

NB: So you were working for Hydro? Were you out of school by then?

MA: during the summers while I was a senior at high school and while I was in university. I worked in the summer at Adam Beck Hydro Generating Station. We did public relations for Ontario Hydro. In fact we did some over on the American side. We helped them get started with operations, which was the Robert Moses. Anyway we worked there. There were six or eight of us.

One day Brian Doherty came in with a handful of tickets and said, "You girls have to really help me to fill this theatre. We absolutely have to have it full and it show ? and he briefly went through what he was doing. "And give the tickets to the tourists." We all looked at each other and we thought these tourists are not going to be interested in Shaw. So we got on the phone and phoned everybody we knew. We used all the tickets and whenever he came in with tickets we knew how to fill the place.

Initially we were all young. I was in my late teens. The other girls were in the early twenties. We all knew Shaw of course. It was part of the curriculum while we were in school. I didn't major in English. I minored in English and majored in psychology. Anyway we all had been exposed to Shaw so we would have these great conversations about what we were going to see and, you know, we enjoyed, not being part of the performance, but the whole idea of studying Shaw. After the performance, we would go down to the Oban Inn and there would be Brian holding forth over in the corner. He would be waving us over and he would go on talking for hours and of course he was very interesting, especially to all of us who thought this was the greatest thing because we were used to going off to the Shakespearean theatre and this was really novel.

I have this memory when the guild had their retro a few weeks ago. I remember going to see "The Shadow of a Gunman". with Sean McCahey, a very great Canadian actor. He had this scene when he comes in and shoots this gun. It was very loud because you were in a very confined space and no one expected it to go off, although we saw him with the gun. Well, everybody jumped and of course we were on wooden seats with wooden floors, and chairs were falling over and people were falling over and it was just cacophony for about 5 minutes. Everything stopped until the audience got themselves organized. The performance stopped and it must have happened at every performance because people start laughing and people are disruptive.

That was one of the memories that would always stay with me. I thought afterwards that, before the performance, when now they tell you to turn your cell phones off... Well back in those days they used to come in and used to say, "Ladies and Gentlemen, you are sitting on wooden chairs and there is a wooden floor and it makes a lot of noise so for the sake of not interrupting the performance, would you please sit still." Then they would talk to you about, "We know it is hot in here and there is no air conditioning. If you are using your fan, don't disrupt your neighbors." So they would say all of this and I said to one of my friends, "Don't they tell you that there is going to be a gun shot and not to jump out of your seats because that was more ? than anybody moving. So I think the second year or the third year, they actually bolted the chairs behind them so they wouldn't move. The first year there were movable chairs that folded. That was a disaster. Then they put a rod in behind the wooden chairs and this held the row together because the other way the rows didn't even stay straight you know it was a mishmash. But the rod was a pill too because if somebody, when they first came in didn't keep it straight, the whole aisle was off.

It was hot. I remember having two beautiful fans, which I called my Shaw fans, because the programmes were so wimpy that they wouldn't do anything. So everybody brought fans and you would be sitting there watching the performance and you would look over and everybody would be fanning themselves.

It was a wonderful time and unlike today there were a lot more younger people going to the Shaw. Today it is more of a senior audience that you see going to the Shaw.

NB: But I think the tickets are very expensive.

MA: You know, I think you're right. As students, saving our money, we could still go a performance. If we didn't have tickets and we wanted to see something, we could go. I have kept the membership or at least gone all

of these years. I don't think that, except for the time living in Europe, that I didn't go down and see something. It has been part of my life.

NB: So you were never an usher.

MB: No just an attendant.

NB: Did you go the first year?

MB: Yes but I think my memory melds all those years together because other than the "Shadow of a Gunman" and you know, how many times I have seen "Major Barbara"? I really thought that if Brian Doherty got a theatre, he could make a go of it, because I thought to myself, "This is exactly what we need. Something for people to do besides going to the Falls." And I just thought it was a wonderful wonderful thing and I talked about it to my friends in university. I know that in summer when they could get away from summer jobs, they would come down, they would stay with me and we would go. You know it was really really something.

NB: But there were other theatres in the area. There was the Carousel Players and the Little Theatre.

MA: Yes and there was a summer theatre in New York that I used to go to.

NB: Melody Fair

MA: Yes there was Melody Fair. It was different. I think the others were light theatre. It was almost like summer stock while Shaw was serious theatre. It was something that people go and see in Toronto rather than a musical, a revue, a farce or something that was lighter. I don't know that it would have survived if we hadn't managed to build a theatre.

NB: I think probably having professional acting helped.

