

The Rhodes Less Traveled

by Banuta Rubess

When I was a teenager my high school sweetheart pointed out a small, black and white photograph in the newspaper to say with admiration, “Look, that’s a Rhodes Scholar.” When he told me that the Scholarship wasn’t open to women (as it wasn’t, in the early 1970s), and I asked why not, he explained this was because Rhodes Scholars were geniuses. Which women, by implication, were not.

This unspoken implication hung wet and heavy between us and forever lingered somewhere in my mind. No matter how great my marks were, no matter how unique my achievements, lest we forget, women are not geniuses.

Many years later I stepped on the QE2 with some 80 other freshly minted Rhodes Scholars to sail off to a new life in Oxford. As I walked up the gangway, I kept waiting for a Monte Pythonesque cane to emerge from the wings and to scoop me off the ship as a fraud. The feeling didn’t vanish even as I studied in Oxford. I remember receiving a letter from a beloved professor in Canada, and, before slitting it open, steeling myself for the words I expected to read — something absurd, something along the line of “I’ve waited years to tell you this, all those great marks I gave you were just my private little joke.” Of course, no one ever wrote those words.

Ridiculous fears? I’ve met male Rhodes Scholars who confessed they had a similar feeling — Rhodes Scholars are geniuses, I am not a genius, ergo I can’t be a Rhodes Scholar — but I wonder if female Rhodes Scholars have it in bulk.

I admit it, I fell into the Rhodes Scholarship. I didn’t dream of being one all my life, since this wasn’t even possible. I never lusted for political office or academic clout. My story is entirely different: I wanted to go to Latvia.

In 1977, I finished my B.A. and wondered what to do next. I had spent ten days in what was then Soviet Latvia and was bowled over by the experience. But totalitarian states aren’t very keen on foreigners mixing it up with the locals. No one was allowed into the fort — except on a scholarship. Scholars were allowed to spend a year there. I decided my cloak of invisibility would be academia. I would be a doctoral student. The topic I chose turned out to be a political hot potato, as were my views and my outspokenness, and rather than get into Latvia, I ended up being barred from the country until *perestroika*. However, to my own great surprise, I did get the Rhodes Scholarship.

I had researched universities which would allow me to pursue my scholarly aims without demanding endless exams and essays on topics of no interest to me. Oxford beckoned. Another boyfriend came into play — one who had applied for the Rhodes with no success — but I thought, well, if he can apply, so can I. I remember going to the Queen’s University office for the application and being told that I was wasting my time because I wasn’t athletic and my politics were leftist. They nearly didn’t give me the form. I sent it in anyway. One of my reference letters came from a woman who later became the President of Latvia.

The day before our interviews, the selection committee hosted a reception (at a male-only club which only permitted women to enter its halls as guests). I remember walking into the reception with all the other potential Rhodes Scholars and checking out what everyone was wearing. I realized I looked completely different and acted differently. I quarreled with the committee members rather than toadied to them. I talked to the people everyone ignored — their wives, the women in the room. I remember these conversations with particular pleasure. The next day, as I was ushered out of the interview, it occurred to me for the very first time that I might have won the Scholarship, if I had taken it seriously. The whole process seemed an elaborate lark. But as Latvians would say — the Rhodes was my fate. As I waited to hear the results, I watched *Star Trek* on television and every time the phone rang, turned off the sound. After all, if someone from the committee actually called, on hearing the words “Beam me up, Scotty,” they might change their minds about giving me the Scholarship and hang up. Geniuses don’t watch *Star Trek*. When I got the Scholarship, my family was ecstatic. But my boyfriend said I shouldn’t tell any of our friends at university, because I would make them feel bad. So I didn’t. I kept it to myself. Good thing I broke up with that guy. But to this day, I am reticent to tell people I’m a Rhodes Scholar. Why?

