

RAYMOND WICKENS

When I first heard about the Shaw Festival, they were in their second or third season. They had their production when they brought in the gentleman from New York to direct, Maynard Burgess, and Brian Doherty, I don't quite know how he got to know about me, but at that point in time I was working in the Red Barn Theatre at Jackson's Point. We had just finished the summer season there and I got back here to Toronto and of course, like most actors cum managers, was wondering what I was going to do next because I didn't have a job. One morning, really early in the morning, the phone rang and it was this Irishman called Brian Doherty, whom I didn't know, going on about this Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake. I'd only just got up so I wasn't really with it all, and he said, "Will you meet me in an hour?" I said, "Where are you?" and he said, "At the Celebrity Club." It was a club on Jarvis Street and a lot of the actors and directors and producers used to hang out there. I said, "Yes, I'll be there." I thought, "This is sort of exciting. I don't know what it's all about but we'll go and see."

Of course, Brian could talk anybody into doing whatever he wanted them to do. He was an absolutely amazing man. He had so much enthusiasm. He was telling me first of all about the wonderful town and the fact that he had started the Shaw Festival and was thinking of really expanding it and wanted help. He had heard through somebody that I was good at managing and at publicity. I said, "Well, I'm always willing to try something but I think I'd better come and see what you're talking about." So I think at the end of that week I drove to Niagara-on-the-Lake to meet with Brian again and of course was completely taken by the town. He gave me the whole tour, Fort George, the lot; we didn't miss anything out. Again his enthusiasm for what he wanted and the fact that Andrew Allan was the artistic director—well, of course, I was just in awe of that man because we all wanted to work for him on radio, and he was Mr Radio, there was nobody to beat him. And I also met his associate, Sean Mulcahy; these Irish people are really quite fascinating.

I said to Brian, "If you've got Andrew Allan in as your AD, I think I'd better join this company. It's really good people." The money was terrible but that was beside the point. The facilities we had were just dreadful. I was given an office on Queen Street and it was just down the road from what was then known as The Yardstick, where Betty Taylor ran this drygoods store and materials. I had this tiny little office—no bathroom; I had to go down to a little Chinese restaurant down the road and make a deal with them that I could use their bathroom when I needed it. But I said, "I'll be in to buy tea every day," because I'm a great tea drinker, so that was all right, and occasionally I used to eat there. Then of course I looked at the Court House and I'm thinking, "How do they turn this place into a theatre?" but they had obviously done it before. With that, I started having meetings with Andrew and got all the costing. It was very funny. They were doing that year *Pygmalion*, *The Millionairess* and *Shadow of a Gunman*. I probably was with them in 1964 leading up to the 1965 season.

Anne Butler was the first girl Andrew asked me to contract and I didn't say anything because Anne and I ~~was~~ ^{were} old friends from England and in fact we both were in drama school together and we were really good friends. I said, "What is she playing?" and he said Eliza for sure in *Pygmalion* and *Epiphania* in *The Millionairess*. I said, "That's wonderful," trying not to be overly excited. I sent Anne a letter that was terribly formal because I thought, "People may be reading this and I'm in my first year at the job," so it was, "Dear Miss Butler, I'm very happy to inform you that we would like to use your services..." and then I called her. It was wonderful because I had somebody I knew to publicize. She was playing two leads and how many actresses get a chance to do that in one season? Not very many; there are not that many good roles. So I got Anne and we made the front page of all the Toronto papers in their entertainment sections, some which I was really please about in brilliant colour. We had an extremely good season. We had first-rate actors—most of these people are still working now doing wonderful things—and the support then of pretty well most of the town.

