

TIM DEVLIN

It was 1962 and it was called Salute to Shaw. They wanted to have a festival at the Court House and, as I recall—and please remember I could be wrong in any of this, it was a long time ago—they were having a great deal of difficulty in getting support in Niagara-on-the-Lake. I can remember much, much reference to the matron ladies not thinking that Shaw was going to be the right thing to be doing down there and we were not getting the kind of help we thought we should get, so there was literally no money and everything had to be done on a volunteer basis. They quite cleverly went to all the local theatre companies, of which there is an abundance and always has been in the Niagara Peninsula. There was the Grantham Operatic Society, which I think is now called the Garden City Operatic Society, the St Catharines Community Theatre, the Welland Theatre Society and one in Niagara Falls.

Interviewer: Barbara Ransom said she was with the Peninsula Press Theatre.

Mr Devlin: I don't know whether that might have come after or not. I think I worked with Barbara Ransom in two things, one with the St Catharines Community Theatre. But they changed the name from the St Catharines Community Theatre. Maybe they changed it to that. When I left in 1962 at the end of the season, I left the area, it was still called the St Catharines Community Theatre.

Within it, I served on the board. I was one of the committee that wrote the procedure and the constitution for the theatre. I am a strong believer that you can't succeed with any kind of theatre company if you don't have a procedure of operation, an understanding of the pecking order. If everybody's trying to give orders and you've got all these egos and screaming tantrums it never goes anywhere. So we tried very hard and I remember it took a lot of work. There were Alice Crawley, myself, the Fordhams; I forget whether Molly Hancock was part of it. There was a very strong committee who sat over a long period of time trying to develop a strong constitution and a strong operational procedure and we took a lot of that information with us—whether it was ever used or incorporated—to the Shaw Festival or whatever it was supposed to be at the time. I know they wanted it to be a festival. People rallied from all of the theatre companies around. I was a member of the Grantham Operatic Society, the St Catharines Community Theatre and I had just finished a production at Welland. I think I was a member of every one involved with the exception of the Niagara Falls company.

I initially went down only to assist in the setting up and to lend my support. I remember a meeting and we were all there and kind of looking at each other wondering, "What on earth is it they're trying to do and what do they want from us?" I think already Don Juan in Hell had either played or was about to play when they brought us in. Don Juan in Hell was done as a reading and it was a so-so success. I think people were a little startled seeing it as a reading, thinking they were going to the theatre, and to do a reading was a little advanced for the type of audience that was available.

Candida, which was the first full stage production with a set, was the production they had decided on. Barbara Ransom had just won I think the best actress award in the Dominion Drama Festival for Desire Under the Elms, I think, and she was going to be Candida. There was a cast change. I found the original person cast, named Ted Fordham, and they eventually replaced him. I found the name in the announcements in my little file here. I was not at all there to be physically on the stage at all. I was happy to go down and work with Alice Crawley, whom I adore. She and I began with the St Catharines Community Theatre working under a very talented set designer called Bob Burns. We both worked on sets. Alice did a lot of phenomenal sets and then I a couple when Alice wasn't available after Bob Burns left. Then suddenly my interest was in being on the stage and I kind of moved on to the stage and dropped out of the set side of things. I was happy to work with Alice

down there and help out in any way I could, but I was just coming out of three end-to-end productions, as I recall. I left one production and went straight into another one and then straight into another one, so I had had about a six-month run and for community theatre that is an awful long run; you don't get that in professional theatre half the time. So I was pretty exhausted.

I'll be really honest with you, I was not particularly interested in Shaw. I guess I was like the matron ladies of Niagara-on-the-Lake; I thought, "I don't quite understand why they want to make a festival around this one author." I was getting very into musical comedy and if I had to choose I would make it a musical comedy festival. The director, Maynard Burgess, was asking me if I would sit in and read with the people who were auditioning for Prosperine and other things, so I began reading the character Marchbanks and I had absolutely no interest in the character. They kept auditioning people for Marchbanks and Maynard couldn't find anybody he wanted. He kept asking me to play it but I was about to move to Toronto and was not even going to be there during the summer. An acquaintance had arranged for me what probably would have been a walk-on or a bit part in a Walt Disney film that was being done in Toronto, so I was coming to Toronto to actually do something in the professional theatre. I would have had to give it up to do this Shaw thing.

