

A surprise speaker for your conference?

Or a relaxing yet stimulating interlude in the programme?

This brief encounter could be both!

BIRD TALK

a message for humanity



A slightly absent-minded “professor” comes to the lectern to welcome the guests. He wears a green academic gown over his suit. He explains that the speaker of the day – a parrot from the forests of Puerto Rico – chooses to address the audience as “Neighbours”. Back home, the parrot’s nearest neighbour is a huge radio telescope, whose construction contributed to the deforestation that now threatens the parrot’s existence. The keynote of the speech reminds the professor of a line from a song: “Neighbours need to get to know each other”.

Pulling the hood of the gown over his head, adding the knot of his silver tie as beak and earphones from the lectern as eyes, the professor transforms before our eyes into the parrot, which hops up onto the lectern lamp as a convenient perch.

From here the bird launches into an impassioned speech to us, its earthly neighbours. Why this immense effort to find intelligent life in a silent universe when we parrots are right here? Alex, the African grey parrot, proved that we can communicate with you. We share the gift of speech and language. Parrots are more similar to humans than any extra-terrestrial species will be, but they are now threatened with extinction...

The speech itself (*The Great Silence* by Ted Chiang) ranges over many existential themes and is both interesting and thought-provoking, amusing and touching. Audiences young and old have expressed their pleasure on hearing it.

As an item in an event programme, organisers can see this as a cultural break or as an ingredient in their discourse. Either way, I suggest they encourage participants to attend the lecture “Bird Talk” without further explanation. The professor’s introduction provides the necessary context for the parrot’s performance.

Kevin Benn

Born and educated in England, I have lived in Sweden for most of my adult life acting at Teater 23 in Malmö and teaching English in schools. Now retired, I tour with a Swedish children’s play “Nasse hittar en stol”; act in English at Playmate Theatre Malmö; and tell stories – preferably in costume – to anyone who will listen.

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PRACTICAL MATTERS

Audience: suggested max 100 persons in an intimate setting

Venue: a lecture theatre or room with a raised platform for my lectern
lighting for the lectern area
appropriate seating

Time: get-in: 30 mins, get-out: 20 mins

Performance: ca 20 mins plus 20 mins conversation with audience as required

Performing Rights: Janklow & Nesbit Associates, New York, for Ted Chiang

Fee: by arrangement, payable to my firm, Playmate, approved for F-tax

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