We were always accused of having wild parties and disrupting. We weren't doing any of that; it was all other people or other groups. There were a lot of Americans there who used to have these big parties. We did party but we weren't really rowdy or anything. The town ^{was} quiet, it was nice, and it was very easy then to find accommodations. I used to go into the Prince of Wales and you walked into the bar and there was sawdust on the floor and it was men only in one part of it and if you wanted to go into the nice lounge you had to have a female with you. That hotel used to feed all the actors for a really cheap price because none of us were earning any money really so it was nice that we had a reasonable place to go and eat. As it got more popular, the staff of the theatre increased enormously and the accommodations suddenly, like always, went up in price. When we were there I lived—they're both dead now—with Elsie Stewart and her sister and they were like the salt of the earth. They would tell me stories about how they used to leave Niagara-on-the-Lake in a horse and cart to go shopping in St Catharines and get all their supplies. They were just fabulous. They had never met actors before and suddenly here I am in their house and bringing in actors and they loved it. They just thought it was wonderful. Brian Doherty was responsible for arranging all this, but they would come to an opening night in a horse and cart, dressed in, as they called them, their centennial clothes. I'm sure they didn't really understand the plays that much but they enjoyed the feeling of being there.

So that first year for me was one of getting used to the area, getting used to publicizing a summer theatre and I thought, "We can't just do it locally. We need more people," so that's why I concentrated that first year on Toronto a lot—the newspapers, television, radio stations, everything. Also, I went across the river to Buffalo and did the same with the Buffalo stations and press. I built up in that one year a really nice press corps of people that really got behind the theatre and actually wrote about it; not just reviews, but they did lots of feature stories and things. When we closed the season we hadn't made any money but we hadn't really gone terribly into debt; we were in a bit of debt but it was manageable. I talked to the board of directors, I guess that was when Calvin Rand was the chairman, and said, "If we really want to make this festival go, you've got to find some money for me so I can go further afield and try and get the American market particularly." I said Stratford was a perfect example. They had got all the Americans going there and I said there was no reason why we couldn't do that in Niagara-on-the-Lake. I said, "In some cases, they can do both Stratford and us if they want to." So we hemmed and hawed about it and they finally gave me a budget which got me to go to New York and as luck would have it—I was relatively unknown to the major critics there; I hadn't dealt with any of them but I knew of Clive Barnes first of all from when he was in England and I thought, "He's not American. I'm going to go the English way about it: just call him, say, 'Hello. I happen to be in town and I'm publicizing an exciting theatre. Could I come and see you?'" I did that; I called him at his office when I arrived in New York City. He said, "Come on down and have a beer with me." Boom, I was there. He came that year to the festival. It was the first time. Getting that recognition from the New York Times of course opened the door to all the other papers and a lot of press came. I did Boston, Chicago, and then some of those smaller towns from New York back to Buffalo. Wherever I went I seemed to be successful if it wasn't for the actual newspapers doing things for me right there and then, if there was a Canadian embassy or a Canadian consulate around, I did realize how useful they were in these areas. They will set up official cocktail parties to meet press people. I came back with all my contacts and I thought, "I hope they all turn up now. I've spent all this money."

Then the most exciting news came along that Brian, in his own way—to this day I still don't know he did this—managed to hire Barry Morse as the artistic director. In those days, Barry was at the height of his success with *The Fugitive*, playing this terrible Lieutenant Gerard who was chasing David Janssen all over the place. I couldn't really understand how he could get away from an American series like that and finding time to run the Shaw Festival. But it turned out that Barry, first of all he had a love of the theatre so that was his number one priority; he also had met George Bernard Shaw when he was a student at RADA, and he'd got in there illegally because he was underage when he first went to RADA. So he had a lot of things going. He seemed to have enough energy—he nearly killed us all. We would be going round the clock with Barry.

That was exciting though. He was also geared to doing publicity. He said, "The only way you're going to get people in is to publicize it. It's no good—you can have the best company in the world—if people don't know about it." Of course, that fitted with what I was trying to do, but suddenly having a real personality at that time who was really well known sort of said to me, "Good, let's do it." So we did everything from having Barry adjudicate the local drama festival in Niagara Falls, and that went on for two weeks and there were adjudications after every performance and then the party with all these well-known people coming in to say hello to Barry. Then we hooked up with I think Tip Top Tailors because he said, "I'll wear one of your suits and you put my photo in every single one of your stores with the Shaw Festival poster by it." That is the sort of crazy things we were doing in those days, but it worked—plus the fact that I got a free suit out of the deal myself. Barry said, "You give my manager a suit." He did any of the television shows that were around; he did all the charity ones where he was raising money for this or that.

