point, who used to come to all the theatre, left a little note or had a note put on my makeup mirror. The note said, in response to the review, "Never mind, Gordon, high station in life is earned by the gallantry with which appalling experiences are survived with grace." So I put that on the fridge next to another little one that had something to do with a Toronto reviewer and it said, "Never wrestle with pigs; you both get dirty and the pigs love it."

Question

Mr. Plummer, what is your most embarrassing public moment?

Christopher Plummer

Today.

Question

This one I received on my Blackberry. We want to know, would you entertain us by singing Edelweiss?

Christopher Plummer

Oh my God. Moving on.

Question

Who is your favourite leading lady?

Christopher Plummer

That's difficult because there have been a lot of favourite leading ladies from Dame Edith Evans, who was probably the greatest high comedienne in the 20th century. I played with her in England twice. That was a great honour. She was 75 years old and the youngest spirited actress I have ever known in my life. Then, of course, there are the beautiful ones, which we won't talk about. Then there's my latest lady, Helen Mirren, whom I absolutely adore. We did the Tolstoy thing today. She is a fabulous actress and enormous fun to be with. I think those are two that come to mind.

Gordon Pinsent

And we lost Susannah York.

Christopher Plummer

Susannah York, yes. I did two pictures, three pictures with Susannah. She's adorable. She died last week at age 75. As a matter of fact, there are so many people who have been dying lately. It's awful. This has been a very busy January.

Gordon Pinsent

Your Rufio, Peter Donaldson.

Christopher Plummer

Peter Donaldson, another marvellous actor. I missed his memorial because we opened "Barrymore."

Gordon Pinsent

I know. I went to that so I couldn't come to the opening of yours.

Question

Is there a role you haven't played, but would love to? This is posed to both of you.

Gordon Pinsent

Not yet. I mean there may be something I don't know anything about, but that intrigues me almost more than

anything on a list. As the old saying goes, whatever the next one's going to be.

Christopher Plummer

Yes, yes. I've always wanted to play Othello, which, of course, I would be lynched for if I did it. It's a pity because I think every kind of colour and race should take a crack at that great part. I missed doing that one. What I would love to do one day is Peer Gynt, as an old man, not as a young man, and play it old so the play goes backwards in time.

Gordon Pinsent

Oh, that's beautiful, yes.

Christopher Plummer

I think that's possible. It sort of reminds me of one of Ingmar Bergman's lovely films called "Wild Strawberries."

Question

This is to both of you again and this is the final question. If you had to choose one role which has affected you profoundly, what would it be?

Gordon Pinsent

I think it was a film that I did called the "The Rowdyman." I had a chance to do it in Hollywood. Somebody wanted to buy it and I thought that I might as well do it myself if it's going to steer my career in a better direction or something. We filmed it back home in Newfoundland. I think my idea behind it at the time when I wrote it was to wonder how I would have been had I never left. Basically that idea intrigued me.

Christopher Plummer

It's a wonderful, wonderful piece.

Gordon Pinsent

It's not a bad piece, you know, and it cost Spielberg coffee money to make it. We did it in 22 days before DVDs and stuff so it's not even out in that sense. We really, really tried so hard to get everything kind of right in a very sim-

ple way. I think it was Sarah Polley who said something about filming in this country. Because things are so hard to get done you're pretty sure you're going to make a good piece of work out of it, because you may not get another chance for a while and so on. So there is solid stuff coming out of this country now, you know?

Christopher Plummer

Yes, I know.

Gordon Pinsent

When people ask how things compare to the old days, I think we'd be able to say that it's improved a lot.

Christopher Plummer

Oh, good God yes.

The appreciation of the meeting was expressed by The Hon. Henry Jackman, Honorary Chairman, The Dominion of Canada General Insurance Company, Former Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, and Past President, The Empire Club of Canada.



