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Alexander McPherson – interview transcript

Interviewer: Therese Clutario

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Designer. Frith Banbury; Bristol theatres; costume design; designing productions; kabuki drama; Music Hall; pantomime; Rapier Players; scenery; stage management; touring; Trelawney of the Wells; Victorian theatre; weekly rep.

TC: I've always wanted to ask you how you managed to stay, to be in the business for more than 50 years now. What is the secret?

AM: I don't know. It's because I want to do what I do.

TC: You have a great time?

AM: Not always. It's something I always wanted to do. I'm enjoying myself very much. I've always lived on the edge.

TC: Because it's freelance?

AM: That doesn't really matter if you're happy, and it's also been quite hard.

TC: And even now for big productions?

AM: Yeah, but they're few and far between. I'm sort of scraping.

TC: How do you get the jobs for stage design? Do you send in your portfolio?

AM: No, no, no. People asked me because they know me.

TC: Oh, it's reputation then?

AM: Oh yes. I'll get asked to do a sort of plays, whatever in a certain style. Because I have a certain style and you know... and if it's OK for him.

TC: You have a particular preference for...

AM: No, no, no I don't. I'll do anything. I'm not very keen with modern.

TC: Why not?

AM: I don't know. It's because I love reproducing period...

TC: You're interested in Victorian stage machinery?

AM: Yes, machinery.

TC: Why?

AM: I'm interested in Victorian theatre because I suppose I've always been interested in sort of moving theatre and Victorians were very good at that.

TC: And you worked on Peter Pan?

AM: Peter Pan. But that's quite a long way out of your [scope].

TC: Yeah, but it's OK.

AM: Yes, ah well. Brief history, just Peter Pan. In a way it would be a big scenery at that time. The Edwardian...

TC: Did you also do the costumes?

AM: Yes, also the costumes.

TC: How many costumes did you have?

AM: I can't remember.

TC: Oh lots?

AM: You've got the pirates, the Indians...

TC: And the?

AM: Lost boys.

TC: But you didn't do the swords or...

AM: Ah no. Well. They would have been part of the costume.

TC: Ah OK, so you designed that one?

AM: Yes.

TC: It's a really big job. Now you're working on...?

AM: A musical. But I haven't really started yet because the script hasn't arrived. But as soon as I get the script I will start sort of researching. Well, I am already researching as much as I possibly can.

TC: How long does it take you to prepare?

AM: Takes as long as you have.

TC: Do they give you a deadline?

AM: Oh yeah. You have a deadline. You're lucky it's a little while. Most of the time the deadline is really, you know, usually very quick. They usually want it the day before yesterday.

TC: That's really quick. [Laughs]

TC: And is there a difference between designing for a musical and for a play?

AM: No, not really. It's scale.

TC: Oh just the scale.

AM: Designing everything. Everything you design is different. You have to approach it in different ways. It's always new. It's always something not done before. It doesn't make any difference what... you work with new people, with the director who has different ideas, new ideas. That's it.

TC: And that musical will be staged when?

AM: Huh?

TC: The musical that you are working on, when will you stage it?

AM: In August.

TC: Oh.

AM: That seems a long time but it's not.

TC: I was wondering if you could tell me again how you started in theatre. I know that you started when you were fourteen.

AM: That's right. When I... just after I left school, I, you know, it's something I wanted to do. I suppose and there were no theatre schools to go to, so I simply started as a sort of apprentice I suppose you might call it. Things were different during those days. So I started as sort of helping paint scenery, learning to paint scenery.

TC: Where was this?

AM: In Bristol. At the Rapier Players which was at the Little Theatre in Bristol which isn't there anymore. At the Colston Hall which is a big concert hall. They had been rep since 1930s.

TC: And when you were younger you always went to theatre to watch plays?

AM: Not to that theatre necessarily. I went to the theatre to see various Christmas pantomimes. They got this quite old [inaudible] because it was the war and the theatre had a sort of sovereign attraction because it was a different world. It was quite a contrast to the austerity that was around you. So I think that's what... I always used to

have model theatres. I spent hours as a little boy cutting out all the figures and the scenery for the sort of toy theatre.