Then he said, "Ray, we've got to have auditions." I still had my apartment in Toronto, as did Barry, but I had a little larger place than he did because he only needed a place for weekends. My apartment became the hub of the audition process. We put a notice out with Actors Equity and a few other people and we were absolutely swamped with actors. I had been around long enough to know a lot of the actors in Toronto so for me it was like old home week as they were coming in to audition. We had them come in the back door of the house; I always use the back door and the kitchen was right there. They came in the back door, and knowing actors, we had tea and coffee going for them. I was co-ordinating the actors going in to see Barry. Barry had taken over the living room for the auditions, so I would go in with a photo resumé and say this is So-and-so, and Barry knew a lot of them himself anyway, and then Barry would see them out the front door and I would bring the next person in from the back of the house. That's how we did it and we did that for nearly a week of seeing everybody. It was amazing, all of the name people who would turn up for these auditions. Out of that Barry assembled an absolutely phenomenally good cast. Again I had great fun by publicizing, when he'd finally made his decision on who he wanted, all these wonderful actors. That was another round of interviews. I got so excited I even subscribed to the press clipping service so I would get all the stories back. In fact, and I suppose they should go to Shaw one of these days, I do have somewhere here very extensive scrapbooks of the Festival with all the early publicity in them. Also the mime theatre, which I took on afterwards through Brian.

So Barry and I had a wonderful summer. I got to meet his family. I just loved everybody. We smuggled his wife in for the opening night; he had no idea about this. We smuggled her in and suddenly she was there on his opening. To my way of thinking, that was the turnabout for the Shaw Festival, still in the Court House but if you can imagine all the actors painting that Court House before the show, including Barry. He was there with the paint brush in his hand, right up virtually until opening night, having the guns going off and all the ceremony. We did Man and Superman, and that was another wonderful publicity story because in that play you have to have a car that is driven on stage. To get a period car that you could actually drive—Tom Kneebone I think was playing the chauffeur in that and he couldn't drive, so Barry had to let his character drive the car. It worked all right. We did find that car somewhere out in eastern Ontario. We drove out and this guy was absolutely delighted to let us have it for the run of the play. So we set another press conference up, this time on the main street by the clock tower, and we had Barry drive the car along saying, "I told you we were going to get a car and it's going to drive on the stage." Of course, everybody knew the size of the stage in the Court House, but it worked: We got it on stage, how I don't know; I have no idea, I can't remember. Somehow or other we got it in, up on that floor, and it actually drove on every night and drove off. I guess it's one of those things where the impossible can become possible. And of course we made the papers right across the country on that.

By the time we closed the season, we were playing—I don't know what the exact percentage was but it was like 105 percent of capacity and that was I think all the extra people we used to let in to stand at the back

or something. I think that was when we turned completely around. Barry then didn't have the time to do another year. Everybody begged him; the board of directors wanted him, everybody wanted him to stay on, but he couldn't. But we had another fabulous actor that I hadn't known. It was somebody Barry had seen in an Oscar Wilde play, I think it was *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Paxton Whitehead was playing one of the juveniles in it and was absolutely wonderful. So in Barry's first season, Paxton was asked to be in the company and also to play opposite Zoe Caldwell when we did *The Apple Cart*. That was again a major piece of casting that really worked well. So Barry suggested to the board of directors that Paxton take over as the next artistic director. And that was actually quite a good move. Paxton was so low-key compared to Barry but he was very high-keyed on the fact of directing and getting the right people. So I was fortunate again to have another really wonderful artistic director to work with. By this point we actually had started to make some money. In Barry's year we got the first government grant, something like \$10,000, and that was sort of a thrill: "We're actually getting recognized by the government now and they're actually going to give us money!"

Interviewer: Somebody said that when Barry heard how much the grant was, he said, "That's not enough. Send it back."

