

MEMORIES OF THE SHAW FESTIVAL
BY JOAN DRAPER
267 VICTORIA ST.
NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE, ONT. L0S 1J0
MARCH 1997

From 1967 until 1978, I lived at 36 Picton St. My memories of the Shaw are from that period in my life.

I am walking down one of the side streets when a woman I scarcely know beckons me to her front door. She tells me she is renting to a young performer from the theatre and she wants me to see something. Her house is immaculate and every square inch of floor space is covered in very expensive broadloom. She takes me to the rented room and there, in the middle of the pale pink carpet is a pile of sand. It seems her boarder had spent the day on the beach at the foot of King St. and had gathered some pretty stones. To retrieve them, she simply upended her pail on her bedroom floor.

Passing the Prince of Wales Hotel I look up to the bedroom windows. Each one is open as it is very hot and there is, of course, no air conditioning in the entire building - just a few window units in the public rooms downstairs. On the window ledges are bottles of milk, pop and little packages of food. This is where the apprentices are housed and I understand they were paid \$50 per month. There are no screens on the windows to protect them from the insects. I should point out this was long before the hotel was purchased by the Wiens family.

There is a rumour amongst the town people that insists the young people of the town are being introduced to the demon weed marijuana by the apprentice actors. This apparently originated from a parent who discovered pot in her darling's room and associated this with the arrival of the young actors to our town. A distrust of the theatre invading Niagara-on-the-Lake made this assumption only logical in some minds.

Had they paid attention, they would have deduced that pot was very familiar to their teenagers long before Shaw brought their disreputable crew to our innocent little backwater.

In the early days when Brian Doherty first devised the idea of a theatre, readings were held on the Court House stage. Local women would lend one of their party dresses to the actress involved, pick it up at the end of the performance, take it home to be sponged and pressed, and return it the next night. As sets were needed, a great deal of the carpets, furniture and props came from local homes. This actually went on for quite some time until the theatre could finally afford its own. There were many local people involved in cleaning, painting, selling tickets and generally pitching in where needed.

It was some sort of anniversary of the Shaw Festival in the Court House Theatre. I sense it was the 10th anniversary, but I am not certain. A hot summer night, it is still daylight and Brian Doherty and Calvin Rand are standing on the top step in front of the Court House front doors. On the sidewalk is a large, flat, farmer's wagon which contains a huge birthday cake made by the Niagara Home Bakery.

There are very short speeches given by Calvin and Brian. Queen St. is closed to traffic from Gate to King. At one end, there is a rock band and at the other a country/western group. By this time it is dark and still very warm. In a large area in front of each band, people are dancing. There are tables set about the street serving pop and juice. The cake has been cut and there is a piece for everyone.

It is a very happy event. Everyone from town is there including the children. There is much animated conversation. Little tots are sitting on their father's shoulders, some clad only in a diaper. Bare feet are to be seen on both adults and children. People perch on curbs, in shop doorways and anywhere they can find a seat. Many have brought their own lawn chairs. The shops are closed and the merchants mingle with the crowd.

There is a feeling of pleasure and contentment. A good time was had by all.

I am standing in the Court House in my best long frock with a handful of raffle tickets. The sale of each ticket will put a cedar shingle on the roof of the new theatre. I can't remember what the prize was, but the tickets sold quite well. Everyone was good natured, even though they were probably asked the same thing at another performance.

I also recall a garden party at the home of Calvin and Pat Rand on John St. As I write in 1997, it is now the home of a School of Philosophy, although I believe the Rand's still maintain the coach house and pool as their own summer residence. This afternoon in the garden was a fundraiser for Shaw, as usual. Local women had been asked to wear a costume from the wardrobe department at Shaw and this fashion show was part of the entertainment. I was given a dress that had been worn by Carol Shelley in Noel Coward's to-night at 8:30. It was a classic 1920's cocktail dress and I was thrilled. Miss Shelley sought me out afterwards to pay me a compliment about my performance in her dress. She displayed her usual good manners but I knew that only Miss Shelley could do justice to that gown. She was such a lady. I recall standing on the muddy lawn after the fashion show trying to convince a couple from Buffalo to make a donation to the theatre - as the long stiletto heels of my black silk pumps sank slowly into the ooze. On inspection, the silk had peeled back to the base of the heel, exposing white metal coated in mud. Ah, the sacrifices we make for culture.

It was the day the Queen and Prince Phillip came to Niagara-on-the-Lake for the official opening of the Festival Theatre. The whole town was closed to traffic. Excitement was high. They were to dine at the Pillar & Post, visit the Fort and attend a performance of You Never Can Tell in the evening. They were sleeping in a railway car in St. Catharines. That morning, I looked out my front window to see a procession of large trucks driving slowly by loaded with fully grown pine trees. That night I saw

them planted along the driveway of the new theatre, with their support wires carefully camouflaged.

She was at least three hours late. All that time, the people who were waiting at the Fort were not allowed to leave as they had all been passed in by security. One wonders about the bathroom. All facilities are outside the palisades! I had invited friends to watch for her from my home as we knew she would have to pass by on the way to the Festival Theatre. Of course, no one realized she would be that late. The town was full of security forces, one of whom was stationed outside my house, but they were not giving out any information. It was a very warm evening.

I had been commandeered by Betty Mitchell to dress in my best and stand in the lobby of the Festival Theatre and sell drinks tickets. At a specified time, I arrived at the Stage Door and was passed through by the security on the door. I should add that I didn't realize that Betty had offered me a real plum, as it was obvious those who were volunteering for the evening would have a better view of royalty than those on the street. I had a friend who was much more eager for this opportunity than I was, so I suggested to Betty Mitchell that she take my place. It seems this was impossible as all the volunteers had been cleared by Interpol! No substitutions were allowed.