NB: You know I was really impressed that some of the actors that they were able to come down - Jessica Tandy for example, and Stanley Holloway. I was very impressed that some of these actors were ones I actually knew and I didn't know much about the world at that time. I thought "Gee a little town like NOTL gets this calibre of actor to come in!", because that was really something and I always thought that the costumes were wonderful. Some people don't think about those things but I think that they all go to make a great performance. It is the total effect. Not one person, not one actor, not one director. It is the total package that makes it work. And always able to get very good people. All the way through ? then later on in the late 1980s and 1990s, I was chair of the Niagara College Board of Governors and at that time we had some very difficult financial times. We had to look at cost cutting and what you cut in programmes. If you are in tough times you take it off. And one of the programmes was technical theatre and at that time Niagara College was only one of two venues in Canada offering technical theatre. The other venue was out west so Niagara College was really the only eastern post secondary offering technical theatre, which was really important. And the board was for axing it. So I said what if we spoke to Shaw and ask them if we could pair with them in trying to salvage this programme and relocate the programme down there. So we freed up some space here, which was a premium at that time at the college because it was very small and still in Welland with a satellite in St. Catherines but the theatre programme was in Welland. So we went down to the Shaw Board and they were very receptive with the idea. They thought they would give it a trial to see how it would work. I know it wasn't easy and I know they gave it two years. But unfortunately it didn't make it in that form. A very big disappointment. I still am disappointed that it didn't survive in that form because it was timing. It was timing I think and the unions. They had different mandates and different perspectives of how things should go. But if it had happened later on, say five or ten years later, there would have been space and there would have been a necessity to make it go

NB: At the college?

MA: No, at the theatre.

NB: This was before the festival theatre was built?

MA: no the theatre was built It was in Christopher Newton's time. It was 1989 and 1990 it was only there for two years. If you weren't involved with the theatre you might not even know. Not a big programme and it didn't have that many students but it could have grown.

NB: Were there courses offered in the Shaw theatre?

MA: Yes, it was hands on technical theatre so they had to practise with the lighting, with the set making, you know the staging. It was a hands on programme, where they needed to have a workshop.

NB: Did they any lectures?

MA: Yes, I think they did and they might have had the lectures at the college. Or maybe they had lectures down in NOTLI. They did have a church hall, where they had some lectures.

That was part of my relationship. There was big difference between a college union and an actor union and it created a bit of tension. I was getting all this as the chair of the board. I may not have gotten the real goods because you are getting something that has been glossed over to make it palatable. But I did have the opportunity to talk to the board and they just said, "You know it just isn't working." So we lost technical theatre.

There is technical theatre in Canada, just not around here. I don't know where the one in the east is. It was not something back in the eighties that people thought about but today, technical theatre and film are all raised right up as something that the kids want to do.

NB: Also it has gotten so very technical. Now you have radio controlled everything like the revolve.

MA: I remember "Cavalcade" way back when they did that first revolving stage. I was in awe. I thought, "Boy this is really great that they can do this down here."

NB: I remember "Ideal Husband" and it had the revolve and they were dancing on it so there appeared to be a crowd.

MA: Unless it something really different like "Rashaman", something like that will stay with you. But after you have seen some of them, they all run into each other and it is hard to differentiate unless there is something that is a spectacular performance or something like that. I really think that the Shaw has done wonders for NOTLI. I know some people don't think so.

NB: Do you remember when Christopher Newton came and he was going to put a pavilion in the commons? What was your take on it, living out of town?

MA: You know I really felt that the Common should stay as it was. I go back to going down to NOTLI to ride horses at the riding stable across from the Prince of Wales. I think I am a little stick in the mud. I am for progress but I sort of think like the people who live down there. Although a lot of them were Americans and they only came down in the summertime. Most of the houses were closed the rest of the year. I think they deserve to have something that is their own. Not everything Shaw Something that is their space. I have friends there who have lived down there for years, and they get overtaken and overwhelmed for a few months of the years.

NB: What always impressed me in NOTL that there were people that moved there because of the Shaw. They retired there because they loved the theatre and had been going to the Shaw. Then there are other people who never have been to the Shaw. The local people for example. I have this friend who comes and does odd jobs for me, and he never goes to the theatre.

MA: It is like people who live in Niagara Falls and never go to look at the Falls. But it is a little different.

NB: Yes there is a group, a small group, that is part of it and then there is a large group that never paid any attention to it. They are benefiting from the tourists such as the stores. The people, who work in the stores, the nurses at my husband's nursing home, they have never have been to the Shaw. And people working on council, the farmers, people who own the stores and actually work there, they never go. It is very strange.

MA: I know unless they have a town day when people are invited to come and don't pay. Then they might come. But if you are in tourism business you should really know what is going on in your town.

NB: Even when they have the town dress, it is the people who are in the Shaw guild and people like that who go. My feeling about 1981 it wasn't the pavilion. It was something else. The busses. The fact that council wasn't listening to them but only to the Shaw.

MA: It was something underneath. I belong to the museum and I believe that you should support what is your history. They do that really well in the U.S.. Every town in the U.S. has a museum. Something or whatever. I think we fall down a little bit. I remember my father saying people shouldn't come here just to see the Falls. They should come here for the history. This is where the history of Canada was made. And most of the people don't understand that and whenever anyone came to visit us from out of town, he would start at Fortt Erie and he would give them a historical tour of the war of 1812. Right straight through to NOTL and this he did until he died. And this is what we should be talking about. The Niagara peninsula. We should be talking about the War of 1812. Of what made Canada and where Canada started in Newark which is now NOTL. I think he had a real point. That is where the bus tours should be. It shouldn't be going from souvenir store to the next.