

Oration for Rakie Ayola
To be held at 11am on Monday 22 July 2019
by Professor Tony Howard

Provost

This morning, I am delighted to introduce our honorary graduand, the award-winning actor RAKIE AYOLA.

Rakie is the daughter of a Nigerian father and a Sierra Leonean mother, and was brought up by relatives in Cardiff. She dates her fascination with performance from her childhood when she saw Barbra Streisand in *Hello Dolly* on t.v. , ‘singing and wearing a big hat’. So Rakie joined various youth theatres and left school to take up a scholarship with the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, where she studied acting for three years. She is a Fellow of the College now.

I must add that Rakie is also Patron of the Childhood Tumour Trust, and a Trustee of the Actors’ Children’s Trust. We all have to thank her for that life-giving work.

Her inspirational career has encompassed stage, film and television. She won hearts for three years as Nurse Kyla Tyson in *Holby City*; she was a criminal matriarch in Channel 4's comedy drama *No Offence*; a few months ago she was in the thriller *Shetland*; and in *Dr. Who* she sacrificed herself and saved David Tennant.

Tonight she will be on stage at the Bush Theatre in London giving a profoundly moving performance in Caryl Phillips's modern classic *Strange Fruit*. Directly before that, she was a god at the Kiln Theatre, Kilburn; and - as all J.K. Rowling fans in the Congregation know - in the West End production of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* she played the grown-up Hermione Granger.

Why is Rakie in constant demand? Because of the emotional warmth, honesty and fearlessness of her acting, and her deep love of language as a vehicle for the truth about our lives.

Throughout her career, Rakie has been outspoken on the subject of racial discrimination in the entertainment industries. In 2001 she founded her own production company and created the film *Persephone's Playground* to press for wider ethnic representation.

Shakespeare is important to Rakie. She has spoken eloquently about the continuing relevance of those plays in today's world and the need to nurture new audiences. Early in her career, she played Ophelia and Viola at Birmingham Rep in pioneering seasons that ensured the diversity of the city's communities was reflected on the stage. With her husband Adam, Rakie has produced a fine film of *Twelfth Night* alongside a series of online talks designed to explore the play and make it vivid for young people.

On days like today, a University can honour any figure it admires from the world beyond the campus; or perhaps it will honour someone with a special local connection. Today Warwick is proud to do both.

Rakie's love of Shakespeare and her concern with ethnic representation recently came together in her vital work with Warwick's Multicultural Shakespeare Project and Coventry Belgrade's Black Youth Theatre. She starred in two drama-documentaries on the achievements of British Black and Asian actors, including *Against Prejudice*, about the legendary African-American star Ira Aldridge, who ran the theatre in Coventry in the 1820s – when he was not yet twenty-one.

‘We are part of a tradition.’ Rakie has said. ‘That matters. We have to learn about the people who came first. What has been achieved?’ On the stage and on our screens, generations of talented women of colour have shared their stories with us. ‘They should all,’- Rakie added - ‘They should all be here.’

Vice-Chancellor, in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, RAKIE OLUFUNMILAYO AYOLA.

590 words