There is a phenomenon in school classrooms which I am sure has not changed in 50 years. Exams are returned, a girl sees she has top marks, and she hides the exam as fast as she can. She makes self-deprecating jokes about herself so she will be accepted. My Rhodes Scholarship, my branding as a superior intellect, did not sit well with being a woman. People don’t just feel “bad” around a high-achieving female. They hate her. They are afraid of her. They work hard to take her down. Had I been a highly competitive, testosterone-driven person this might encourage me to fight back. But in that sense I am ever so not the Cecil Rhodes ideal personality.

What is the Rhodes ideal? After I — to my great surprise — won the Scholarship, I reviewed the prerequisites trying to figure why I was chosen. After all, the Queen’s University staff had been so sure I didn’t stand a chance. A selection committee member said to me, it’s not whether you play football, it’s whether you are the captain of the team. At seventeen, I had my own theater company, and my feistiness certainly would have spoken of leadership quality. This aspect may have been decisive. However, being a woman, and an idiosyncratic one, I brought a whole world of characteristics that were utterly foreign to the standard Rhodes world view. This is what I feel as I read the quarterly Rhodes reviews, or go to the various reunions. That I must be a fraud, a freak, a glitch in the Rhodes process. I remember being at a 4th of July party when President Clinton was visiting Latvia, when I told the American ambassador that one of the two Latvian Rhodes Scholars was present at the party. I was holding my one year old daughter in my arms at the time. “Oh,” said the ambassador with excitement, “where is he?” “It’s me,” I told him, and to my grim satisfaction I saw his jaw drop in horror.

In retrospect, it seems to me that my interviewing committee was groping for the correct version of a female Rhodes Scholar, and in that foggy state, found me. Women who excel in the academic field are not always highly competitive. Men who excel often are. The leadership which the Rhodes Scholarship seeks might not be demonstrated by a woman who is the captain

of her rowing team. She may be a great team player instead. I toil in a field that is not about power, money, or influence. Yet underlying the ethos of the Rhodes Scholarship is a desire for power, a desire to be part of an old boys' network. This network has no meaning for a woman. I've attended enough Rhodes Scholar lunches to know artists are rare among the Rhodes Scholars. There's Bob Joy, Kris Kristofferson, a few poets, a brilliant writer like Modris Eksteins is rare (and he's Latvian, like me!). Somehow the Rhodes fails to attract us creative types. Perhaps because essentially the Rhodes is about ambition and power — a Scholarship for leaders, and especially leaders who will not rock the establishment. Its concept is to maintain and strengthen the existing power structures. Artists, by definition, are against the status quo. (Note that when Rhodes Scholar Joel Bakan, a law professor, made a film, it was against multinational corporations.) As an artist, I regularly strive to achieve something impossible — a perfect piece. I do so in the art form most suited for masochists — the theater, where everything is ephemeral, everything ineffable and dependent on a highly crafted, deeply considered moment, impulse, whim. In the arts, the Rhodes label is a problem, not a stairway to success. It would be better to be an ex-junkie recovering from murdering his wife than to have been considered the *crème de la crème* of academe.

So for me, the Rhodes Scholarship has not been a stepping-stone to my brilliant career. Having said all that, I am so glad to have won the Rhodes Scholarship and wear the badge with honor. It is the defining moment in my life, my liberation from my past, and I am ever so grateful to the Rhodes Trust for bestowing it upon me. There can be nothing more wonderful than three years at Oxford. Many American Scholars come to Oxford from another Ivy League university, and this means they come to Oxford jaded. They know what it means to be in an academic environment of the like-minded, of the sharpest thinkers, of international renown. For me, this was a first. For the first time in my life, I met with people who thought like me, who were passionate about ideas, who felt discussion was the food of life. I chose graduate studies rather than a B.A., which meant I lived and breathed at St. Antony's College, one of the most international groups of students one can imagine. I like to think I was very Rhodes-like by immediately getting involved in the extracurricular life, even though I never rowed. I met a young undergraduate called Neil Bartlett who was founding a theater company. In my first year at Oxford we made four original productions. I had shed my old skin and as they used to say, found myself. Once I finished my doctorate, three years later, Neil and I founded an international theater company. My professional life began. Perhaps something similar would have happened had I never applied for the Rhodes Scholarship. But I doubt it.

