

**PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION**

Kennedy Center Honors Recipient  
The White House

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
AND THE FIRST LADY  
AT THE  
KENNEDY CENTER HONORS RECEPTION

The East Room

5:50 P.M. EST

MRS. CLINTON: Please be seated, those of you who can be seated. Welcome to the White House. It's a longstanding tradition for the Kennedy Center Honors Reception to be the first event we hold in the White House, after all of the Christmas decorations have been put up and are in place.

And I can think of no better way to kick off a season of celebration than by celebrating some of our most gifted and beloved artists. Through music and dance, on film and on the stage, the men and woman we honor tonight have stirred our hearts and soothed our souls.

Over the years, they've made us hold our sides with laughter, wipe away tears of sorrow and leap to our feet in appreciation. One of them has even taught us how to shake a proper martini. (Laughter.) But most of all, they have reminded us of the vital role that the arts can and should play in helping all of us appreciate the rich and complex world in which we live.

So we thank you. We thank you for blessing our lives with your creativity and passion, with your talent and imagination. In a few hours, you will be honored on America's stage. But now we welcome and celebrate you here, in America's house. And to lead that celebration, it is my great pleasure and privilege to introduce the President of the United States. (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Thank you all and welcome to the White House, to a wonderful array of artists who are in this room and members of the Cabinet and others who have come to be part of this happy evening. We share this evening with honorees who have touched our lives and ennobled our nation.

Recently, Hillary and I went to Greece, and I had the opportunity early in the morning to go and visit the Parthenon, a magnificent, almost unbelievable architectural creation, given what had to be done to make it work and the materials and instruments that were available at the time.

The Parthenon was the brain child of the great statesman, Pericles. Pericles said this to his soldiers in the Peloponnesian War: "We shall not be without witness. There are mighty monuments to our power which will make us the wonder of this and succeeding ages."

As the curtain falls on this remarkable century, at the dawn of a new millennium, it is fitting that we Americans should ask ourselves, what will be the monuments that we offer up to the gaze of succeeding ages. Today we are blessed with unprecedented prosperity and military might; but I believe it will be true of us, as it was Pericles' Athens, that the monuments of power that truly define, sustain us and last throughout the ages are those that spring from the mind and the spirit.

Just as we remember the great philosophers and playwrights, the historians and architects of ancient Greece, so tonight Hillary and I are proud to welcome you here to pay tribute to these five remarkable artists and creators. They come from many places, their immense talents range over a wide creative landscape. In giving the world new ways to understand the human experience and celebrate the human spirit, they are all leaving their own enduring monuments for succeeding ages.

And now, to present them, four Americans and one Scotsman -- who tonight I declare an honorary American citizen. (Laughter and applause.) It seems appropriate to do on the 10th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, after all, we couldn't have won the Cold War without you. (Laughter.)

In 1940, Borge Rosenbaum, of Copenhagen, sought safe passage to America, just ahead of the Nazi advance. The United States consul, who had seen his comedy show, granted him a visa on one condition: he had to promise to continue his career in America. With just \$20 in his pocket, he arrived in the United States, changed his name and began to learn English by watching gangster films. (Laughter.)

Soon, Victor Borge landed himself a regular gig on Bing Crosby's radio show. Eventually, this led to the longest running one-man show in Broadway history and 40 years of travel across America, Europe and Asia, perfecting the fine art of playing brilliant piano in the clumsiest possible way. (Laughter.)

Who would ever have thought that one person could be both a virtuoso pianist and an ingenious comic, combining the two into one mischievous, uproarious show. Perhaps the common link between Victor Borge's music and his comedy is his uncanny gift for improvisation. Once, when a pesky fly would not leave him alone, he so skillfully incorporated the fly into his performance that all the audience were absolutely sure he had trained it to cooperate. (Laughter.)

At age 90, Victor Borge continues to share his gifts with the world, not only through comedy, piano and conducting the world's major orchestras, but also through the generous scholarship fund he created in gratitude to those who risked their lives to save Scandinavia's Jews. Tonight, we are deeply grateful to one long-forgotten United States consul and to the Great Dane who has kept America rolling with laughter for so very many years.

Ladies and gentlemen, Victor Borge. (Applause.)

MR. BORGE: Who was that gentleman? (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: You know, you ought to hang onto that thought -- in about 14 months people will be asking that question for real. (Laughter and applause.)

Steven Spielberg once said there are only seven genuine movie stars in the entire world today. Of course, his list includes Sean Connery, one of the most charismatic and commanding actors ever to arch an eyebrow on the silver screen.

He rose from humble beginnings in working class Edinburgh. Even today, under the tux he wears better than any man alive, he still sports with pride a "Scotland Forever" tattoo on his arm.

He left school at age 13, helped support his family as a concrete mixer, brick layer, sailor, steel bender, coffin polisher and weight lifter. All jobs that prepared him for a lifetime of diverse and wonderful roles.

