TONY VAN BRIDGE

I was first aware of the Shaw Festival when a friend of mine, at that time quite a recently made friend, Paxton Whitehead, invited me down to have a look around. I had never been here at all. I was almost ignorant of the existence of even the town at that time. I came here eventually as an actor in 1968. I'd been playing in Winnipeg and so forth with Paxton and we had done Heartbreak House in Winnipeg and I'd played Captain Shotover. He asked me to come here and play that here in that summer of 1968, which of course I did, and at the Court House, naturally. That's all there was at that time. I'd really been coming here, on and off, ever since until 1979, and then I had a break at that point and I didn't come back until I think 1988, and I've been here ever since, which is very nice, very good. I had several years in between sort of interspersed with Stratford. In 1969 I was in the States, in 1970 I came back and did Morell in Candida, and then I think my next visit here was in 1974 and 1975, which was the year I stood in for Paxton as artistic director while he had a break. In 1976 I went back to Stratford, and that was my last year in Stratford. Then I was here in 1979.

In those years it was really rather different because the plays were presented in a different way. The seasons were shorter and the plays were presented one at a time. One could say there was virtually Shaw Festival ensemble as it now exists. A company of actors would be hired to perform a play and the next play that went on would have a completely different group of people. All the first group had moved away again; the play was the one engagement almost. It worked more or less on that basis; there was no hard and fast rule about it. One or two people would carry over but not necessarily so. That went on for quite some time. I suppose the break occurred when the Festival Theatre was built. What was the first thing I did in this theatre? I've forgotten; it's very strange. Anyway, it's in the book so I don't have to remember it [The Devil's Disciple and Too True To Be Good]. I know I wasn't in its first year. Stanley Holloway was here to do You Never Can Tell. I'd been with him before, because he was in the Candida, and then he came back and did this.

This was a wonderful theatre suddenly to appear in this part of the world—absolutely great. Of course the George didn't come into things until much later. It was a mime theatre and was a movie house in the very early days. I remember it being that. It was a lady and her husband who ran it, he died and she went on running it for a bit, then she sold it and thereafter drove a taxi in town.

At the Court House we used the stage as it was. There is a stage there and there are two pillars which are part of the building itself. Those pillars were incorporated in the set nearly every time by Maurice Strike because the stage is very shallow and we would build out from that to the front, so that the pillars had to be in the set somehow, either an entrance in front of them or behind them, something like that. So you always see these two pillars in shots of the early productions. It was done as if it was a proscenium theatre. The seating was arranged as in a proscenium theatre, not in the present round-the-square idea. And it was like that for some years. I suppose it was Christopher who invented the square configuration, which has been gradually improved on. I think it's very good now, it works very well. It was a smaller acting area then, but it was workable. It's surprising what one did there. We did Heartbreak House, Major Barbara and things like that, and in several settings; it was quite cleverly handled.

The approaches to the stage were similar to now but slightly different because there was a kind of scaffolding arranged for seats then, so you still entered in a kind of canvas-covered thing. The dressing rooms were roughly in the same area and we approached the stage in the famous canvas tunnel that is there now but on the stage left side only. You either had to make your way around the set at the back or make sure you were there. In Heartbreak House the captain had a little den that he has on the stage right. I was the only person who ever went into it. I would pop in and out of it and all the other exits and entrances were on to stage left. There was one particular part where I had to go into that den and it was quite a long time before I came on again, but there was nowhere else to go. So I was in this tiny like room on stage right for the whole piece

of the act that I wasn't in. It was really quite funny. It all seemed to work very well and it led to what it is now and to the big breakthrough which was the building of the Festival Theatre, of course. I suppose Paxton's sort of big contribution to this place was being determined that this theatre should be built because the festival wouldn't have developed at all if one had been confined to the Court House. It would have still remained as a little summer festival of just a few weeks instead of now going from April to October, and in our case this year, November.

Interviewer: In your book you said Niagara-on-the-Lake reminded you of Brigadoon.

