

Olivier Dassault

**Chevalier of the Ordre National du Mérite insignia bestowed on
Pascal Renouard de Vallière**

Monday, November 5, 2007 – Grand Amphitheater of the Sorbonne

Honorable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Rector,
President
University Chancellors and Professors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,
Dear Pascal,

“When a child appears, the family applauds amidst great joy,”
Victor Hugo said it so well. And he could have been speaking of you.

The family circle is gathered here in this amphitheater (which, for me, is a change from the Hemicycle) to demonstrate our friendship, esteem and appreciation.

There are many things to be said of families. Yours, dear Pascal, is one you have chosen and built.

The same is true of everything you undertake and all your successes, thanks to your multi-faceted talents.

One might say a “recomposed” family.

I, for one, celebrate with you as a brother, as I myself am something of a "composer".

Throughout your life and even tonight, you have built and erected, guided only by two rules from which you never sway: hard work and friendship.

I cannot neglect other qualities, of course: your loyalty and imagination, your sense of organization, your discipline at work, which you prove time and time again and with which we are all familiar.

All of these additional qualities result from your exemplary efficiency and the manner in which you work.

Hard work and friendship. I could also say: perseverance and powerful friendship.

The latter could be somewhat reversed, as you also have "powerful friends".

For many years, indeed, you have built personal and close relations with very well-known personalities.

Obviously, I could list the names of Heads of States or captains of industry, artists and experts, politicians and intellectuals.

Among others, I notice here tonight in this amphitheatre, the faces of friends: Dr. Al Kholi who was recently honored with the Légion d'Honneur, and rightfully so, bestowed by you, my dear Philippe (Douste-Blazy) when you were Minister of Foreign Affairs.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Al Rashid and Mr. Aaron Frankel. Your presence here in Paris tonight speaks for itself.

Your great relations with President Hossni Moubarak are not a secret. But I promised I would not reveal the names of others I know.

However, I do have a thought for the Royal Family of Saudi Arabia, in particular Prince Sultan Bin Faisal Al Saud, King Fahad's nephew.

You were only 19 when your eyes were opened wide.

In front of you: the desert.

This mysterious, immense, open and scintillating desert.

Blond dunes bordering the soft banks of the clear, green waters of the Persian Gulf. You had dreamed of them.

From your childhood room, you had imagined these dunes.

Like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, you decided to turn your life into a dream so that dreams would not consume your life.

You left.

You left for these countries and their beauty, leaving France to try your luck.

The language barrier? You simply leaped over it and became familiar with customs and traditions.

You made friends and, more importantly, you were accepted everywhere.

A rare privilege for a traveler, one that a simple tourist never enjoys: the entire country opened up to you.

Your love for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia rapidly became known by the Royal Family. Equally rapidly, they started consulting you and, in 1983, at their request, you opened an office in Riyadh to manage the private business of senior Kingdom officials.

You then started to develop your expertise and use your energy and increasing influence to serve relations between France and Saudi Arabia.

In 1990, you founded the Association des Relations Franco-Saoudiennes under the warm protection of a great diplomat who we remember tonight, Paul Guidi.

On your advice or thanks to your services, a certain number of influential people found their way to France, even though their eyes had been riveted on Switzerland, Monaco, London and the United States.

Long before anyone else, you used all the principles on which the attractiveness of a region is based: seduce, conquer and retain.

Attracting people to our country does not suffice, whether they are simple visitors or investors; they must want to stay with us. In this regard, only the quality of the work, relations and services count.

You are a builder of bridges, an artist, drawn towards fantasy, and I would say a genius, blessed with the know-how to meet people one does not always meet.

Our broad gathering tonight is a testimony to this talent.

You are spontaneously daring and warm, moving towards others and those you seek to meet.

I remember our first meeting very well.

Hard work and friendship. Always.

Responsiveness too.

To better meet the needs of people who choose you as their contact, in increasing numbers, you reorganized and transferred your business to Cairo in 1996.

You then became a consultant for major personalities in the Arab Persian Gulf, for whom you act as ambassador in France and throughout Europe.

You then made a choice that is to your honor. And I believe a noble one.

You could have used this network of relations, indisputably dense and broad, for your own benefit.

But success means nothing to you if it does not serve a greater good.

