

## BETTY TAYLOR

The first year I was involved was 1963, with Androcles and the Lion. The costumes had mainly been rented from Malabar's. Denise Ferguson was the lead and she needed a soft, flowing toga kind of thing, which I made. That was the first thing I actually did. How could I forget the most important thing—the lion. Jimmy Beggs was the lion and there was a lot of hilarity about his costume. Mary Walsh was a very fine seamstress and she made the most beautiful mask out of rug wool, a wonderful head with a mane, it really was superb. We were in the kitchen of the town hall, which is where they used to put their things on and Jimmy trying his outfit on. He said to me, "I feel great except that there's something wrong with my tail. It just doesn't feel right and I can't work in it." I said, "Put the outfit on and I'll have a look at it." His body was all makeup and he was wearing short, tight swimming trunks. I said, "You know what's wrong with it. The tail sticks out; a lion's tail grows from its body." He said, "That's right. Can you do something with it?" It was almost time for the play to start and I didn't want to start undoing a lot of things that someone else had already done. I said, "I'll take the tail off but you'll have to have the suit on and I'll have to sew the tail on, on you, together." So I put him over two chairs, just those collapsible wooden chairs, with his rear in the air and the bathing suit on. I had my hand inside his bathing suit with the tail on top, stitching it so we could get it to the right shape. It worked really well, but by the time he stood up he could hardly walk because the chairs had been so hard. You can imagine all the remarks the others were making while we were doing it.

There were a lot of town kids in the production. And of course Percy Rodriguez. He was on TV at that point, a main part on a show in the States. Percy was black, of course. His wife, Meadie, came to town with him for part of the time. I held a little afternoon tea for her to introduce her to some of the ladies. That was the only play he did here. There were people in that show who were very professional. At the time we were using the stage in the main hall of the Court House. As you went in the main doors, they used to build a sort of vestibule. I think Tom Legge was doing the carpentry then. Everything was always done at the last minute. They used a fabric like raffia, like matting; a rough, open fabric; like a canvas but you can buy it in all colours and it's really inexpensive. It wasn't as heavy as canvas and easier to work with. They used to staple it on the walls. I was sent to help to do that because we were finished and they weren't. I don't know whether it was the same show or another show, but the prop shop was in the market square and they used to put the seats in all the time and paint the stairs. This one time we from the wardrobe had to go and paint the stairs, and the people used to come dressed then in evening gowns and they were literally standing outside waiting to go in while the paint was drying on the stairs. They built that vestibule every year because it had to be taken down after the season ended.

Then the next year I rented the shop at the corner of Queen and Regent and opened a fabric shop. By this time I knew John Brook, who was also part of the theatre and owned woollen mills in Simcoe. His parents had come from Yorkshire and built their own mills there. I dealt with John and through the theatre was able to get fabric from him and started this little business. It was a fun store because this was a very small town then. I had an old, round, pedestal dining table in the front window with the pattern books on it and women would come in and have a coffee, it was almost a meeting place in a way. Brian came in one day and said, "What do you do with the room behind the shop?" I said it was my stock room. "Can I look at it?" I wondered what he wanted to look in my stock room for. He had a look and said, "I've had a great idea." By this time Raymond Wickens had come to town from England, doing the publicity and working in the little Shaw office where the Loyalist Village is now. That was the first Shaw office. Raymond and Brian came in and were looking around and Brian said, "We are looking for somewhere to start our own wardrobe. If you rented this space to us, then you could work for us." That was my real beginning with The Shaw. From then on, they made their own costumes in the back of my shop.

The first person to come was Hilary Corbett. She was from the south of England, and a very talented, very elegant lady. She lives now in Belleville and still does work for the CBC in Toronto and some private

designing. Rita Brown, whose husband Peter at that time was also involved with Brian and Calvin because Peter worked in a financial capacity for Acres so there was financial advice that could be given there, was asked to sew or offered to sew. So there were Rita and myself as the two seamstresses and Hilary as the designer. She was easy to work for and taught us a lot that we had never known. We could both sew but she taught us all the finer parts about working on costumes. We were the only two in the beginning and would work often into the wee hours of the morning in the back of the shop. But we had a lot of fun. Michael Bain, was in props or something, had a guitar and he'd come and sit and play the guitar while we worked. We probably were a nuisance. We'd have the window open, or Michael might have been sitting out on the street, I can't remember, but we'd be doing this at one o'clock in the morning. In the beginning I think the town thought The Shaw was a bit of a nuisance.

