

## Robin MacPherson: Producing Creative Producers



Prof. Robin MacPherson is Director of the Institute for Creative Industries, Professor of Screen Media and Director of Screen Academy Scotland (a Skillset Film and Media Academy partnership with Edinburgh College of Art) at Edinburgh Napier University. He leads ENGAGE, an EU MEDIA-funded collaboration with the Irish, Estonian and Finnish national film schools. Formerly a documentary film and television producer with Scottish and UK BAFTA nominations, he joined Edinburgh Napier University in 2002 from Scottish Screen where he was Head of development. In 2010 he was appointed by the Scottish Government to the Board of Creative Scotland and in April 2011 he joined the Board of Creative Edinburgh. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. He blogs at <http://www.robinmacpherson.wordpress.com>

*Producing Creative Producers (March 2012)* was hosted by Screen Academy Scotland at Edinburgh Napier University in association with the National Film School Ireland at IADT, 'Producing Creative Producers' was a two day CILECT/GEECT supported event which attracted over fifty delegates from thirty five institutions in twenty countries and addressed the question of how we do, can and should train creative producers in film schools and how we do/can integrate more effectively in the wider context of producer development in the screen industry. The conference chairs were Robin MacPherson and Donald Taylor Black (Director National Film School Ireland, IADT).

Acclaimed producer Rebecca O'Brien, creative and business partner of Ken Loach, provided the opening keynote of the symposium with an industry perspective in a talk which explored her own experiences as a producer, current issues in the industry and new models for producing in the future. Noting that *"For as long as there is a need for content that is entertaining, there will always be a need for someone to wrangle it all together"* she observed that *"we can't rely on people like Andrew [MacDonald] just popping out of the woodwork"* and that in film the *"goalposts are constantly shifting... there is never only one approach to making a film."*

Speaking of the future and the multiplicity of platforms and technologies on which film is being distributed O'Brien observed: *"We talk about "convergence" now, but once film and TV drama were interchangeable ... We seem to be moving back in that direction because there are so many new layers available to us - the new producer needs to know how to navigate this variety, this potential, have a view as to what might be the best format with which to exploit their idea."*

Reflecting on how best to prepare young producers for this world she concluded: *"It seems to me that the way forward in training our new producers is to give them bite size courses that fit their bite size world. I think that suited me in my own learning journey and it seems to suit the apprentice producers I work with."*

The remainder of the first day saw the delegates discuss and debate the keynote, their differing approaches to the selection, training and development of creative producers and share their 'best kept secrets' by explaining how they use specific exercises or projects to nurture creative producing skills.

The second day of the symposium provided a perspective from across the Atlantic with the second keynote address being delivered by Prof. Bruce Sheridan, Chair of the Film & Video Department at Columbia College in Chicago. His presentation covered the background to his and Columbia College's decision to 'reinvent their producing curricula' and introduce an MFA in Creative Producing as an antidote to the traditional US emphasis on line producing/ production management or, where courses have gone beyond that, their focus on *"analyzing feature film case studies, brokering traditional industry connections, and teaching financial principles and strategies in a manner closely related to MBA (Master of Business Administration) studies."*

Sheridan explained that *"We decided to define for ourselves what a Creative Producer could and should be, restructure our approach accordingly, then through careful experimentation and adjustments send new producers out into the world ready to work in the current production environment but empowered to evolve professional producer culture. We also decided to work first within the undergraduate program and use what we discovered there to decide how to configure graduate level creative producing."* The outcome was a new curriculum in which creative producing is introduced *before* line production/ production management but by the end of which the producer will have worked in at least six advanced productions.

The final panel session of the symposium looked at what film schools are doing to providing a bridge into professional practice and ongoing support for their graduates. Several MEDIA- funded collaborative projects between film schools were highlighted including the *Low Budget Film Forum, Midpoint, Four Corners, Atelier Ludwigsburg-Paris* and *ENGAGE*.

By the closing session of the symposium it was very clear that the place of creative producers in film schools and the importance of tailoring curricula and teaching approaches to their needs is very firmly on the development agenda for GEECT/CILECT member schools (and indeed the wider industry) and a general consensus that the discussion, debate and exchange of experiences/approaches needs to continue.