Tony van Bridge: I still like to keep that image of it. If one puts on a sort of romantic hat now and again and thinks about it, it's quite interesting that it still seems to turn into something else. It can do it in the day. It's particularly noticeable now because we get vast crowds of people in the summer, the biggest crowds this year I've ever seen—not all coming to the theatre, unfortunately; most of them buying ice cream or other things—but the town is full of people until about 6:30 or 7 o'clock and they begin to go. In hour the town is practically empty, except just for the people who are going to the show, so suddenly it turns into somewhere else. It's almost as if the place breathes and says, "Oh, I'll have a sleep now until the next log arrives." And in the winter there's nobody here at all, really, so you do get the effect that the town sleeps. The Brigadoon idea just sort of cropped into my head one day, that it just really disappeared in the winter because it does for many people.

Interviewer: You said in your book that it was really Paxton who brought you here and he let you and your family live in his first house at first.

Tony van Bridge: Yes, we did, for two summers. They were short spans of time because that's the way it worked then. It was very nice. There was myself and my wife Betty at the time, and my daughter Shona came down for a bit but she would be off with friends. We also brought a cat and a dog. Paxton didn't seem to mind and they enjoyed themselves in this wonderful house, that is still on the Parkway. I've no idea what number it was; I could say "That's it" if we drove past it but that's as far as I can go. It's past MacFarland House for a bit, not far. In 1974 we lived in what we used to call the Burroughs cottage on Prideaux. The Burroughs used to live in the corner house and behind them was a little cottage where Sharry Flett and her husband, Anthony Bekenn, and daughter live now. In 1975 Tom Kneebone had a house on Victoria Street and he was going to Stratford for the summer and I was here for the summer, and it was the whole summer because I was artistic director, so we just changed houses and it worked very well. In 1979, which was my last play at that time, we had an apartment in the building that is now the Moffat Inn. It had been all sorts of things—flats, doctors' offices, a ladies hairdresser in the middle part. The two buildings were kind of separate and now they've put them together. Now I'm back on Victoria Street in an apartment that is almost opposite the stage door of the George so it's great for me, I don't have to move.

Interviewer: After you decided to come back to the theatre in 1987 you asked Christopher Newton for a job. Why did you choose Niagara-on-the-Lake rather than, say, Stratford?

Tony van Bridge: I had outgrown Stratford, I think, and I don't mean that in a put-down way at all. I didn't want to do Shakespeare any more and the Shaw I thought was a more manageable size to work in, especially as the main theatre was doing so well with a lot of stuff. I lived in Stratford for 15 years until my wife died in 1979, so I found the Shaw was more my style. I could get to do different kinds of plays. People have a habit of calling me "that Shakespearian veteran," which is a lot of nonsense really. I haven't really played all that much Shakespeare; I played whatever turned up at Stratford during the years I was there, and it's wonderful to do some Shakespeare, but there came a time when I didn't want to do it any more. I didn't want to do the great monumental shows any more, so I preferred to think of this as a place where I could do what

I wanted to do. I must say, I made the right choice because I get to do things here that I always enjoyed doing and which a lot of people have never done. I suppose a lot of the stuff that goes on in summer stock, as it is called here—I call it weekly rep, as it was in Britain; things like The Two Mrs Carrolls and The Hollow, Busman's Honeymoon and all those things, which I enjoy doing, they're fun. This is the sort of thing I was brought up on, really, the sort of thing I started doing when I was first in this business in 1938 and 1939. One's whole season would be made up of one of those every week.

Interviewer: I talked to Leslie Yeo a few weeks ago and he was telling me he would learn a new play every week. It must have hard work.

Tony van Bridge: It was. I don't know how we did it, quite honestly, but obviously it didn't do us any harm because he's 82 and I'm 80. There must be something therapeutic about it but I certainly couldn't touch it now. If somebody gave me a play right now and said, "You're opening that next Monday," I'd say, "Don't be silly," and leave very quickly. It's amazing the way one got used to doing it—got used to going on, not being at all sure what the scene was about sometimes. You could do that. There would be a scene in the play and you'd think, "Oh, I don't know this scene very well," and you'd get through it, in varying degrees. I don't say it was good at all, but it did train one to use the concentration about what the play was about, what the part was about, so that if you got lost at all you could find a way to push the scene through. I'm sure from the front now and again it must have been horrible, but with only a week to learn it, it's extremely possible that it was horrible most of the time for an audience. I don't think I would have really liked it, but people used to come and see the plays and have a good time.