After making 007 the most famous character in the world, Sean Connery went on to broaden his reach with brilliant performances in movies such as "The Man Who Would Be King," "The Name of the Rose," "The Russia House," and "The Untouchables," for which he was hailed as another Olivier. Among his numerous honors, he's earned an Academy Award, a British Academy Fellowship, the French Legion of Honor, Edinburgh's prestigious Freedom of the City Award -- and, very important to me, a fairly low handicap on the golf course. (Laughter.)

To this distinguished list, tonight we add Kennedy Center Honors and we thank him for four decades of unforgettable, masterful contributions to the world of film.

Ladies and gentlemen, Sean Connery. (Applause.)

On May 4, 1971, in a 16-minute solo of indescribable beauty and emotional force, Judith Jamison vaulted into the realm of legend. The solo was called, "Cry," and Alvin Ailey created it just for her. Rarely, if ever, had the artistry of choreographer and dancer come together in such an elemental, spiritual way. In the chronicle of her career, that night was just one in a long list of soaring triumphs for Judith Jamison.

After a childhood filled with patient and exacting study of dance, her big break came in 1964. "I taught a class of ordinary students," the famed choreographer Agnes de Mille reported. "But there was this one astonishing girl." Miss de Mille brought Judith Jamison to New York to perform with the American Ballet Theater. A year later, Alvin Ailey asked her to dance with his company. For the next 15 years, she premiered new roles, set new standards of excellence and earned unprecedented global acclaim.

Her achievements as an Ailey dancer would be enough to earn Judith Jamison a place here tonight. But she has always sought new ways to stretch and extend herself, and those around her. From the Ailey Company, she went on to star on Broadway, choreograph modern dance and opera, and found her own dance company.

In 1989, she returned to the Ailey Company to take over as Artistic Director and fulfill her mentor's dying wish. In this role, she has preserved Ailey's legacy while creating transcendent new works, cultivating a new generation of stars, bringing dance "back to the people," in her words -- and, I might add, greatly inspiring many of our daughters.

Tonight, we thank her for a lifetime of breaking down barriers and forever lifting up the grace and beauty of American dance.

Ladies and gentlemen, Judith Jamison. (Applause.)

After six years in the Navy during World War II, a sailor named Jason Robards, Jr., used the GI Bill to enroll in the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. He got some parts and drove a cab to support his family. Then, at the age of 33, he auditioned for the lead in "The Iceman Cometh," with the esteemed director, Jose Quintero. From the moment Robards began to read, the part simply belonged to him. As Quintero later remarked, "I came to see that Jason was the greatest young actor in the world."

Jason Robard's authority as an artist only grew with age. After his chilling performance in "Iceman," he starred in the Broadway premier of O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey into Night," securing his standing as the finest interpreter of our finest playwright.

He went on to earn the highest honors on the world's great stages, including, of course, the Kennedy Center, where he presided at the groundbreaking and shined in the very first play the Center produced. Of course, he has also enjoyed remarkable success as a screen actor, and won back-to-back Academy Awards.

But performing under the stage lights of the theater, drawing us into the shadows and, occasionally, even into the sunshine, has always been his first love. He took possession of the American theater in 1956, and he has worked and reigned there, magnificent and vulnerable, ever since.

Ladies and gentlemen, Jason Robards, Jr. (Applause.)

When Stevie Wonder was a baby in inner-city Detroit, his mother dreamed of carrying her son to the Holy City of Jerusalem in hopes that he would gain his sight. What she could not yet know was that her child had already been profoundly blessed -- blessed with prodigious, awe-inspiring inner vision, and musical talents that must have come from the Almighty, Himself.

By the age of eight, Stevie was composing for piano and mastering the harmonica and drums. At age 13, he got the world clapping and stomping with his breakout single, "Fingertips Part 2," his very first record went gold. At the ripe old age of 18, he came out with his first album of greatest hits. (Laughter.)

We all know Stevie's songs and we all try to sing them. (Laughter.) Even for those of us who sing off-key, they're all in "the key of life." At times, his songs seem to be in the very air we breathe, always part of the sunshine of our lives.

Over these past 30 years, as he has composed and performed these songs, Stevie has also helped to make Dr. King's birthday into a national holiday, to tear down the walls of apartheid, to alleviate hunger, to stem youth violence, and, in so many other ways, to compose the remaining passages of Dr. King's unfinished symphony. Along the way, I might add, he has also been a perfectly wonderful friend to Hillary and to me and to Vice President and Mrs. Gore, for which we are very grateful.

So tonight, we honor the prodigy, who became a prophet, for using his divine gifts to move the world to sing and to act.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Stevie Wonder. (Applause.)

Well, there they are, ladies and gentlemen: Victor Borge, Sean Connery, Judith Jamison, Jason Robards and Stevie Wonder. In them we find comic invention, rugged strength, towering grace, inner fire, and music that flows down like a mighty stream. Tonight the United States salutes them all.

God bless you, and God bless America. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

END

6:08 P.M. EST