TC: Your family, they often went to the theatre [when you were younger]?

AM: No, I used to get taken as a boy to pantomime, which is a tradition. Everybody would be taken to the pantomime. And then occasionally I would be taken to the musical which was at the Empire Theatre in Bristol when I was a young boy.

TC: Did you like it?

AM: Oh lovely! Yes.

TC: But the productions, were they for kids?

AM: No, no, no. Gosh! There were sort of comedians, jugglers, whatever.

TC: Oh, OK. And they you also mentioned last time that you had an aunt...

AM: My aunt.

TC: Was an actress?

AM: She was a chorus girl.

TC: She influenced you?

AM: No, because I never met her. She was lost in the Spanish Civil War.

TC: Oh.

AM: She just plain disappeared.

TC: What was your parents' reaction when you told them you wanted to work in theatre?

AM: Well, I think they wanted me to work in the hotel business which was their business but

they did...

TC: They didn't [oppose]?

AM: I'm sorry.

TC: You remember who first taught you how to do the stage?

AM: Several people.

TC: Were there a lot of young apprentices?

AM: No, no. It was just me.

TC: Oh just you?

AM: Yeah.

TC: How did you get accepted? You told them 'I want to learn how to...'?

AM: No, no. A job was advertised and I applied for it with my mother.

TC: But you had no portfolio, nothing?

AM: No, no, no. Nothing. Just an interview and I got the job.

TC: Do you remember what they asked?

AM: No, this was all back in the 1940s. I don't have a list of time. I don't remember. But it would have, you know, would have been Ronald Russell who was the director of the theatre.

TC: Do you remember your first few days at work?

AM: No, I don't remember at all. I can remember everything was painted in the cellar. Under the Colston Hall in Bristol on its wall flats.

TC: And you helped?

AM: And I helped paint. I used to paint the paint mouldings, anything on the flats and we had to stage ...paint mouldings. I used to mix the paint, clean the bucket, make the size. because everything was painted with size paint.

TC: Size paint?

AM: Size was the medium. Oh you had powdered colours and you mixed the powdered colours with size, so I used to leave the size and make the whiting which was a big bucket.

Oh sorry.

TC: It's OK. You were saying something.

AM: No, no, no.

TC: I wanted to ask you if you interacted with the actors?

AM: No, no, nothing to do with this. No, no.

TC: So you were just by yourself?

AM: I used to see them. Of course, yes, when they would come to the rehearsals.

TC: And the directors, they often visited the cellar?

AM: Occasionally they would visit the cellar.

TC: So in Bristol you learned how to paint. How long did you stay there in Bristol?

AM: With the Rapier Players? I can't remember exactly. Maybe six years or so something like that. As I told you I have no memories for time or dates.

TC: Did you sort of climb up the ladder while you were there?

AM: Yes, I did. When I was in the company I used to go off in summer and do a summer season at the Weston-Super-Mare Playhouse - another theatre which doesn't

exist any more - and I was given the job of doing the scenery for the weekly rep at the seaside Weston-Super-Mare. That was the first time that I did anything by myself. I was about sixteen. And then it was a real rich one. I actually did the scenery in a week. My job was painting scenery so in a week you would... On a Monday you would open your plays. On a Tuesday you would do carpentry and select all the flats for the next play and then I would put the primer on, base them in. That would take until Wednesday. Then Wednesday afternoon, I would be off and on Thursday I'd start finishing on the painting and that would take until Wednesday. Then Wednesday afternoon, I'd be off. And on Thursday I'd start finishing the painting and the mouldings and stenciling. And I'd have Thursday and Friday to do painting on all that detail and on Saturday we'll go in and paint the backings. That's what you see through the doors and out through the window which holds the flats as well and then obviously on Sunday if you had to work, you work. And then you go on Monday in the morning, a lorry would arrive, collect the scenery and take it to the theatre, set up on the stage, and in the afternoon we would have your rehearsals, then in the evening the play opens. On Tuesday you'd start the ritual all over again and you would start the next play, and in the evening you'd be making your little model for the next play, and all these used to be done in the local store where they used to keep the deckchairs at the seaside. So by the time we would have started the painting the deckchairs were all gone and the place was empty and there would plenty of room, but as the weeks went by the deckchairs started coming back. Soon you had less and less room with all these piles of deckchairs.