Hilary announced that we were to have a young man coming who had worked at Stratford, I think. I think he was Austrian. His name was Werner Kulovits. I was sent off to St Catharines to pick up Werner. He was coming to cut, because at this point Hilary was doing her own cutting. Rita and I could cut out from a pattern and make a dress but we didn't know any theatre costuming and we didn't know how to make a pattern. I remember very clearly exactly what Werner looked like. Young man around here very seldom wore a suit. Werner had a grey pin-striped suit with a raspberry shirt. His suit was lined with raspberry silk and he had a co-ordinating tie. He was rather a nice-looking young man, very charming. He had made all this himself, of course. He now has a business of his own in New York City and he does everything for Harry Belafonte—makes all his shirts and makes this for Sherry Belafonte, so he has really gone a long way. Werner was our first cutter. That made things easier for Hilary because she could spend more time with us.

Maurice Strike came. I would try things on for Hilary and we would do silly things like model them in the doorway and have a laugh. There was a dress that Maurice designed—poor Maurice, if he could hear me now—and we hated it. It had panels of gold and mauve. Actually it was a beautiful dress but I felt like an Easter egg every time I put it on. I would come through the door in this gown and we would have great laughter all the time about this dress. We had a lot of fun as well as a lot of work, which was good because we worked hard for almost no money. If we hadn't had that fun it could have been a chore.

Hilary at that point was living at the Prince of Wales, which was a dump. She was almost afraid to go in there. The rooms were \$10 a week and the beds were so awful that you couldn't sleep on them. They put up with a lot of things they weren't used to.

Hilary had sent me to St Catharines to buy some fabric and she sent Christopher Root with me. He was Barry Morse's son. Christopher was going to carry the stuff because the parcels were going to be quite heavy. We were coming back along Lakeshore Road and all of a sudden we were faced with a house being moved on a flatbed truck. By this time we were where the bends are. We were stuck behind this house and couldn't go any faster, and to back would have been ridiculous because we would have had to go all the way around. I kept saying, "Hilary's going to be furious that we're out this long." We couldn't get out of the car because there were other cars behind us. Finally, there was a man working in his garden and I rolled the window down and yelled out, "Would you please call this number. Ask for Hilary. My name is Betty. Tell her we're stuck behind a moving house." That was a joke for a long time around wardrobe: "Yeah, that was a good excuse, stuck behind a house."

We didn't have a lot of things to work with, no setup like wardrobe has now—none of these wonderful irons and professional sewing machines. We used our own sewing machines. Hilary probably worked under the most stress because the responsibility was hers and she had been used to working with better equipment and people who sewed better than we did because we were not professional seamstresses. Actually, she and Rita and I are still a team; that has been a friendship that has gone all the way through.

The Magders had a store then on the opposite corner to me. They were a Jewish couple who moved into town and took over a general store. A lot of people and the farmers shopped there for basic clothing, shoes and boots. The Magders were very active in their own way, some of it I think financially, and were very helpful in I think giving good prices on things that were bought, because they were both very interested in the theatre. Two years ago the Festival had a performance and invited all the original people to it and we were all at the front. The Magders came back to town for that and we hadn't seen them for years. But they're both deceased now. There was a little wool shop and she might have done some knitting. Barbara Tranter did some work, Mary Coltart, Mary Walsh, Ian Chambers who was a very good seamstress, and I'm just talking about regularly in the beginning, before we had the wardrobe. Dorothy Middleditch was sort of Brian's right hand. Al Anderson was doing all the electrical work then. Sheila Haney stayed with me. I rented one of my rooms to Sheila Haney, Mary's mother, and Mary was with her part of the time. Howard Cable and his daughter I think were involved in some capacity at the beginning too.

I knew Brian quite well. Actually he took Raymond and me to the University Club to a press meeting. Brian was a fine man, a very bright man. I think he was his own worst enemy in a way because of his lifestyle. He came from a very well known family, a lawyer. He was very pleasant always to me. He and Jean Marsh were really a working team. She was Jean Usher and then Margaret Marsh died she married Fred. She was very involved. I would think it was Calvin, Brian and Jean who were the three, and Dorothy Middleditch; they are the ones who stand out most in my mind as being the most involved. Beverly Mitchell became the secretary and stayed with Shaw a long time. Then Raymond came to town. He was doing publicity for Shaw and then he went to the mime theatre. He's still in Toronto.

