JENNIFER PHIPPS

I first became involved with the Shaw Festival in 1967, the year we went to Expo 67 with Major Barbara after we had done the production here. My next season was 1970 and I was in Forty Years On and Candida. That was of course in the Court House. Paxton Whithead asked me to be in the show. I played Rummie Michins in Major Barbara. I had known Paxton for some time so it wasn't a question of auditioning. The next time round was in 1982 when Christopher Newton asked to me be in the first play here in his regime in the big theatre, Albert [redacted], which was a marvellous play but funnily enough at the Court House, which was quite changed of course by then because he had got the built theatre that goes inside the hall and that was not the case at all when I first came here.

The first time I played there it was just like a mini-theatre. Of course the backstage hasn't changed at all really. We were on the stage that is a stage now in the hall and the way to get to either side of the stage is still exactly the same. How they worked that I'm not quite sure because the seating was different. I still remember walking up the side and then the dressing rooms are at the back, partitioned off in the grope hall. As small as they were then, they are now. They are very cramped now because they do bigger shows, incredibly cramped actually. I couldn't architecturally work out what they had done inside the theatre part when I started working here again in 1982 until I discovered that they raise the acting stage to the level of the platform, and I was very impressed by that. It has a totally different feel. I've done quite a few plays at the Court House. Before it was just like a very small theatre, a mini-theatre because it was a proscenium arch. I saw a couple of shows from the front when I wasn't in the season—I saw The Circle, I remember, with Kate Reid in it—and it didn't seem in any way odd; I mean I wasn't straining to see, so they must have had some sort of tiered system for the seating, which I don't recollect.

Commuting from Toronto then was so much easier. There were no cars on the road; well, hardly any. I used to do a lot of commuting with Eric House when I did Major Barbara, and I remember coming down one time just for what we call notes, which Eddie Gilbert gave us for the previous day's rehearsal, and I fell fast asleep in the chair watching, and I remember it was raised like a balcony. It seemed as if they had a balcony then. Now, I don't know whether I'm just dreaming but I know I was elevated when I nearly fell asleep sitting on this chair. I said to Eric afterwards, "Did anyone notice I was asleep?" and he said, "Oh, no, only when you fell off the chair," which I didn't do. I remember there was just one tree coming down so we knew were halfway to Hamilton, but now there are all those offices and I don't remember them being built at all.

It was difficult to get accommodation. I had two children so I always knew that was going to be a problem, travelling with them. I was in a tiny weeny hut that is not opposite the video shop on Mary Street. There was a fruit stand and behind there were four or five little huts, sort of winter cottages, and we stayed in there the first time, which was really very, very primitive. There was an actor in the company at the time who was a good friend of mine called Patrick Boxill and he used to round and knock on people's doors and get accommodation for himself, but he was a single man alone and also a very good tenant and also very winsome, so that was probably why people let him in. He ended up with the most marvellous digs—people with tennis courts and things like that. But it was hard and there must have been an accommodations area but there was nothing like it is now, which is really quite extraordinary the way they manage to find places for people to stay. Of course there is a difficulty because most people have two rents to pay. I don't now because I have this house in Niagara-on-the-Lake but it is quite crippling, and then finding somebody to live in your other place in Toronto, but that's just the actor's lot that you know and expect you're going to have those trials and tribulations. Twas ever thus, I think, through the generations.

The next time I was here I was on Shakespeare and that was very near what is now the corroded beach, which wasn't corroded then. I remember when Paxton asked me to come down the second time I said I would get one of those caravans, motor homes, because he had a house on the Parkway and I would put it in his

driveway. He actually expected me to come there. He thought I was serious and I thought I was being pretty inventive and rather silly. I don't know where the accommodation came from. The second time round was not bad accommodation but the first time round was pretty bad in 1967.

