



# Cambridge Arts Theatre

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**Interviewee's surname:** Robertson

**Title:** Mr

**Interviewee's forename(s):** Mike

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** Lighting designer

**DOB:**

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<b>Abstract:</b>	Olivier award-winning lighting designer Mike Robertson explains the world of theatre lighting, reflects on how technological advances in lighting have influenced design and talks about his work for Cambridge Arts Theatre.
<b>Key words:</b>	Scotland, Tivoli Gardens, RSAMD [Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama], Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Joanna Town, ALPD [The Association for Lighting Production and Design], Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, Clare Fox, Rohan McCullough, Hugh Whitemore, ATG [the Ambassador Theatre Group], Maybox, Tom Mulliner, Christopher Biggins, Matt Drury, Brad Fitt, Roger Mander, Matt Crosby, pantomime, lighting, design
<b>File</b>	
<b>00.00</b>	Mike Robertson introduces himself.
<b>00.14</b>	<b>How did you get started in lighting design?</b>
	<p>He talks about how he became involved in lighting design. His father was a painter and his friends from art school were Scottish colourists, sculptors, and painters. Robertson grew up among a wonderful bohemian circle on the east coast of Scotland. As a young child, he admired their artistic skills but despite his best efforts he had no gift for this type of art. However, he knew that the idea of colour, line, and form fascinated him. He recalls a holiday to Denmark when his family visited the Tivoli Gardens. His brother Adrian was around 7, he was about 5 and they saw a glass sculpture in the gardens. When you turned the pieces of glass which made up this sculpture against sun, they made refracting images and colour patterns. He turned to his mother and said "Frieda, I want to be a lighting designer". Robertson says that neither of them knew what that was at the time, but it reflected his love of colour, form, and the "magic" which is "to marshal natural light into a new state". He began working with local, amateur productions and then wanted to take lighting design further. He applied to drama schools and was offered a scholarship to what was the RSAMD [Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama] but is now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. He was also offered a place at the Guildhall [Guildhall School of Music and Drama] in London. The advice at time was that if you trained in Scotland there were less employment opportunities. He thinks this was true then, but hopes it is no longer the case. When he was 17, he spoke to Jo Town [Joanna Town], then the Head of Lighting at the London's Royal Court Theatre, and the current chairman of the ALPD [The Association for Lighting Production and Design]. Town told him that a London training would give him better opportunities. He therefore decided to go to Guildhall, despite how convenient it would have been to go to Glasgow, especially as he had been offered a scholarship and would not have had to pay for his studies. He stayed in halls of residence at Spitalfields Market, where nobody wanted to be in the early 1990s, and there was no night life at all. Despite having gone to a boarding school in Edinburgh, he has always preferred Glasgow and is sad not to have studied there. He took a 2-year course in Stage Management and Technical Theatre at the</p>

	<p>Guildhall. Mike urges young people now to take a broader qualification (as he did), even if they know which field they want to specialise in because he believes having a working knowledge of all departments pays dividends in the end and makes you more rounded as an artist.</p>
<p><b>06.30</b></p>	<p>Robertson speaks about moving into the profession after receiving his diploma. He was initially certain that he would be an overnight star, but in practice he found it difficult to get his foot in the door. He would write to people looking for opportunities, but to no avail. One day he decided to leave Scotland for London to seek his ‘fame and fortune’ and stayed with a friend for a fortnight while he made connections. An agent and producer Clare Fox phoned him “out of the blue”, and he happened to be in to take the call, something he considers a “sliding doors” situation. She was phoning to tell him about an opportunity with the actress Rohan McCullough, who was looking for a lighting designer for a play about Beatrix Potter written by her mother. Rohan and Robertson ended up having many connections over the years. McCullough’s partner was Hugh Whitemore, a playwright who wrote <i>Stevie</i> amongst other plays. Once, Rohan called Robertson after a dinner saying she had met George Biggs at dinner. Robertson says that Biggs ran an organisation called ‘Maybox or Mayfair’ [was involved with both the Maybox Group Ltd and Mayfair Entertainment Ltd in this period]. Mike was with Maybox/Mayfair for four years working on <i>Blood Brothers</i> at the Phoenix Theatre. He went from being a chargehand, to a deputy, to acting chief during this time. Meanwhile, he was also getting small gigs at places like the New End Theatre in Hampstead. He had a series of big career progressions after this, but this was how he started out.</p>
<p><b>09.59</b></p>	<p><b>Can you take me through the process for lighting a show and how that might differ for the different genres?</b></p>
	<p>Robertson speaks about the process of lighting design. He says if you are asked to do a dance piece, there is a classic expectation for a certain methodology, though not for a particular look. For a pantomime, which could be described as a condensed musical, reality is heightened. If you take a blue sky, which in a serious play would represent dreariness or lack of optimism, you heighten it beyond its natural state to give it a positive glow. Robertson recalls being taught some very hard and fast rules about lighting design during his training but says that these rules no longer apply and “you can do anything with anything”, which he finds exciting. For a time, Robertson worked with David Lawrence, another lighting designer, designing lighting for aircrafts. He worked on the J2000 fleet for Virgin and the Airbus A380 for Airbus. He found this extremely boring because the engineers would use complicated terminology and were rather uptight, though he concedes that this was probably necessary as the stakes of airplane engineering are high. He feels it was worthwhile as he learnt things, LED technology was in its infancy, and he learnt things there which he could bring back to the world of theatre. He speaks about innovations by people like Rick Fisher who lit</p>

