

JOHN K. (JACK) COUILLARD

I was the first treasurer of the Festival and one of the original board of directors, but only for two years, when I resigned when I moved to Toronto. I have a lot of nice memories of those two years. One of the first was when Brian Doherty asked me to be treasurer. He was a lawyer in St Catharines and I knew him from that. I was the Niagara Township clerk and treasurer and had business dealings with all the lawyers in the district. Brian called one day and asked if I would be treasurer and told me what they proposed to do, setting up a Shaw theatre. I was up to my neck right then in many other things. I had a young, very small family; I was studying a correspondence course at Queens University, I was chairman of the board of managers of St Andrew's Church, and really up to my neck in everything. However, he was very persuasive and I finally agreed that I would do it. One of the responsibilities of the treasurer was to pay for his own long-distance calls, postage stamps, stationery and everything else. However, that wasn't too onerous at the time.

The first winter, Brian suggested we should keep people together and we should have some other activities. He suggested we establish a film society. So we formed the Niagara Film Society and showed foreign films. Brian had a source of them in Toronto. These films were very racy by the standards of that day; of course they are nothing like what is shown everywhere today. Darcy McCord I think it was, operated the Brock Theatre. I think we saw them one Sunday night a month. A lot of people came to see the foreign films. When the film was over, McCord would simply put it in a bag and leave it down on the front steps and the truck would pick it up sometime through the night or early in the morning. There was never any danger in those days of anybody absconding with it. Things like that didn't happen in Niagara in those days.

Another thing that Brian was able to arrange was *Spring Thaw*, which did sort of a dress rehearsal out of town as the first performance. Brian convinced them to try it in Niagara-on-the-Lake. A funny thing happened the first time. Dorothy Middleditch was the secretary and when we were to do *Spring Thaw* one day—it was during the week, I recall—Dorothy called me about two o'clock in the afternoon and said the Equity people, the union people, had arrived and met her at the Court House and, after having had a look at the hall, decided they would not perform. I was shocked, as she had been. I said, "What's the matter with the hall?" She said, "There's no toilet backstage. What are we going to do?" I said, "I don't know, but we'll have a toilet before performance time tonight." I got busy on the telephone and called Gerry Wooll, whose company, Genaire, had the concession for the blue fluid that flushes toilets on aircraft. I called Don Harrison of Harrison's Lumber and Hardware and he agreed to get a carpenter and supply some lumber to build a form and a toilet seat. Then it was a case of how we were going to curtain this off. I recall that an aunt of mine, Helen Ball, had a beautiful Chinese screen, a four-piece screen, quite large. I called and told her our situation and asked if I could borrow it, that it would perform at the Shaw Festival, or at *Spring Thaw* at least. So, with that, all we needed was a nail to hang a roll of toilet paper on. It took a couple of hours to get it all set up but after it was done the Equity representative said, "That's fine." So often, many members of the cast have to have a nervous pee before they bounce on stage and when they come off stage. They would have had to go to the back end of the hall and downstairs and that was just impossible. That showed that everyone would co-operate.

Later they did install a toilet back where the kitchen is now in the large hall but that really wasn't very satisfactory either.

We had *Spring Thaw* for two or three years and it always drew great crowds. They would do one complete performance for us. The hall was always full. People in St Catharines and Niagara Falls heard about it and would come down too. In 1964, when Betty and I moved to Toronto, we continued to see *Spring Thaw* in Toronto, and then of course it was broadcast after that.

I always remember directors' meetings at Brian's house, the Rand estate coach house. We had quite a few of them through the winter, sometimes with everybody and sometimes with only three, four or five of us. On cold nights, Brian always provided soup. When you got your bowl of soup he would come along and put a

dollop of sherry in it. It was sort of a tradition with him. He was a very hospitable chap and a lot of fun.

Calvin Rand would throw three or four parties a season for the directors and all the people who worked at the Festival, including the cast when the cast was still there. They were very pleasant. He had the big house and all sorts of resources so we had great parties. I remember one particular party when Seán Mulcahy got a skinful and he was very attracted to a young woman who was only in her late teens, I guess. I do remember her last name was Dow and she came from the Dow Brewery family in Quebec. Seán was chasing the pants off her—that's what he had in mind, getting the pants off her—and she was frightened. She came and took refuge with Betty and me and begged us to keep him away from her and please take her home. I took Seán aside and he cooled off a bit and satisfied himself with another drink. He was a lot of fun.