The first manager that I worked with in my original season when I was a student at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts—as it says in the book, my first professional thing was in 1938 in the summer vacation from RADA and they sent me to a repertory company for six weeks. The chap who ran it always played the lead in all the plays we did for those six weeks and he never really knew any single line correctly. He had a rough idea of what it was about and a rough idea that it ended in a certain way to give you a cue. So it was a kind of training in itself, learning to cope with that. But that's something I don't think I could do now. I've noticed if there's a moment, and one does get them still, when for some reason the concentration drifts and there's a little blank, you get over it and you get through it, but I've noticed my ability to do it is not as good as it was. There was a time when I could get through and all that, but I couldn't do that now.

Interviewer: At one of the members' days, Fiona Reid was on a panel talking about playing at the Court House. She said she felt working here was the hardest work she had ever done in the theatre because you are rehearsing a play in the morning and doing another play perhaps in the afternoon.

Tony van Bridge: She's quite right, it can be hard work. I'm lucky this year. Since I'm the old man they've given me one play to do and it's fine, but everybody else has got two plays and you're doing that, you have heavy days. Once the plays are on, it's not too bad, but you still get times when you do nine, 10 or 11 shows a week, which can be tough. But the tough time is when you are playing one and rehearsing another one, because in most of that time you're not on stage; it's devised so you can be used in rehearsal. She's quite right, it's quite tough, but it's the way to do it. The big thing is that while day by day it may be tough, you know that by the end of it you're going to have a show that's worth putting on and a part that's worth presenting. I say that just to distinguish it from the other thing I told you about, doing it every week and going on really on a prayer and just hoping you get through. It's not the same as that; that was a different kind of hysteria.

Interviewer: You weren't in Forty Years On but you were here that year and Reid Willis told me that the boys in the play sometimes disrupted what was going on the stage by all their laughter when they were supposed to be off stage but they couldn't be because of the Court House setup.

Tony van Bridge: I remember the set because I saw it. It was a two-tiered set so they had to take what stage there was out and play it on floor level. That's how one started playing on floor level in that theatre, was with that play, and I think they stayed with it; I'm not sure they ever put the stage back. In one sense that was done purely for space; I think generally speaking the stage, even though it was quite shallow, was useful because it was cutoff from the audience rather than having their feet on your living-room rug, as they frequently have to. Quite often the front row is as good as in the set. It can be very difficult to act with somebody else's feet in the set, I find. They always do something with their feet, wiggle them or change them over, things like that.

Interviewer: At the members' day, Kelly Fox said she had progressed from looking at feet to looking at the black spaces between the heads.

Tony van Bridge: Oh, yes, yes. I've never had a problem with looking at faces from the stage. You get that in all theatres if you get it at all. It's particularly so in the Court House, and the George they're very close, and in these days it's more noticeable because one doesn't use footlights. In the old days of footlights you could not see anyone beyond them really. There were just shapes there. It's not a matter of training myself, it's just something that happens. When I'm on these stages, quite often somebody will come off after a scene and say, "So-and-so's sitting in the front row." I'll say, "Oh, are they?" because I may have looked and my eye line may have been down there at some time or other but I don't actually look at them. It's easy to say that now because I can't see anyway; I can barely see you sitting there. When I could see clearly, for some reason I never picked out faces in an audience. Perhaps my focus would go beyond them, or something like that, but it kept me from associating them with my thoughts, which were supposed to be about the play, so I could keep clear. I never had the terrible thing happen of saying a line and suddenly in the middle of the line saying, "Oh, good heavens, that's So-and-so sitting out there."

Interviewer: Your book went up to 1989. Any anecdotes that you remember since then?

