

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa, Antony Sher.

“It was my good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944 ...¹”. This is the opening line of the play, *Primo*, as performed by Antony Sher: first in London, and then at the Baxter Theatre in 2005. His appearance at the Baxter was the first time that “this Sea Point boy” had performed in Cape Town since he had left at age 19.

In the intervening 37 years he had, immediately, done away with his South African Accent², but also was accepted into the Royal Shakespeare Company and made his name as a serious Shakespearian actor. His big breakthrough came in 1984 when he played the title role in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, for which he won the prestigious Laurence Olivier Award. He has also published his drawings and written books and plays. In 2000, he was knighted for his services to acting and writing.

But back to the Baxter Theatre and the words of Primo Levi, who wrote a book about survival in Auschwitz. That book, because of its detail, its honesty and because of the way that it opened up and exposed Primo Levi’s experience, became a masterpiece of 20th century literature.

Antony Sher adapted that book for the stage and, with his particular attention to detail, his personal honesty and his ability to expose the essence, created a deeply moving piece of theatre. His attention to detail included research trips to Auschwitz and Turin, watching documentaries, talking to survivors. Every aspect was carefully thought out and precisely planned. Sher’s honesty is what allowed him to capture the spirit of Primo Levi, to (according to his director) “reach so far into the character that it was not a question of acting, but *being*³”.

At the time, Sher had started to experience stage-fright - what he called “the Fear”. He asked himself the question: “If you’re suffering from chronic stage fright, is it a good idea to write yourself a one-man show?” Well of course, now we know that the answer is yes. Somehow, with the love and intensity involved in bringing the role to life, somehow with the journey away from self indulgence and the raw exposure in the simple prose, there was no room for the Fear.

Many critics said that *Primo* is the best performance he has ever given, but, as the New York Observer pointed out ⁴: “In *Primo*, he achieves an acting miracle by not seeming to act. He is acting, of course. He’s on a stage. We’re in the audience. But he does not **perform**.”

And this is the miracle that he brings to role after role.

He is Richard III; he is Shylock; he is Disraeli. And because he is there, we are there, and we experience it all, even the peculiar paradox of why Primo was lucky to go to Auschwitz only in 1944. This was because, at this time, there was a labour shortage, so the Nazis allowed the prisoners to live a little longer and so Primo Levi survived. And so the book and the play both begin thus, with the strangest of lines:

“It was my good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944...”

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to invite you to admit to the degree of Doctor of Literature , honoris causa, Antony Sher.

1. Levi, P., *If This is a Man*. 1995: Abacus.
2. Sher, A., *Beside myself: an autobiography*. 2001: Hutchinson.
3. Sher, A., *Primo Time*. 2005, London: Nick Hern Publishers.

4. Heilpern, J.H., Antony Sher's Primo Levi: Can the Holocaust Be Staged? *New York Observer*, 2005. 24 July 2005).