

BARBARA RANSOM

It was 1962 and I had been with the Press Theatre and the St Catharines Community Theatre. For the most part I think it involved people from that group. I can't remember being asked to go down and why we went, but I know the evening I was to have an interview with Brian Doherty there was a party at Dr Mitchell's at Niagara-on-the-Lake and my husband and I were going, but I had first to go and meet Brian. I think it was just a meeting; I think it was a done deal. We got there and I was given the part [of *Candida*]; so I think he was pretty desperate, he wanted some people quickly. Later I went off to the party and was talking to someone who had acted and had done that part and she said, "Oh, I think you'll be all right. You're a bit older"—I think I was 28 or 30 at the time and I had a little boy. She said, "You're mature enough, you can do that." I look back now and think how immature I was. Frances Hyland did it later.

I had heard of Brian Doherty before and knew he was a lawyer in Niagara-on-the-Lake, that he was a bachelor and had written a play while still in university, so I went with this wonderful idea of this very handsome young lawyer I was going to meet, and while Brian was charming and wonderful, he wasn't this man that I had in my mind. The director was brought in from Buffalo, Maynard Burgess, and he was just a delightful, gentle man.

My son Jeremy was just two years old and went with me to many of the rehearsals because of the time of day or because my husband was working. He got his introduction to backstage and he remembers it well, yet he turned two, I think, the day before the play opened. He would follow me up on stage so one of the girlfriends of one of the actors would take him outside. That's what he remembers most, that he was taken off, and he remembers the clock town in the middle of the road and just hates the sight of it now because it always meant he had gone out. He is with the National Ballet so maybe that was his early introduction to theatre.

I don't think there were very many rehearsals. I think we did it very quickly. There certainly weren't the six weeks that one was accustomed to. I remember Calvin Rand being there quite often to watch our rehearsals, and going down and sitting with him on the chairs that were put out, and he said, "I'm very impressed, very impressed." It buoyed us on anyway. It was an adventure.

We had always loved Niagara-on-the-Lake and at times had looked at houses to buy and live down there. We decided to stay in St Catharines, but it was that small town, it was very embracing, it was an exciting time. My husband was a pharmacist and I know Brian would have like him at one time to take over that little pharmacy that is there and later was taken over by the pharmaceutical association.

I don't think Brian had a lot to do with it as we were rehearsing. I remember the set being very wonderful. The young man who played the curate *was* a very young man, he was still in high school. Reading over the play and thinking about the ages of us all, he was a very appropriate age, but he was really very young, maybe 17 or 18. And Tim Devlin seemed very young. But I can see that he was a good person for it. Probably we were all sort of typecast in a way and we did our best. We stood up and spoke out and tried to be heard. I don't think any of us had any formal training, but experience as far as local theatre was concerned.

I know the set was a very nice Victorian look. Alice Crawley had found a wonderful shawl that she had draped over the fireplace. There should be pictures of it but I've never seen any. Mrs Lampard of *The Standard* came down and reviewed it. I think I should have pictures but I'm not aware of where they are. If I do find some I will get them to you.

Interviewer: It must have been quite difficult working in the Court House because it wasn't really set up as a theatre.

Mrs Ransom: No it wasn't, and there were no dressing rooms. Louis Berai did the costumes and he was a very talented man, so we all looked very well. It wasn't raked seating, it was just all flat on the floor. I think because we were all amateurs and had done it in places like basements it was not bad for us. We were quite happy; all we needed was a stage and curtains, and we had them, and a good set, and we had it. I have a feeling the man who played the father came in on very short notice but I may be mistaken. This was Ted Fordham. Someone else was to have done that role and he was brought in at the very end because the other fellow couldn't do it. I have a feeling there were things written around on places so he could do the part. Later that role was played by Stanley Holloway, so you can see how unbalanced it was.

I have the feeling Louis Berai found costumes and adapted them, put wonderful cord on them and made Candida look quite beautiful—and lovely hats. The woman who played the secretary was marvellous, Jean Malloy; I don't think she's living now. I don't know what experience she had but she was just a perfect person for it. The man who played the minister and I were somewhere around the same age, rather young I think; Jean Malloy was older and more experienced.

Interviewer: Alice Crawley said something about one of the dresses being bought by one of the actresses and she thought it had been worn at a wedding. Do you know anything about that?

Mrs Ransom: I don't. Would it be the one I would have worn? Was it all lace—lace, lace, lace?

Interviewer: Yes.

Mrs Ransom: It was a Victorian wedding dress. I do believe I have that piece. It is very, very light and I wouldn't have known where I got it from but I bet that's it. I don't know how I would have ended up with it but I do have that dress. I don't remember wearing it either, but I do have a dress like that.

Interviewer: Paxton Whitehead said that even in his day there was a problem with washrooms.

Mrs Ransom: I don't recall any washrooms on that floor. They would be downstairs. I don't recall; it was 35 years ago.