I don't quite remember why I finally decided to play it. I was working full-time in advertising display in St Catharines so I sort of extended my departure from that job and my move to Toronto and stayed working for the summer to do this. I can remember sitting in the drug store next door trying to memorize dialogue on my coffee breaks so that I could drive frantically right after work down to Niagara-on-the-Lake and rehearse. I think just about everybody involved was in the same boat. We were not being paid; I don't think we even got expenses, gas money or anything. Everything was voluntary. St Catharines Community Theatre and Grantham Operatic Society loaned flats and paint and paint brushes; everything was loaned. It was particularly exciting for that reason. It was a great coming together of all the various groups and I think that was a very stimulating and exciting part of that first 1962—it's hard to call it a season because it was two productions.

If I'm not mistaken, there was a write-up done by Variety. I believe that somehow Variety reviewed *Candida*. The Toronto papers also reviewed *Candida*, as did the St Catharines Standard. The reviews were basically very, very good and the success of that production meant that I think we added extra shows more than we had intended to do. I know we had matinees and there was one day when there were two shows in the day. I can recall that primarily because of a very funny incident that happened between the shows. In 1962, Niagara-on-the-Lake was a very different place from what it is now. It was not the beautiful tourist attraction; everything was very seedy and run down. There were these grand old estates that were decaying and collapsing. It was like *Gone With the Wind* after the war.

There was a large military presence at Fort George, an awful lot of soldiers based there. My voice teacher, Madam Julia Dennis—who is long deceased; she was in her 80s then—came to see the afternoon show. The reason I know it was an afternoon show is because she asked if we could have coffee between shows. I said, "Oh sure. We can slip next door." There was a little sort of greasy spoon next door. That afternoon somebody presented Barbara Ransom with a big bouquet of roses and she very kindly gave the man who played her husband, Morell, and me each a long-stemmed rose. I kind of left the stage carrying this long-stemmed rose. Remember, this was 1962 and I had grown my hair very long and very, very wavy. It was not quite Beatle time yet so long

hair on guys was simply not a usual thing, but I wanted Marchbanks to look very poetic. I was wearing a velvet jacket and a very flouncy scarf at my neck, and I had all these curls pouring back off my head and down my back, and full stage makeup. I took Madam Julia Dennis downstairs, still carrying this long-stemmed rose.

We went downstairs from the Court House Theatre and into the greasy spoon. I of course wasn't thinking, chattering away, and we were enthused about the production and the response. It had been a particularly good show and she was very excited. We walked in and I had barely shut the door when I suddenly looked around and the place was full of soldiers. It went deathly silent and they all sort of looked like, "What's this coming in the door?" I thought, "Oh God, how do I do this now? I can't turn around and run, dragging an 80-year-old lady with me. I just have to tough it through." The way it was laid out, there was a centre section of booths and booths all around the outside, so you could walk full circle. We got a table in the centre section. We were sitting talking about the production and I was very, very aware of one particular soldier who kept walking round and round, going by, stopping, leaning over, looking me in the face, fascinated by all this makeup and not quite understanding—I'm sure they had no idea there was a theatre next door—looking at me very bizarrely. I would just nod and carry on, almost still playing the character. I felt almost more like Oscar Wilde than Shaw. When we finished out tea and I had to back to the theatre to get ready for the second performance, as we were leaving I paid for our teas and opened the door. I suddenly turned around on my heels to face this staring, gawking café, put the rose in my teeth, and did a ballet bow, a full-curtsey bow to this entire restaurant, and took the rose out of my mouth, waved it in the air and exited out of the place, leaving all these people sitting there with their jaws hanging. In an instance like that, you can only play it through. It was fun, and it's strange that things like that are the things you remember. I was dining out on that little story for a while at the theatre.