The dressing rooms were in the end of a small hall and they were just curtains. Dr Blue would have to have makeup completely on his body except where he was clothed because his skin had to be darkened. The first thing he would do when he came off the stage was climb right into the sink—and it was a sink, not a washbasin but like a kitchen sink—he would climb into that and squat himself down and get all the makeup washed off. There was always great hilarity every night when he did this because he was not a small man, he was not overly tall but quite stocky. They didn't really have dressing rooms, just these curtains, so there was often lots of hilarity because people would go in and somebody would be just half dressed. Everybody took it in their stride and there was no embarrassment because you were all just too busy.

Renée Asherson came from England. They always have to feel absolutely perfect when they go on and if they don't they're not going to perform as well as they should. She had to wear this hat that she didn't particularly care for. She always felt that because she put it on and then later on she wouldn't be wearing it and her hair wouldn't be the way it was—Hilary would get exasperated about this because she had so many things to think about, she didn't need to worry about whether somebody's hair was all right. I always seemed to be the peacemaker so Hilary said, "Will you go the town hall and see what you can do about this hat," because Renée refused to wear it. What I ended up doing was telling her that I would go every night to the town hall and help her with her hair. We became quite good friends and left me a lovely note and a great big bottle of perfume when she left at the end of the show and said it had meant a great deal to her because she could feel comfortable. Everybody did whatever was necessary to try to help because we all worked under difficulties. Some of those people who were in the shows were stars and weren't used to working in a kitchen or dressing behind a curtain; they had come from other places where they had had more comfort so you had to go out of your way and do these little things to make life smooth for everybody. Zoe Caldwell was easy to work with. Betty Leighton was a wonderful lady. That was really important to Renée and it was such a little thing for me to go up there. We became a group of friends. More than once I would have somebody over to my place for dinner on a Sunday, Barry Morse for sure, because they were living in such terrible quarters at the Prince of Wales.

When I first came to live here I was almost afraid to walk past the Prince of Wales at night when the men were drinking because it really a dump. They had a standing bar on the front street and the door was always open and you could see all the drunks. It was not easy for those girls to be living in the Prince of Wales at that time. Margaret MacLeod was another lovely lady to work with. Sandy Webster, great, great guy.

In 1965 there were still amateur actors in The Shaw. Norman Harding was a local man. Roger Pickens was from town. Juliana Saxton was from St Catharines. I remember helping Susan Clark make herself a pair of slacks because she wanted to learn how to sew. Molly Hancock I think was from St Catharines and had done other theatre work in the area. Then of course John Brook arrived and Pamela was involved in here.

**Interviewer:** I guess you would have to fit all of these people so you would have to deal with all of them.

**Ms Taylor:** Oh, all of them, yes, we did. Jessica Tandy was a wonderful person to work with. She was a top-line person. She had a birthday while she were here and had a party at the Oban Inn. Her brother-in-law, Hume Cronyn's brother, was a master at Ridley College. They gave a party but I didn't go. She came and asked me the next day why I hadn't been there. I thought that for her to notice, we were just people who worked backstage. She was a great lady in the theatre. That was the kind of relationship we had in those days.

I think this is about where I stopped working for the theatre, 1969.

The prop shop used to do most of the work in the market square because it wasn't a parking lot then, it was just empty ground. Tom Legge was in charge and he was professional. Some of the local boys helped, Doug Yates for instance; Michael Bain was professional. Once the theatre became professional, really the sewing was done by just Rita and myself because we were the only paid members and you had to get the work done. It was the earlier shows where the local ladies altered things. They never really made anything, that was really adjustments to rented costumes. It wasn't until Hilary came that we started making costumes, and I think it was the same thing with the sets. Al Anderson was the electrician but he was a qualified electrician, and when we got the new theatre Andy Saelens was the electrician.

We were having dinner at my house and Barry Morse was there and I forget who else. I'd made Yorkshire pudding for dinner and there was some left over. My children were at the table and they were young. There was only one piece of Yorkshire pudding left and Barry got out of his chair and picked it up with his fingers and put it on his plate, and my children were horrified because if they had ever done that they would be in big trouble. Because it was Barry Morse he could get away with it. Steven Sutherland and David Schurmann, the Schurmann boys, used to come over and visit.