TC: Wow, so it was a seven over seven days job. You worked from Monday to Sunday.

AM: Yeah, but that's what you did.

TC: What time did you start work in the morning?

AM: Normal time - nine o'clock-ish.

TC: And then finish at?

AM: But that doesn't matter. If you want to do something you don't mind how long it takes. It's one of those things. It's a vocation. You don't ever work on that sort of job in theatre for money.

TC: Do you remember the plays that were staged?

AM: No, no, no. Not many. They were all drawing room comedies.

TC: Oh

AM: Murder mysteries, all that sort of thing.

TC: Did you do a lot of Shakespeare?

AM: No, no, no Shakespeare at that time. We never did Shakespeare. I did one when I went to Bristol Old Vic. We did lots of Shakespeare. But this was in the basic rep, weekly fortnightly rep which is a tradition that is gone. We don't have that tradition anymore. It's long gone. Lots of people say that it's a wonderful thing. I don't think it was. It was to teach people shortcuts and bad habits, actors as well. You got shortcuts of these things quickly and I'm not quite sure how this works and the standard would be totally unacceptable now.

TC: Because everything was done in a hurry?

AM: Well, it was done in a hurry, it was done to a certain form, but it was you know it was good discipline.

TC: What about the costumes?

AM: The actors provided themselves for that because it was generally everyday clothes.

TC: OK, there wasn't a costume designer?

AM: No, no, no costume design. If there was anything that was costume you'd just get order [from that PR in that skip?] and people would put it on but that didn't happen very often. Basically we used to do mostly modern plays and even if there weren't any modern plays, they'd make them modern plays.

TC: You stayed there for six years, what made you decide to leave?

AM: I left yes. But I can't recall exactly why. Probably I'd had enough. [Laughs]

TC: And then what did you do after Rapier Players?

AM: Various things. I did various jobs. I decided that I would give up the theatre. But it's in my blood too much. So I went as I said into restoration.

TC: Art restoration?

AM: Yes, in a gallery but I didn't like it very much. I found that it was a bit sort of, it wasn't what I expected. And so I sort of left that job and then I was lucky enough to get a job at the Bristol Old Vic as a technical assistant.

TC: Did you apply for it?

AM: Yes, I applied for the job and I got my job. That was just sort of a technical assistant, which was making props, sort of props you would make, a property master would make in the carpentry room, bits of furniture, various wooden props and also you worked the shows as a sort of stage hand as well. That's what we did. So you did a bit of everything. And then I went from that to becoming property master in the theatre and then on to being a painter.

TC: And then from painter?

AM: To designer, yeah. Because as painter you design the odd play every now and again. It's part of the job, like my time to become a designer you know.

TC: Do you remember any memorable plays that you did in Bristol? Or designs?

AM: I did the play which opened the new theatre, the historic theatre in Bristol which is a theatre [inaudible] this theatre where I originally went to work in Bristol, Theatre Royal was still a Victorian theatre, still had a Victorian Stage and it was very sort of very small, very inadequate for the sort of productions we were doing, so I was Head of Design over the time that they did the transition to the the Little Theatre for the opening of the musical at the restored theatre and I designed the production, a musical play, Trelawney which is based on Trelawney of the Wells which was a memorable production sort of a big musical.

TC: Who were the stars?

AM: Does that really matter?

TC: No. You did the costumes too?

AM: I did the costumes for that as well as the scenery, but things were different then. That was a different theatre. The theatre that I was talking before was a repertory theatre. Another kind, different altogether. And Bristol Old Vic was a subsidized theatre, subsidized by the Arts Council. We did classic plays as opposed to drawing room comedies. Yeah.

TC: And were there any interesting personalities that you've met in Bristol?

AM: Oh lots! Goodness, my memory is you know...

TC: Diana [his wife] told me that Jeremy Irons...

