

“He is like a builder who wants to create the biggest, most beautiful”

am not crusading for *l'exception française*.” Indeed, in a gesture that is both practical and highly symbolic, Messier plans to move into a 530-sq-m apartment on New York’s Park Avenue in September to be closer to the company’s core business.

The son of an accountant from Grenoble, Messier graduated from the prestigious Ecole Polytechnique in 1979. He went on to the Ecole Nationale d’Administration, the traditional finishing school for France’s government and business élites, and rather predictably joined the Finance

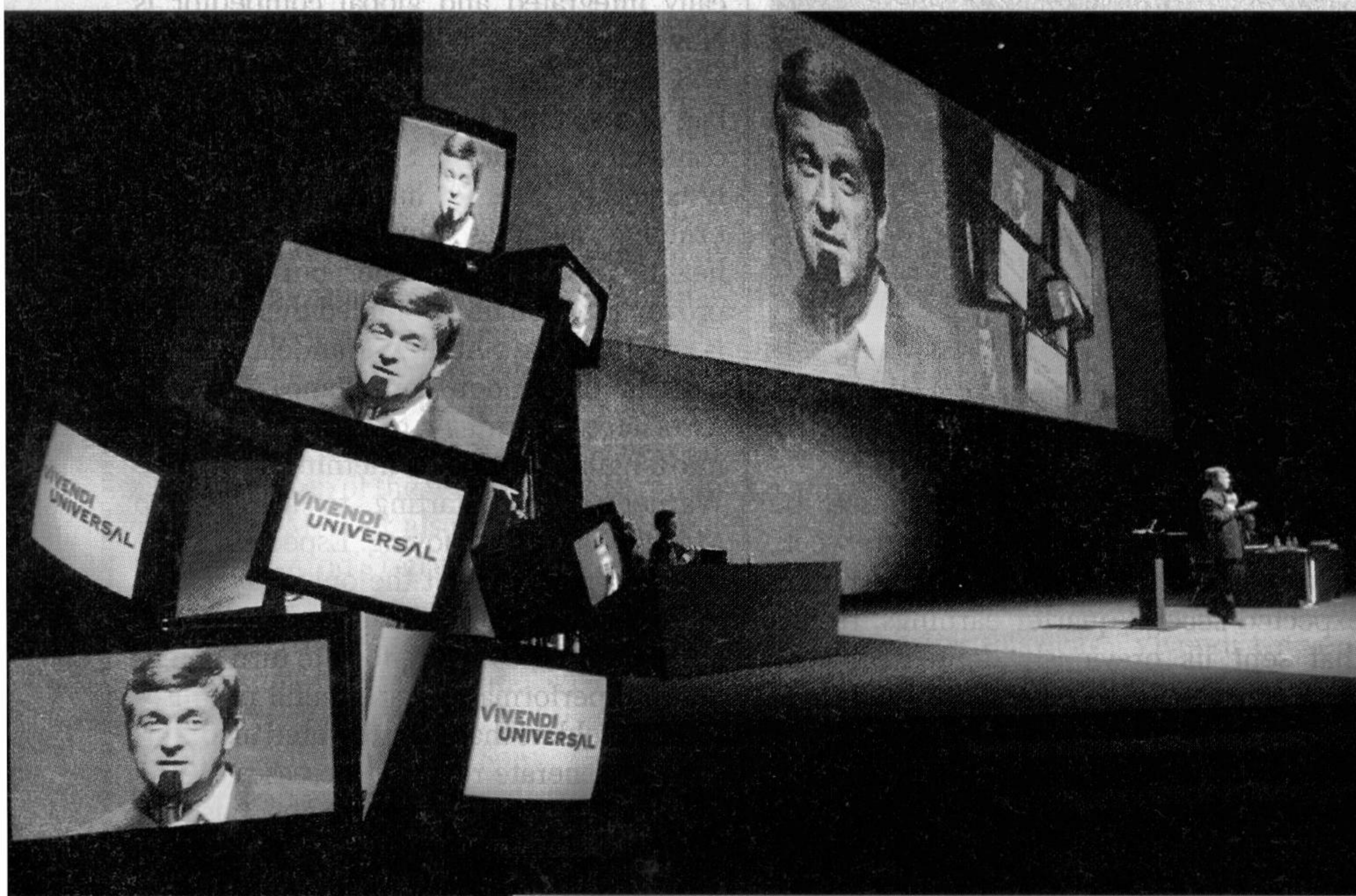
In 1994, he left Lazard to join the Compagnie Générale des Eaux, a water and waste-service group founded by Napoleon III in 1853, and became its CEO just 19 months later. He immediately set out to pull apart the firm’s gangling structure and sell off more than \$25 billion in holdings. “When he got here, it was really *l’horreur!*” recalls an associate from those early days. “A lot of the older executives couldn’t believe that [then chairman] Guy Dejouany brought in this guy who could have been his grandson as his successor. In the end, he