I remember we had a very good company, a surprisingly good company. I continued to work in the theatre professionally for a lot of years, both in Canada and in England. I worked with a lot of very big directors and a lot of very big stars in very small things. I was doing small things; when I was a very big thing I was a big thing in a small pond and vice versa. Looking back on my experiences in Niagara-on-the-Lake and the Shaw Festival, I think my co-workers, directors, set designers and staff were up to the par of anyone I ever worked with. A big budget sometimes makes someone look as if they're better, simply because they've got more money to spend. I often think the greater talent is the one without the money who can still create the illusion. So that was always a good thing to look back on, not just at the Shaw Festival but all of the various groups that banded together to help establish that first test year. It was a test; it was a test to see whether it would work, and it was a test that, if it did work, these grandes dames who lived there were going to come onside and make it continue to happen. Since I was leaving, I really didn't much care one way or the other, although I always want to see any theatre progress.

I can see the set. I can see my blocking and I know where the furniture was. Stage right there was a fireplace, because I had to take the poker and put it between us as if it was a sword. Upstage left was the exit from the drawing room. There was a desk upstage right. There was a two- or three-seater settee downstage left. I remember because I instigated a piece of business. The stage was very small and Prosperine and I had this very bizarre scene; I can't remember what it was about but I was acting very theatrical and poetic. In rehearsal I was trying to get at her, and every time I went around this settee—she was centre stage and I was extreme stage left—every time I went to go to her in this menacing way, I had to go round the settee, which weakened my move. It

he felt that, in my innocence, I had captured the character better than some professionals he had directed, simply because they had looked for too much in it and had subsequently added things about Marchbanks which were too adult, maybe too mature, because Marchbanks is like a child but at the end he ends up being far more mature and he becomes the man and Morell becomes the child. This is why Candida chooses Morell and stays with him, because she knows Marchbanks will go on and prosper whereas Morell couldn't, so it was like a reversal or roles. We were having to discover this on stage in front of an audience; you think, "Oh yeah, that makes sense." Sometimes I suppose it's a little like doing daily soap opera where you're handed pink pages and you whip on and you say them and as you're saying them you're thinking, "Really? Is that really it?"

I must try to get one of these programs. How nice to see my name mentioned. I remember when I came back from living and working in England and I looked up Alice, she told me she had been invited to a function or something at the Shaw Festival and was acknowledged as having done that set. I was thrilled for her. She's a wonderful lady. She could do a set for them today and it would be right up there with the best of them, I kid you not. This is the lady who did sets on a two-dollar budget. I'm not sure if she won but she was certainly nominated in the Dominion Drama Festival; in fact, I think we did win a Dominion Drama Festival theatre set award—I can't think what it was called now—which Alice was a major part of. She was an extremely talented lady but she was like a lot, raising a family and trying to run her life and didn't have the opportunity to go out. I later ran into our teacher, Bob Burns, at the O'Keefe Centre. He was running the backstage or something for a New York national tour. I ran into the Fordhams in Victoria when I established the RPA Productions at the Pantages Playhouse. They were living out there and they came and became part of that whole scene again. It's funny how you run into the same people. I think they probably still live out in B.C. Joan Fordman was very much a part of that. I don't have an address for her. You could always send her a tape and tell her to put some reminiscences on it.

Maybe it's in the program; I have a feeling that Bonnie Clark, another lady whom I absolutely adore, was the prompt. "Bonnie Clark"; I remembered it right. I remember her because I wanted to throttle her. She was so anxious to do a good job and had never prompted before. This is a girl who belongs on the stage—a wonderful singer, a wonderful performer from the Grantham Operatic Society. She and I had played opposite each other in Pajama Game just prior to this. She came down to prompt; everybody was helping in any way they could. But if you had a dramatic pause, she was shouting the line louder than you were projecting. It was like an echo. I was almost terrified to pause. I felt like turning round and saying, "Will you stop prompting me. I know what they line is, give me a chance to take a breath." In rehearsal I felt like I was doing rap because I daren't leave a gap or she would be shouting the lines. That was one of the fun things of doing it.

It sounds rather stupid because I was in my early 20s but the word "deportment" had never crossed my experience or vocabulary before. I think it was Variety or the Toronto paper, I don't remember which, they made much of my deportment and I remember having to ask somebody what that was. Because I'm a dancer I moved about the stage like a dancer, which very much suited the poet with his long wavy hair and the velvet jacket. So moving balletically about the stage actually worked for me without my ever realizing I was doing it. I can assure you it was no great acting skill that I decided to employ that I decided to employ; it was just something that was within my own facility that comes across. I remember the other day Brian Linehan was interviewing Anthony Hopkins and he said, "I don't know why I'm in this business, I don't know how I do it and I don't know what it is I'm doing." Often the best actors do do that, they just have a natural gift.

