



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

**Chancellor Anne Giardini, O.C., O.B.C., Q.C.
Convocation Address Fall 2019**

from the audience.

The idea for *By Heart* came to Rodrigues from something said by the critic and philosopher George Steiner: “Once ten people know a poem by heart, there’s nothing the KGB, the CIA or the Gestapo can do about it. It will survive.”

And so, to ensure that, whatever else happens, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 30 will live on, Rodrigues travels the world’s stages, teaching volunteers to commit Sonnet 30 to memory.

It is a stunning poem, one that speaks forcefully and subtly of the immense, transformative power of memory and of love. It’s the one that begins “When to the sessions of sweet silent thought, I summon up remembrance of things past”.

Why Sonnet 30? Rodrigues’s inspiration came from the gathering of the Soviet Writers Congress in 1937. Russia was then in the middle of the Great Purge, during which Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin sought to eliminate all dissent by executing and exiling people in the millions, including writers.

The great Russian author Boris Pasternak had been invited to speak at the congress. He was warned, however. “If you speak, they will arrest you. And if you don’t speak, they will arrest you.”

After three days of the most careful speeches possible by others present at the congress, speeches that said little to nothing and that inspired and offended no one, Pasternak is reported to have risen, and simply said out loud two words: “Sonnet 30”, which he himself had translated into Russian.

His audience knew the sonnet too. In their hundreds, the writers rose and recited by heart along with him the Pasternak translation of this sonnet. The group was for a moment as one against Stalin’s forces. And, it is reported, something of a miracle happened. Pasternak was not arrested. Stalin’s henchmen were confounded and the gathered authors’ need for hope, for something beautiful and enduring to cling to was met.

Rodrigues’s *By Heart* is about the importance of memory, of ensuring words and ideas are held fast in the safe hiding place of our brains and our beings where no one can take them from us.

In some ways this is why I don't fault the tourists I see at museums and galleries and historic places who photograph instead of seeing. They understand perhaps that the experience is fleeting while the captured memory can be very long indeed.

And this is why I recommend building up your powers of memory by memorizing whatever suits you best. For me this is poetry since memorizing poetry is delightful, relatively easy, and impresses the heck out of people.

It worked for Pasternak. Sonnet 30 said to the other writers, to Stalin's agents, to the world, and to history: You can't touch us. You can't destroy Shakespeare. You can't destroy the Russian language. You can't destroy the fact that we know by heart what Pasternak has given us.

Sonnet 30 ends with this couplet:

But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.

Please remember this: stay in touch with us who remain here at SFU while you go out to do