I remember the Prince of Wales was almost like—a flophouse is the wrong word for it because that brings different connotations—but I remember staying there for a while. It was $10 a week over what was then the pool-table place, shove penny and the beer joint. That was pretty horrendous. Then there was another place, which is now the Bank House, which is quite smart, but that was an accommodations that we would go into. It had separate rooms and a lot of us all lived on the same floors and it was like a privately run bed and breakfast by us, the actors. That place on the Parkway that is now a museum had marvellous rooms. I remember going to visit Dominie Blythe, who was in Caesar and Cleopatra, and all she was a bed on the floor in the bare room but she loved it there because there was such a beautiful atmosphere in the house. But that was let out, not by the man who owns it now, of course. So we were pretty primitive in our accommodation. They've had a changeover in the accommodations person. This lady comes from Scotland and she's marvellous, Margaret Gaffney. She seems to have worked out a miracle with accommodation. They have to evidently keep things going for a whole year and that means pricing is difficult because we have to take up some of the price to keep the Shaw able to carry the building through for the whole year.

I was going to say the town itself was basically the same structurally but of course that's not true at all. It had a much more rural feeling to it and you much more noticed the lovely houses. I remember there was one house I always wanted to own on the corner of Mississauga and Gage. I think it's a bed and breakfast now. It's a little house on the left-hand side. I think the difference is so enormous you can't compare. There were places where you could shop; you can't shop now. There was McClellands??, a wonderful shop. They tried to make a go of it when they moved to Mary Street but it didn't work out for them. There was Betty Taylor who had a dress shop where you could buy needles and thread and material. She worked at the Festival. It was really a whole town, a whole village I suppose it would be called, and a miracle that, through vision, the Shaw Festival started in the Court House.

I remember Paxton saying once, when they thought of building a bigger theatre, "Well, I know we're over 100 percent capacity but will we be able to fill a big theatre?" And they were, they were playing to over 100 percent capacity for every show. They were top-liners in those days and Paxton didn't have a company. Obviously there were people who worked better in the kind of plays that were put on. I remember when I did Forty Years On and Candida I was the only actor except for Paxton who was—oh, Paxton didn't do Candida—but who was there for two shows. They only did the two shows; the season was minute, and shorter still before then when it actually started. It's always had a tremendous calibre here. In the Paxton era he did bring in, which was very inducive to spark the interest of the audience, he did bring well-known—and at that time it was English top-line performers. Stanley Holloway, for instance; I worked with Stanley. They were pleased to come for a short time. And the plays are accessible and light but they're thought-provoking. That's what Shaw's all about, an intellectual giant with a great deal of irony.

There never seemed to be any transportation; there's no transportation now. There used to be a boat that I came on, and of course there was a time when there was the aeroplane. That was tremendously exciting, it was wonderful. It would go back and forth across the lake for $25. You caught it at the Island Airport and it came over here to our airport. All sorts of odds, bods and sods were going on that aeroplane, not just the theatre people. There has never been a bus. This is all getting round to the fact that in a long season sometimes people have felt a little trapped here, because the season is so long and the home is not here. You cherish your car rides. There is a list up on the theatre's boards of who's going into Toronto and where and who needs a ride to go here or there. It sounds odd because you're so involved and so busy but there are times when, for certain people anyway, the isolation is very strong.

Sandy Webster stayed in St Catharines at one time and some people live in Queenston but really the main thing is to be in Niagara-on-the-Lake and to be downtown. They prefer that because we work late at night.

Interviewer: Sandy said when he first came here the only place he could find accommodation was in Port Colborne.

Ms Phipps: That's amazing. He's a big commuter is our Sandy. He's a miracle man on the road. I can't believe he does what he does. He's behind the wheel constantly and it doesn't seem to faze him at all. He's the person I was saying did commute in 1980 from St Catharines, which is still quite a long way when you add up the two-way trip. Maybe Patrick Boxill's idea was best, which was to go round and knock on doors. But the company wasn't a company in those days, it was just who was in the plays. The people who were in the administration when I was working in 1967 were local people. The best person to ask about all that is Ron Nipper, who's been here for 26 or 27 or more years and seems to have a remarkable memory of the ins and outs. I remember the administration was above the liquor store as it is now. There were only about four people in there.

Interviewer: Paxton said he never wanted a permanent company.

