

INTERVIEW WITH SHAW DESIGNER, MARTHA MANN

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This is Jamie Maine Pryce, Interviewing Martha Mann, who is the designer for the Shaw Festival in 1963, its second year of operation.

J: Martha, when did you get involved in the Shaw theatre?

M: Not very long before the first professional season got under way because, I always thought that since Andrew Allan had spent so much of his career in radio that he had forgotten that you needed a designer. He knew that you needed actors and sound, and all that stuff. I can't remember the exact date, but we went into rehearsal in June and I wasn't hired until the beginning of May. I don't know whether I was just the fifteenth choice or whether this just hadn't been dealt with as a necessity for running a theatre. I suspect the latter.

J: Why did you choose to get involved?

M: It was a new venture; I was a very young designer. I was beginning to do a lot of work in Toronto and it sounded like an interesting event for me. But beyond that, I remember when I got the phone call I knew nothing about the venue, or the schedule, or the mandate, or who was involved. Basically, I think I was here because I had worked with Sean Mulcahy several times before this event and obviously I think he liked my work, and I was going to come cheap (she laughs). I have always thought my connection through the Shaw was basically through him.

J: What was Sean doing that season?

M: He was the associate director. He played Valentine in *You Never Can Tell* and he directed *Androcles and the Lion*. He was very much involved with anything I observed with Brian Doherty and Calvin Rand.

J: Were Brian and Calvin involved in the actual day-to-day production?

M: Well, you see there's a problem. I was not a resident either because they couldn't afford it or they wouldn't afford it, so I was driving back and forth to Toronto. I saw both of them frequently and they seemed to be very involved with what was happening, but if I was here I was either in somebody's basement sewing a costume or I was in a garage where we were painting the scenery. I wasn't around the rehearsal process or production process very much.

J: So, you were designing both the sets and the wardrobe?

M: Yes, and the props and everything else.

J: What was your actual involvement? Were you an overseer or did you do much of the work yourself?

M: No, I did a lot of the fetching and carrying. There really was no infrastructure at all and I think it was a kind of a forgotten aspect. Basically, I was designing. Most of the clothes were rented (or borrowed) from Malabar's because there wasn't much choice of places to get clothes in those days. We had just

made the evening gown for Denise Ferguson for *How He Lied to her Husband*. The only reason we had to make that was because Denise was very tall and slender and I couldn't find anything at Malabar's that was suitable because they were mostly opera costumes. And then we made all of the Christian marauders in *Androcles and the Lion*. There were lots of biblical costumes to be had in Toronto because in those days because every church did a Christmas pageant and all the Roman stuff was kindly lent to the burgeoning Shaw Festival by Stratford. I got the sense that it was you know... "all these poor people in Niagara". It will never succeed because there had just done *Julius Caesar* the year before. So that was a huge boom because we got all of these fabulous armour, and boots, and swords and standards... a whole bunch of stuff from Stratford.

J: How did you track down props and wardrobe in churches in Toronto? How would you know where to go?

M: Every church in Toronto did a Christmas pageant and some had better costumes than others and Malabar's had a wonderful system. They had the A-list Christmas pageant, the B-list Christmas pageant and the stuff that was in boxes in the basement because nobody wanted it. We did want a fair amount of it because it was rags and tatters. But, it was also the early 60s, and I haven't seen a photograph of it for years, but I know when I looked at the sketches that the Christian marauders weren't very chic but they were very 60's. There was a lot of rags sort-of thrown over them. Again, because there was no costume structure in place, we couldn't do a lot of painting or breakdown because there wasn't anyone there to do it. I spent most of my time driving about and trying to bring all this stuff together.

J: What about the CBC? It was doing television production at that point and Andrew (Allan) obviously was very connected both with radio and television.

M: They had never done anything Roman. By that time "Wayne and Schuster" may have been on the air. They hadn't been doing television for very long so there wasn't a huge wardrobe stock. I remember going to the CBC and looking. We may have got a few of the men's suits for *You Never Can Tell* from the CBC, but there was very little to choose from. In fact, now that I am thinking about it I am positive we got two or three suits for the men.

J: Now, that would suggest that most of the props and costumes had to be done here...

M: Well the furniture, particularity for *How He Lied to Her Husband*, was fabulous because it was all out of somebody's drawing room. It may not have been an Edwardian antique, but it looked like it. I was taken to various houses and there were endless choices. It was very much a community event in those days. I suspect that they were all Brian's friends, but people were more than willing to lend the contents of their houses little-knowing what would happen to them. You couldn't borrow as much as a cat-dish from somebody these days because they would never expect to see it again.