You therefore decided to personally invest in the achievement of major international projects that bring States together, their cultures as well, and to create new economic relations.

This reminds me of the famous line of Robert Surcouf, the privateer.

An admiral of the royal fleet called to him, saying “You, privateers, you fight for money, while we, the King’s sailors, fight for honor.”

Surcouf replied, "Each one fights for what he lacks!"

Dear Pascal, in the age of sail, would you have been a privateer or an admiral?

Maybe both, Captain!

I can imagine you quite well at the commands of an intrepid and rapid vessel, ignoring protocol, racing ahead of the frigates, grasping greater liberty to hold the course, and winning great victories.

How could I not mention at least one of your victories, as it has brought us to this prestigious place, so important in the history of thought: the Grand Amphitheater of the Sorbonne?

One of our friends who greatly admires you and who, like me, has great esteem for your self-made career, asked me why this place had been chosen for tonight's ceremony. As he had asked me what your ties were with the university, curious as to whether you had written a doctoral thesis, I had no difficulty in telling him that you had not written a thesis, but a page in the history of the oldest and most erudite university in the world, the Sorbonne.

Yes, indeed. Thanks to you, your drive, your imagination, your daring and tenacious determination, today this eminent university is also present in the United Arab Emirates.

We are all aware of your close ties to the Heir Prince of Abu Dhabi. Perhaps some of us do not know that you were the initial instigator of this worldwide project, that resulted in the installation of the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi.

Indeed, it was during many conversations you had with Sheikh Mohammed that you raised the idea of creating first-in-kind partnerships on a different scale with our greatest university, thereby creating a playing field for this type of cooperation with France.

I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate your commitment to the Sorbonne in the UAE project, which is the starting point for other major projects such as the creation of the universal museum in Abu Dhabi under the aegis of the Louvre and the professional Equip'hotel fair, another example, which will now be held in this region.

Beyond the economic dimension, I want to insist on the value that these projects have for our knowledge, our teachers, our researchers, our cultural institutions and our companies. In a word, for France.

In a region of the world where the economy and politics are so closely tied together, you have given new energy to French operations, greater scope to our bilateral relations of friendship and trust, dynamism to our partnerships and the ability for our cultures and civilizations to communicate with each other.

I am proud to have worked with you on the projects you initiated when you asked for my support and gave me the honor of asking for my sponsorship.

I am perfectly aware that this was not always easy, as each side had to be convinced, reticence had to be overcome, prejudice need to be combated, in particular on the French side.

In the eyes of the general public, you were elegantly discreet, allowing officials to take the honors.

You were barely seen in the photos of the inauguration of the Sorbonne in the United Arab Emirates by the side of the Minister of National Education, who was Gilles de Robien at the time.

Friends, you must admit it is a challenge not to see Pascal!

Despite all this, your role was obvious to the Minister of Corporations and Trade, Renaud Dutreil. And to one of your lucky stars: Patricia Balme.

It was indeed Renaud Dutreil who noted your talent and expressed the legitimate gratitude you deserve for all your actions in awarding you this honorary title, which I will now pin to your label, welcoming you into the Ordre National du Mérite, our second national order, created by General de Gaulle to honor the qualities and acts of those who contribute to the grandeur of France.

Your daughters, Ayoumi, Noura, Loulwa and Sahra, to whom you are so attentive and protective, like the great patriarchs, and your wife, Kyo, who brings to you all the wisdom of civilizations with the most elegant of smiles, can be proud this evening.

I also acknowledge the presence of Marie, your mother, who has always guided and supported you on your path, with a certain combination of kindness, understanding, discipline and love, which are a mother's greatest gifts.

And let us not forget your sisters, Monique, Christiane, Chantal and Michaëla.

They are legitimately touched and flattered for you. We also remember your father, Maurice, who would have been so happy to see you receive this honor.

And since we are gathered here together for an important ceremony, I will now close and proceed with the solemn rite.

Pascal Renouard de Vallière, in the name of the President of the Republic of France and by the powers invested in me, we ... wish you a very happy birthday!

Of course, I am joking. But today is indeed your birthday!

I'll start again.

Pascal Renouard de Vallière, in the name of the President of the Republic of France and by the powers invested in me, I name you Chevalier of the Ordre National du Mérite.