Calvin was our showbiz angel. He really put an awful lot of money in in the beginning. The first year we didn't have terribly long performances and not too many of them. *Don Juan in Hell* was read by Calvin and Gerry Wooll and Calvin played a Spanish guitar for entertainment afterwards. Anyway, it was stinking hot. We had a real heatwave. However, we still filled the hall. As soon as it was all over, thinking about next year, we had a meeting and decided that we had to have a next year, that we had had a good start. The first thing we talked about was the heat in the Town Hall. You can tell I'm an oldtimer in Niagara; I refer to the Town Hall and not the Court House. It was always the Town Hall. After thinking about all the options that might be available, and of course we couldn't afford any of them, Calvin said, "Leave it with me. I'll come up with something." What he did was go to an air-conditioning company in St Catharines and arrange to buy a very large unit or units that would handle the hall. Of course that was before the hall was restored and the wind used to blow through those windows too and of course the heat would blow through the windows as well. He arranged to have these air conditioners installed with the understanding that at the end of our season they would take them back and give him whatever they felt they were worth as used air conditioners. I know that the first year it certainly cost him \$5,000 at least. At any rate, he did that in the interests of getting this thing going.

We didn't have much problem with wages the first year, just sort of general expenses. But the second year, a program had been decided and Betty and I went away with our family for a week and we had already decided on the program—at least Brian had—and actors had been engaged. We were away for a week and it just happened that that week Brian and Calvin decided to sit down and do a budget. There were just so many things they didn't know about budgeting for that. They didn't think about unemployment insurance, or insurance, or Equity fees; there were just so many things. I was green to showbusiness too but I did know about these things anyway. I came back and they presented me with a budget. I looked at it and said, "We better have another meeting right away because there are going to be a lot of changes here." It was going to be impossible. We had a full house every night. Calvin said, "Well, we're going to go ahead." I said, "We can likely pay our expenses but not our payroll." He said, "Okay, the first payroll you can't meet"—I always made up the pay on Thursdays—"call me and tell me how much you want and either I'll bring a cheque down to you or you can come up and pick a cheque, whichever one of us happens to be babysitting at the time." So he set up a bank account at the Imperial Bank and I deposited whatever sum of money and replenished it as necessary without any problems. I just had to tell him, "Calvin, I need \$4,000," and there would be a cheque for \$4,000. Without Calvin there would have been no Shaw Festival.

I tried to convince Brian that we should call the establishment the Court House Theatre, then we could say "The Court House Theatre presents the Shaw Festival," or "The Court House Theatre presents the Niagara Film Society," or anything else we wanted to do. But he really felt that the name Shaw Festival would have more drawing power than the Court House Theatre and I'm sure it has.

The only meeting of the board of directors that was not held in Niagara-on-the-Lake was in Toronto at Jack McKenzie's office. He was president at the time. I went up to his office. I just went as a spectator, having received notice of the meeting. I didn't know any of the directors except McKenzie himself. Close to the termination of the meeting, the woman who was the administrative director at the time said,

"Tomorrow"—Monday, I guess it was—"is the closing day for our purchase of the Brock Theatre and I need 25,000 more dollars." McKenzie said, "You fellows heard that. I expect that you'll get together and give me \$25,000 as soon as we're finished here." Sure enough, at the end of the meeting they all pulled out their cheque books and handed the woman cheques for \$25,000. There were a lot of people working for the Festival at that time, people who really had their hearts in it.

I remember that before it was called the Brock it was called the George and just operated in the summertime, of course. For a while, leading up to the middle of summer there would be Saturday night performances. One time there was a special motion picture that had sound and was called *Wings*. It was really very special and was given a big buildup. I was about 12 at the time. Unfortunately I had to have my eyes examined in St Catharines that day and the doctor warned me about not going to see any motion picture for two or three days. I was dying to go and spend my 10 cents to see *Wings*, but unfortunately it came to Niagara and left after one performance so I never saw it. A woman named Phyllis Bissell played the piano. Her daughter Elizabeth went to school with me and still lives in the house on Highway 55 about five houses up from the Mary Street intersection.

Brian arranged for costumes from the Crest Theatre in Toronto and also from Stratford, and Malabar's. Malabar's were good us. They loaned us all sorts of things at no charge. That's when Betty Taylor and her group, with my wife Betty, worked on fitting costumes. Betty would come home laughing and say how bosomy some of these young actresses were and how they had to let out the costumes as far as they would go to fit some of them. When it came to getting these costumes and returning them, Brian always looked after that himself. He called me one day, a Saturday, and asked if I could come out to his place. He said, "I need you to give me a hand." When I went out he was loading his car and he had a lot of Roman soldiers' costumes that were hard—shin pads and breast plates and things like that. He drove a small car and had packed everything into it that he could and there was still more to go in. So he said, "Jack, I'm going to get in the car behind the wheel and I want you to fit all these other things in and close the door." I said, "What if you have to stop?" He said, "I won't stop till I get to Stratford." If he ever had had to open the door he would have lost half his load. I don't know how all those costumes got here. They likely came the same way, I suppose.