AM: Jeremy Irons was one of the acting ASMs.

TC: He was from the theatre school?

AM: No, I don't think it was the theatre school. There was a sort of... I don't know if that exists anymore, but he was what you call 'Acting ASM'. They were young actors or actresses who would act as well as help with stage management when they were beginning the profession. Everybody had to begin somewhere and in those days we do it that way. When you join a company, you helped with fit ups and help on the stage management and help people like me change the paint frame.

TC: For the Bristol Old Vic was there a company of actors and actresses or did you have to audition?

AM: No, there were actors. It was a basic company. Occasional actors would come in and do various parts. It was a sort of nucleus of actors. It was the same in the rep. Someone reasonably famous would come in. It was the same sort of system.

TC: You've worked with Frith Banbury?

AM: That is a long time after?

TC: Oh long time after.

AM: With Frith Banbury, that was back in the late seventies. You have the date with the poster haven't you?

TC: Yeah, a little poster.

AM: That was commercial management. It has nothing to do with Bristol. There was a phone call and they asked me to do a production and I did *Ardèle* which was with Frith Banbury.

TC: How was your experience with him?

AM: Oh, he was a wonderful man. He was full of energy and imagination.

TC: Was it your first time to work with him?

AM: No, I've worked with him before. I've met him since. He's a wonderful man. But I only did the sets. I didn't do the costumes.

TC: Vincent Price was there?

AM: Vincent Price was one of the actors in that production with Coral Browne.

TC: You remember the opening night?

AM: Well, the opening night was in Oxford. Some of the first nights, I would...

TC: You often attend the opening nights?

AM: Yeah, usually.

TC: To check if...

AM: Well, you're expected to go, in theory.

AM: There's much much more you should be recording in rep. It's a lost tradition.

TC: Lost tradition?

AM: Well, you don't have it anymore. Basically it replaced the audiences on the rep, these sort of seasons. Its got seasons where you do a different play every fortnight.

TC: Wasn't it a bit tough. Different play every fortnight?

AM: But you had West End, West End supplied the plays. The plays were all new and they would run and then the reps would all do the same play. That has come from the West End.....It started in the West End. The origins of musicals today.

TC: So you only got the hits from the West End and staged it?

AM: Well, we used to restage them, yeah. And you had what they called... French's Acting Edition.

TC: Sorry, a what?

AM: It's called French's Acting Edition, which is a sort of script of a play. French's published the script. Now in the script you have all the roles, description of the set and all the movements and the prop list and the grand parts. And really if you only had a fortnight to do it and all you have to do is to take a book and reproduce practically all the moves of French's Acting Edition put the doors in the right place and it was all done.

TC: Oh I see.

AM: And obviously I'm not saying that the director didn't have a wonderful imagination. You could put an interpretation of the play because basically it was all there for you to do.

TC: It was easier for the actors.

AM: Not necessarily the actors, they still had to learn their lines. But the director has. So you enter left, you enter right, you come to the French Windows and most of the plays always had French windows and fireplace.

TC: Because they were drawing room comedies?

AM: They were all drawing room comedies and maybe a staircase.

TC: It's always the same.

AM: Not always but they were variations in that sense.

TC: What was a normal set like for drawing room comedies?

AM: Normally, you had a fireplace, French Windows, doors in both places and... You know French Windows?

TC: Yes, yes.

AM: It was always a certain middle class type of presence in the play.

TC: But French's, there is nothing for the stage?

AM: Quite often there were photographs. You could interpret it your way but you could decorate the wall. So a London set had green wall, another site you would do it red. It was whatever you decided but you had to have a lay out and if you didn't do designs or layouts...

TC: Were there a lot of people who watched the repertory plays?

AM: Not really, quite a few people yes. There wasn't much television then and we only had the cinema, we had the theatre. There wasn't much television. Of course as television grew...

TC: How much would people pay to watch a play?

AM: Oh not very much compared with now.

TC: Was it more expensive than going to the cinema or...

AM: It would have been slightly more expensive yes.

[interruption]

TC: It's great. I mean, I got a lot of interesting things from you. Something I never knew...

