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# Remarks at the Kennedy Center honors reception

William J Clinton

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Thank you very much. Thank you, Senator. [Laughter] I'm trying to get used to that. I want to--[laughter]-look, I've got to take every opportunity I can to practice here. [Laughter]

I want to welcome you all here, especially, of course, our honorees and other artists and former honorees; Members of Congress who are here-Senator and Mrs. Lott, welcome; we're glad to see you-and to all our other distinguished guests.

As Hillary said, it has been a profound honor for us and a great joy to do these Kennedy Center Honors for 8 years in a row now. We thank the people we honor tonight and their predecessors for lifting our spirits and broadening our horizons.

Thirty-eight years ago, President Kennedy wrote that "art means more than a resuscitation of the past. It means the free and unconfined search for new ways of expressing the experience of the present and the vision of the future." Each in their own way, tonight's honorees have brought to a venerable art form a spark of the new and unexpected. And each has left it more modern, more brilliant, and forever changed for the better. Now, let me present them.

Very few people visit the East Room, where we now are, and find themselves in danger of striking the 20-foot ceiling. [Laughter] But that is exactly what happened to Mikhail Baryshnikov when he arrived to rehearse for a White House performance in 1979. With a portable stage set up, even this stately ceiling was too low for his trademark soaring leaps. No ceiling or boundary, not even the Iron Curtain, has ever held him back for long.

His successful performance of that night was televised for millions of Americans as "Baryshnikov at the White House," another step towards cementing his reputation as the greatest male classical dancer of our time. With his daring leap to freedom in 1974, he also inspired millions with the idea of liberty, and he used his freedom to move beyond classical ballet to movies and to Broadway and, in 1976, to fulfill a lifelong dream by bounding onto the stage of American modern dance. And it has never been the same since.

From "Push Comes To Shove" to his path breaking White Oak Dance Project, Mikhail Baryshnikov has pushed the boundaries of a challenging art form even as he has broadened its audience. He continues to give brilliant performances at an age when most of us are, frankly, being told to get our exercise in private. [Laughter]

So tonight America says, thank you, Mikhail Baryshnikov, for the heights to which you have lifted the art of dance and the heights to which you have lifted all of us. Thank you.

No less an authority than John Lennon oncesaid, "If you tried to give rock and roll another name, you might call it Chuck Berry." [Laughter] The Beatles, the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones all copied him, but Chuck Berry was the original. He fused country and blues into a new sound that was distinctly American and utterly new. And 40 years later, the Chuck Berry sound still blazes across our stages and from our radios.

He is, quite simply, one of the 20th centurys most influential musicians. His guitar riffs were some of rock's first, and they're still some of its greatest. His stage moves, especially the duckwalk, which he invented, are often imitated, sometimes intentionally(laughter]-but never equalled. His fresh and vivid lyrics captured American life, whether you're rich or poor, young or not so young, and they suggested the rhythms of a new and better day for black and white Americans alike. NASA even sent Chuck Berry's music on a space probe searching for intelligent life in outer space. [Laughter] Well, now, if they're out there, theyre duckwalking. [Laughter]

It was my great honor to invite Chuck to play at both my inaugurals and my 25th reunion at Georgetown University, which we held here on the White House grounds. 1, too, have loved him for more than 40 years. So we say, thank you, Chuck Berry, for making us laugh, making us shout, making us dance, and making us happy together. Thank you.

These days you hear a lot of people saying we need to change the tenor here in Washington. [Laughter] They are not talking about Placido Domingo. [Laughter] We are truly blessed to have him as artistic director, as a conductor, and still performing as one of the greatest operatic tenors of all time.

It is almost now impossible to imagine opera without him. He has performed 118 roles, probably more than any other tenor ever. He is still adding new ones. He has set new standards, and he has worked unceasingly to bring opera to a wider audience through movies, television, and live concerts, and of course, especially as one of the famed Three Tenors. Their concerts have brought operatic singing to an audience of one billion people across the globe. Think about it: one in six people has thrilled to the sound of this man's voice.

