

NATALEE ROSBERG BENSTOCK

I became involved with the Shaw Festival starting in late 1972, early 1973, before opening of the new theatre—as a volunteer in 1972 with the Guild, which was terribly active then trying to get things together, and then at the opening of the theatre. I had a very important job; I arranged for the choir that came in to sing "O Canada" for the Queen. I continued as a volunteer for a couple of years until finally Tom Burrows said, "You don't have any clout. Either come on staff or I'm going to have to hire someone."

I had the first of about seven jobs at the theatre. I was the first special projects co-ordinator, I was the first audience development officer, I was the first public relations director, and I think probably the first light music director. As we grew, as a volunteer I did certain jobs. We had a music series in the winter. That's how I started it. Tom asked me to do a feasibility study to see if indeed there was an audience and a market for the theatre in the winter. His assistant, Bill Poole, gave me the job of finding out about music. From that we developed two winter concert series that lasted two or three years. We had the Toronto Symphony, the Buffalo Philharmonic, the Orchestre de Paris.

I jumped around and did whatever needed doing because we were growing. I think I went on staff in 1974 or 1975 as music administrator—I don't know, I had various titles.

My background was an arts background. I got involved before my husband, Joe, got sick. He died very quickly of liver cancer. I had married him in 1970 and he was dead by September 1972. Early on in 1971-72 I got involved with the Guild and I loved it and enjoyed it. I met Tom Burrows at a dinner party right after Joe died and said to him, "I have a background in theatre, radio and volunteer work. What would you do if somebody said, 'I have seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, including nights, available?'" I am an American. I married Joe, fell in love with Canada and became a landed immigrant. I wanted to stay in Canada after Joe died; I did not want to come back to the States, to Buffalo. So I wanted to find a niche and the theatre was the perfect opportunity. Tom said, "That sounds very interesting," and he didn't call me. About three weeks later we were at another dinner party and I said, "You're either too busy or too rude to have bothered to call to say, 'Don't bother me, lady.'" So he said, "How about lunch," and along came my involvement. The theatre became my life for a while and then became an important part.

After I remarried I moved back to the States, and it's a funny story how I got the job when I was no longer a landed immigrant. I wrote the job description and nobody could possibly have filled it. It said "bilingual" but nobody asked me what the two languages were; they were English and Spanish. I worked part-time for two years. Christopher Newton came in January 1979 and spoke with all of us and I said, "I have been working for about a year and a half part-time and I don't think it's good for the theatre and it's not good for my marriage. I can't be in two places. I find if I'm home and something happens at the theatre that night, I'm not accessible, and if I'm at the theatre I'm uncomfortable." So we agreed I would stay through the opening nights, because the festivities had always been my responsibility, and after the last show of the season opened I would leave, and that's just what happened. So I never worked for Christopher.

I did the Shaw Show Train; I did the New Horizons grants; I did Camerata, the summer music workshops; I did the first tours. It was all firsts because we were looking for things to do and I got the title to go with the job, whatever there was to do. I had to go out and either find a source for the money, find somebody to volunteer to help me, or come up with a creative idea, and that was what I was best at. When I was a kid I wanted to be on stage but I was near-sighted. I couldn't do anything about it and it was too long ago for contacts. So I fooled around with radio when I was

a kid in Chicago and the Midwest. After I moved here and was married I never did anything professionally except a little bit of radio, wrote musicals for people, things like that. My whole background had been in theatre so that's how I came to the Shaw and I loved it.

The Sardi party

When we had the Women's Guild and the new theatre had just opened, in 1973 or maybe 1974, we decided to have a big fund-raising event. There was no big involvement with the board of directors the way you often have to. Somebody said, "It's too bad we're not in New York, we could have a party at Sardi's," and the line hit me. I said, "Why don't we have a Sardi party here? Let's call Vincent Sardi and ask him to come." Then I discovered that Brian Doherty and Vincent Sardi were good friends so I asked whether I could use Mr Doherty's name. I called Mr Sardi and told him what I wanted. At the time, Tom Jamieson lived in one of the big estates in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Brunswick House I think was the name, and he offered me the house in which to have the after-theatre party.