AM: Well, it's quite, well. No, I mean it's because you're obviously interested in this sort of subject but it's a different tradition for you. Suddenly you come into an alien tradition.

TC: Yes.

AM: And I was talking to Diana and I didn't know there was actually... the only thing I can think of is this wonderful Javanese puppets.

TC: That's Indonesian.

AM: You know what I'm saying. I'm not being rude.

TC: It's a different culture for me. I don't know who the actors, actresses are.

AM: It's a sort of strange tradition. It's almost a sort of alien as the Kabuki. It's amazing because I did some work at Sadler's Wells. I painted scenery. This was the old theatre. Every year the Kabuki used to come in to the theatre and used to do things that come from Japan to do Kabuki.

TC: Oh really.

AM: I was painting on the paint frames. You probably don't know what it is?

TC: I have a vague idea.

AM: It's a paint frame, it's a machinery which is like a big frame where you nail your canvas on to the background, so your background is nailed on like a big artist's canvas on this paper and it goes up and down, either you go up and down the platform or the frame goes down into the well, then we paint. You've got the scrips.

TC: What I imagined was that you used a ladder to paint the top most parts.

AM: No, no, no. You don't use a ladder. You've got a platform. Either it goes up and down or you go up and down on the platform. In Sadler's Wells the platforms used to go up and I can remember being at the top and as I left the frame I pressed the button to go down and the people from the Kabuki (who have been there in all their white faces watching me) and I was fascinated by them, their stuff, what they've done and they were fascinated by what I was doing. It seemed quite crude and it's a very delicate style. It was such an alien tradition.

TC: Everything is all new to me.

AM: That's what I've been saying. I'm not being rude.

TC: No, no.

AM: Javanese puppetry. It's like the end of the world and then suddenly you come...

TC: Plunged into British Theatre for one semester.

AM: Which has a tradition, which, as you know, goes back to medieval times? We have all those traditions of [inaudible] which are still there.

TC: Even the designs?

AM: Well, yes but designs like everything else it's all got traditions. You trace your history through. Right way back some actors could trace their people who have taught them. They were taught by somebody who was taught by somebody who worked with Babbage you know.

TC: Ah yeah.

AM: You could trace your way back.

TC: Oh yeah.

AM: That's all I'm saying. It's all a matter of passing on traditions. That's what happens, so you have heritage.

TC: Quite a long heritage. Does your design depend on what kind of stage there is?

AM: Oh yes. Of course, yes.

TC: Proscenium

AM: But not all theatres have that. The Crucible in Sheffield doesn't have a proscenium. It has a thrust stage. There are audiences on three sides.

TC: Which one is easier?

AM: Well, you have a different approach to whatever the stage requires.

TC: You always base it on what kind of stage there is.

AM: Oh yes, of course.

TC: How do you start conceptualizing for the stage design? You read the play...

AM: Yes, you have to read the play, that's usually a good idea. And then based on the form you develop the sets, the costumes that are right. Normally what you will do, obviously read the play then leave your mind open and you meet the director and then you discuss the play and then that's the beginning of the ideas. You usually find you have ideas in common so you start working with good ideas and then develop it. I normally do sketches, based on where I see it and usually goes on to sort of brainstorm, that one's here, that one's there, couldn't do this, couldn't do that. Sometimes you could do versions of, you know, maybe a cardboard sketch, then I usually make what I call a cardboard model, model on a card, just white card. If you can imagine that on painting and it's rough. It's sketched. Just a sketch. So you have a piece of the proscenium as a sketch and you decide that's fine and then one makes the finished model, which is like a 1:25 metric scale and you make that and that becomes the finished model and once that's accepted you have to do floor alterations. For the carpenters, they would do ground plans, floor plans of the sketch and you'd do elevations or working drawings of built pieces and that goes on to the carpenters. Then you go do the costumes which by then you would have obviously known the costumes in your mind and, again, according to what you know the production is.

TC: Where did you learn to design costumes?