**Interviewer:** There's a story here about losing Jimmy Beggs one day—this is Mary Coltart talking—and they started to scoot around town looking for Jimmy and went down to the beach. Brian had had a few drinks, she says, and he said, “There's Jimmy.” It seems Brian mistook Jimmy for one of the buoys.

**Ms Taylor:** Mary and I sewed together at my house and are still old buddies.

**Interviewer:** She says the lion's head was made in Toronto.

**Ms Taylor:** No, Mary Walsh made that. The costumes came from Toronto but Mary Walsh made the lion's head. I have a picture of it out of the newspaper. Mary did it out of r heavy rug yarn and it was in different shades. It wasn't all one colour, she had the different browns. His makeup was wonderful. So Mary's not telling the truth completely; it's what she remembers or what she

thinks she remembers.

I always remember Martha Mann. She was a big lady and sloppy. She was designing costumes. She wore those very open and heavy leather sandals, almost like a man's sandals. She was quite mannish anyway. I used to say, "She's got the dirtiest feet. Why doesn't she wash her feet?"

I still correspond with Maurice Strike. He's a reverend now in England in the Anglican Church. They were here two years ago. They became my next-door neighbours. I lived on King Street, in the next block down from the chamber of commerce; the second house was ours. The Strikes lived opposite where Cameron lives, so the side of their garden was the back of our garden, we were good friends. Raymond Wickens parents came from England and I had them for dinner and I invited Maurice and Nancy. While we were chatting over dinner, we were talking about the fact that Maurice was going off to do some work in the north of Scotland and Nancy and the children were going to with him. They had rented a cottage in the country in the south of England. So I was invited to go with the Strikes to England and had a holiday in the country with them. Maurice's work was very elegant. Anything he did was very detailed and elegant and a lot of work to work on. Nancy was saying when she was here that they had had the church fête, which was fun for Maurice because he was able to make banners and do a little of his old designing.

[About ironing of shirts in Mary Coltart transcript:] I wonder if Mrs Bolton did those because when my children were little she came to me one day a week and ironed all our shirts.

It was when they were looking for local help that I became involved, in 1963, when they had actually rented most of the show. I remember making Denise Ferguson's dress, and making a belt for Percy Rodrigues because he didn't feel comfortable. The belt on the costume they had rented was either too small or the costume didn't have a belt. I remember making a belt for him. He had a headache and I ran over to the drugstore and got the stuff you got in those days that they made up for you and it fizzed, and he thought that was wonderful because I had put myself out and done that. He was a big star but no side to him at all.

I never loaned any furniture. My husband would never have lent anything to the theatre. Anything I did was sewing, or painting the stairs and hammering up the stuff all around to make the vestibule. You all pitched in and went to everybody else's department if you were finished. Everybody pitched in and did everything necessary to get the show on the road. It was not like it is now. I know many of the actors who are here now and they are very friendly, but there is not the family feeling because it is too big. When there is just a handful of people who are doing whatever they can to get a show on the road, then you're a family. Once the theatre comes to this dimension, sometimes you don't know all the people working there. I bet I don't know half of them now.

Rita had a tea for Paxton two summers ago with maybe a dozen people in her sun porch and I was there. I had never liked Christopher Newton particularly because I think the times that I have been in his presence he'd been sort of bombastic or whatever, but I just didn't take to him. He was at the tea and spoke to me, and I was quite surprised. He asked me where I'd come from and I said Leeds, and he said, "Oh, my gosh, I went to Leeds University." Well, then of course we got into a great conversation and I saw another side of him that I didn't see before. By the time he came the theatre was big and I never had really known him.

**Interviewer:** He was there in 1964 in Village Wooing, but that would only have been for a couple of weeks.

**Ms Taylor:** Yes, and I wouldn't have got to know him that well.

I think the people who had to stay at the Prince of Wales suffered the most. It was a standing bar and you

could see it from the street. My parents—we were teetotalers, we never had anything in our house so as a little girl I was afraid of drunks. If my mother knew somebody had been drinking, she would cross the road with me. We were good Methodists, we didn't mix— We didn't even have wine. When I first came here and had Barry in the stroller and would take him for a walk, I'd practically run past the door because it would be open and all of these drunks would be standing there just hanging on to the bar. It was a real dive.

There was a dime store next to the Bank of Commerce and they were very helpful.

Grand-daughter arrived; end of taping