I remember on the last night of it I had laryngitis, probably because I don't speak properly, from my diaphragm, so my throat went, but that had a good effect on it because it made it a deeper, more mature voice. A friend came up and said, "I liked tonight. This was a better night." Luckily we don't know how poorly we do things or how well we do things because we probably wouldn't do them. You just go up and do your best and if there is a director who has faith in you, that's all you need. You do what you can for him and if he says, "Yes, you're doing it beautifully," then off you go. For most people in this kind of thing, criticism is difficult but because you do your best, you do what you can, so it is terribly upsetting to be panned.

Interviewer: Have you acted since then?

Mrs Ransom: Yes. I always did it with the Press Theatre, then I stopped for a long time and went back and did *The Wizard of Oz* when the Press Theatre did it and I did something for the Anglican church. I found the less I did and the longer it was, the more insecure and more nervous I became. I just found it hard to remember the lines. I think you have to be doing it all the time. I had done it quite a bit before Shaw. I had done *All the Way Home*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and was nominated for best supporting actress in *Bus Stop*, so I had done those things with the Press Theatre. There was a printer's called Peninsula Press and we had the facility upstairs over it and that is why it became the Press Theatre. It later became a legitimate theatre with a manager and a director from Toronto came over.

Interviewer: Were you asked to go back to the Shaw the next year?

Mrs Ransom: There was a reception the next year in the summer and I was not able to go. That's when Andrew Allan came, I think, and it was an opportunity to go and meet them and I didn't go, so that was the end of it. I don't know if any of the rest from that group went.

Interviewer: Alice thought there was a wish to have a professional troupe.

Mrs Ransom: I think we could have gone down and got bit parts because there were local people who did make it. Obviously we didn't want it very much. We'd been the best, we weren't going to be—. I remember the opportunity came to go down and there were some family obligations and I couldn't go. I regretted it but I couldn't do anything about it.

Interviewer: Alice also thought the Niagara-on-the-Lake people wanted to keep it as a local venture.

Mrs Ransom: I never felt like that. Certainly Brian was just anxious to get us and was very kind and very nice about everything, and very appreciative that we did come and do everything.

The young man who played the curate, Terry Cahill, was very young and, as young people are, very cavalier about things. There was something tragic that had happened in Niagara-on-the-Lake at that time and I remember his, "Oh well." Life didn't matter that much. Later he was riding his bike over on St Paul Street and he was dragged under a bus or something. I know his family grieved terribly, but I always remembered his cavalier feeling that he had. I just think that's a 17- or 18-year-old kid, how he would think, "Nothing can happen to me."

I don't remember any funny things. I guess I took it all very seriously. Perhaps we do, we take ourselves too seriously.

I went back to see *Candida* when Frances Hyland did it. It was amazing how the lines came back. I thought, "Yes, I did it like that. Yes, I said it like that." I know I compared myself favourably with her; and it's not an age, because she could be any age and do that. That person said, "You're old enough to do it." I probably wasn't mature enough to do it. It takes a mature actress to feel the things that are in a part. It's very easy to say the words but it takes maturity. I think Frances Hyland could do a very young person or a very old person. She has the experience. It's probably good it wasn't caught on film because it would be very difficult to watch, and yet it's too bad that it wasn't.

There were no pictures from 1962 in Not Bloody Likely. I know Jeremy as a young man went down to Niagara-on-the-Lake and all the pictures were up and he was very disappointed that my picture wasn't there or that other people in that first season weren't there.

I think Niagara-on-the-Lake has changed a great deal. Just talking about whether we were wanted there, it was always felt that there were always the old Niagara-on-the-Lake people and anybody else, no matter when you came, would always be the new people. But now it has changed so much that it would be difficult to find the old people. I think we would have been quite happy to be down there, but maybe a bit less happy now; we liked it when it was the original, and old, with very few people and it was a small community. Our friends who live down there say, "We don't see the tourists that much," or, "In the winter it's fine." But you don't walk up the main street in the summer because there's hardly any room.

Talking about that first year that none of us repeated, Maynard Burgess did come back and I think he was in one of the plays the next year. But he was a professional. He later was directing in Buffalo and called me to do Pygmalion. It was in the winter and it meant my husband staying home to babysit, which he objected to, so I didn't go. So I guess I wasn't meant to be on the stage. I just kept missing those opportunities.

Brian lived over at the Stables, behind Calvin Rand's, and that may have had something to do with how I became acquainted with him. We had friends, Saul and Joan Herzog, who live at the Stables, and Joan appeared in a crowd scene the following year, I think. Peter and Rita Brown also lived in the Stables. Brian was in one of the gatehouses. There were two gatehouses and then the Stables around, so it was quite a nice little enclave. I think mostly he just got in touch with somebody at the community theatre and that's how he got us all. Although one young fellow was from Welland Community Theatre, David Michener. I didn't know him before, but Ted Fordham and Tim Devlin I knew, and Louis Berai because he had done costuming for us and Alice had done sets. So I really don't know exactly how he found us, but most of us were involved there. I was saying that my husband was a pharmacist and Brian would have liked us to have bought a house down there and bought the pharmacy. Maybe he wanted to hand-pick people to come to Niagara to live, people who would be interested in the same things and could help the town.