Being a woman and an artist and a Rhodes Scholar means you are really pushing an envelope. The theatrical field is still tremendously patriarchal. When I began to work as a director, I knew of only two or three female directors who were respected professionals. Now there are a whole lot more, at a time when incomes in theater are low, and the boys are rushing to become film directors, another profession where there are precious few women. My art is the art of a Rhodes Scholar in that my work is innovative and challenging. Over 30 years in two very separate cultures I have seen people react the same way: with wonder and passion. I arouse controversy

regularly. I make change. But being so very different from everyone else — sticking out like a sore thumb — means that I've been criticized for my strengths, attacked for my forthrightness, or simply utterly ignored. This does not happen to my male colleagues. I wish I could say this is something men did to me, but it isn't. Women are as provoked by strong women as men.

Dr. Olivarius' Rhodes Project is curious about why female Rhodes Scholars are not a political presence. My feeling is that we are not very interested in power. I know we should be, since power gives you opportunities. I wish I craved it, but I don't. I recently read a fascinating article which discussed why women still weren't in positions of power. The writer argued it was a hormonal issue. Men have a drive to compete and dominate. Women usually don't. We know this. Women like to do things by consensus. Men like to do things autocratically. The world hasn't changed enough to reward people who prefer consensus, who also happen to be women. I doubt that the world will ever change that much.

What would I tell future Rhodes Scholars? There is no such thing as a genius. What a nineteenth-century concept! I have seen gardeners I thought were geniuses. Uneducated mothers who were geniuses. The Rhodes Scholarship is an opportunity to be unique. Forget the expectations. No one can live up to the expectation of others; craft your own. The opportunity of the Rhodes is tremendous — it is one of the greatest presents life will give you. Every day at Oxford is a treasure and I urge you to explore every nook and cranny of it — not only the buildings, not only the libraries, but the people who will be beside you and around you. I'm not talking about the other Rhodes Scholars, I'm talking about the students and teachers at Oxford. Each one of them is a diamond mine full of ideas and a unique experience. In many cases, this experience has yet to unfold, yet to be excavated. But it is there — look for it. And there is one more thing you get: time. It is highly unlikely you will ever again have several years which you can devote to exploring whatever is a burning concern to you. Time is the one thing no one can guarantee or replace. Use it well.

About the future, mine or otherwise. As I write this, I am 49 years old. Seven years ago I moved from a country people considered one of the best in the world, Canada, to a country which is the poorest member of the European Union, Latvia. What the Rhodes Scholarship couldn't give to me, time and a revolution did. I'm supposed to be here. I find it an endlessly exciting and inspiring place, but I'm very worried about its future. Latvia has always been a political football and has experienced unspeakable carnage due to its geopolitical location. The American drift to a religious state does not bode well. The news from the environmental front is terrible. And yet, living with two young children and fearing for them, I draw hope from their inventiveness, from their belief that the world is a great place and that wonderful things must happen there. I don't think a mother of two young children is capable of being anything but hopeful, no matter how scary the world.

A final note. There were actually two genuine frauds the year I got the Rhodes Scholarship. On the ship, a girl showed up who claimed she was a Rhodes Scholar, and when asked to share her Rhodes experience story, became very vague. I knew her from my own university days and recalled her as a kind of ski bunny — I was rather surprised that she had won the Scholarship.

She joined us in all the Rhodes activities, but once we got off the ship was soon pressed to admit her fraud and disappeared. The other was a more serious offense — a Rhodes Scholar whose fellow Scholars began to doubt the veracity of his achievements. He too has disappeared into the unknown, but I believe “action was taken.”

Thinking about these two misguided individuals, sensing their mettle or lack of it, I know I’m not a fraud. I’m the real thing.