

**Speaking Remarks by Christopher Deacon regarding his nomination as the
new President and Chief Executive Officer National Arts Centre**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**June 12, 2018
NAC, Ottawa**

Thank you Adrian for those very generous words.

Good afternoon everyone! Thank you for being here.

In all humility, I am so happy and honoured to become the National Arts Centre's next President and CEO.

I am so thrilled to take up the leadership of Canada's National Arts Centre. What an opportunity! I'm brimming with ideas and energy and a passionate desire to work with all of you here today... And with artists, producers and educators across Canada.

And of course, with our remarkable NAC Artistic Leadership team: Alexander, Jillian, Brigitte, Kevin, Cathy, Heather and Heather and Kenton. I can't wait to get started!

The performing arts are thriving in Canada! From Newfoundland to Nunavut to Nanaimo and everywhere in between, artists are telling stories through music, theatre, and dance...and through newer, or more diverse, forms of expression. The National Arts Centre stands for all of those artists – and their audiences – whether their work appears on the NAC stages or not. The NAC is a symbol. It's a destination. It's a launching pad. The NAC is Canada's stage.

As I stand here, I am filled with gratitude for my mother and father. My parents met in Piccadilly Circus in London on VE Day as thousands poured into the streets to celebrate the end of the Second World War.

My Irish mother was working as a nurse in London. My father was a Canadian Armed Forces musician performing in the UK to bolster the spirits of the British people during years of bombing raids. Mom and dad fell in love, married and moved to Montreal.

We lived in a tiny veteran's house – five kids, two parents, no money. It was in that house that I first fell in love with live music. My dad would play the clarinet...in the living room...or the kitchen. It would be jazz for a spell, then Mozart for a spell, depending on his mood. It seemed perfectly natural to have live music in your life.

When we moved to the *Outaouais*, Dad had a day job, but to keep life interesting, he wrote music reviews for the Ottawa Journal. I would go to concerts at the NAC with him. Sit in the box, lean over the railing and watch Itzhak Perlman with the NAC Orchestra. Or Oscar Peterson with a jazz trio.

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Mom paid for music lessons, for instruments, for pocket scores of Beethoven symphonies. If I needed something, Mom was there. I only wish she were here today to see this moment, but I know she is always with me, in here.

I am deeply grateful to the many artists for the gifts they have given me. Working alongside artists as diverse as Pinchas Zukerman, Guillaume Côté, Kelly Lee Evans, Louis Lortie or R.H. Thompson has been my education. With every show, every tour, every starry-eyed creation, they have taught me invaluable lessons about art ... about life... and about the beautiful and complex diversity of this country.

Chief among those I thank today is Peter Herrndorf. Without Peter, this day could not have happened. Beyond everything he has done for the arts in Canada, he has done so much for me: given me so much of his time, his patient guidance, his insight. I thank you, Peter, from the bottom of my heart.

To Adrian Burns, our illustrious Board chair, thank you for your vote of confidence and for your outstanding leadership and devotion to the National Arts Centre. When you offered me this job, I promised you I would give it everything I've got. I repeat that promise here today ... and ask all of you to hold me to it.

To my wife, Gwen Goodier... she is the brilliant and beautiful woman sitting right here in the front row. She has sat in the front row at opening nights, at season launches, at galas. Thank you, Gwen, for being my greatest cheerleader, and for taking up the arts as your cause too.

As the NAC enters its next half-century, we will build on our recent successes. We will build on the values and vision that have brought us to where we are today. We will remain involved in the areas of performance, creation and learning across Canada. We will push even further our national role, reaching out our arms to Canadians everywhere. Live and through digital platforms.

I take the opportunity to mention the NAC's National Creation Fund. The Fund will soon announce its first recipients, chosen from creators across the country. This is a great example of the NAC's commitment to supporting ambitious new creations and showcasing the stories of Canadian artists.

Our stories define us. One such story is told in the poem "I Lost my Talk", by the late Mi'kmaw poet Rita Joe. The story of how a residential school tried to take away her culture and her language.

Before creating a work based on this poem, three of us from the NAC and Producer/Director Donna Feore visited Rita's daughters in Eskasoni, Cape Breton, to seek their blessing. Over two days, they fed us barley soup, showed us the land and introduced us to the community.

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Last year, during its Canada 150 Tour, the NAC Orchestra performed “I Lost My Talk” in Eskasoni. The community shortened their hockey season so they could host the concert in the local arena. On the day of the concert, Rita Joe’s daughters sat in the front row. As the music began, they started crying and then we all started crying: a deeply emotional moment. A moment that demonstrates what Kevin Loring, Artistic Director of NAC Indigenous Theatre, means when he says that stories are like “medicine”. Music, theatre and dance all have the power to heal.

That’s why I am so proud that the NAC is creating the Department of Indigenous Theatre that will put the voices of Indigenous artists – and their stories – on the national stage. It is one of the greatest initiatives in the NAC’s history.

As a Francophile born in Montreal and raised in the Outaouais region, I’ve always been fascinated by the influence language has on culture. This link between the two is one of the things that make our country so richly diverse. The NAC’s commitment to French is one that I take to heart. I will make sure that the NAC becomes just as national in French as it is in English.

Speaking of playing a national role, I congratulate Heather Gibson, our brilliant executive producer of NAC Presents. She has recently announced her Fall season of 50-plus Canadian singer-songwriters and performers of contemporary music. This will be a growing part of our future.

This atrium is another symbol of our future: bright and beautiful. It was our dream to renew the institution by renewing the building. So I say to Canadians: this is your place. Come take in a wonderful, heart-rending performance. Or you can experience the NAC in new ways. Enjoy a free event in our public spaces, stretch out in a yoga class or just relax with a great cup of coffee.

By creating these light-filled public spaces and a new entrance, we sought to connect the NAC to the street and to the country. To render the NAC more welcoming.

Our new public spaces are now named after generous Canadians who believe in the NAC’s vision. For example, this modest sign at my feet says “Yulanda Faris Stage”.

Yulanda Faris served on the NAC Board of Trustees until 2015. Sadly, she passed away. Yulanda and her husband Moh were generous supporters of the arts in Vancouver, here at the NAC, and elsewhere. In honour of his late wife, Moh and his children made a major gift to the NAC. Donors such as Moh have played an important role in achieving the NAC’s ambitions. We will continue to work hard to deserve their support.

A few final words, to the NAC team I will soon lead.

Being part of the NAC team is a calling.

Some years ago, after a most remarkable performance in Southam Hall, the dressing-room hallway was packed with people - a crush of people – including Hamilton Southam himself, the NAC’s visionary founder. He leaned in close to me and said, “Your country needs you.”

He was asking me to give the NAC everything I had...and that’s what I’ve done. And in this wonderful new challenge, that’s what I will keep doing. And so, to all of you on the NAC team, from our founder’s lips to your ears, I pass on the words of Hamilton Southam: “Your country needs you.”

With your ideas and your passion, you shape the future of the NAC. Your creative energy will kindle new flames, spark new adventures, blaze new trails. Together, let’s help Canadian artists continue to tell the stories that inspire, provoke and deeply move audiences.