Tony van Bridge: An Inspector Calls from 1989 was the play I liked to finish on. One of the things I enjoyed doing very much since then was Cavalcade. That was great fun. It was a different kind of piece to be in. We managed, through Dangerous Corner and An Inspector Calls, to introduce J. B. Priestley. He became a kind of regular for two or three years, which I think was quite good. It's good that the festival works that way—and now Granville Barker, which is fine. There are some others out there that might pop up. We might even find a Galsworthy that might work. And James Barrie; I think there's some good stuff there. I would like to see an experiment in that because he's a very whimsical writer but I think modern directors would know how to cope with that. They would know how to use the whimsicality and use a different attitude towards it, rather than getting overly sentimental about it, which is what happened in quite a lot of productions of plays by people like Barrie in his time. They were done rather sentimentally. There is sentimentality within them so you don't really need to lay it on again. Indeed, some of the stuff that is taken for sentimentality has quite a sharp little kick in it here and there. There is a play called Dear Brunus which I think is a marvellous piece really. It sounds very whimsical on the surface—if we had a second chance, would we make all our dreams come true? It rather indicates that no, I'm sorry, you would make the same mess of yourself that you've already done, which I think is a very reasonable philosophical point.

I think the thing that since then I've found fascinating is to watch the way this place has developed and has indeed become a very important theatre in North America. One isn't just saying that now. I think one went through a stage of saying that, it was good publicity, but I think it's not definitely true. I don't think you'll find many companies that will approach the standard that is now in existence in this place. And that's important. It's important for all reasons. It's important for the theatre as a whole, which has spread its influence even though it is one of the, what shall we call it, not the less popular arts but the less attended of the arts. It's easy to get people into big extravaganzas and all sorts of things like that, but to get them into a piece of straight,

good theatre, it's a small group of people but a very important group of people who have to be catered to and whose input is very important, otherwise we do turn up doing a lot of those big things that, let's face it, aren't all that great and really are built for another kind of public, which again might be quite legitimate. It's entertainment and one mustn't deride it because there are a large number of people who like to be entertained by the big extravaganzas and one mustn't say they're all silly; one has to say that they're there and that's what the people want so one has to say that particular part of the industry, one must call it that, is honour-bound to give them the best of that kind of thing.

When it comes down to the sort of stuff we do here, it's even more interesting here than just normal theatre trying to do good plays; we're doing a little more than that because we're covering one of the richest periods of theatre that has ever existed by putting it into Shaw's lifetime, which is as good as 100 years, from 1850 to 1950 so to speak. That era is chock-a-block with masses of plays—good, bad and indifferent plays; some plays that we wonder why they ever put them on, and one or two you can say, "Okay, why did they put it on? Let's do it and see." There's a vast number of plays that one can draw on and find a modern context or modern way of doing them, and maybe they can last forever, particularly when you're got the major things of Shaw that one can repeat after a few years. You find your classics out of the whole picture.

I've heard people get a bit sniffy about the some of the mysteries, for instance. They say, "Yes, it's very well done but it's not a very good play." That may be true, but at the same time, by showing what worth there is in the play and what kind of plays were popular at a certain time, we're probably even saying why, by approaching them from our point of view. The mystery play, which isn't written much these days, has had its role taken over by television. Almost everything you see on television is a murder mystery of some sort. Night after night there's a whole string of them. Some are very good and some of them aren't. The genre of the mystery has become the daily diet of the television audience, which is one of the reasons they're so popular when we turn them up on stage. I think they're well worth their place in a theatre season of this kind.

The farces are a great tradition. You can follow those down through the Commedia, the French stuff, the stuff of the twenties and thirties in London, which was the great place for it eventually. You have to be careful when it comes to farce; some of it doesn't work. Maybe it doesn't work because we're approaching it the wrong way. We did one some years ago called Cuckoo in the Nest, which is a Ben Travers farce. I played it in rep, all those thousands of years ago. When we were going to do that I thought, "Oh, goodness, that'll be a funny one. They'll love it." Well, it didn't come off somehow. I can't explain why or how, and I can't just say it's because we did it better all those years ago; that's not true either.