Ms Phipps: That's right. He said that. At that time it seemed the only way you could possibly do those plays was if you had actors who could understand the basic ethnic character that those writers were putting in their plays. You had to be very, very English or Cockney and all like that. There's a sort of a type. It's still difficult to grasp. I may be stepping on somebody's toes but it might be slightly cheaper than having a huge amount of people. The plays didn't accommodate large numbers. When we did Forty Years On, though, there were lots of boys. We got those basically from Ridley College. No, it was not Paxton's policy, but I'm delighted that it's been Christopher's policy.

Forty Years On was quite an achievement because that was at the Court House and there were all those boys. There was man called Robert Harris, who came from England, and they're always stunned when they come over because they think it's another English town. They all come over by the aeroplane so they think they're still in England. And the theatre was so tiny, especially backstage, so it was like going back to your fit-up days if you were an older actor. I remember Stanley being sort of, "What's this? Where's this? This cubbyhole." Not that he had any snobbery about him at all. I remember my son, who is not an actor and 37, was then too young to play in Forty Years On because they had a cutoff age. They've just done The Children's House and you couldn't be under or over a certain age for the girls. I remember the Ridley College boys, because they all knew each other, were a bit bolder than Franny Hyland's son and of course Reid. I played Nursey??, so I probably took a bit of the old Nursey offstage as well. And then of course I had my two little ones with me—the boy, Paul, who was too young to be in it; I don't think he ever got over that—and my daughter Dahlia, who was two years younger than he was. So I had children around me anyway. Alan Scarfe was in it and, as always, great fun. I had to play a man at one time. And Paxton is always pretty aloof, being so tall. The only specific thing I can remember happened to me after the play was done. I went to stay with my mother in Henley-on-Thames and she took me down to the boat races at Henley. It was the very first year that Ridley College had entered and they also won their specific race. At least three of the boys who had been in Forty Years On were rowing. So there I was, matron from the previous year, cheering on the boys. It was very exciting. I felt very proud, as if they were my own boys. I've got some photographs from the show. I found the other day, which I was going to give to Paxton and got half of his address and not the entire amount, there was a wonderful radio play from England with John Gielgud playing what Robert Harris played, and there it all is, Forty Years On. It's a wonderful piece, very English and very old-boy school. Great fun and a miracle that they did—with success, as far as I know.

The 1967 production of Major Barbara started, of course, in the Court House and then we went to Port Royale in Montreal. It wasn't actually in the Expo grounds; we did it outside in the Place Des Arts. They had a very long, very wide stage, and they were worried about putting this tiny little set that we had for Major Barbara into the big stage. The brilliant idea had been to make things bigger, so it would look as if they filled the stage. The cannon was twice as fat as it had been when it was in Court House, so that the two actors who were sitting on the Court House cannon quite comfortably with their legs dangling on either side, now had their legs spreadeagled. I was Rummy Michin?? in the Salvation Army. We had had an ordinary-sized Salvation Army table at the Court House and when we got to the theatre in Quebec we had one double the size. I was talking to Nobby Price and Eric House right down this enormous six-foot or eight-foot table. The character I played is only in the second act, so I went out to see the other part of the play and it was hysterically funny. You can't make the people any bigger, and if you make the set bigger the people look smaller. They were like tiny, wee ants walking around this enormous set. Anyway, it was reasonably successful, I'm quite sure, but it did look funny.

I've worked in all three theatres and the problem I think with the Court House and George is a vocal one. You think they're very small but the Court House has got an enormous rake in the audience. You feel you want to intimate, close to the people who are around you and in actual fact you've got to get way up to the top, and it's knowing how you can technically not appear to be screaming for the first few rows and yet be clear enough at the top. There are all sorts of answers that go around in the theatre. For instance, that if you're thinking properly, then everyone can understand what you're saying, it doesn't matter if you're speaking in a whisper. There's also articulation, which is much easier for people who have been trained or speak originally English, because our speech pattern is very much in the front of your mouth so you don't swallow things as you do if you're an American, who, when they try to speak as if they are English get a rather peculiar sound.