	<p><i>An Inspector Calls</i> and how conventions started to be challenged in the industry. Nowadays, Mike says that that everything is very fluid and creative. He considers that collaboration should really be termed cooperation, as people have completely different views on how to put on a play, and that nobody should be above a note. When ideas go well, he says that it feels very exciting, but that you should not get carried away with this and people must still feel able to give notes and suggestions. Robertson says that one of the first things to do when working on a project is to talk to people. He says that if there does not seem to be a clear vision, you can change and develop with the project together, provided communication is strong. He says that often the most simple, obvious idea is the correct one. He feels it is important to be as real and authentic as possible to achieve good results.</p>
<p><b>15:32</b></p>	<p>Robertson explains that in the old days, it was common to have tungsten follow spots on in a musical when someone started singing, but that the scenes would just be “lights up for comedy”. In part these conventions were dictated by the limitations of the equipment. As equipment has improved – more artistic flexibility has been possible within lighting. ‘In the same metre square of air, something can do ten different jobs, whereas in the old days it only did one’. He continues to explain the potential for one light to serve multiple roles in the storytelling, with reference to a streetlamp in the Agatha Christie play <i>Verdict</i> [dir. Joe Harmston, designer Simon Scullion]. Robertson extends the example to explain the process of developing a lighting scheme, beginning with the master list and going through several phases of refinement. retaining ‘wiggle room’ for the show to develop. He notes that in the past refocusing lights meant manually climbing a tall ladder, and now this can be done from the ground.</p>
<p><b>21.50</b></p>	<p>Robertson sums up the differences between lighting design in the past and present. He concludes that the design process today is ‘somewhat deferred’, freer but perhaps less precise. Digital technology at first was more efficient and offered more lighting design possibilities but the quality of the lighting was not so good, Robertson believes we are now coming through this and quality is again good. Improvements in LED technology have ecological benefits and should be pursued, but they do not filter in the same way as Tungsten.</p>
<p><b>24.10</b></p>	<p><b>Have advances in lighting technology made your job easier or harder?</b></p>
	<p>Robertson says easier. He explains that in the olden days the sets were removed to allow them to focus the lights, but this was difficult when you were trying to focus a light on a particular cushion or sofa! The lights were very hot, refocussing took hours, the drapes and scenery added to heat and equipment frequently blew up! It was tiring and cumbersome. ‘If something pops on the first lighting bar as 9 o’clock in the morning your think “Ah!” ...it was going to be a bad day.</p>

