Will Ferrell’s Class Day Speech at the 352nd Harvard Commencement

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This paper will provide a thorough analysis of the humor that Will Ferrell used when he was the class day speaker at Harvard on July 4th, 2003. How the audience received the speech and what Will Ferrell was trying to accomplish will be analyzed.

Biography

John W. Ferrell was born on July 16, 1967 in Irvine, California. He graduated from the University of Southern California with a sports journalism degree. After his graduation, he started working as a sportscaster on a weekly cable show, but then later found his interests in acting and stand-up comedy. He started acting and in 1995, he became a feature cast member on Saturday Night Live. He’s made himself a memorable actor on the show doing impersonations as well as other memorable characters. He’s been in a number a movies including “A Night at the Roxbury” and “Old School”. He has developed himself as a well known comedic and actor.

Use of Humor

Will Ferrell is a professional comedian so making this speech humorous was probably really easy for him. From the beginning of his speech, he uses humor, which helps hold the audience attention throughout the entire speech. One of the hardest things to do in a speech is get the audience’s attention and keep it for the entire length of the speech. Ferrell does a great job of making the audience want to keep listening. The introduction of the speech makes one wonder where he is going to go with the rest of it. He came out dancing to the song “Celebrate Good times” in an outfit that looked like
something a captain of a boat would do. He said something in the middle of it about a boat show, then he acted like he was really confused as to where he was.

“This is not the Worcester, Mass Boat Show, is it? I am sorry. I have made a terrible mistake. Ever since I left “Saturday Night Live,” I mostly do public speaking now. And I must have made an error in the little Palm Pilot. Boy. Don’t Worry. I got it on me. I got the speech on me. Let’s see. Ah, yes. Here we go.”

Using this introduction grabs the audience’s attention. It doesn’t start out how many speeches do. He starts out like he flustered, and not many people would want to be in that situation if they were giving a speech to the graduates of Harvard.

After the first part of the introduction, he keeps on acting like he doesn’t know who or what he is speaking for:

“You know, when Bill Gates first called me to speak to you today, I was honored. But when he wanted me to be one of the Roxbury Guys, I – Sorry, that’s Microsoft. I’m sorry about that. Star Trek Convention. No. NRA. NAACP. Dow Chemical. No. But that is a good one. That is a good speech. The University of Michigan Law. John Hopkins Medical School. I’m sorry. Are you sure this isn’t the boat show? No, I have it. I don’t have it on me. I do. It’s here. Thank you.”

One of the first pitfalls of humorous speaking is offensive humor. According to the text, you should never use humor that has the potential to offend the audience. However, Will Ferrell doesn’t seem to care if his humor may offend someone. On Saturday Night Live, Ferrell often impersonates President Bush. He spends a lot of his time in this speech making fun of our president. He tells the audience that George Bush asked him to pass on some sentiments to the class of 2003 and does his impersonation of the President.

“Students, Faculty, Families and Distinguished Guests, I just want to take time to congratulate you on your outstanding achievement as graduates of the Class of 2002. The great thing about being the Class of 2002 is that you can always remember what year you graduated because 2002 is a palindrome which, of
course, is a word or number that is the same read backwards or forwards. I'll bet you're surprised I know that word, but I do. So you can suck on it.

Make no mistake, Harvard University is one of the finest in the land. And its graduates are that fine as well. You're young men and women whose exuberance exude a confident confidence of a bygone era. I believe it was Shakespeare who said it best when he said, "Look yonder into the darkness for knowledge onto which I say go onto that which thou possess into thy night for thee have come with only a single sword and vanquished thee into darkness."

I'm going to be honest with you, I just made that up. But I don't know how to delete it from the computer."

While these statements could offend a lot of republicans that were probably in the audience, he did it anyway. And although he was making fun of the president, I believe the way he did it caused it to be well received by everyone. Republican or not, everyone knows our president is not the best speaker and will say things like “exuberance exude” and “confident confidence”. These examples may take it to an extreme, but over exaggerating some of Bush’s flaws is what makes it humorous.

Another part of this speech that is very humorous is when Ferrell attempts to tell the graduating class about the “real world”. Many times, when people tell you about the real world, they tell you about hardships and how it “really is”, when the truth is that everyone’s reality is different.

“So my gift to you, Class of 2003, is to tell you about the real world through my eyes, through my experiences. And I'm sorry, but I refuse to sugarcoat it…. But I do know this. You're about to enter into a world filled with hypocrisy and doublespeak, a world in which your limo to the airport is often a half-hour late. In addition to not even being a limo at all; often times it's a Lincoln Towncar. You're about to enter a world where you ask your new assistant, Jamie, to bring you a tall, non-fat latte. And he comes back with a short soy cappuccino. Guess what, Jamie? You're fired. Not too hard to get right, my friend.”
When he says this to the audience, he is trying to act like the ‘real world’ is a tough place, but hardships to him is having his limo be late to pick him up or having to ride in a town car. I think that he was trying to portray that whenever you’re having a bad day or when you think that your life sucks, there are people who have it a lot worse than you do. Not everyone has a chauffeur or an assistant get them coffee. But what he’s trying to do here is to tell them, in a humorous way, that you can get wrapped up in your own world but you need to step back and realize once in a while that it’s not that bad.

Another time that Ferrell used humor to convey a deeper message was when he claims that we live in Russia.

“I’m sorry, graduates. But this is a world where you aren’t allowed to use your cell phones in airplanes, during live theatre, at the movies, at funerals, or even during your own elective surgery. Apparently, the Berlin Wall went back up because we now live in Russia.”

I think he does this because a lot of time people complain about certain rules and regulations set by our government. But really, they’re not that bad. People think that not being able to do certain things is taking away their liberties, but really it’s not as bad as if we really were in a communist country. He pokes fun at this and goes on to say that it’s not easy and that he’s sorry to talk so ‘tough’ but they need to know these things.

I think by doing this he’s always poking fun at the fact that many times people will tell the younger generation that they have it easy and when they get out in the ‘real world’ it’s not going to be so easy, when actually it’s not all that bad.

Conclusion
Making humorous speeches are very difficult to create, especially to make one that is funny the entire time. You have to worry about offending people, using irrelevant humor, and delivering it poorly. Will Ferrell did a good job at avoiding these downfalls of humorous speeches and his speech was received well by the audience.

Class day ceremonies at Harvard are supposed to be light hearted and a way for the students to relax since the next day, graduation is long and boring. Humor is a very effective way to gain audience attention and keep it. I believe that Will Ferrell uses humor very successfully and manages to keep Class Day light hearted and fun.

Bibliography

1. www.commencement.harvard.edu/2003/ferrell.html