[Looking at a St Catharines Standard article:] We went through a cast change, if you can imagine, because Burgess was played by Edward Fordham. Johnson Butler was supposed to play it. He was a Thorold lawyer.

This is "Salute to Bernard Shaw planned for theatre in Niagara-on-the-Lake." Who's Frank Gorbett? "At a meeting this week, Miss Malloy, Miss Joan Fordham and Mrs Alice Crawley were present to help in the planning. Frank Gorbett of Welland, who directed the local group's festival-winning play *Desire Under the Elms*"—I worked under him and I couldn't even remember who he was, how awful; yes, we won the festival—"will direct the first play," which I think was *Don Juan in Hell*, which was done as a reading. "Well-known directors of each group will be responsible for the production. Among them are Maynard Burgess of Niagara Falls, who has considerable New York experience, and Mrs Barbara Spigel of Niagara Falls, Ontario, who was with the *Old Vic* in England." Now, that never happened. There were other things planned. "It is proposed that the play will be given at alternate weekends, during the weekend when the town hall theatre is not being used. There will be a Shaw film show"—Yes, there was a film show at the Brock Theatre. They ran a film festival at the same time at the little Brock Theatre. "Niagara town council has given approval for the use of the town hall theatre. The production will be nonprofit with any proceed resulting going to the town of Niagara for improvements in the hall, such as additional seating, new washrooms and other projects." So the money was put to some use.

Interviewer: The Court House Theatre must have been difficult to play there because it wasn't really designed as a theatre.

Mr Devlin: To me, it's a stage. I've worked on worse. It was a stage, it was a room, it had seats and you could turn the lights out. Draw the curtains, turn the lights out and then aim lights at the stage. Believe it or not, when we were in production with that set of Alice's and the lighting and the ambiance of that theatre, always filled—no part theatres; it was always full, I can remember that and I can remember the wonderful warm response we had from everyone, and the flowers and everything—in my mind's eye, scanning in the darkness on that stage, it's no different than if I were on the Festival stage. The thrill and the experience and the energy was as alive in that theatre—I mean, look at all the phenomenal productions they do at the Red Barn Theatre. It looks a little bit like a theatre but the stage is, like, on the roof. I've never seen such a high stage; you get a nosebleed it's so high up. The front row is looking at shoes all the way through the show.

I think if you're an actor or a performer you adjust to where you're working. While I've worked in 3,000-seat theatres since, the thrill is the same. I have a great pride, with hindsight, and I'm very, very glad I participated in the Shaw Festival and that I didn't play a walk-on or an extra that would have ended up on the cutting-room floor in that Disney movie rather than do this. You don't deserve any more recognition than the fact that you were there, period. But I do know that if we had blown it, if we had goofed that year, it probably wouldn't—in fact, we were told emphatically it simply wouldn't happen the next year. That was constantly hammered into our heads that "We gotta get it right, we gotta do a super production; we can't have any more readings." You could do that in your living room. We had to do a set production and we had to prove it and prove ourselves, and subsequently it would open the door for the festival the next year. We were all absolutely thrilled when it worked and it was a success and was reviewed favourably and we heard that the next year it was being established as an ongoing festival. At which time I just went on about my business and never once applied to go back to play the thing.

I guess at the Shaw, the two things kind of came together. They had a room that was feasible, and I love that Court House. It had a flat floor with movable chairs that we had to put out every night. I would be setting up chairs and sweeping the stage in costume before they would open the doors. Sometimes they would open the doors and I would have to run like hell and get behind the curtain as people were coming in. We all were doing everything. I felt like I was trapped in an old Judy Garland/Mickey Rooney movie. It was a fun season and I remember it better than I remember many other productions, including things I did in England in professional theatre.

Interviewer: Did you get involved with painting the set?