In the first year the population of Niagara-on-the-Lake wasn't very large. I knew all the oldtimers. Frank Pitt was the janitor or custodian of the Town Hall and Jim Robertson had been friends and compatriots of my father. On two different occasions one of them stopped me and said, "Jack, you really shouldn't let yourself be involved with these people in this theatre stuff. These are really not good people. They have bad morals, they're wild and you should not get involved with them." I said, "Well, I'll be very careful. I'll make sure I really don't get involved with them. I'll just work along with them but I won't get involved with them." They were typical of most of the oldtimers in town, who really cast an eye askance at the Shaw Festival. The second summer, there was a park bench down in Simcoe Park just at the entrance to the park across from the Prince of Wales. One nice warm summer day there was a couple at that park bench from the east of the Shaw. The girl was lying on the bench and the young fellow was sitting on the bench beside her, massaging her whole body. Of course a lot of the townspeople saw this and were aghast at it. Of course they were also doing a little loving as well as the feeling. I heard several complaints about that, which I took right away to Andrew Allan, who was the director at that time. I told him he'd better ask those people to do those things in privacy, not out where the townspeople could see them and ruin the reputation of all of us.

We didn't have anywhere to build sets so we got permission from the town to build them out behind the Town Hall. At that time, that area, which is a parking lot now, was used for storage by Niagara-on-the-Lake Hydro, for the power poles, which were set up on racks there, but there was enough room for our set people to work on the sets. The set builders were all hired hands. A couple of them were theatre set people who came from out of town and they got some local carpenters to work. The local electrician we used was Andy something—I can't remember his name right now but he was the son-in-law of Art Wilson.

In 1963 there was a woman whose husband was a master at Ridley College. She had been an actress. I don't recall the parts that she played but she didn't want any money to do this but we had to pay for her babysitter and for her gasoline to come down from St. Catharines. Other than that, that's all she wanted. For people like that, the only compensation they got was going to Calvin's parties.

INTERVIEWER: Was the decision to go professional something that was hashed out over a long time?

JACK COUILLARD: No. Brian said right at the end of the first year that the next year we had to have some professionals. We could fill in with people like that actress, and there were a few others in the area, but if we were really going to make a go of this in the future we would have to hire some professionals. That's when we got down to actually counting the number of seats we could jam into the hall, the number of performances, how much the tickets could be, and things like that, to work out what our income would be. That's also when Calvin said he would help if necessary. I certainly didn't realize and I don't suppose he realized either the extent to which his help would be requested.

Of course he has been a strong supporter ever since. When I moved to Toronto we kept in touch and my business brought me over here quite a bit anyway, so I talked Calvin into coming over—he was coming over on Shaw business and some other business so I got him to come to speak to the service club to which I belonged and that met every Thursday at noon at the Royal York. He did and we had about 90 or 100 fellows out, so as soon as that was done I broached the subject to our club entertainment people that we should take a busload over to the Shaw Festival. We did that for about five years. Like everything else, it becomes old hat, you want to go somewhere else. I had arranged for a block of tickets, enough to fill a bus, which was 52 at the time. The first couple of years we did something illegally. We had some jump seats up the centre so we could get more people in. Once you were in, you were in until you got to Niagara-on-the-Lake. There was a toilet on the bus, but who could get to it except the people sitting beside it. The entertainment committee would always come up with a big jug of a good mixed drink so everybody would be in a happy frame of mind when we arrived. I had arranged for a dinner at either the Oban or the Prince of Wales and everybody left happy.

INTERVIEWER: Did you come in after the initial meetings when it was decided it would be a Shaw Festival?

JACK COUILLARD: Yes, Brian and Calvin had had meetings and decided.

INTERVIEWER: And Jean Marsh I think was involved.

JACK COUILLARD: Well, she came in as a director. Brian used to squire her around a bit when he needed a female on his arm. He wasn't so inclined that way but he did take Jean Marsh out. It was principally Brian and Calvin.

INTERVIEWER: You said Calvin and Gerry Wooll did the reading of *Don Juan in Hell*. There are four people in that, three men and a woman.

JACK COUILLARD: Yes. I don't remember the other two, I just remember those two, strangely enough.

INTERVIEWER: And Calvin was the stage manager as well, according to the program for *Candida*.

JACK COUILLARD: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Were you involved at the theatre as an usher or in some other way?

JACK COUILLARD: Yes, doing that and also setting up stages and things like that. "Treasurer" was the title and the principal part but everyone mucked in to do everything—stacking chairs, cleaning up the hall, little things that had to be done. There was never any stinting by anyone. Everyone who was at all involved jumped right in.