

Your Royal Highness
Director General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is with great pleasure that, on behalf of Thorvaldsens Museum in Copenhagen, I am able to take part in the opening of the exhibition *Writing is an Act of Love. Hans Christian Andersen's Diaries and Almanacs*.

Both in Denmark and beyond the country's border, the 200th anniversary of the birth of Hans Christian Andersen has given rise to a large number of exhibitions, events, concerts, lectures, new publications and so on in celebration of Andersen. And at the same time, they also re-interpret him, extend our knowledge of him, moderate it and make his oeuvre relevant and up-to-date.

Everyone seems to have *some* relationship to Hans Christian Andersen – or rather: he is broad enough for everyone to have their *own* relationship to him – the facets in his personality and his oeuvre are so numerous that everyone seems to have light reflected back on them from their own investment in a knowledge of the great writer's life and work.

And that is precisely what is so different about Andersen. At the same time that, as a person, he is apparently so easy to caricature and make simple to understand – snivelling, cantankerous and self-absorbed – he is an incredibly complicated human being, and the different levels to be

found in his work are likewise astonishing whether on a first, second or subsequent reading of his fairy tales and novels.

People are seen in many different ways. Other contemporaries of Andersen were felt to be virtually made in one piece – for instance the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen – even though a later age can naturally see that this is not so. And like so many others, Andersen derived comfort from Thorvaldsen, was elevated in his close friendship with him and achieved a strengthened belief in himself.

We believe that in this exhibition, in which Andersen's diaries and almanacs are quite literally at the very centre, we have penetrated to the very starting point for the special quality of Andersen's oeuvre. These are the countless observations, meetings with people, moods, momentary insights, peculiarities and most intimate thoughts and actions, which he writes down in his almanacs and diaries. This is the raw material on which he bases himself after having freed himself from the literary and linguistic templates that stamp his earliest works. This liberation from given forms took place especially during and after a visit to Italy in 1833-34, when Andersen met the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, who acquired great significance for the other's belief in himself. "Feel your own strength, do not allow yourself to be led by the judgement of the crowd, and go calmly ahead ..." was Thorvaldsen's advice to him in January 1834 when a devastating review of his first major poem *Agnete and the Merman* reached Andersen in Rome.

Andersen looked up to Thorvaldsen. After the festivities to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Thorvaldsen's birth in 1870, which took place in a building alongside Thorvaldsens Museum, which had opened in 1848, the

participants went into the museum courtyard, where Thorvaldsen lies buried, and placed flowers on the grave. Throughout the proceedings, the ageing Andersen – now 65 years old – had remained slightly anonymous in the background. It was as though he knew Thorvaldsen too well to take part in an official occasion in memory of him, but in his diary he wrote: “I dare not hide anything in these pages, which will never be printed but are born of my everyday thoughts. That I felt so much in my life to be related to Thorvaldsen, our poor birth, our struggle and the great recognition we have received from the world.”

Andersen felt that their poor background, their artistic struggles and the recognition that came *first* from abroad and later from their native land of Denmark bound him and Thorvaldsen together. And it is an important feature of the exhibition we are opening today that it precisely goes beyond Denmark’s borders by being shown here in the marvellous Bibliotheca Alexandrina. This “abroadness” – so to speak - It has sharpened our awareness of the nature of this material that we are concerned with, and of how others see what we Danes think everyone knows about Hans Christian Andersen. What significance might it achieve?

The original objects in the exhibition are very limited in number: no more than four open diaries and 15 almanacs – many of them not even open. And for most people Andersen’s handwriting is not legible in any case. But as with the pea in Andersen’s fairy tale *The Princess on the Pea*, which was placed in a museum after spoiling the princess’s sleep, we have tried to surround and visualise the innermost quality of Andersen’s art with aura, with distance, with magic. These will allow us to perceive that we are here standing before the most important thing of all: writing.

Writing allows us to preserve a momentary beating of the pulse by means of a system of signs; it is a treasure that is passed on in new combinations of the same signs, from the daily calendar and the exercise book written at night quite close to the poet himself and thence launched far out into the wide world.

And we think it is right that the actual significance of the exhibition should not be tied down to the few manuscripts on display, but that it should arise precisely in those people who see and think. The experience is *in* the viewer and the listener and is created *by* the viewer and the listener. We aim at dialogue and independent co-creation. “A book does not exist if it is not read. It is always a relationship. Writing is an act of love”, writes Paul Auster, and that thought has been the driving force behind the exhibition and given it its title. Director General Ismael Serageldin of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina puts it so well when he writes in the foreword to the exhibition catalogue: “Hans Christian Andersen presented to the world and to every one of us a lasting gift: his oeuvre. In it, he holds up a mirror to us in which we can find the innermost qualities in ourselves; he opens windows so we can see the world in a new light”.

The exhibition team has been made up by curator Annesofie Becker, the architects Henrik Ingemann and Alexander Damsbo, head of productions Martin Christiansen and myself, and I should like – first of all – on behalf of this team to express my gratitude to you – Director General for the partnership between our institutions and the opportunity to mount this exhibition in this fantastic building and on this historical site and to your staff of Ambassador Taher Khalifa, head of exhibition department Gamal Hosni, exhibition specialist Bassam Kemal and the rest of the staff for a smooth and effective cooperation.

And I will also express our thanks to the Danish Ministry of Education and the Hans Christian Andersen 2005 Foundation, the Bikuben Foundation and The Hans Christian Andersen ABC Foundation, which have believed in our project and provided funding so that it became possible. Then I should like to thank the Danish Embassy in Egypt, headed by HE, Ambassador Bjarne Sørensen and his very professional staff for all good help during the process. Finally I will thank Mr. Enan Galaly, who has been so generous with hospitality and support the two times we have come to Egypt.

In the showcase in the exhibition there are examples of some of the earliest handwriting of Hans Christian Andersen and definitely the last page he wrote the 18th of June 1875 after a life of endless writing. May Hans Christian Andersen stand as an example and guide for all those others who might wish to conquer language.

Thank you for your attention.