	<p>Today refocusing is done by remote control and the technology is more reliable. However, the flip side to one piece of equipment serving multiple roles is that, when the equipment goes wrong, it can be catastrophic. Robertson explains how he mitigates against this, and against the pressures of a touring schedule, with reference to his work on <i>Fascinating Aida</i>. Robertson reflects that when something is focussed by a human, whilst this can be harder to replicate on tour, there is a greater allowance for artistry.</p> <p>Robertson recalls learning swatch books of gel filters, their numbers, and the make up of the chromatograms (how much red/ blue etc). He says if you do not know this, you cannot relate it to the RAL system in paint etc. And then it can be hard to get consistency across mediums. Technology is not composition, placement is not design, design needs meaning, it must support the artist. A knowledge of composition in art, is a lifelong passion and learning, and this needs to underpin design.</p>
<p><b>33:36</b></p>	<p><b>The differences in designing for a fixed venue show versus a touring production?</b></p>
	<p>Robertson details the differences between designing for a show which is staying in one theatre and one going on tour. He says that a production going on what was known as “The Waitrose Tour” meaning going to places like Cambridge, Guildford, or Oxford, was less problematic because the setup is largely the same, unless there is a radically different stage. He says that provided the proscenium heights [the height of the proscenium arch] of the different theatres are not hugely different, you can recreate lighting with little difficulty. He says the front of house lighting is the part which is not able to be replicated across different theatres. As it is not worth the money to string up new trusses to put lights in the exact position they were in in other theatres (unless it is high end production, or in that theatre for a long time), Robertson says that the continuity of front of house lighting is not a problem which can be solved. However, he does not believe front of house lighting is vitally important if you put enough lighting around the proscenium. He remembers watching productions from in the circle where you are sat above the front of house lights, and the effect you get from watching the light going into the stage making it appear very flat. He therefore decided not to rely heavily on front of house lighting in his lighting design to avoid creating effects that can only be fully appreciated by people in the stalls. Also, light gets lost somewhere between the fixture and the stage so even with 30 kilowatts pouring at the stage, there is very little tangible effect. Robertson says that what makes you see people on a stage creating contrasts, not pouring light at the stage because we see objects because of relative contrast, not because they are bright. He says that lighting a play which is not going on tour is a luxury because if it is touring, you know it will never look quite the same as it did where it was first set up, despite best endeavours. He says that often you tour overhead rigs, which are increasingly LED,</p>

	and not front of house rigs which in some places are still tungsten.
<b>40:42</b>	<b>Are you there at rehearsals whilst blocking is still going on or do you come in later when everything is as fixed as possible?</b>
<b>40.53</b>	Robertson speaks about the point at which he comes into a production. He tries to come in both for blocking and once the blocking is set. Previously, the expectation would be that the lighting designer would come to the run through when everything is mainly blocked. However, if you come earlier in the process then you can have an input and develop a good relationship with people in the production. He says that actors divide into two categories, “bats” and “moths” those who go to the light, and those who always manage to miss the light. Robertson describes the bi-reciprocal nature of the process where when actors and lighting designers work together, both profit from it. He says that while working with the actors directly mainly comes in later in the process after everything is blocked, if you go to rehearsals, you can build a relationship have an influence with the actors, so you are able to get them to work with the light better. He believes when actors and lighting designers work together, that is when everything is at its sharpest. Robertson discusses the positives and negatives of watching the early rehearsals or coming in afterwards when everything is more fixed. He compares this to when he watched the film version of <i>On the Waterfront</i> when he was working on the stage show and how it can give you preconceived notions which are unhelpful. He says that blocking changes are not the end of the world at all, and that you need to be very flexible. He says that working on award shows and tribute shows where you set up 100s of lighting cues and lighting for 40 acts in a day teaches you to be very flexible.
<b>46.26</b>	Robertson’s first West End play was the <i>The Wood Demon</i> by Chekhov, which he thinks was an early draft of <i>Ivanov</i> [ed. <i>Uncle Vanya</i> ]. While he was doing this, he was offered a production of the <i>The Magic Flute</i> out of the Bristol Hippodrome. This production attracted the attention of the Harare International Festival of the Arts and Robertson was sent out to Zimbabwe to work on the show. Initially it was going to be in a 700-seat theatre but then it was decided that it would be outdoors in the Harare Gardens for thousands of people. He was working with basic equipment without any moving lights and remembers the control tower being very far away from the lighting rig. A snake fell out of a light and down his t-shirt, which was terrifying! He met the lighting designer from Det Norsk theatre in Oslo, he wanted him to deputise for him and light Philip Pullman’s <i>The Firework Maker’s Daughter</i> . Robertson says never to fear scale as a lighting designer - if it is bigger, put up more lights. He adds that if you are working in bigger theatre, it is likely they will have more lights to work with because of this. He says that when working on a smaller scale like at the Cambridge Arts Theatre, there are brilliant opportunities to be had which are different to the opportunities