Sardi not only came but he sent us caricatures from his walls, swizzle sticks, napkins, the whole works. He had a three-day ball. The president of the guild and a couple of people from the board met him in Toronto, took him to Winston's to a magnificent lunch, five courses with wine, although Vincent Sardi never drank. Then he came down and we had this great party. We hired caricaturists, we had raffles, and I don't remember everything else we did. But everybody was dressed to the teeth and Vincent Sardi held forth and we made money and friends. That would have been in late 1973 or early 1974.

Winter activities

In 1973 I fooled with the tours of the theatre and in late 1973 I did the feasibility study on winter activities. We had 740 square miles of regional Niagara to draw from and we discovered that people would come to things in the winter if they were worth while. Bill Poole and I put together a wonderful program. Some of the talent we got from Contact. I don't know whether they have that in Toronto any more. It was a forum for young talent. I think the ministry ran it. Some of the other talent we just hired. That lasted a couple of seasons.

Films for seniors

I think the next year I started the New Horizons grants. New Horizons is a federal agency that gives seed money, and only seed money, for projects involving seniors. One of the things we had discovered was that in the small towns in regional Ontario there were no movie theatres open in the afternoons, and if they were, they were not showing the kind of movies that seniors wanted to go to. So a wonderful woman with the federal government helped me get a grant of \$7,000 to provide transportation. There was no transportation to Niagara-on-the-Lake from any of these towns. We hired buses for senior citizens clubs all over the area. It cost them 50 cents each to ride the bus both ways and 75 cents, I think, for the movie.

I formed a committee and they helped me select the movies. A wonderful guy at the Ontario Science Centre, Gerald Pratley, got the movies for us. This went on for quite a few years. We met every other Wednesday and the senior citizens in Niagara-on-the-Lake were the hosts and hostesses and served cookies and tea. It was a PR job because at that time I really felt the involvement of the town was terribly necessary. We had all volunteer ushers for the longest time, either senior citizens or young kids. The film program ran for one year and, although no one was supposed to get seed money twice, we got it for I think two more years and that was that; the theatre got too busy.

We filled downstairs in the Festival Theatre—we couldn't use upstairs—which was 545 seats at the time. I felt like a dispatcher half the time. We had buses coming from all over: not quite as far as Burlington, but you name it, I had buses. We showed all those wonderful things like San Francisco—you can imagine the kind of movies. They adored them. Every week I would go out on the stage and you would have thought I was the biggest star in Hollywood with the applause I got, just welcoming them and telling them what was happening. It was wonderful, and it was good for the theatre. It kept people busy during the winter in the communities and it gave them a lovely feeling about the theatre.

Music workshops

In the 1973 season when we did the winter concert series, Camerata was on the program, a chamber group of six people which has broken up since. Somehow Bill Poole and Tom Burrows decided to put together a summer concerti workshop with Camerata, or to have them in residence. I was called in and said, "Fine, but I'm not a musician. What do you want from me?" They said, "We want to bring from all over Canada talented young kids. They will audition either in person or on tape. But we don't have any money for them." So I said, "So?" And they said, "So we have to get them here, house them and feed them. What can you do?" They got 17 kids the first time. I called the ministry of culture in each of the provinces from which we selected children and got their fare paid. Then I spoke to people in Niagara-on-the-Lake and the first year it was 16 or 17 families and the second year about 14 families who provided for three weeks homes for the kids, supervision and meals.

My job was to ride herd on these little monsters for three weeks, and it was such fun. The big house next to the golf course belonged to Norman and Ruby Long, who gave a welcoming swimming party and picnic for the kids. We picked two or three kids each year from our region, kids who were not as good as the other kids but to encourage them. One of them was a boy named Fleming from Beamsville, whose parents owned the second-largest chicken processing business in Ontario. They gave the kids a tour of the chicken hatchery and a chicken barbecue.

The group played once with the St Catharines Symphony and they gave two or three free performances upstairs in The Buttery in the summer, where Camerata also performed in the summer. I saw one of those kids last year when she was a guest artist with the Buffalo Philharmonic, Chantal Julliet. Mark Amarang is a well-known soloist, Lemalin also. Desmond Hovick became the cellist with the Orford String Quartet, which just broke up in the last year or so, and his sister was first violinist with the Cincinnati orchestra. Some of the kids became very successful, and it was great fun because they were talented. Camerata was a marvellous group to work with.