gy to create wider, faster and more flexible points of access to information and entertainment,” Messier said during a two-hour interview in his elegant, wood-paneled Paris office overlooking the Arc de Triomphe. But his early efforts to produce a European titan by allying Canal Plus—a major film producer and satellite owner, as well as Europe’s largest pay TV company—with industrial partners repeatedly stalled.

Meanwhile, Messier took advantage of deregulation by setting up Cegetel, France’s second-largest fixed and mobile phone operator, whose investor group also includes Britain’s Vodafone. As Messier strengthened his publishing hand on one side—buying U.S. gamesmaker Cendant Software and merging it with his Havas publishing—he added Internet to the mix by taking control of AOL’s French operation (sold off following the AOL-Time Warner merger). Less than four years after taking command, Messier had started to put together the content-and-conduit structure he saw as the winning combination of the future.

But if Messier thought he had a copyright on that idea, the January 2000 announcement of AOL’s acquisition of Time Warner came as a jolt. The union created a communications mammoth with combined revenues that are likely to approach \$40 billion this year, a delivery infrastructure based on Time Warner’s gigantic U.S. cable network and AOL’s ability to reach into the homes of its 33 million Internet subscribers worldwide. The new group planned on using those digital tubes to sell the news and entertainment content of the Time Inc. magazine group and the music, film and TV library of the Warner group. Of the AOL Time Warner deal Messier said, “Nothing would ever be the same for Vivendi.”

Rather than leading the charge into the future, Messier was now forced to play catch-up—and fast. He renewed earlier contacts with Seagram CEO Edgar Bronfman Jr., whose Universal entertainment affiliate had plenty of content but nothing to deliver it with. In just six months, the two men struck an agreement for Vivendi to buy the entire Seagram group, merge Universal’s music and film units with Vivendi’s communications activities and sell off Seagram’s drinks business. “This was a very good fit,” says Messier. “It also created a group with a lot of firsts: on the Universal side, the global leader in music,



IAN HANNING—REA

STRONG IMAGE

Messier says Vivendi Universal’s positive earnings results confirm the wisdom of the two companies’ merger last year

Ministry. Four years later, at age 29, he was chosen to oversee the first privatizations of state companies in French history. “I followed that example by privatizing myself,” quips Messier, who joined the investment bank Lazard Frères in 1989.

At Lazard Messier quickly bonded with the firm’s heavyweights, among them Felix Rohatyn and Steve Rattner, impressing them with his energy and drive. “He was always doing eight things at once,” says Rohatyn, who in between his stints at Lazard also served as U.S. ambassador to France. “I never had more trouble reaching one of my partners on the phone.” In between phone calls, Messier, the product of the Old-World French establishment, became a disciple of New-World market-driven business practices.

only had to maneuver a few people out of the executive circle to convince everyone that he was, indeed, the boss, and things began falling into place after that.” Jean-Marc Espalioux, the company’s former financial director, recalls that Messier “took power like Napoleon on the 18th Brumaire—it was a coup d’état.”

In what would become his signature sell-to-buy style, Messier pooled the divestment proceeds with the group’s lucrative water revenues to finance a spate of deals that created one of Europe’s largest media units. In 1998, with the group activities narrowed to communications and the world’s largest water-waste business, Compagnie Générale des Eaux became Vivendi.

“Our vision since the start was to marry content and delivery, and use technolo-