

CBC, Canada

George Anthony

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Entretien avec George Anthony

Creative Head, Arts, Science and Variety, CBC Television (1990-2005)

28 mai 2019

Marie-Odile Demay >

George Anthony, amongst many other responsibilities during your time at CBC, you were responsible for programming arts and music at *Opening Night*, the arts program series at CBC. In 2004, you became executive producer and creative consultant of the *Rick Mercer Report* for nine years. You retired from CBC in 2018. Given your background in commissioning and programming arts programs on Canada's national public broadcaster, [I believe you think](#) television is an effective way of making the arts more accessible.

George Anthony >

[Yes](#), and the best example of this is the work of Rhombus Media, a Toronto-based production company that focuses on performing arts and music TV programs. The team has done a great job of making the performing arts and the art world more accessible to a wider audience through television. Before I started at CBC in 1990, Adrienne Clarkson, who later became Governor General of Canada, was already advocating for them on the network. While I was at CBC, I worked with the Rhombus team on lots of successful programs. Sheena MacDonald was in sales, and Niv Fichman, Larry Weinstein, and Barbara Willis Sweete were both producing and directing.

I have to mention first their film, *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993). It's one of the best films I've seen on art and a great example of the genre. The original plan was to do a TV special about the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould and his relationship with the *Goldberg Variations* that made him famous around the world. François Girard, the whole Rhombus team and I were really excited about the idea. However, CBC/Radio-Canada couldn't provide the necessary financial backing for the project, which was pretty much like the actual film. Niv suggested we turn it into a feature film instead. This let us get the funding and CBC money that would normally go to a feature film. Despite the long process, we were able to make it happen as a feature film, which was a great outcome.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Why do you think this film is such a great one about art?

George Anthony >

The subject matter is definitely a big part of it. There are lots of ways you could have made a documentary about Glenn Gould and the *Goldberg Variations*. François Girard's idea of making thirty two short films that mirror Bach's thirty two *Goldberg Variations*, in fiction, was really

original. Before this project, I only knew François Girard from his 1991 film *Le dortoir*, which I thought was pretty impressive. I was immediately drawn in by the scale of his vision and the creative flair he brought to the Gould project. It was a great idea, but it was tough to pull off because it wasn't a filmed, staged performance. It was a feature film that included music performances. This was a pretty new approach to combining film and the performing arts at the time. Girard was able to attract a diverse audience with *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*. The concept and film were successful regardless of how familiar the viewer was with Glenn Gould or the *Goldberg Variations*. I think this was a big reason why our partners were interested in getting involved with the project.

When I started at CBC in November 1990, Adrienne Clarkson's show was already up and running, as was *Sunday Arts Entertainment*. Most of the content was produced in-house, so my main goal was to figure out how I could help out with these shows. But proposals from independent producers like Rhombus didn't always fit the format of *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* or the *Sunday Arts* show. So we had to come up with some different, more elaborate content for broadcasts on different art schedules.

Marie-Odile Demay >

You mentioned the CBC arts series *Adrienne Clarkson Presents*, *Sunday Arts Entertainment* and *Opening Night*. Could you explain what they were about?

George Anthony >

The *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* series, which ran from 1988 to 1999, was a magazine show that covered a wide range of artists and events each week. The format was pretty flexible. The duration of a profile varied, with some lasting twelve minutes and others up to forty minutes. Adrienne's bilingualism and national outlook enabled her to showcase numerous Quebec artists on English television, within the confines of her show. She wasn't confined to the studio and undertook a significant amount of filming on location. *Sunday Arts* was a magazine show with a focus on documentaries rather than profiles.

Adrienne Clarkson Presents had a weekly viewership of between 300,000 and 400,000, which was pretty good for an arts series. Nevertheless, it was considered a low-rated CBC show. We justified this by noting that on an average night, when Adrienne had 300,000 viewers, it was the equivalent of selling out the O'Keefe Centre in Toronto a hundred times. So, while the viewership may not have been a significant figure in the context of television, it represented a substantial audience for the arts and for artists across the country. We often got letters from viewers in smaller cities, like Red Deer, Alberta, thanking CBC for showcasing artists who wouldn't otherwise have had the chance to tour these locations.

The initial two series were primarily dedicated to showcasing Canadian artists and Canadian culture. Given the extensive coverage already planned, there was little opportunity to look beyond Canada, except in the case of exceptional events. For example, when Adrienne went

to Paris, she covered the opening of Luc Plamondon's *Notre-Dame de Paris*. But this was still a Canadian artist and production.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Was the format of *Opening Night* the same?

