

Interviewee: Anthony Phillips [John Anthony Phillips]
UoS Dates: 1971 - 1974
Role(s): First Director of the MacRobert Centre



Interview summary:

Start 00:10 – AP was the first Director of the MacRobert. Before this he was Music Officer for the Northern Arts Association in Newcastle. He had received money to bring the Scottish Opera to come to Newcastle for seasons of opera. Through this he met Peter Hemmings the Chief Administrator of Scottish Opera along with Alex Gibson the founder of the company. It was Hemmings who informed AP that the University of Stirling was building a new arts centre with a fully equipped auditorium, pit and fly tower. Hemmings asked if AP would like to consider working at the centre. There was initial resistance to taking the role but AP eventually went. He had a meeting with Tom Cottrell about the job in 1969, along with the Secretary Sir Derek Lang. AP got excited as he saw the building being built ground up. He felt inspired by Cottrell's vision for the centre.

07:40 – The Gulbenkian Foundation funded the MacRobert and made the first few seasons possible with a grant of £30,000. The Scottish Arts Council also contributed to the venue, and so to Scottish Opera and Scottish Ballet, along with the University. There was no local authority contribution financially to the Centre. The MacRobert Trust provided the Centre with a capital grant. There was capital and revenue funding from the Scottish Film Council.

10:25 – Parameters were set for the auditorium to be multipurpose. Supposed to be equally good for music, opera, dance, theatre and film. There was a theatre consultant appointed to work on theatre with the architects. The MacRobert's success was largely due to him, John Wickham. AP was the only member of staff in the MacRobert to begin with; his experience was in the music side of the business. There was no budget and no programme, there was just Tom Cottrell's vision for what was needed. Matilda Mitchell, the Principal's secretary looked after the art gallery and was extremely good and experienced at it, with plenty of connections in the Scottish art scene. AP felt he desperately needed a technical second in command. Roger Deerson was appointed and was phenomenal. Deerson worked tirelessly with the installation of sound and lighting equipment and all the requirements needed. Terry Clark was appointed Technical Director. Film was a great experience in MacRobert. Stirling was only the second regional film theatre in Scotland.

19:00 – The scheduling of shows was extremely complicated. John Riddy's job was to raise money for the University by letting it commercially. It became clear early on there is a very different timescale for an opera season and for organising a conference. Riddy was not pleased being told that he couldn't bring his corporate sponsors into the MacRobert because it had been booked for performances. There was a great deal of juggling. Needs of university population had to be considered. All of these people and aspects of programming operated on different timescales. AP remembers Bob Bomont's enthusiasm for pantomime. The Centre opened in October 1971, when AP had been in post for about a year.

23:00 – The development of the studio theatre interested AP the most. He had a powerful ambition for a resident theatre entity and a musical entity in the MacRobert. It was never achieved with music. A small theatre company called the Theatre Makers was established. They rehearsed and built their shows and workshops in the Centre and were supported by MacRobert budget. They put on a production of *The Caretaker* and a very good documentary on the origins of the Scottish National Party.

28:20 – For AP the first live night felt like he was walking on autopilot. Doesn't believe there were any hitches or disasters. The MacRobert held a relationship with the Scottish Opera company for four or five seasons. There were productions of Mozart operas, the premiere of Iain Hamilton's *The Catiline Conspiracy*, and Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Scottish Opera seems to have erased their relationship with MacRobert.


32:00 – It was a very expensive operation to host opera at the Centre. To put on a production at the MacRobert there would sometimes be 80 plus people involved. There was technical crew, administration, management, soloists, the principals, the chorus and the orchestra to organise and accommodate. Everything had to be separately costed and scheduled. There was no music department at all in the university in the early days. So there was no music presence in the University. John McGrath's 7:84 came for seasons.

40:26 – The Scottish Arts Council forked out money for the MacRobert. Sandy Dunbar an old colleague of AP took a job at the Scottish Arts Council. AP believes it is due to Dunbar that the centre received so much funding.

43:00 – Constantly had to be on the lookout for acts to book for the centre. AP was always amazed at how cheap jazz was to put on. The performers didn't want huge fees but it took a lot to persuade them to get out of their comfort zones such as clubs and onto a big stage. He knew some jazz musicians. He enjoys being around performers. Getting the programme together and to work was hard due to things constantly competing with one another. Big companies had to stay for a while. One night productions were used to fill in the cracks. The mainhouse and the studio theatre could not put on performances at the same time.

52:50 – AP is remembered as being an active presence at the MacRobert which enhanced the audience's pleasure. He remarks that he thoroughly enjoyed the role he undertook within the MacRobert. Instinctively felt his name was on everything in the MacRobert so he wanted to make sure everything was acceptable. One summer season he was stumped, summer was a hard season. After Tom Cottrell's death AP sensed a change in the place. The money had dried up which made things really hard especially because he had to be more conscious of what would bring in a box office return. The University didn't seem like the place it had been under Cottrell. It was a slightly unhappy place. The English Studies department was spectacular and he was indebted to Ian Lockerbie, John Brown and Grahame Smith for their specialised knowledge in creating the film programme.

[Ends 1:02:02]

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