J: But this is the way summer theatres used to run. I remember being a props man for the Peterborough Summer Theatre in 1954, and you would go and see a very nice drawing room and assure them that no harm would come to the sofa or the carpet or whatever it was, and you knew full-well that the thing was in total risk once it got out of that house. But the town was very willing, was it? It was a small town.

M: The town was very willing. The Oban was here then, because we borrowed some stuff. You could always disguise any venue with potted plants and flower. We borrowed (and they were real, not fake as they would be now) beautiful reproduction Japanese urns with huge palms and greenery in them which practically made up the set for *How He Lied to Her Husband*.

J: All of this of course was at the Courthouse theatre?

M: Yes. And without a lot of the additions and conveniences that have since been added to it. I remember there was a terrible problem with the double bill of *How He Lied to her Husband* and *Man of Destiny* which takes place in a rustic inn, and there was nowhere to store the furniture. I'm sure these people didn't know that it spent a lot of time under a plastic sheet in the parking lot or on top of the fire escape. There was literally very little backstage facility. I don't think a play had ever been produced in this venue before, and the fact that it happened at all was some kind of a miracle. It would be interesting to whoever designed the lights because I'm sure there were a dozen lighting instruments at most. Now if you look up over your head when you go, there are hundreds of lamps.

J: As far as the technical facilities were concerned, you needed the technicians. People to put the flats together (I'm assuming you still needed flats in those days), and somebody to actually cut and sew the fabric. Where did you find these people?

M: I think it was ignorance as much as anything else, because when I was hired there was no technical director and I suggested to them somebody I'd worked with for two or three seasons in summer stock who was a very industrious young man and he was hired as the technical director/production manager. He was everything. I haven't been able to unearth my copy of the program but my recollection is that eventually we did have to hire on a part-time basis. But, again, a lot of it was done on the weekends with volunteers. The sets were not simple, because *You Never Can Tell* has three sets and *Man of Destiny* was a bigger set. *How he Lied to her Husband* was played mainly in front of the curtain with all of these fabulous potted palms and probably \$10,000 worth of furniture. It looked pretty swell.

J: Would any of these people have had experience in amateur theatre?

M: I think so, because I think there was quite an active amateur theatre across the river. I think a lot of people who were interested in theatre in Niagara-on-the-Lake were involved with this. I know that the person who played Androcles was sort of the star of this theatre and had been very involved in the first year of The Shaw Festival (the first year it was actually called that).

J: As a side issue, you talked about \$10,000 worth of furniture sitting under sheets in the car-park. Do you know whether there was any insurance policy?

M: I'm quite sure there wasn't (she laughs). I mean I don't know who will ever hear this interview and I'm thinking "Oh my god, I shouldn't have said that" because they will be saying "That's what happened to my sofa? I've always wondered." (She laughs again). I suspect there wasn't.

J: It was just one of those things that would be thought of later.

M: Yes.

J: What are your happiest memories of that season at The Shaw?

M: It was very exciting despite all of the difficulties. I did not stay here because there was no money to do so. My unhappiest memories are driving along the Queen Elizabeth at two in the morning, back from a rehearsal. But the fact that it was a very new venture and we all felt that it was going to be a success, to simply to have been part of that was very exciting.

J: Are there any people who were involved in that 1963 season who have any connection today or recently with the Shaw Festival?

M: I don't think so.

J: Other than Calvin Rand, he's on the Board of Directors. What about Rita Brown?

M: No, Rita Brown came to the festival later. I honestly don't think there is except possibly they remain as patrons and donors to the festival.

J: Do you remember the names of any of those early seamstresses or participants?

M: I don't unfortunately. I ran into one particular woman who was my assistant. This poor woman had thought it was going to be a part-time task and realized very quickly that it was not as much fun as she thought it was going to be. She was having to deal with temperamental actors and rehearsals that went on till midnight, and sewing that started at seven in the morning in her basement. I cannot remember her name, but it would not have happened without her. I saw her many years later and she was a supervisor at the Oban Inn. I wish I could remember her name.

J: Where did the actors live?