Audience development

I did a lot of speaking when a group wanted an actor or a director and nobody wanted to go. And if somebody came who needed a tour of the building and was too important to give it to one of the kids but not important enough to disturb Paxton, Leslie, Tom or whoever was there, I did that. I did audience development for a year and a half for Dick Kirschner, and detested it because it really was not my field. But we did a good job and we increased the school audiences particularly. I always did the opening night events for the theatre and represented the theatre usually at any social event where it had to be represented.

Then we decided we needed something for members, so we did a New York show tour. It was absolutely fantastic. Carole Shelley came to lunch because she had been at Sardi's and Vincent

gave us a nice room. They were very impressed and we saw some great stuff. That was so successful that we put together the London show tour. I took the New York tour with an escort and I took the London show tour over, the highlight of which was Ayot St Lawrence with a private tour and the British Museum with a Shavian historian. That started the members' tours, which were very successful.

Then we did the show train. I think Sam Blyth, the tour operator, was 26, and we put together a train consisting of two sleeping compartments, a lounge, a dining car and a caboose that was made into a cabaret. Tom Kneebone and Dinah Christie entertained every other night from Toronto through Winnipeg, Calgary all the way out to Vancouver. When we stopped in Winnipeg it was the opening night of the Winnipeg Ballet; when we stopped somewhere else, something else was going on. It was so successful that Sam Blyth went into the show train business all over Canada. We planned one for Egypt, Israel and Jordan in 1979 but there was a little bit of a problem there and the Canadian and American governments both said they could not guarantee safety and would prefer that we not go. I think we had about 40 members go on the show train. They were planning on doing it again the following year, in 1980, but I don't know whether they did. It was marvellous publicity, it was great public relations, and I think even more than for the theatre was what it did for Sam because it really made him into a big tour operator.

That was life at Shaw. It was fun, wonderful, exciting. I worked for a lot of interesting guys. Tom we called the general manager but they were executive directors, whatever, from 1972 to 1979.

Canadian film awards

We also had the Canadian film awards at the theatre. It was the year when there was some kind of problem with French-speaking Canada and they decided to have them in Ontario. The theatre was selected. One of the odd things I did was put together an art display by Norman Maclaren and he gave me a lovely book. The funniest thing that happened with that was that the Etrogs sat in my office and there was a very officious woman representing the Toronto end of it. We had gone in for meetings and she wasn't too pleasant. When it was over she called me and said, "I understand you have four Etrogs in your office and I want them returned." I said, "Oh. What did you say?" She said, "You have four Etrogs." I said, "All right, I'll return the four to you." I returned four and some other people in the theatre took the remaining five home as souvenirs. That event was most exciting. It was about a five-day affair. I assisted Bill Poole—actually he was my direct boss, Tom's assistant—putting that together, making all the plans, arranging for people coming down.

Involvement with the town

What's interesting about my involvement with Shaw, you may not want it for history, was my husband's involvement. The man I married had been a professional actor in the States and a stage manager for Kaufman, believe it or not, in New York and Chicago. He had worked in Canadian television until the ruling that you had to be a landed immigrant to work. I remember the first time I brought him over when we were seeing each other, I tried to introduce him to people and I went to present him to an actress who was there and said, "Kate, I'd like you to meet"—She looked at me as if I was crazy, threw her arms around Mel and said, "Melvin, I haven't seen you in years." That was Kate Reid. He worked with many Canadians and knew them, so it was wonderful because he was involved with theatre and the people I didn't know, he had known, because he was older than I was.

I remember the theatre going up practically stone by stone, Ron Thom coming, and Ray Senior

who did the curtain for two or three years afterward when we used the curtain constantly. He would come down or send down, from Quebec I think, some young students who would get up on ladders and carefully sew back the sisal that had come loose. I guess we used that curtain for most of the time I was there and then it got too heavy. He is the same man who did the sculpture that used to hang on the landing up to the balcony, and that was given in memory of a dear friend of mine.

