Chris Parnell / Roger L. Stevens Address 2026

“Defending the Gatekeepers”

It is a profound honor to stand before you this afternoon to deliver the 2026 Roger L. Stevens Address. I am deeply grateful to Dean David Grapes and the Board of Directors for giving me the opportunity to share some time this afternoon with such a distinguished community of artists and leaders. I’m so impressed by the investiture class this afternoon, and lucky to be in your orbit today. David: thank you for being such a supportive presence in my Hollywood journey. I’m blessed to know you, and grateful for your guidance and support.

To be invited to speak among those who have shaped, sustained, and elevated the American theatre is pretty darn humbling and inspiring. And as foul a mouth as we have in the Hollywood entertainment industry, I promise to keep my remarks today to only one four-letter word.

You’ll know it when you hear it.

I take a lot of meetings.

I think I learned early that a good idea can come from anywhere.

Back in 2012, I was taking a general meeting with a producer I’d never met before. Pretty straightforward stuff. I’ve taken a million of these meetings. At the time I was working at Sony Pictures Television in Drama Development, where my job was basically to be a mid-level “truffle snuffer”. Hunt out ideas from capable producers, writers, and show-runners, and if it was something we thought we could help produce, we’d make a deal with the writer, work on the project and the pitch to get it into shape, and package it with the right team so that it would be enticing for a

network to take a chance on buying a pilot script that might… just might… make it through the crucible of television development to one day become an on-air series.

At that time, the broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox) would buy about 50 drama projects out of the hundreds of pitches they heard every year. Then they'd maybe shoot eight or ten pilots, and only a handful of those would actually make it onto the fall schedule. So a lot of what we did was hear as many ideas as we could, filter quickly, and hope we were right.

In that meeting, The producer rattled off a dozen or so ideas he'd been thinking about to see if I was interested. We danced around for about 45 minutes, and as he was wrapping up, he said, "Y'know, I have one more idea… just a notion I've been kicking around."

I'm going to pitch you the hook of the television show briefly now… just a little "elevator pitch", here goes: the number one name on the FBI's Most Wanted list - a notorious power broker for the world's baddest bad dudes - mysteriously strolls into FBI headquarters in D.C. and turns himself in. He offers to give up everybody he has ever worked with, if and only if he can partner with a young FBI agent who just started her first day at the bureau this morning. Who is she? What's his relationship to her?

No idea.

But I told him to hang on, let's riff on that (my favorite part of TV development is that it's improv jazz.)

As it happened, I already had a script deal with a gifted writer I liked a lot named Jon Bokenkamp. We'd come up short on his first pitch into the marketplace, so I was sitting there with a great writer under a deal (which is a polite way of saying I was on the clock to find him an idea). I told this producer, also named John,

about the deal, and it turned out he knew writer Jon. I said, “Well, give him a call. See what he thinks.”

Producer John called me the next week and said Writer Jon wants to call it *The Blacklist.*

Sure. Whatever.

So Producer John spoke with his boss, legendary feature producer and third John: John Davis (Denver native and fellow Broncos obsessive… Go Broncos), and the three Johns and I packaged up a showrunner to take it out to market. Seemed silly not to find another John, so we attached John Eisendrath and the four Johns and I sold the idea to NBC. 218 episodes later, *The Blacklist,* starring James Spader, Megan Boone, and Harry Lennix cemented itself as one of the longest-running broadcast series on television.

Why, after all the ideas that producer pitched me that day, did I land on *The Blacklist*?

I’ve thought about that question a lot.

A good idea can come from anywhere. There just has to be someone to listen to it.

For years, I could never really explain to my parents what I did for a living. They’re here today, along with my aunt, and I’m very grateful they are and fortunate they were so supportive of their son as he muddled around to finally find a career in the arts.

I don’t blame them for not really knowing what I do; historically, television executives don’t get their names in the credits. That’s the trade-off in our industry. I have a relatively stable job and a contract, but the incredibly talented people I have the honor to work with every day… the writers, producers, actors, directors,

production designers, set decorators, costumers, composers and caterers… they're working gig to gig. They don't always know when the next job is coming.

They get their names in the credits. Deservedly so.

A few years ago, I was on the phone with my mother, and after some thought, she surprised me by saying, "I think I know what you are now. I think you're an artist."

I thanked her, and we moved on, but I've struggled with that ever since.

An artist?

I've seen too many films and shows about the movie business from *Sunset Boulevard* to *Swimming with Sharks* and *The Player* (we love making shows about ourselves). And what I've learned from those films is that I'm a suit. A gatekeeper.

I answer to a corporation. Just like many of you here answer to institutions, boards, donors, subscribers. We help keep the entertainment engine running, and if it doesn't get funded, it doesn't run.

So I find myself caught in a conundrum that I'm willing to bet a lot of my fellow gatekeepers in this room share:

How do we make art that will fund more art?

And note that I called it art. Not content. We don't make content. Content is for cat videos. I am blessed, and I do not take it for granted for one day, to work with artists. They make art.

Doesn't make me an artist though.