It's partly due to the fact that if you put something from the twenties and the thirties on the stage, you have to do a certain amount of translation in its presentation to our present attitude towards it. We do that with Shakespeare, and I'm not just talking about the modern dress thing, but we deliver Shakespearian lines to each other with modern intonations and modern approaches to argument which were not being used 40 or 50 years ago. The big declaimer of the big tragedies is really in the past now. You can't sort of moan away. Obviously I exaggerate when I use expressions like that but it's just a way of making the point. Acting itself is a thing that changes, from style to style, depending on the actors' approach, the public they are playing it for, all that kind of thing. And each way of doing it can be just as real and just as justified, but if you do it the wrong way within a period then you put a stumbling block in the way because the audience doesn't understand what you're getting at. It's not an argument that has any finite boundaries at all, and that's why it's very difficult to say, "If we're going to do that play now, we have to do it like this," because it's also easy to say, ""Yes, but if we have to do it like this, we have to find a way of making this the presentable way of doing it." But that's the great thing about this place: the possibility to do all that is right here.

I notice that now and again we do one of the big American plays. That's another thing that could be very

good here because there was an era, the thirties and forties, when the big plays on Broadway had enormous casts and they were enormously popular but they're never done now commercially because no management can afford to pay the company just to do that one show. But if you've got a company that's doing a whole season with three or four plays with that play worked in, then you can draw on larger numbers of people so that you can do that kind of play now. There's a whole bunch of those out there, and they're a challenge to us because there are certain of us who, shall we say, are not all that great at American accents. You've got to find a way to play an American accent without making yourself sound as if you're doing a bad accent, and also making quite sure that even if you're merely suggesting an American accent, it is acceptable for the character. More of those little things that don't have finite edges that one has to cope with.

Interviewer: Anything to remember about working with Stanley Holloway?

Tony van Bridge: He was a great character, of course, very good to work with. I worked with him only the once, just that one show, but he was very good indeed, very co-operative. When Franny Hyland was suddenly sick and couldn't play Candida, and I was preparing my one-man show GKC which was going to open a couple of weeks later. I'd remembered that Stanley Holloway had a great career doing a lot of famous old comedy songs and things like that, patter songs, and he was very famous for it in Britain and elsewhere. I don't know which of us thought of it first but I came up with part of the idea anyway that perhaps he could do half an evening of his stuff and I could do half an evening of some of the Chesterton stuff, which was ready. Paxton took up the suggestion and it worked pretty well. We gave people the option of getting their money back if they didn't like it, because there really wasn't time to tell people that we were going to do this. Some people had come to see Candida and didn't want to see anything else, so they went away, but not very many. He was a nice man and went on quite a long time. I think the last time he was here was for the opening of the Festival Theatre in You Never Can Tell. He was what one used to call an old trooper; he had done absolutely everything. He'd done a lot of English film work in the days of the Ealing comedies.

I'd always quite admired a lot of Chesterton's writing, thought it was quite funny. When I decided to look around for a one-man show I thought first of all of doing some Sherlock Holmes stories, as if one was Dr Watson, since they are written in the first person and Watson tells the stories. It seemed to me already made up. Then I thought, "It's a bit long for a whole evening to do short stories like that. So who else wrote detective stories?" Then I thought, "Well, Chesterton wrote Father Brown. We'll do Sherlock Holmes and Watson in one half and Father Brown in the other." That hung around about a couple of weeks in the head and then I suddenly realized, in reading some Chesterton which I hadn't read before, such as his autobiography, that I could do a one-man show on Chesterton using the first person by using the autobiography as a basis and inserting various little stories about him told in the first person. That makes one or two of the stories that he wouldn't actually have told about himself, but other people did, make him sound a little pompous, but that's okay.

So I put a character together that might or might not have been Chesterton and it seemed to work. As a matter of fact, one of the people who saw it was one of his publishers. I can't remember his name; Sheed or something like that. He was quite approving of the whole thing. He said, "You speak the words actually better than Chesterton did." Apparently he had a rather high, squeaky voice. I did selected pieces and generally speaking kept him on a middle line of humour. I didn't get too serious or too deep in any of them because I think that's something else; they're to be read. When you're looking for an entertainment, then I haven't got to worry about the content of each piece, whether it has value as a thought. If you get somebody like that, then it does have value as a thought, so what you look for is the thing that will construct it as an entertainment on the stage. Eventually I just got rid of Sherlock Holmes.

