

Christopher Addison

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Colleagues and friends, graduates and graduands and their families - today the University will award an honorary doctorate to Christopher David Addison. Sometimes the role of orator on occasions such as this is based on reading very worthy and rather dull biographies and cv's and trying to understand and interpret rather obscure scientific concepts. However I have to say that the preparation of this short talk has been rather different, based primarily on significantly more entertaining DVDs and You Tube Clips. But first some material from that other reliable source of knowledge, Wikipedia. Chris Addison was born in Cardiff, interestingly on November 5th, which one can interpret as ensuring that his birthday is adequately celebrated throughout the country each year, or maybe as an indicator of the possible treasonable tendencies that have found fruit in later political satire. His Welsh residence was short however and he moved to Salford near Manchester when he was four. He was educated at Manchester Grammar School, and from there he ventured south to this the University, where he studied English Literature from 1991 to 1994. In his first year he lived in Vale Hall and then followed the way of all student flesh to Selly Oak for his later years. He admits to having spent a lot of time in the Guild, helped with Carnival, and did, as he put it in an interview with Red Brick "a lot of society stuff". Unlike many humanities graduates of that era it would seem that the world of commerce and business held little attraction for him, and, after his directing ambitions were frustrated, he began to be known on the north west comedy circuit, winning the City Life North-west Comedian of The Year title in 1995. In 1998 he made his first of many appearances at the Edinburgh Fringe, during which he received two Perrier nominations, the first for his 2004 show *Civilisation* and the second for 2005's *Atomicity*. He has been referred to, by the Independent, as the thinking man's comic, and his work has been known to include references to the periodic table, evolution and anthropology. His career in stand up comedy continues and he still regularly tours and performs around the countries. Indeed in a week's time he is due to appear at the Lichfield Festival. Unfortunately this is too late to be an advert as it would seem that all the seats in the 550 seat Garrick theatre are sold. However to ensure our honorary graduand retains a sense of humility, it is perhaps worth noting that at exactly the same time the Ukelele Orchestra of Great Britain will perform to two or more times that number in Lichfield Cathedral.

But it is perhaps for his broadcasting career that Chris will be known to most of us. This began in 2004 with the Radio 4 political satire "The Department", followed in 2005 by the Ape that got lucky and in 2006 by *Civilisation*, these last two being based on his Edinburgh Fringe shows. He has appeared on many panel shows such as *Just a minute*, and the *Unbelievable Truth*. On television we find him as Oliver "Ollie" Reeder, Advisor to the Secretary of State for Department of Social Affairs and Citizenship on the "The Thick of it", and he is of course a regular on *Mock the Week*. Then appearances followed as Dr Alex Beenyman in *Lab Rats*, Have I got news for you and as a responsible adult in *Skins*. And of course he has been the Direct Line insurance salesman trying to sell his product to more than usually difficult customers.

But his degree in English literature has not been in vain, and he also has written output to his credit – the column "Funny Money" in the Guardian and there have been two books - *Cautionary Tales for Grown-Ups*, which was followed two years later by *It Wasn't Me: Why Everybody is to Blame and You're Not*. Perhaps these may ultimately become part of the English Literature canon for undergraduates to study.

So his career is indeed illustrious, but I feel it appropriate on this occasion to probe a little deeper into our honorary graduand's view of Universities. To quote first from one of those You tube videos I mentioned. Chris describes his unerring method for determining the status of a University. "The longer the name of the University and the vaguer the location", and here I necessarily paraphrase, " the lower its status". But it is primarily in the TV series Lab Rats where Chris Addison's career touches on University life – indeed he not only acted in the series as Dr Alex Beenyman, but also co-wrote it. I found when preparing for today that the DVD of this series has been passed around the researchers and staff in my research group in an unmarked brown envelope for the last few months, but I was, somewhat reluctantly, allowed to get hold of it. On the basis that writers tend to write from their own experience, one wonders where the characters could have found their genesis – the ineffective and sometime sodden Professor who is the nominal head of the lab, the rather vague and incompetent lab assistant (who, oddly, seems to have a Birmingham accent), or the slightly psychotic lab assistant with on a quest to punish all who irritate him; the hard pressed and hard bitten laboratory secretary; the Dean whose only focus is on money and harbours a thirst to cut resources to the lab wherever possible, or Dr Beenyman himself, the hard pressed academic trying to match all the competing demands of research funders, incompetent colleagues, lack of leadership and inept management. It is interesting to speculate just where Chris met the individuals who were to provide inspiration for these characters.

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, for a career of invention and innovation, for his ability to work across and enhance many genres, but most of all for making us laugh, I present to you and to the University Christopher David Addison, for the degree of Doctor of the University, honoris causa.