In the winter we used to have the Paxton Whitehead Memorial Ping-Pong Tournament on stage. It was something just for laughs, usually when the staff came back to build the sets and there was nothing to do in town. The trophy was probably some obscene-looking thing.

I lived in Niagara Falls, which was 15 minutes away. When the theatre was being built, the Guild was very active trying to get things going. Most of the Guild members were from Niagara-on-the-Lake. I was sort of the Niagara Falls representative, although that was not a title. I think the reason they were so delighted to have me there was that I was from the Falls and that was another segment to draw from. I got involved in Niagara-on-the-Lake with the townspeople doing volunteer things and trying to include them, because I learned from Guild that they had a very proprietary feeling about the theatre. Tom and Paxton both felt it was very necessary to keep that relationship, to keep that involvement. They used volunteers whenever they could and it was not just a financial arrangement. There was a sense of community that was absolutely wonderful. At that time, anybody from the cast or the staff who rode their bike down the street would hear, "Hi, how are you Jim," or Bill or whatever it was. Everybody knew everybody else and could not wait until the season started and the actors were back. "My actor" was So-and-so because he lived with me; "your actor" was So-and-so because he lived with you. It was a warm, lovely feeling. I really was a little disappointed when I found out that the involvement with town over the years has become less and less, that there are no more volunteers doing certain jobs, but I can understand it because the theatre is much, much larger. I look at the amount of staff in the early days and the amount that is on a program nowadays and it is incredible.

I wanted to live in the town, and for years there was talk about building townhouses on Calvin's property, Randwood, and it never got done in time for me. But I could scoot back and forth in 15 minutes, so even if I went home to change clothes for an opening, I could be back quickly—or in an emergency, and we did have a few when there were actors incapacitated, shall we say; or something would happen, the bridge would get stuck and part of the audience was on the wrong side of the Homer bridge. Those were the fun times too, though.

Celebrities

At one time in the theatre there was a large room that was a reception room for private parties. That's where Her Majesty went between acts and that's where the Légers came. For some reason, Madame Léger and I hit it off. I complimented her on something. I said, "That's not American and it's not Canadian. I want a confession." She said, "My dear, when Jules was in Paris he worked, I shopped," and we started talking. She was the most delightful woman. From that came a personal Christmas card.

Pauline McGibbon, the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, was a dear friend of John and Bubby Brook. Bubby worked for the theatre as audience development director; John was the development director. They told me the story that one time Pauline and Donald McGibbon came down and stayed with them. Early next morning, the McGibbons climbed out a window to leave because they didn't want to awaken the Brooks. That's how close the friendship was. So the first time that Her

Excellency was coming down, Bubby said to me, "I will introduce you to Pauline. I'll signal you." I was waiting off at the side and Bubby was talking to Mrs McGibbon when finally she signals me to come over. She said, "Your Excellency, I'd like you to meet a dear friend of mine. This is—" Absolute blank; she looks at me in panic, suddenly can't remember my name. I said, "I'm Whatsername, Your Excellency." Do you know that every time the woman came down after that she'd say, "Where's Whatsername?"

At Tom Jamieson's home in Niagara-on-the-Lake at an opening night affair, pre-opening and I am hostessing, going around thinking I am being terribly charming to everyone. There was an absolutely beautiful woman, charming and sweet, who was on the board of directors, Beryl Ivey from London, Ontario; the Ivey Foundation. I was busy talking to Beryl, oozing charm, and this man came up with a couple of young men. He looked very familiar but I really couldn't think of his name. Finally I knew I had to do something. I turned to him and said, "I'm sorry, I would introduce you but I can't think of your name." And he said, "I'm Dick Ivey, Beryl's husband." They were both delightful about it.

I didn't meet the Queen when she came to the theatre and I'll tell you why. I passed it by. The Guild was allowed only so many people to meet the Queen. I'm an American and I didn't feel it was right for me to stand in a receiving line and have somebody who was Canadian and would like to meet the Queen not be able to. But I sat about 15 feet away from her and had a ball. I turned pages for Mary Schmon, who put the choir together that sang "O Canada," in French and English, in the Fort on the day the Queen came. It was interesting watching her expression because she covered her ears when they did a mock battle and Prince Philip took her hands and put them down and patted her hand as if to say, "It's all right, honey, nobody's going to shoot at you."