George Anthony >

No, *Opening Night* was more like a series of arts specials that were produced primarily in-house. That wasn't always the case. Guy Maddin produced and directed the TV feature *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* (2002) for *Opening Night*, with a budget of 1.7 M\$ and in collaboration with the CBC.

For instance, at *Opening Night*, we had the chance to show some of CBC's significant archival material from the 1950s and 1960s. At the time, the CBC was lucky enough to host a number of exceptional American music performers in our studios, especially African American entertainers who wouldn't be given exposure in America at the time, due to racism. So, these artists often opted to perform in Toronto instead. The CBC would invite them in a TV show where these great performers would have some of their first exposure on television. To provide an example, Sammy Davis Jr. performed his first television special with CBC, as did Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Della Reese. CBC has a substantial archive of black and white footage from that era. In 2002, singer Molly Johnson hosted an hour-long special in which she uncovered previously undiscovered treasures buried in the CBC archives. The Canadian audience was unaware that the stars they knew from American television were pioneering breakthroughs in Canada. So, it took someone to uncover these great archives and after a considerable period, an internal voice finally spoke up, suggesting that we should be doing something with them. I recall taking this TV special to a film festival, where it was met with great enthusiasm. Many people didn't realize it was originally created for a Canadian audience. This was the kind of content I was showcasing on *Opening Night*. It was more of a performance show. We also had opera specials originating from PBS's *Great Performances*. However, we preferred to focus on specific excerpts from the opera and the performance, rather than devoting the entire hour to it.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Did you ever engage in international co-productions?

George Anthony >

CBC was never successful with that.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Why is that?

George Anthony >

Honestly, I'm not entirely sure. Our primary objective was to create content for the Canadian audience. So, co-productions weren't something we had to do. Rhombus and other independent

producers would come up with financing solutions that were both innovative and effective. They would blend national and international content seamlessly.

The Karen Kain^[1] special, *Karen Kain: Dancing in the Moment* (1997), which was produced in-house by Veronica Tennant for *Opening Night*, got an International Emmy Award. I believe that our approach was effective, and we saw success in the international market. However, only those with an understanding of ballet and who knew Karen Kain would be likely to be excited by it.

Marie-Odile Demay >

At CBC, you were focused on producing original content for *Opening Night*, so you didn't consider the international potential of those productions as much as you could have. Is that what you're implying?

George Anthony >

Indeed. We were definitely focused on producing content for our domestic audience, but we also wanted to appeal to an international audience by inviting internationally renowned stars. For instance, Canadian tenor Ben Heppner was a guest star on Kain's program. And Veronica Tennant also produced the special *Margie Gillis: Wild Hearts in Strange Times* (1996) for *Opening Night*, featuring guest appearances by the acclaimed American opera singer Jessye Norman. However, the audience was highly specific in its preferences. Rhombus established its own international network, comprising both financing and a viewership base, and succeeded in reaching an international audience. CBC did engage in international sales, but this was not a primary focus for these programs. Unlike Rhombus and other producers, we didn't have to sell the product to finance the next one. As a result, some of these specials didn't have the longevity they deserved.

Despite this, other variety specials we produced, such as *You Must Remember This* (1994), featuring Canadian ice-skating champion Kurt Browning, became a mainstay of PBS for approximately ten years. The show wasn't just about ice-skating. It also included elaborate stage performances, such as Browning performing the Gene Kelly number from *Singin' in the Rain* on ice. It was an impressive production set. We constructed the New York street on the ice, copied the original decor, and choreographed the same dance movements on ice. Before I joined CBC, I'd been working in Hollywood on and off for a few years. I thought I'd reached the final major studio when I started working at CBC. They still had, in house, a team of professionals, including costume designers, set designers, and construction experts. It was an incredible experience and I was lucky enough to be involved in the last part of it. I do think, though, that at CBC, the value of these resources wasn't fully recognized because they were already well-established.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Please tell us about any other arts programs you think are especially noteworthy.

^[1] Former Canadian prima ballerina, choreographer and artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada.

George Anthony >

Willis Sweete's special *The Planets* (1994), which we produced in collaboration with Rhombus, was initially turned down by CBC. The original musical concept was developed for German television ARD or other broadcasters, but not for CBC. At that time, Barbara, Niv, and Sheena were meeting with CBC producer Carol Reynolds and me. Niv made a remark to the effect that CBC always had enough money to make another ice-skating show. Carol replied, "If you create an ice-skating special, we can set aside funds for your project as well." As a result, Barbara ended up directing a special with the Olympic skating champions Paul and Isabelle Duchesnay, and former world champion Brian Orser, set to music by Gustav Holst. The production also included choreography by Lar Lubovitch. The show was a remarkable success. Another noteworthy Rhombus production, once again directed by Barbara, was *The Four Seasons* (2000). This production used a soundstage instead of a theater stage, which was a big change from the traditional filming techniques. The visual difference was striking.