The fact that I'm even debating a question about how to fund art is bananas, because I didn't set out to be a gatekeeper. I don't particularly like suits. Business affairs negotiations frustrate me. On an easy day, I field dozens of calls from agents with new pitches, writers and producers for me to meet, materials to read, projects to consider.

I hate saying no.

In the last five years alone, I've passed on more than 2,000 pitches heard, scripts read, or meetings taken. Out of that, I've probably said yes to around fifty.

I didn't set out to be a gatekeeper.

I started out as an actor. I received my BFA in Acting from the University of Colorado, where I was lucky enough to do two seasons on the Mary Rippon at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. From there, I was fortunate to get admitted into the MFA program at Florida State University's Asolo Conservatory for Actor Training by Brant Pope, who is sitting here next to my parents.

The methodology that underscored Brant and his team's teaching style was the Meisner Technique.

If I hear some groans out there, it's because you know. You know.

It ain't easy. It is emotionally draining. But what Brant, over the course of three years, installed onto the top of my head was an antenna to really listen. Acting is reacting, and if you aren't listening, you aren't acting. Anybody can memorize a speech, perfect it in the mirror, and deliver it by rote. The real challenge is to listen on stage, in front of people, with no emotional safety net, and react honestly to that.

Brant taught me to listen.

And it turns out that's the first step in gatekeeping.

I listen for a living.

I listen to pitches. Television ideas that might become series. Story-time daily from creative visionaries. And then I evaluate whether that idea, translated into an actual program on your TV at home, would be tonally and creatively right (and make a profit) for the company that employs me. It is certainly not all my decision. None of us do this alone. Programming a TV slate is a team sport. It involves an army of Olympic-level superstars from marketing, communications, finance, operations, production, casting, distribution. I am inspired daily by the absolute ballers I work with.

But as one of the executives who catches the pitch first, I listen to the idea in its most fragile form. And like many of the gatekeepers in this room, I have to hold a lot of things in my head all at once.

Over time, I realized that when I hear a pitch, I'm running it through several filters.

The first is the practical one: can we make it?

Tom Rothman, the Chairman of Sony Pictures Features, has a mantra he drills into his team: "Creatively reckless, fiscally responsible."

Sticks in your head, doesn't it? "Creatively reckless, fiscally responsible."

Can this idea actually be produced on a television budget? Can it sustain itself over multiple episodes? And can we deliver on the

promise of the premise every week at a level that doesn't disappoint the audience?

Television is intimate. Full of producible scenes with series regulars on standing sets, which is usually pretty cost-effective. That's one of the reasons I love it so much. It falls on the writer to run the show, because it's on them to keep you hooked on an episodic budget.

My favorite writers in all of literature are television writers.

Their lineage goes back to radio, which had to burn through plot and cliffhangers to keep you listening through the commercials.

But what really kept you coming back from the Maxwell House ads wasn't just the plot.

It was the relationships.

Radio writers figured out that if you built characters people cared about, they'd show up again and again just to spend time with them, and when television came along, it was just a new toy for writers. The engine stayed the same.

So that's the secret: for a very long time, television didn't have to be that expensive. It was designed to be experienced once and then disappear into memory.

As the business evolved, from syndication to streaming, the ambition grew. Bigger scale, higher cost, more competition for attention. Television is having to compete more for less eyeballs by increasing production value, scope and scale.

Sometimes it works beautifully. But sometimes the whiz-bang of technology and visual effects pulls us away from the core strength of the television medium: characters, in your home, that you have invested years of time with.

So the first filter is simple: can we make it, and can we make it in a way that honors what makes television unique?

The second filter is the audience.

Is it something they want?

Well… before you can answer that, let's ask a much harder question: Who exactly are "they"?

Because "the audience" used to feel like a single thing that we could quantify. A number you could chase by reading the Nielsen ratings.

But we're now seeing a massive audience shift in television - they don't sit down at 8 o'clock and wait to be told what's on anymore.

Today it's fractured. Social media has been able to deliver you short form content that's perfectly, algorithmically curated for one audience: you.

Increasingly, we're faced with audiences having to choose to experience longform entertainment over the dopamine hits of bite-sized algorithmic appetizers. And most folks have a TV in their home, so I can only imagine how hard it is to get them off their couches and into a seat at live theatre.

So sure, let's do our market research, and go talk to them. What is the audience that we are trying to cultivate? And what stories do they say they want?

But if it were that simple, if success were just a matter of asking people what they want and handing it back to them… well, every show would be a hit. However, we're not professional photocopiers.

Because what people say they want, and what they actually respond to… are not always the same thing.

The good news is: this is a skill that can be learned - we just have to know how to translate:

During times of societal change and instability, our first instinct is to deliver lightness. Comedy. I've found that those are band-aid fixes. What they're really looking for… is comfort. A world where problems get solved. Where the bad guy gets the cuffs put on and the good guy is saved by the smart lawyer.

During times of routine… of sameness… when life starts to feel a little too predictable, our instinct is to give them more of the same to keep it going. But what they're really looking for… is surprise. A story they aren't living at home. Seeing others live a life of danger and adventure.