But he has always been more than a voice. As a young man, he prepared for later life in Washington as an amateur bullfighter. [Laughter) Now, instead of a cape, however, he waves the baton, which means that he is the only person in Washington who gets at least a finite group of people to do what he tells them to do. [Laughter]

As a visionary artistic director of opera here in Washington and in Los Angeles, a frequent performer around our Nation, he has truly

sparked the rebirth of American opera. And he has shared his prodigious gifts wider, in support of disaster relief efforts from Armenia to Acapulco. Through his annual vocal competition he has championed young singers all over the world and has worked to bring opera to places it has never before been heard.

So we say thank you-thank you, Placido Domingo, for sharing with us your matchless artistry and for being a true citizen of the world.

For more than 35 years now, Clint Eastwood has been one of America's favorite movie stars. Of course, he's also an Oscarwinning director. He's actually done pretty well for a former elected official. [Laughter] I hope I am half as successful. [Laughter] I think he didn't keep running for office because he realized once you get in politics, you can't do what he did in most of his movies to your adversaries-[laughter]-although you can wish to do it, from time to time. [Laughter]

His path to stardom began with bit parts in movies that starred a tarantula and a talking mule. His break came in the spaghetti western "A Fistful of Dollars," an Italian movie filmed in Spain, based on a classic Japanese film. [Laughter] But the rest is history for the Italians, the Spanish, the Japanese, and most of all, for the Americans.

"The Man With No Last Name" has truly become a household name. His characters have ranged the peaks and valleys of human experience, from urban vigilantes to mythical cowboys, from troubled artists to Secret Service agents. And while he keeps making top-grossing movies, Clint Eastwood also keeps taking risks, playing against type, making small, thoughtful films that no one else would, quietly building a second career as one of our best directors, composing songs for five of his movies, and turning his lifelong love of jazz into a movie about the legendary saxophonist Charlie Parker.

Like the strong, silent cowboy he so often played, Clint Eastwood has become a quiet force in American film and a star for the ages. We thank you, Clint Eastwood, for giving us a lot to cheer about and lately, a lot to think about. Thank you very much.

Earlier this decade, TV Guide gave Angela Lansbury a perfect 100 on its lovability index. [Laughter] Now, that's what we need more of in Washington. [Laughter] There's no mystery why. She's known and adored by tens of millions of viewers as Jessica Fletcher on "Murder She Wrote." But fans who have followed her remarkable career know her just as well as Broadway's greatest stage mother of them all, Gypsy Rose Lee. And everyone who loves movies about politics remembers her brilliant performances in "The Manchurian Candidate" and "State of the Union."

The United States was lucky to welcome Angela Lansbury to our shores as a child refugee from the Nazi bombing of London in 1940. Just 4 years later, she made her first movie and won her first Oscar nomination. She went on to earn two more and became an acclaimed actress in an impressive variety of roles.

Hollywood alone couldn't hold her. She conquered Broadway in "Maine" and went on to win four Tony Awards. Then she found television, and "Murder She Wrote," which began in 1984, continued for 12 successful seasons.

Over her career her acting has given us a window into the full range of human emotion and experience. Her inventiveness and courage have inspired her colleagues, and her commitment to charity, especially the fight against AIDS, should inspire us all.

Well, Angela, you earned your perfect score. And we thank you for a wonderful lifetime of gifts.

Well, there they are, ladies and gentlemen: Mikhail Baryshnikov, who soared out of the Soviet Union and into our hearts; Chuck Berry, who rock-and-rolled his way from segregated St. Louis into the American mainstream; Placido Domingo, who brought the songs from Spain and changed the tenor of America's music; Clint Eastwood, who rose out of Depression-era California to earn a place on the Hollywood Walk of Fame; and Angela Lansbury, who left her childhood home in England to become American royalty.

Each one has given us something unique and enriched us beyond measure. Together they bring us closer to President Kennedy's vision of art as a great unifying and humanizing experience. Their triumphs have lifted our Nation and left us a better and richer place.

Again let me say to all of you, this night and every night before it has been a profound honor for Hillary and me. You may find people who do this night better in the future; you will never find anybody who loves it as much.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6 Lm. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Patricia Thompson Lott, wife of Senator Trent Lott.