Before I started at CBC in 1990 and throughout my early time there, the CBC would send cameras and trucks to performing arts venues like the Stratford Festival to record two stage performances, edit them together, and broadcast them on television. They were extremely thorough, but their approach differed from Rhombus's method of filming the production on a soundstage with multiple takes.

Rhombus produced cinematic adaptations of theatre plays. *Elizabeth Rex*, a play by Timothy Findley, was originally staged in Stratford in 2000 and subsequently adapted for the screen by Barbara Willis Sweete in 2004. This is an excellent illustration of a successful play adaptation for the screen. It was a significant shift to transition from filming stage performances to creating a full-length film. Similarly, music programs frequently captured live performances directly on stage. For instance, European broadcasters often aired concert specials in multi-camera coverage, showcasing the violin section, then the brass section, and so on. This format was similar to radio, with minimal visual stimulation. Rhombus music shows were different, though. They mixed in some visuals to make the music more engaging, which was pretty new at the time.

Marie-Odile Demay >

At the time, Rhombus was really innovative.

George Anthony >

Absolutely. Rhombus and, later, CBC were also at the forefront of developing innovative variety specials, with ice-skating specials being a notable example. The format for most ice-skating specials was a series of performers showcasing a variety of jumps and leaps, followed by the next skater in a different costume. Plus, there was coverage of competitive events, like the World Championships or Skate Canada. So when we started making these shows, like the Kurt Browning special or *The Planets*, we basically redefined what a variety special could be. These programs were often narrative-driven and featured a prominent musical component. It was no longer simply a series of isolated actions or a guest star singing a song or performing. Instead, it was a scenario that made sense within the context of the overall storyline. I believe this is

the reason Rhombus was so successful and received so many awards. While they were more expensive than other options, there was a clear rationale behind this pricing.

In 1996-1997, Rhombus, in association with TVOntario, produced a series of six one-hour episodes entitled *Yo-Yo Ma, Inspired by Bach*. The series featured the world-famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma performing the *Suites for Solo Cello* by Johann Sebastian Bach. The series delves into the fundamental sources of inspiration, exploring the creative partnerships between Ma and contemporary artists from diverse fields. It's a great example of Rhombus's innovative approach to music programs. For instance, who would have thought of combining Yo-Yo Ma with ice-skating stars Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean?

Marie-Odile Demay >

I think it's fair to say that Rhombus helped to expand the audience for classical music and artists.

George Anthony >

Yes, absolutely. For the audience, it was an ongoing process of discovery. Normally, the general public wouldn't be so into classical music. But this approach worked well in getting past resistance and reaching a wider audience, including those who knew Yo-Yo Ma and those who were new to classical music. The strategy proved effective in terms of ratings.

The Christmas show, *Canadian Brass: Home Movies* (1992), features fifteen of the most popular pieces from the Canadian Brass's extensive repertoire. The show is a fun mix of music and home movies, and it's been a hit with audiences. The idea of mixing music and "home movies" was pretty complex, but it was a lot of fun to make and it was really satisfying to see the final result.

To succeed in arts programming one must be willing to take on challenging projects, embrace creative originality, and cultivate talent. It is also about getting the right people involved, including artists, programmers, broadcasters and people who can fund it. Rhombus demonstrated expertise in all of these areas. I was fortunate to join CBC at a time when there was a lot of support for my work. Robert Rabinovitch, the CEO of the CBC from 1999 to 2007, advocated for arts and culture on television, and this was reflected in the schedule.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Throughout our discussion, you have primarily focused on performing arts programs, with no mention of painting, sculpture, or architecture. Why is that?

George Anthony >

The visual arts were already covered in the *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* and *Sunday Arts Entertainment* weekly series. Beaux-Arts programs were generally standalone documentaries or artist profiles, presented in a variety of formats. The *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* series was highly flexible, allowing for either three twenty-minute profiles or a single sixty-minute documentary feature program. It was therefore easily able to accommodate one of these programs. While Adrienne's programming did not prioritize visual arts, her profiles on painters were of notable

quality, well-executed, and showcased a diverse range of artists. She had excellent cameramen and her team was highly knowledgeable in this area.

Marie-Odile Demay >

So you have a particular interest in the performing arts.

George Anthony >

Indeed, it was a personal interest. Furthermore, I was operating within the scope of the mandate that I had been given at *Opening Night*. I was lucky to have the latitude to develop concepts and commission highly qualified directors to oversee their realization. For instance, I could inform Larry Weinstein that I would not be taking on his proposed documentary on Schoenberg, but that I was interested in developing a film on Kurt Weill instead. So, he ended up producing a really well-received music special called *September Songs: The Music of Kurt Weill* (1994). And later, I was thrilled with his film on Harold Arlen, *Stormy Weather: The Music of Harold Arlen* (2002).