I decided to dress myself up as Chesterton. That developed because, when I first started doing it, I would

get myself made up and into the costume and come on and do the character. But I was asked to do a show for a school in the gymnasium and I thought, "I'm not going to take the whole of this thing. It's not really kids' stuff in that sense." So I decided to show them what the costume was and what it was like getting it on, and so forth, and telling them a few things about Chesterton while I was doing it, and then just reading a cut-down version of the Father Brown story that I used. They liked that very much; that was fine for them. I got somebody to help me with the costume. When I finally developed it, in the Court House in 1975, I had the costume, the wig and the various props all on stage. The stage was set up as a study, a very untidy study since he was rather an untidy man, with books and papers all over the desk and floor, and wastepaper baskets overflowing with stuff. In among all this stuff, various bits of the costume were hidden, so you could say the character was actually on stage. I came on as myself and chatted to the audience. The only thing I did to prepare was, I had a whole suit of leotards on so I was black from head to foot, so it looked kind of balletic. While I was chatting, I was gradually putting it all on and then just walked down and said, "Well, Mr Chesterton's arrived," or something and people loved it.

So I kept that from 1975 until I last did it, four or five years ago I think, in Toronto. It was getting tough by that time; I couldn't do it at the moment. That was worth doing. I evolved out of other things and I found stuff that I hadn't known of Chesterton's that was exactly right for the piece. I finished it with a ready of the first Father Brown story, The Blue Cross. That's one of the reasons I can't do it now, unless I started again and learned that story. I know it pretty well, actually, because I did it for so long, but I did actually read that as a last part. One critic, Mackenzie Porter, didn't like me doing that. He thought I let myself down by reading it. I don't agree with him; I think if you're going to pretend to read something, you read it. It just made a difference in the rest of the piece. I was wandering about the stage with the other material, picking up stuff and doing all sorts of things, then I just went and sat down and read the story.

Interviewer: If you hadn't read it, you might have been criticized for changing Chesterton's words.

Tony van Bridge: Yes, quite. I might well indeed. I did a television version of it, which is still in existence. It was a shortened version, just for an hour, whereas the whole thing with an intermission ran about two hours.

When I first came to Canada there wasn't a great deal of professional theatre in the general sense, and I think there's no doubt that the amateur theatre of the time was of great importance because it kept the theatre floating in a country that didn't have too much. The Dominion Drama Festival was big and strong, which is great, and I think everything has grown out of that so it is a very important connection to have. I'm sure some people think a pro forgets where it's all come from but I don't think that's really so. I think most people are aware that that is where it all started. If you like, I started myself in that because one of the first things I did was with a local dramatic society in England. That was where I first got interested in the whole thing. I think its connection with the Shaw Festival—that's the way it started—and it shouldn't be forgotten, and isn't forgotten. It was very necessary to have it there to get things off the ground and get public interest going in something of that nature. I'm quite certain it still exists in that way, of doing that kind of work. We don't hear so much about it these days, because in the days of Dominion Drama Festival, as there wasn't any professional theatre virtually, one did hear about it because it was the big drama event of the year. I always like to think of the two things connected. I don't believe that one should feel that the amateur gets lost; it's just changed, as much as anything. Many people who were amateurs also became professionals. Those who didn't, didn't want to, I guess, or had something they preferred to do as their life work. Using the stage as a recreation is wonderful. I think it helps enormously because we get a lot of academic interest in the theatre from audience members. I get a lot of people always asking questions about the theatre and they are people who quite often have done amateur work or decided they don't want to be professionals but still have a hankering towards the theatre. So we're all in this mess together, that's really what it amounts to.

Interviewer: Do you get stopped quite often on Queen Street?

Tony van Bridge: A fair amount, yes. I get kind of conspicuous chiefly because of that silly tricycle of mine. It's the only tricycle, virtually, in town to go up and down the main street. One does stand out a bit as an extraordinary creature.

Curtain