During times of isolation… when people feel increasingly set apart from each other… our instinct is to go bigger. Louder. More spectacle. But what they're really looking for… is connection. A character on TV who shares their values. Someone who helps them feel less alone.

These aren't stories, or feelings, that you can get in 8 seconds. These aren't itches that can be scratched by social media. This is a deeper connection to the art, and one that takes time to absorb.

That's our focus. How are we going to get them to watch more than 8 seconds? Well, we must make them curious enough to find out what happens at 10 seconds. And then the hour after that. No pressure.

This is existential for us, fellow gatekeepers. And that's what makes it worth doing. We're the ones who have to figure this out.

Because once we've figured out how to make something, and decided who it's for, then the real responsibility begins…

The third filter: What is this saying?

Because whether we like it or not, all programming carries values.

Even the ones we describe as "just entertainment."

There is no such thing as a neutral story. Every show is a representation of an artists' vision and point of view.

Their take on what is admirable, what is to be ridiculed, what is unacceptable, what is edgy, what is possible. The artist is always, in some way, opening themselves up for us to share in their imagination and see though their eyes.

So the question is not whether I have an ethical responsibility as a gatekeeper. I absolutely do.

The question is: what do I do with that responsibility?

Which brings me to something I've come to believe very strongly:

Advocacy without ego.

We're are not the author. We're the steward.

I've seen too many projects get flattened and the rough edges that made it distinctive and challenging get shaved off because it didn't fit inside the box. I must have the empathy to understand what is actually being said, and if it doesn't fit inside the box that

I've been tasked to build, it's my job to say no now and not string on talent. I've sadly made that mistake a few too many times.

The hard part is saying yes. Because then it's my job is to identify what is essential, protect it, and help the rest evolve.

Because if nobody is protecting the soul of the thing, then what you wind up with is something that fits but no longer matters.

Death by a thousand well meaning notes.

And sometimes, advocacy without ego means protecting the project not because it serves a convenience, or even because it serves the company's immediate interest, but because it serves the truth of the piece.

I remember one of the first times I really had to do that.

We had a greenlight to produce *Outlander*, a Scottish historical romance, and we were trying to figure out where to film it.

The production team came in with all the reasonable options. New Zealand had rolling hills. Bulgaria had infrastructure. Prague had both. There were arguments for each. Sound stages. Crews. Predictability. The whole practical menu.

And I said, "Folks, we gotta film it in Scotland."

They looked at me like I had lost my mind.

They said, "Chris, there is no filming infrastructure in Scotland. There are no sound stages. There are talented crews… but none that have mounted a production at this level. We are going to have to train up a local workforce. It's rainy. It gets dark early. The bugs are awful. I mean, have you seen the bugs?"

I said, “We’re filming it in Scotland.”

Because Scotland was not just the backdrop of that series.

Scotland was a character.

Scotland is number three on the call sheet. It’s Claire, then Jamie, and then Scotland.

So we built the infrastructure where there wasn’t one.

We found an abandoned factory and got to work. And over time, what was once an argument against filming there became one of the legacies of the show. Today, the Scottish production infrastructure is vibrant and deep. The stages are humming. More than one show can shoot there at the same time. There are hundreds of people who now work in film and television in Scotland because *Outlander* helped build a production base and train local talent there.

Now, that’s not a story about executive heroics. As I’ve said, TV is a team sport. No greater example than the fact that there would be no Outlander if not for my secret development executive Annie Parnell, my wife. A good idea can come from anywhere, and my first test audience is always my family.

Advocacy without ego allowed me to recognize what is essential to the creative identity of a project and refuse to let the rough edges get shaved off.

And once I had language for that, I began to find my own voice. The antenna was working.

Now I was listening… to myself.

Which brings me back to *The Blacklist*.

Why did I say yes to that pitch, after hearing a dozen other ideas that day?

Why *that* one?

Because at some point, after all the analysis and all the framework and all the checkboxes and discipline, the final filter…

…is instinct.

And over the years, out of all the advice I've ever been given in this business, the line that I use the most is this:

When you hear an idea, it's either "Fuck yes" or "No thank you."

Told you I'd get to that four-letter word.

Maybe that's the art.

So, does that make me an artist? I don't know.

I still work for corporations. I still sit in budget meetings. I still take too many calls. I still spend a lot of my life in rooms where art and commerce are taking the fight to the mats.

But I listen. I've found the art in that.

Maybe my mother was onto something. Thanks Mom.

So to my fellow gatekeepers:

Listen for the voice inside the noise. Protect those rough edges. That's the good stuff.

Make room for artists to do their best work and build a wall around them. Protect. Nurture. Trust their vision but inspire them when you know they can do better.

Keep your standards high and courage up. Know your audience well enough to challenge them honestly. Know your institution well enough to serve it fearlessly.

And if we do it well, we help make art that funds more art.

Listen.

And when the right idea comes in — have the courage to say yes.

Or, more precisely: Fuck yes.

Thank you.