The cultural magazine shows were quite popular among individuals with an interest in museums, art galleries, and architecture. However, the performing arts specials represented a significant asset for the CBC. Until the turn of the century, our output included a significant number of specials and live performances in the field of performing arts. And it was a great success. We were able to produce programs that would otherwise have been financially unfeasible thanks to our partnerships with independent producers like Rhombus, who provided partial financing. That said, we usually provided the initial funding.

On occasion, I would receive a call from Barbara or Sheena indicating that they were preparing a project for Bravo but lacked sufficient funding. We offered them a second window or the use of our facilities. It was a mutually beneficial partnership, and the results were excellent. For our in-house productions, former prima ballerina at the National Ballet Veronica Tennant demonstrated her abilities as a producer at CBC. She eventually worked with Rhombus as an independent producer.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Have you had the opportunity to view any virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR) content? What are your thoughts on its potential for the arts?

George Anthony >

I am supportive of any initiative that increases engagement with the arts. I think that virtual reality has been a presence in the industry for some time. There is a growing awareness of its potential. We're still figuring out the best way to use this technology in a way that makes it a shared experience, not just something you do on your own. It could also be a means of enabling people, who would not otherwise have the opportunity to do so, to experience Shakespeare's *King Lear*. But it is not a product that can be easily delivered to consumers' homes in the same way that a television program can.

Television is an extremely effective medium. Prior to joining CBC, I had already discovered the challenges associated with working in television. It took me a while to realize how lucky I was to be working with that medium. Prior to this, I was aware of the fact that our content was being viewed by people in their own living rooms. However, I didn't fully appreciate the extent of the privilege of being able to create content and work with audiences who were watching at home, in their own living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms. It is, in fact, an extraordinary thing. Furthermore, it is not feasible for an artist to visit each potential audience member and request their attention. Alternatively, one can simply perform on television and reach 300,000 viewers, as demonstrated by Adrienne Clarkson's numbers. This equates to approximately 200 nights at the Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto, with a seating capacity of around 1,500.

Marie-Odile Demay >

What is the current state of television?

George Anthony >

I am unaware of any individuals who currently watch broadcast television. There are a few reasons for this. We do, however, watch when the Raptors or the Canadiens are playing, indicating that we are more likely to watch live, special events, such as awards shows or sports events. We view them when they are currently airing. There is no desire to view the content at a later time. It is unlikely that people will want to be in front of the TV every Monday at 8 p.m. to watch a pre-recorded show. That approach is no longer viable, I think. On top of that, cable networks are showcasing the most outstanding work, as they have the financial resources and the expertise to do so. The traditional mainstream networks are unable to adapt to the current market. Furthermore, I believe it is currently challenging for creators to differentiate themselves and pursue originality. When a new show is broadcast, I record the pilot episode on my VCR so that I can assess the content. After screening the pilots, I find that there are few that I would be interested to watch the full series. The programs are engaging and entertaining, including romantic comedies, suspense dramas, medical shows and police procedurals. Typically, these productions are of a high standard. There is always a new way to approach a problem, but there seems to be a lack of innovative ideas. I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked on many successful shows during my career. We were able to take creative risks, including in comedy, which led to the development of exceptional performing arts programs.

Marie-Odile Demay >

If I understand correctly, at the time, you were able to take risks. The availability of opportunities allowed for the introduction of new ideas and innovations.

George Anthony >

When I took a risk in creating shows, I was held accountable for the results. But the risk-taking originated at the highest level. I was fortunate to have excellent bosses who encouraged me to take risks and embrace new opportunities. I remember producing a comedy program entitled *Thick and Thin*. Most of the performers were of African Canadian or minority ethnic backgrounds. Notable figures like Russell Peters and Kenny Robinson were among them. I was

responsible for producing the live performance in a cabaret studio setting, in front of a diverse audience. I can confirm that the audience, which was mainly from ethnic backgrounds, had never previously been in a CBC building. The CBC was not racist, but it was not yet a diverse organization. Similarly, I produced another live comedy program with Andy Nulman in Montreal (*Just for Laughs*), featuring exclusively gay comics and gay-themed material. In both cases, I received approval from my superiors to proceed with these television projects, even though they were quite avant-garde. Sometimes it took a lot of back-and-forth to get them on board, but they eventually gave the go-ahead and took the plunge. These shows were game changers because they broke new ground. I believe there will always be room for creativity on TV, as long as the right people are involved with a great concept.