Interviewer: Were you sitting close to her in the theatre, because I've heard she may have had a nap because she had been up from about 5 a.m. that day.

Ms Benstock: I was not sitting near her in the theatre but everyone who was, commented. The security was tremendous upstairs. Even one of the RCMP commented, "Well, I guess she's catching up a little bit." She did take a teeny weeny nap. He did not, he was alert all the way. He has a very loud and a very clear laugh. It was an interesting evening, it was a good evening for the theatre and I think she really loved it. That was the first time that we needed any true security, although I think Trudeau had been down the second night of the week, I think. The first week we did some concerts too—Lois Marshall, the Orford String Quartet, and a couple of other performances sort of to get the theatre warmed up. Then Madame Gandhi and Trudeau were down, and I think it was the sixth night that was the official opening when the Queen came.

Madame Tussaud's Bernard Shaw

One year, prior to the season opening, Madame Tussaud's in the Falls contacted me and said they had a marvellous likeness of Bernard Shaw and did we want to borrow it. We had him sitting in the lobby when people came in. Some people thought it was absolutely terrible for us to do and some people thought it was great fun.

Changing times

Interviewer: Why do you think the Sardi party and the show train were not repeated?

Ms Benstock: I don't think you could repeat a Sardi party more than once every five or 10 years.

First of all, I don't think Vincent Sardi would have done it while he was still well. Besides that, Brian died, and that was our entrée to begin with.

As for the train, it may have been that it got to be a commercial thing that Sam Blyth was doing himself. The scheduling may have been too difficult to repeat the show train. We were terribly fortunate because we could get to each major city while there was something interesting doing at the theatre and yet not conflict with the theatre's plans. I think with enough hard work and with enough creative thinking they could have come up with something. We used the trip to England to make money, but what we publicized were the private visits to Ayot St Lawrence and the British Museum because that was Shaw material. That was not the most exciting thing we did on the trip but it was a good hook; we hung a lot of stuff on it. I think maybe they have just been so busy with season and have got so big that they are not looking at, or they are overlooking, possibilities for the general audiences who are not members. I imagine the membership is awfully large now. That might possibly be it. Also, we changed ships—not only captains, we really changed ships with Paxton, Leslie and Tom gone, then Dick Kirschner. I think each person coming in had to look at the major purpose of the theatre, which was to produce, perform and obtain revenue from the plays, and I think that's what happened; it just dwindled.

I think it could be done again, I really do, by somebody with a creative mind who would get in and dig and ask for help. I found help is so easy to come by. A crazy example: We did 16 performances of the Don Juan in Hell scene when we did Man and Superman. Whoever was the boss at the time wanted something served at one long intermission. It was decided—English theatre—tea. That's a lot of tea for a lot of people a lot of times. I called Red Rose and asked them if they would like to provide the tea. I told them what it was for and that we would be glad to advertise it in our programs and put little signs up. They thought it was a delightful idea. We also got the cookies donated. People will help, especially if you call them and they say, "What can I do for you?" and you say, "I want to pick your brains" or "I need some help. I know you may be too busy to help me but where would you suggest I turn." Everyone loves to give you advice. They will wind up doing half the dirty work for you.

I haven't been involved with Shaw for 20 years so it's hard for me to say. I only see it either as one of those oldtimers looking at what's different and saying, "It's not like it used to be," or as a member of the audience. Everything seems so different. Even the numbering of the seats surprised me the first time I went and they had changed the system. But whatever they're doing, they've got an awful lot of friends over here. I think the theatre is going to stay healthy; on the American side and I'm sure on the Canadian side too, it's too much a part of the summer life of people here. Fortunately for Americans there's a dollar exchange because the price of seats is terrible; it's horrible for Canadians but it's not quite as tough for Americans. It was a great place to work, it was a great community, and I still enjoy going over to visit my friends once in a while and just walk around—off-season, when all those tourists have gone!

Curtain