M: Well there was a great deal of "hoo-hah" about that because again, I think every livable/rentable space had been rented. People were putting people up in their basements. The actors were not happy. There was a lot of carry-on about, "I'm not staying in this garage" ... but I think that money did change hands. The town had no expectation of how a play was put on, or actors and their weird hours. I remember there was one huge scene with a family who had decided to take somebody in, who they thought was an unmarried actor, but it turned out that he had a perfectly lovely wife and a brand new baby. They arrived to stay for a weekend. Suddenly these people who thought they were just having one quiet young man had an actor's party going on with a baby, and a wife. It was a surprise. The town expectations were not prepared.

J: This is what happened in summer theatres. These actors who worked in the summer theatre would have billeted with somebody. There would be a list of eight or ten people who would be willing to take a guest for part of the summer.

M: Yes. You and I worked for some of the same summer stock companies in our youth. I'm sure we could digress and talk about places I have stayed in Peterborough.

J: Indeed. How long was The Shaw season in 1963?

M: I believe that each play ran for two and a half weeks.

J: Did they run in reparatory?

M: No, they didn't. They ran one after the other. We opened mid-week and they played for the following two weeks.

J: Were they dark on Mondays?

M: No. There was a mantra in the company (started by Sean Mulcahy) which was "Oh my god, we open on Monday!" It proceeded in a very disciplined and theatrical way, but there was not sufficient professional support. It was not any kind of malice, it was that people did not think that you needed a wardrobe supervisor etc. It was a total surprise to those who were working with me. They were wonderful and their commitment was enormous, but they hadn't realized that when the shows were running you actually needed someone backstage. The biggest surprise was laundry. For some poor lady to be dumped an enormous pile of nasty, sweaty clothes that need to be washed and ironed at one in the morning and back, that was one of the biggest surprises. In the process of getting the Shaw Festival organized, a lot of this hadn't been thought of.

J: Did you have a budget from the beginning of the season?

M: We must of. I have some of the costume sketches, I have a lost program, and I couldn't find any financial record. I remember I was paid \$350 to design four plays and eventually after a lot of complaining I did get a \$30 allowance. I was driving back and forth from Toronto three times a week.

J: No gas allowance?

M: No gas allowance at all, but reluctantly I did get \$30.

J: That was 40 years ago, \$30 was different.

M: When I think of the salary perhaps it was a little ungenerous. I'm sure the actors in those days were getting \$125 a week, if that. It was not as dire as it sounds.

J: Did you do matinees?

M: Yes. We did one matinee on Friday. Just one a week.

J: Do you have any unhappy, noteworthy, eccentric memories of that season?

M: The unhappy memories have kind of vanished. It was not the happiest experience I have ever had, but 99% of the problems that I had were simply the fact that I wasn't here most of the time. There was only so much you could do over a telephone. Jimmy Biggs, who played the lion, was extremely determined and neurotic about ending up looking like Bert Lahr from *The Wizard of Oz* (1938). We ended up with a clever solution. He wore very little clothes, almost like a loin cloth and wonderful lion

makeup. I made on my kitchen table a huge raffia and straw lion mane. It was rather like a production of the end of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was a very fanciful lion. It was quite controversial because a lot of the critics and the audience thought he should look exactly like Bert, and he didn't want to. He was a very attractive young man and it wasn't really how he wanted to play it. It was 1963 and this was a complete re-design from what Sean and I had talked about previously. Most of it was designed over the telephone. There were those kinds of problems.

J: What happened to the costumes, and the sets and the props at the end of the season?

M: The evening dress was bought by Denise Ferguson, the sets were probably just junked and the props in somewhat battered condition. The furniture went back to where it came from. I don't believe that from that first season there was any storage at all. The lights were rented from a lighting company. It's too bad the lion doesn't still exist. It either went home with somebody or into the trash can.

J: Have you had any subsequent association with The Shaw on a professional basis?

M: Unfortunately, no. I shouldn't say it's a sorrow, but it is a professional regret.

J: Were you involved with Stratford?

M: Yes. I've designed at Stratford.

J: And Canadian Opera Company? But nothing in The Shaw again.

M: no.

J: Is there anything else that comes to mind that you would like to leave for the record?

M: I suppose the enormous development and the transition of what's happened to this festival. If the good fairy came down and said "what would you wish for?" I can tell you what I'd wish for. I'd wish there was a theatre to replace the courthouse. From a design point of view, to look at the development of design and the conceptual work that has been done at this festival- I wish it had been done by me.

J: It did start 40-something years ago as a summer theatre.

M: Yes, and despite employing probably the most famous director in Canada, it started out with virtually nothing except a huge commitment in terms of time and money from the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake and look what's happened.

J: Thank you very much Martha.

M: Thank you.