Then of course you have an enormous sound problem in the George with the air conditioning. It is a continual buzz that the audience doesn't here, and the actors don't hear for that matter, but it's a job getting the sound over that so people in the back get absorbed as well as people in the front. I imagine that's one of the reasons that the musicals do so well there, because they're on their own vocal pattern and they don't have the problem that just the vocal actor has. I remember in one show suddenly thinking, "It's dead air." We were jogging along perfectly all right, into the scene, into action, and all of a sudden it was like a cold air right around me and I realized that somebody had turned off the air conditioner. Suddenly there was stillness; you could feel the stillness in the house. On the big theatre I had the best advice ever, which is that it is actually like a very large hall. It is acoustically quite brilliant and you don't have to scream or vocalize very loudly, just think of it as a big hall.

I don't have any problem with people being too close. I like people being close to me in the audience; I like seeing people. Somehow or other, because of that, the angels that are above have given me the problem that, although I wear contact lenses on the stage, I cannot see who is in the audience. I'm quite clear on stage but I can't recognize faces or anything. I can see just little white blobs. I think drastic movement from the audience can be very irritating. I know we had a senior actor here who was extremely worried by one man quite near to the front who had his legs crossed and one leg was going up and down at a tremendous rate. I happened to see the people in the interval. They came up to me and said what a wonderful show it was: "Oh, how marvellous. My husband just absolutely—" And then they got a note saying that what the man was doing was very distracting, to which they then left the theatre in high dudgeon. As an actor you really can't tell. I've learned over the years that if you're doing a big speech and suddenly somebody gets up in haste and leaves, it's not because you're bad it's because they've got a coughing fit or something. I can see movement and I can hear. My problem is probably that I overcompensate with the audience by hearing sound very clearly. I know that in the smaller houses it can be distracting. It distracts some people if an audience is

wearing dead white. You want to embrace the audience with what's happening on the stage—that's why they come to see the play, they've come to join you in this gathering that we're doing—but you have to pull your concentration down so that you are embracing them but also concentrating on the work at hand, and close theatres can be distracting for that. I'm very bothered by coughing. If somebody coughs, and it very often happens that they cough on the key word of the sentence, so nobody in the audience hears it. Just one cough and it's gone: "What does it mean?"

I love the atmosphere in the George, particularly backstage. I don't know, it's just—but theatres are the same everywhere. The big theatre is like the mother-lode theatre, and it is, it is; that is what it is. I love that theatre. I have to say I'm not bonkers on the Court House. I don't mind the cramp, and I think it's terribly clever the way it's been laid out. I've been given two very good roles there, but I'm rather aware that you're playing on three sides rather than just playing a proscenium. After all, the proscenium was the innovation; the three-sided or thrust stage was the old-fashioned stage and they put the proscenium in, which I think is a very good drawing power for that arch; it has a drawing power for the audience. It's so difficult to say those things because after the years I've been here you get with such affection really more for the people and the steps that you walk up and the knowing that, "Oh, yes, I'm going up in the elevator to get to work." It all sounds so silly and banal but it's how I've found I've made my lifestyle. It's a very special place this. It's a town of ghosts anyway, but I don't think The Shaw would have gone quite as far as it has without the company idea that it has had at this point in time. Whether it changes and has a different concept in the way the plays are in the future, that all depends; but I think that this stretch of time not only enlarged the audience but it has enlarged us as actors.

I'm not very good at telling too many stories; I forget them. It's the actors more than actresses who are great at storytelling, most of the time anyway. I wonder why that is. They do, they go on forever. You don't find actresses doing it very much at all. Maybe they observe things in different ways, but they go on and on and on. Some of them are extremely good; I mean it's not all boring. Barry MacGregor is the great storyteller. Even when he tells the story again, it's just as good. He somehow gets rid of his own personality. With some of the old actors, their personality stays in the way, but he doesn't. He's an observer, I guess that's what it is; he observes when he's telling a story so that you get that kind of perspective on it.

Curtain