

Stages of a diverse career

SATURDAY
INTERVIEW

STEVE COTTON

The lawyer with a social conscience is also a player in both theatre and football, discovers Rob Robertson

VARIETY has always been the spice of life for Steve Cotton, who has travelled a long and entertaining road during his time as a lawyer.

He is equally well-known in the worlds of law, arts and sport and is one of the more charismatic characters in his trade.

Cotton, who was a Scottish under-16 back-crawl champion, has never been worried about swimming against the tide since he graduated with a law degree from Edinburgh University in 1976.

The 52-year-old was one of the three founding partners of the highly successful niche business law firm, CCW LLP, which has offices in both Scotland and England, but there is much more to Cotton than his life as a career lawyer.

He has a passionate interest in the arts and is chair of the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh which, as Scotland's New Writing Theatre, has in the last couple of years been performing and working in places as diverse as Japan, China, Russia, Iran, Jordan, Germany, Italy, France, Kosovo, Canada and the United States.

In sport he was part of the legal team for CR Smith in its ground-breaking joint sponsorship of the Old Firm in the 1980s. He has since advised several Premier-league clubs, players, managers and directors, including Doug Smith of Dundee United, when, as president of the Scottish Football League, he had the casting vote on various key decisions which led to the creation of the Scottish Premierleague.

Cotton, a former head boy at Holy Cross High School in Hamilton, also has a keen social conscience. For example, he was company secretary and lawyer to the Airborne Initiative throughout its 10-year existence. He still regards the withdrawal of funding for the organisation as a disgrace, given the success of the project which was designed to help often violent 18-25-year-old males from re-offending.

He started his law career in general practice, where he remained until 1985, after which he started to work exclusively on business law clients and contract law in particular. He has since become an adviser to various household names and trade federations on standard form

contracts and to many others in the fields of IT and the creative arts.

His philosophy is to allow lawyers at his firm, which he helped to set-up three years ago, to take the initiative, and the fact his company has grown from 18 to 35 people with offices in Edinburgh, Dunfermline and Salisbury suggests the approach is working.

"I like to think CCW is a broad church for mavericks in a flat and transparent structure," said Cotton. "Our team adhere to certain core principles but are not slaves to textbooks and standard solutions. For, while Scotland boasts many superb legal firms, we were anxious to avoid the sometimes over-managed 'cloning approach' we had seen at some law firms. Many of the youngsters coming through in the law just now are superb, and the trick for us 50-somethings is to deploy a light touch and give them their head."

Cotton believes that when the opportunity to create CCW came along, his feeling was not so much that other legal firms were doing things wrongly, but rather that there were other ways of working with clients he wanted to explore.

"Specifically, I believe law, as a profession, can sometimes have too high a conceit of itself with the result that we don't always look at the issue from the client's perspective by standing back and asking what he or she actually wants compared to what we, thinking as lawyers and thinking the law is of great interest to everyone else, believe he or she wants. Perhaps our collective fault lies in our training being based around a system based on legal precedent and case law, with that in turn leading us towards timid and risk-averse advice.

"I believe and hope that CCW has nurtured a group of free thinkers who genuinely have other interests and full lives outside the law. That broader experience matters a lot, because, in essence, I think that clients are not just looking for experience, in the sense of you being around for a long time or being an apparent specialist in a given field.

"They want to see if, through that experience, you have acquired wisdom and whether you can deliver magic or the X factor to a given set of circumstances. There is a difference between providing information or standard forms and



ACROSS THE DIVIDE: Steve Cotton uses the collaborative and inclusive processes of the theatre to challenge and stimulate his legal colleagues

texts - which the internet can do - and providing X factor advice which, at least for the moment, remains beyond the internet."

Cotton firmly believes that watching writers, directors and actors work together at The Traverse and attending theatre seminars and conferences has helped him embrace a more collaborative approach to his legal work.

"Being involved at the Traverse has been a fantastic benefit to my legal career," he said. "Having watched artists working together on scripts I have seen how collaborative and inclusive the process is compared to law, where unfortunately many still seem more interested in point-scoring.

"Now we regularly get people in the firm to look outwith their specialisms and comment on cases outwith their comfort zone just to get a different angle on things, something which commonly happens in theatre."

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Cotton, who is also writing a novel inspired by some family stories he stumbled across about the huge Canadian contribution to the Second World War, seems to have huge energy levels that make him able to give complete dedication to his legal practice and the Traverse Theatre, and he talks with enthusiasm about both.

He has never shied away from taking risks and considers himself very fortunate to have been part of the Traverse Theatre team, that in 2005 took two plays to New York to play in off-Broadway venues. When the Amnesty award-winning play titled *When The Bulbul Stopped Singing*, written by Palestinian author and human rights activist Raja Shehadeh and adapted by Scottish playwright David Greig, received a hostile reception in America because of its political content, Cotton was unrepentant.

"The critics agreed it was an incredible piece of theatre but claimed it was essentially propaganda that should not be given space in the USA. I found it sad that people had such closed minds. The great strength of the play is its moderation, and its simple message that moderates on all sides of that seemingly intractable problem were not being listened to.

"Taking the play to New York was an incredible experience, as was finding myself staying in the Waldorf Astoria, which I had seen in so many movies. If someone had told me at school, or when I was a young lawyer, that I would do these things I would have laughed at them."

Cotton admits he has been inspired by many people in education, business, law and theatre dating back to his school-days, and has learned lessons from them all.

"I have always been impressed by free-thinking people, like Professor Joe Thompson who is attached to the Scottish Law Commission. He rarely comes at things in an expected manner despite the fact he is addressing a legal system that is based on precedent, and he rather illustrates my point about the need for wisdom.

"In the artistic world I am a huge admirer of Phillip Howard, the artistic director of the Traverse Theatre, and the team he has put together. Over the last 10 years he has nurtured and encouraged a whole generation of new writers and voices in Scots theatre and worked closely with the likes of David Greig, Gregory Burke, Henry Adam, Rona Munro and

others to enter the end of the incredibly ha

Cotton has many entrepreneurial, and our Gerard Eadie stands head

the rest. "Gerard's company has east and nor relatively un Scotland wh

Cotton. "His advice England, the his company sponsor a fo such an opti as sponsorin Firm would west of Scot Sponsor the months later Glasgowian CR Smith."

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