Raymond Wickens: No, that's not quite true. He was delighted that we'd started. There are a lot of things that people say about Barry and the money that are not really true, not just in the Festival but in other facets of his life. I mean, he could say, "It's not enough," yes, that would be right, but he wouldn't say, "Send it back." I don't think he'd ever say that. He and Brian were very good buddies because Brian could introduce Barry to certain monied people, certainly through the Law Society because Brian was a lawyer. Brian, bless his heart, just bubbled along. There are always stories about Brian that he had too much to drink or that he, you know—I never had a problem with Brian. I took him to I don't know how many press dos. Sure he may have had a few to drink at home or when he went out, but that was *his* life. He certainly didn't harm the festival or do anything. I think towards the end people sort of tried to push him aside and I think that was wrong. It wasn't until he died that suddenly he came back into prominence again. It's sad that it has to be that way, because if it hadn't been for Brian we would have had no festival whatsoever. He got all those local people behind him, all those ladies who would work like crazy. There they were, Betty Taylor and her gang in *The Yardstick* making costumes. It's the most unlikely place for a theatrical costumer to work but it all did work, because each of those people was so dedicated and they would just work like crazy and some of the costumes were outstanding. The same with our designers, Lawrence Schafer in particular, who designed for that ridiculous Court House in those days. Now it's changed and they've built a stage and they've got tiered seating; it's lovely now.

And they've also got that wonderful Royal George Theatre. I'm proud of that because I bought that theatre when I was with the mime theatre. I was the one who raised the money for that and got Peter Stokes to restore it. People forget all of this, of course, but I went to every foundation I could think of and used to come back with cheques and be waving those as I came into the office, saying, "Look, here's another one." Next door to the two dear old girls I lived with were this man and his wife who owned the local cinema, I think it was called *The Brock* then, so I knew them. I would go to the cinema every once in a while and it was a sleazy place; I never really felt comfortable sitting in it, but it was there and was the only thing available, especially in the wintertime. Then we got the mime theatre underway and we were in the old firehall on the main street but that wasn't going to work for very much longer. That's when we decided we would try to buy the theatre. People said, "You're not going to go and buy it, are you?" I said, "Yes, we're going to buy the cinema and get somebody to refurbish it and we'll have a beautiful place." And my God, that became a reality. I was with the Shaw for just over four years. With the mime theatre, which was much harder to sell than Shaw because people don't know what mime is, I was with them for 10 years. It took me 10 years

was very successful, and people are always willing to join a success.

In those days I had one box office guy who manned the phones and ran messages, and one girl who virtually worked for nothing to come in and do the typing, and that was it. We had a local boy from the town who would come in and do all the cleaning up for us. As we got into running the season, a lot of the ushers were volunteers from the town. I don't think I ever did pay for ushers. We had a list of people willing to do it.

The opening night parties were left up to the women's committee. Dorothy Middleditch was great. Actually she was the secretary and treasurer, I think. And Calvin Rand usually gave his house over for that. That was great, because we all trooped over there and had a wonderful time. The only things I used to do for that was—that was when it was still all right to smoke—I arranged for the Rothmans company, because they sponsored our souvenir program, and they used to send these gorgeous girls over for the parties and they would go around with their silver trays and their cigarets and lighters and give people complimentary cigarets. I used to have them at every single public party that we could. That always added a nice touch because they were nice models that they used to send. Once that curtain was down it was in the women's committee's hands. I just went out and said, "My God, we've done it. We've got a happy audience." I used to stand in the lobby and say goodbye to everyone as they were leaving and listen to the comments as they were going out. By that point I think we had perfected the box office. Ron, the box office boy, had an assistant there so I used to leave that to them so I wasn't going in and counting ticket stubs any more.

Usually I had my press people to look after. Sometimes I had to take them to a hotel to get to a phone that had been prearranged for them so they could call in their reviews. People like Herbert Whittaker of the Globe and Mail had to be driven back to Toronto because he didn't drive, so we had to find somebody who could drive him in and drive him out. And the terrible guy from the Toronto Star, Nathan Cohen, you had to make sure that he had everything because he could be very difficult. I never found him difficult. I used to call him up to meet him for lunch and when the bill came he always put it exactly in half and he paid half and I paid half. He never wanted to say to anybody, "The Shaw Festival bribed me." I always admired him for that because he was the only press guy that I know anywhere who would do that; every other press guy takes anything they can from you, but not Nathan Cohen. So he wasn't as bad. I was very sorry when he died because we did lose a rather interesting voice for our business. But he was in favour of Shaw.