AM: That evolved. Just like everything I've done. I've never actually had formal training. It's an evolution because I've been taught by experience rather than by, you know, going to design school and when I started there were no schools. I think there were a couple of schools and there was nothing taught of theatre design. I mean I did go to art school but that was only as a part time student. That was to draw. That was when I was an apprentice in the rep. I had some basic knowledge of drawing because I believe that the drawing side is quite important. My entire knowledge was based on experience rather than going to... You can go to RADA where they do a design course and at Central School of course, so lots of theatre designing workshops. But mine was also just doing it. And I mean literally over the years you know the costumes you pick up all the time, knowledge for my research I look in...

TC: You always prefer to do costumes and [stage] design?

AM: Yeah because it's a total image. It's a total vision.

TC: You've never thought of being an actor?

AM: All my life I've never thought of being in front.

TC: You worked in a Music Hall before?

AM: Yes it was a bit in between when I was out of work.

TC: In between?

AM: In between the Little Theatre, Rapier Players and going to the Bristol Old Vic. I worked in this Music Hall, which as you quite know, is like Archie Rice. They were all like Archie Rice. It was that period of revue, not quite music hall. It was the last days of the Music Hall, when Music Hall was in its death throes and you had these revue companies that were touring around the provinces, doing sort of, you could call them girlie shows.

TC: Girlie shows?

AM: Naughty nights in Paris.

TC: Those were the titles?

AM: That's right.

TC: OK. I can imagine how it is.

AM: It's a bit like the window of theatre.

TC: Where was it?

AM: We would be touring places sort of like Dundee/Dublin Hippodrome which isn't there anymore and Skegness on dates like that.

TC: How long did you stay in Music Hall?

AM: Oh only a few months.

TC: So you did a lot of touring?

AM: I think [inaudible] has explained to you that?

TC: For both actors, for everyone else, for everybody.

AM: Nobody would live like that. It's not for long. It was for an experience which I wouldn't be without it. It was a sort of again stock scenery and then we painted stock scenery.

TC: How long did you stay in one town?

AM: Only a couple of weeks and I could recall months in Dublin somewhere. It was a basic company and it consisted of comedians, choreographers, about six girl dancers and there was this [inaudible] and another lady singer and that was about the company and...

TC: Small one?

AM: Small one and then they would have acts come in, various acts with ladies who took their clothes off. If it was in the Black Country, Black Country comedian but three acts would come in each week and it would boost the company. I would paint the scenery and that would have suited the acts.

TC: How long would the show be?

AM: Twice nightly, yes.

TC: What time does it start? Since it's sort of a girlie show I assume it wouldn't start [in the afternoon]?

AM: Oh no, no. Not in the afternoon. We didn't do matinees. [Laughs] There was one at seven then one after a couple of hours. I don't recall exactly the times but there were two in the evening.

TC: That was a pretty demanding schedule?

AM: It's a demanding lifestyle as well.

TC: Where did you stay? In a hotel, or...

AM: Digs, theatre digs.

TC: And then where did you paint all those...

AM: On the side of the stage.

TC: That was quite crowded then.

AM: Yeah it was quite crowded.

TC: So if you have to paint and do the costumes?

AM: The costumes were stocked next to the costume design. We couldn't do the sets and the costume design. We couldn't really call it costume design. We just made it all up. They went along.

TC: What were the audiences like?

AM: What do you mean? They weren't sophisticated.

TC: Oh. [Laughs] Were they mostly men?

AM: Men.

TC: OK.

AM: Mostly men.

TC: And how big was the venue?

AM: They varied. Usually they were sort of Music Hall theatres. So reasonably large stages but most of the sets were made up of drapes.

TC: Weren't they noisy?

AM: What do you mean?

TC: The audience. They were behaved.

AM: No, no, no. They were well behaved. Oh no, it wasn't that sort of thing.

TC: It must have been an interesting experience.

AM: It was an interesting experience.

TC: And after several months you decided...

AM: You've seen The Entertainer?

TC: I've read it.

AM: Ah you've read it. Well it was that sort of show.

TC: Was it the same kind of play, every city, every time?

AM: They had lots of different acts, different sketches that they would do so they didn't really repeat themselves. So when we went to the next place you'd repeat them. But they had various sketches. Stock sketches.