Mr Devlin: I don't remember. I would think if Alice needed help I would have helped. If I don't remember it's probably because Marchbanks is a very big part and I had a very short period of time in which to learn it and get on stage. I literally agreed at the absolute last minute to take the part because he was going to cancel the production. He said, "Well, there's nobody to play it." I remember Brian Doherty said to me, "You've got to do this or Maynard's going to play it himself with one of his wigs that he wears." Maynard Burgess wore a lot of toupees, all of which sat on the top of his head and were a totally different colour from the hair around the side. He had brush cuts and long hair and everything like that. He was late 50s or middle 50s; I don't know how old he was. A nice fellow, but I remember they were terrified he was going to end up playing Marchbanks himself if I wouldn't do it, so I ultimately said, "Okay, I'll play it." I was right at the end and people had already begun to learn their parts. I seem to recall that I memorized the entire third act in a 15-minute coffee break at work because I hate rehearsing with a book in my hand. I don't mind being prompted during that period but I like to know the lines well enough—I don't usually mark a book, I memorize my moves. [Discusses acting experiences elsewhere.]

I learned a lot from that season at the Shaw Festival. I certainly learned teamwork. I think we were all team players beforehand but I'm not sure that we were ever under such pressure. Usually in St Catharines Community Theatre you would spend three months of evenings getting ready for something. That first season was almost like summer stock where you are playing one thing and doing another. I think I wasn't at the first meetings of this because I was in something at the time, I don't know what it was now. Alice and Joan and people kept saying, "You've got to come down. They want us to do this and want us to help." At the first meeting we all sat around and wondered what on earth we could contribute. Having just read that blurb in the paper, I recall that there was supposedly originally to have been at least three or maybe four productions that were going to alternate or rotate. I know I ended up doing mine and when it was over I completely left the area and went to Toronto and turned professional. That was sadly the end of my experience of Shaw. I should have stayed there.

Interviewer: You said they were planning to do four plays the first year?

Mr Devlin: That article I just read implied that "Barbara Spigel of Niagara Falls, Ontario, who was with the Old Vic in England, as well as Mr Gorbett—" "It is proposed that the plays—" Where did I read that? She was supposed to direct something. They haven't named anything here. I don't think they had even set the season when this Salute to Bernard Shaw was planned. I really think it was money, it was money and people. I think that at this stage in the game they had invited in people like Maynard Burgess, Barbara Spigel and a few who had had some professional experience and they began that season without the involvement of all these other theatre companies and were so strapped for help and input, scenery and everything that you need that it simply wasn't

happening. We were all suddenly dragged in because that announcement was in the paper in July and it is only just barely before we did it.

Interviewer: The clothes were designed by Louis Berai—

Mr Devlin: Yes, Aiken was his real name, of the famous Aiken family in St Catharines, I think they were in construction or something, and Louis Berai was his fashion designing name. He at that time was a very well known Canadian fashion designer. I worked in advertising and display and I used to do Louis's windows for him. He had a shop on Church Street right next to the post office at that time. I had forgotten he did the costumes. That's probably why I ended up in velvet with a big fluffy bow.

Interviewer: Did he make most of the costumes?

Mr Devlin: I think some were made. It's like most costuming things, you go rummaging through people's closets and find things. You can take a pair of regular pants and stitch up the sides and make breeches out of them. As was the case in most productions we were doing at the time, that is the way a lot of period clothes were developed. You would change the lapel of a standard tweed suit and come up with something. [Discusses acting experiences elsewhere.]

I don't think I could have memorized so much so quickly had I not been in this continuous end-to-end run of shows where I was memorizing constantly. I was in one show always learning another. I remember that year I just did one production after another after another. That was really partly why I didn't want to do the Shaw Festival; I was exhausted and I thought, "I don't want to play this." But I ended up really loving it and I really loved the part. I can remember that scene sitting on a footstool, Barbara Ransom in a chair, and I placed the poker between us as if it was a sword. There are lines about knights of old who placed their sword between. I can remember the intensity of that scene. That scene and a scene with Prossie are the only two scenes that stick in my mind. I can hardly remember any of the rest of the play. I can remember the scene between Prossie and me alone on the stage and I can remember that scene with Barbara Ransom as she began to understand me and I began to understand that she was not going to choose me and leave her husband. It's an extremely intense scene and it was so intense that it sticks in my mind. I can shut my eyes and I'm sitting on that footstool, putting that poker between us, and playing that scene as if it were two weeks ago. Yet, things I did two years ago I don't remember at all.