

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a child, I was entranced by that common refuge of children – the stage – and, in particular, by the famously punishing art of ballet. Of course, I was enchanted by the glittering costumes, the ethereal backdrops and the immersive theatricality, but I was also captured by the work behind the scenes, by the years spent toiling at the barre, by the hours dedicated to darning the ends of yet another pair of pointe shoes, in short, by the sheer dedication and diligence of the dancers.

However, after years of plies and pointe shoes...and an untimely crash on stage, I eventually accepted that a career in ballet was not to be. Instead, I chose to pursue my other passion; languages, and eventually interpreting. But the lessons that ballet imparted upon me have undoubtedly shaped my approach. For as a dancer ‘effortlessly’ pirouettes across the stage, so too does the interpreter seamlessly render a source language idiom, entrenched in centuries of cultural history, into a beautifully clear target language rendition. Equally, as a dancer’s execution of the seemingly impossible masks hours slaving at the barre, so too does the interpreter’s calm performance disguise hours labouring over synonyms and symbols. For in both spheres, a successful performance is one so natural that it were as if it required no effort at all; all those years of preparation before the curtain opens or the microphone is switched on are hidden by the performance’s finesse. After all, “the future belongs to those who prepare for it today”.

When the human rights activist Malcolm X uttered those words, he was indisputably talking neither about ballet nor about interpreting. Rather, I believe he was talking about the importance of education and of equipping oneself with the skills to cope with the future, something particularly pertinent for interpreters. As an interpreter, the future is always uncertain. From moment to moment, you are never quite sure of the path the speaker will lead you down. From week to week, it’s rare to know whether you will be talking about fisheries, human rights or market regulation. From year to year, unforeseen political events and technological evolutions dramatically shape the very nature of the profession.

Yet whilst the future is always uncertain, there is much truth to be found in Malcolm X’s statement. For if the only certainty is uncertainty, preparation, the careful construction of robust foundations, is the only tool we have to aid us in the fashioning of future edifices, be they intellectual, political or social. Whilst we can all dream of penicillin-like discoveries, the vast majority of great human achievements required an enormous deal of preparation. After all, even Alexander Fleming required years of scientific education to be able to comprehend the significance of his discovery. For me, the importance of preparation has never rung truer than as an interpreting student. Indeed, preparation has quickly become my strongest ally as I spend hours in the booth working out how far back to hold in simultaneous practice, as I pour over consecutive notes, trying to improve concision, ultimately realising that the letter ‘e’ is not sufficient to cover both *energy* and *the economy* if the speech’s ‘customer’ is to receive a coherent rendition.

Thus, I hope I have illustrated the necessity of preparation in a changing world. But what is all this preparation for? To return to ballet, the similarities between the two spheres lie not just in the seemingly effortless execution of years of practice, of struggling through plies and conjugations, but also, crucially, in the art of communication. For at its very core, interpreting is about transferring a message, about conveying the integral meaning of the source language in the target language. Whether it is in the European Parliament, at a conference, in court or in a hospital, the interpreter bridges the divide between two languages and cultures, enabling communication.

This is where I believe the interpreting profession has something to impart, and here I promise that I am not simply extolling the virtues of my chosen profession! Rather, it seems that if the future belongs

to those preparing for it today, then interpreters are preparing for a future of communication. It is not my place to predict the future or to prescribe a stringent path forward, but in an everchanging world, one which is increasingly global yet increasingly divided, the importance of communication is growing exponentially.

It is for this reason that I am so proud to have grown up as an EU citizen, to have grown up as part of a whole which celebrates diversity whilst simultaneously prioritising unity and communication. For the European Union is a vehicle of expression, one which allows for the articulation of opinions, however divergent, in an attempt to embrace democracy and to achieve the European principles of peace, unity, equality and prosperity. European interpreters find themselves in the incredibly privileged position of facilitating this work, of facilitating, through preparation, continued cooperation and communication. But they also do more than that; interpreters allow people to continue the traditions of their languages and cultures, to speak as they are most comfortable and most eloquent, whilst bringing them together, in their differences, into dialogue.

With every year that passes, it becomes yet more evident that the future truly is unknowable, that unexpected events lie just around the corner, hidden from view. Yet in our changing world with its uncertain future, we find considerable solace, and considerable strength, in the bonds we possess as individuals, we as individuals have with organisations, and organisations share with one another. The creation and maintenance of such bonds rests upon the shoulders of communication. But communication requires work and time, communication requires preparation. "The future belongs to those who prepare for it today". To prepare for our future, as the interpreter does, we must continue to invest in multilingualism, to invest in understanding, to invest in communication. I do not know what the future holds, the changes it will bring and the way our stories will unfold. But in an increasingly virtual world, one divided by political differences, I do know that the art of communication has never been more important. So, let us follow in the steps of the interpreter and the dancer, so that we too can effortlessly perform a pas-de-deux, and not simply solos without an audience.

Thank you.