	available at large scale theatres. He says that the quality of light on people in a much smaller space is better and describes working in big theatres as dealing in landscape and working in small theatres like the Cambridge Arts as dealing in portrait.
<b>51.09</b>	<b>Are the rules different for outside productions?</b>
	If a production is set outside, everything needs to be waterproof. Mike says that outdoor productions are a combination of brilliant lighting and a beautiful setting. He says it is fun to do but not very different from indoor theatre as it is still about lights and people, especially as nowadays it is the same equipment being used since moving lights are now resilient enough to be outside. He says it used to be very different because you were working off generators and lights would flicker, but this is no longer the case. However, he says he is much happier sat at a desk in a lovely theatre like Cambridge Arts.
<b>53.05</b>	<b>Where did your relationship with Cambridge Arts Theatre begin?</b>
	<p>His first show at the Cambridge Arts Theatre was a pantomime. When his friend Lee was doing the sound for a pantomime with Christopher Biggins, he was in London at a gallery having a coffee with Lee and they decided to go to Cambridge to see the pantomime matinee. The play had already started so they snuck in and sat at back of stalls on the left, next to the usher's seat. Robertson sits in this seat to this day. Biggins was at the top of his game. It began his love affair with the Cambridge Arts Theatre. He remembers going for dinner with Biggins and seeing Jack Dee who had done something at Corn Exchange. Dee sat and spoke to them and was utterly charming.</p> <p>Robertson's friend Matt Drury, Head of lighting at National Theatre had a friend called Brad Fitt who was writing the pantomimes for Cambridge Arts at that time (he later became a well-loved Dame). One year, Drury could not do the pantomime lighting and asked Robertson to do it instead. It was Chief Executive Ian Ross' last panto - the 'Most delightful fun I'd ever had'. He listened to Roger Mander's oral history of the Theatre [<i>former Theatre Stage Door Keeper</i>], it is warm and welcoming, Robertson says it sets tone for whole building. He struggles to think of another theatre like the Cambridge Arts Theatre, and he has worked in many theatres. Robertson says it has become a home and family for him, which is especially precious to him as he and his brother were both adopted. He feels one of the ambitions for adopted children is to find homes, and though he had wonderful, adopted parents, finding a home and family like the Cambridge Arts Theatre is special and creates a deep connection.</p> <p>Robertson reflects on the Foyer project which made great improvements Front of House and looks forward to the Theatre's proposed forthcoming capital project which will improve the aged auditorium.</p> <p>'The greatest respect and love for [Cambridge Arts Theatre] and of all the theatres if it went it would break his heart.'</p>

59.21	<b>You work a lot now on our pantomimes, can you speak a bit about designing for those?</b>
	<p>Robertson jokes that coming to Cambridge this morning for this interview, in the spring sunshine, felt odd because he normally arrives in the city each December for pantomime. Pantomime is a “joy and jewel for him in the year”, compared to some dour plays he does in the year pantomime is full of joy. He sees the same creative faces every year, Matt Crosby [resident pantomime Dame] has been there for a long time. The team have developed a shorthand and know how to make something sharper. Like any production pantomime is a product of the chemistry of people, things, situations. The more the constant fixtures are kept the more you get a consistent result if you do not become complacent. He has had good sets, and less good sets, there have been discussions of the Theatre owning their own portals [<i>parts of the set, which would normally be hired for pantomime</i>] which would open up the possibilities for lighting and make it a sharper experience for future audiences.</p> <p>Robertson reflects that the loyal pantomime audience at Cambridge removes some of the anxiety of the creative process, people are fundamentally on your side because they know there is a benchmark of quality. The hope of pantomime is that a child aged five believes that person on a carpet really can fly (which they absolutely can!). He particularly enjoyed Cinderella.</p> <p>The great thing about lighting design is you are the first creative in and the last one out which allows you to be objective about what you see!</p> <p>Robertson has seen wonderful commercial pantomimes, but he prefers Cambridge Arts Theatre, it feels like value for money. It feels like a well-funded production, properly staffed and he believes the audience understands that.</p> <p>Robertson hopes the Arts Theatre will extend their producing arm and begin touring. The experienced staff team at the Arts Theatre can make it work.</p> <p>‘It’s family, it’s warmth...holy grail of loyalty and of success’.</p>
01:07:22	<b>ENDS</b>