When she finally arrived I was near the door and caught a glimpse of her before she was whisked down a side corridor to the royal box. She looked exhausted. She was wearing the magnificent beaded gown that was decorated with the thistle, the shamrock and the rose.

I should mention that the audience had been waiting for her for three hours in the theatre.

It was said that there had been a confrontation between Prince Phillip and the RCMP as they entered the theatre. Phillip had finally lost his temper with the overpowering security people and demanded that they be

protected only by a male and female Mountie who were dressed for the occasion. He got his way.

We waited in the lobby for the full length of the play. We had to be very quiet lest we be heard by those inside. At intermission, we sold drinks tickets. The Royal Couple were out of sight in the administrative offices on the second level. Tom Burroughs, who was the Artistic Director at that time, slipped by to tell us he would arrange to have the royals leave the theatre by the far door, so they would be obliged to pass by us as they left the building. They were in a very good mood and were smiling and chatting to the Rands and to Tom Burroughs and his wife, Kerry. Prince Phillip, as usual, was strolling along behind the Queen with his hands behind his back. The volunteers lined the walls, the men with their back to the brick (they were the bartenders) and the women with their back to the glass patio doors (they were the ticket sellers). I stood smiling at the procession with my drinks tickets clutched in my hand.

Without any warning, Prince Phillip veered from his place and came towards me with a big smile on his face. "Do you plan to give those away" he asked, pointing to my tickets? "Not if I can help it" I replied. We grinned at each other and he went on his way. As soon as they passed through the glass doors, I was surrounded by my co-workers wanting to know what he had said. It was a brief moment in the glare of celebrity and it passed very quickly.

After they left, there was a brisk business in ticket sales and everyone was relaxed and began to enjoy themselves.

In the special washroom that was set aside for the Queen's use by the royal box we found special English soaps and hand lotion that travel with her. She also brought her own bottles of Schweppes India Water for drinking and I believe Betty Mitchell was given an unused one as a token of her valiant work that evening. It was well deserved.

She also hosted a little drinks party for the volunteers at her home later that evening. All in all, it was a very long, but eventful day.

At about the same time, Mrs. Gandhi had arrived to attend the theatre. She had been visiting the Trudeaus in Ottawa. There was some danger to her safety because of the separation of Pakistan and the security was overwhelming.

She was staying with Dr. Jameson on John St., which was 5 mins. away. But they flew her in a helicopter to the Festival Theatre. I walked up to catch a glimpse of her and demonstrators were being herded away from the entrance, although they were not arrested or bullied in any way apparent to me. This visit to Dr. Jameson resulted in a friendship between them that lasted until her death. He visited her in India and corresponded regularly. They also exchanged parcels of books.

For opening nights at the Court House and the Festival Theatre, the flowers came from local gardens and the containers from local homes. A women's committee, with the help of their husbands, would also provide tables, chairs, linen etc. to make decorative displays and small seating area for special evenings. It was also local people with large homes who provided the setting for opening night parties and special dinners for VIP's. They would also provide guest rooms for special visitors. At that time we had only the Oban Inn and the Prince of Wales. Bed and Breakfast establishments were unknown. It should be noted that many of the townspeople who provided these facilities at no cost to the theatre (except perhaps for catering the large parties) were also generous donors to the theatre, and some sat on the Board of Directors.

In 1979, Shaw mounted *The Corn is Green* at the Festival Theatre, directed by Leslie Yeo. In the cast were three young actors who have not disappointed us over the years - Mary Haney, Peter Hutt and Geraint Wyn Davies. I was, at that time, employed by the Publicity Department on a contract basis to assist with opening nights etc. It was my duty to see

that the bottles of wine, flowers and traditional opening night gifts were placed in each dressing room without disturbing the occupant and, preferably, when they were not there. It was impressed upon me that the actors were not, in any way, to be disturbed. I was warned about Mr. Hutt who liked to pace up and down the dressing room corridor when he was not on stage, in deep concentration and often muttering his lines. I am in awe of the acting process (I still am) so I huddle on the stairs out of his way and watch him with fascination. This undoubtedly disturbed him more than if I had pushed past him laden with gifts!

All went well until I entered Miss Haney's dressing room with a bottle of wine in my hand. I was surprised to find her in there and, because of this, I knocked the wine onto the floor and the bottle smashed. I was horrified. It immediately entered my mind that my clumsiness would spoil Miss Haney's performance and I had surely ruined her chances in the theatre! I was immediately pushed out of the way by a member of the wardrobe department and the mess was cleaned up while I sat on the stairs wringing my hands. My distress was obviously apparent to Miss Haney who flashed me a large, forgiving smile and went on to a very successful career on the stage - in spite of me. The play was filled with energy and enthusiasm and was a great success. Somewhere in the Shaw archives is a letter to Leslie Yeo from Katherine Hepburn about this play.

I must mention *Respectable Wedding* by Bertolt Brecht in 1980. It was directed by Derek Goldby. As well as a great deal of socially unacceptable language, one scene depicts the bride (Nora McLellan) being raped with a bottle - in the hands of her husband if I remember correctly. This subject was meat and drink to Goldby. I found the play ragged, as well as startling and didn't enjoy it personally. But it was well worth attending a performance to see the audience response. The hissing sound produced by the intake of breath became part of the sound effects. In response to the rape scene, there would be a stampede out of the theatre by a number of patrons during each performance. I remember Pat Rand leading a rather large contingent up the aisle. It was not to be missed!

