

PAXTON WHITEHEAD

I first came to the theatre in 1966 as an actor and in 1967 I was appointed the artistic director. I stayed in that position through the season of 1977, which also included a short tour after the season into the spring of 1978. That was the period of my time there, with one exception: The 1975 season was not produced by me, it was produced by Tony van Bridge because I was on a sabbatical.

I had been working in the United States for about four and a half years, mostly in the New York area, and about 1964 I finished a production of *Beyond the Fringe* and discovered regional theatre. I was going around various places in the U.S. as a guest, appearing with the regional companies. One of those was the Manitoba Theatre Centre in Winnipeg, when I was hired up from New York to participate in *Heartbreak House* in the spring of 1965 along with a few other America-based actors to join a company there, in which I found Tony van Bridge and Martha Henry. I had a wonderful time and they asked me back the following fall to do *Private Ear* and *Public Eye* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

In the meantime, in the interim after doing *Heartbreak House* in Winnipeg I had appeared in Cincinnati in *Major Barbara*, where I had been seen by Marigold Charlesworth, who at that time was running the Canadian Players. Coincidentally she asked me to come to Toronto to appear in their production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I was intrigued by going to Winnipeg and continuing my relations with the Canadian theatre and actors, which I had come to enjoy very, very much, and doing back-to-back *Earnests* in different parts. The *Earnest* in Winnipeg was with William Hutt as Jack and I was Algy, with Patricia Galloway, Amelia Hall and Bill Needles. In *Private Ear*, the previous production in Winnipeg before *Earnest* that fall of 1965, was Christopher Newton, who of course now is head of the festival. So I was beginning to work with Canadian actors, which, as I say, I got to love a lot. Then I came to Toronto and appeared as Jack in *Earnest* and in another play by a French Canadian, *The Departures*, in repertory there.

How I came to the Shaw

That's when I met Barry Morse, who was recently appointed and was running the festival season in 1966. He asked me to come down and join the company as an actor, to do Octavius in *Man and Superman*, Lord Summerhays in *Misalliance*--which was quite a surprise because I was about, I can't remember now but I could work it out, 27 years old and he is in his seventies--and the third production was *The Apple Cart*. I learned that Barry was not going to be involved with *The Apple Cart*, he was handing it over to Edward Gilbert, who incidentally was the person who brought me to Canada in *Heartbreak House* in Winnipeg. So I rather cheekily asked Barry, "Who's playing Magnus, because since Edward Gilbert's directing it, I rather think you could ask him--he knows me well enough now--whether he would consider me as Magnus." I don't think I would have done that if it had been anyone else, a new director; I wouldn't have had the nerve somehow, because I knew Eddie Gilbert well enough to know he would just say, "Oh forget it, he's too young," or "Not good enough," or something. There would have been no problem about that. But Barry said, "All right, I'll do that, although we do have somebody in mind already." I said, "I understand." Weeks passed and I received an offer from Stratford, Ontario, to appear in *Henry V* as Gower, I think, and something else. But then the Shaw came back said that Gillie Fenwick was not able to do Magnus, which I think was what had been originally thought of, and that Eddie thought it was a reasonable idea so I could do that. So I had my choice and I think because of the part of Magnus in particular, I went with the Shaw Festival and decided to spend the summer there for Barry Morse.

First impressions

I remember going down, during the run of the Canadian Players, just to visit Niagara to look

around, to see what I'd got myself into, as it were, and I must say I was very, very depressed. A friend of mine was with me driving around. We met Brian Doherty, the founder, and he showed us the Court House, which was a big mistake because it looked impossible. You thought, "Oh my God, what has one got oneself into?" For those who remember the town then, of course, it would be quite unrecognizable today. It was really very, very small. The Oban Inn was there, in its pre-fire condition, but very little else. The theatre in the Court House, the Assembly Room, looked too small, impossible; no wing space; where would you dress; how could this possibly be? I must say I was thinking, "And I turned down Stratford for this." Stratford was even offering more money.

That first season

Then we started work, and Barry had cashed in a lot of vouchers, as he said, or credit chits and got a rather stunning cast together. We started rehearsal and it turned out to be right decision. There was Tom Kneebone, Susan Clark, Leslie Yeo and a wonderful bunch of actors. Then midway through the season, or the third season, we were joined by the *coup de grâce* as it were, Zoe Caldwell, for *Misalliance* and to play *Orinthia* in *The Apple Cart* opposite me. That was our first season. I must say that Barry did a wonderful thing in one year, because it really was a very, very small operation up to then. It had a little reputation but Barry somehow burst the seams with it and even then started to talk about a new theatre because suddenly it was capacity houses and we ran for three weeks for each play but we could have gone on for many more than that.

I remember the first preview of *Man and Superman*. Barry decided the inside of the Court House looked very drab and said, "I think we should paint it." The next thing I knew, he himself was in his overalls with a bucket of paint, painting it, so you said, "Well, if Barry's doing it, and he's directing it and playing *Tanner* in *Man and Superman*, I'd better start painting the building as well." I mean, everybody felt pretty much like that, so we all started painting. I'm talking about the interior, the sort of reception area and where the audience was going to be. This only had a curtain between it and the actors' dressing space; there was just a rep curtain put up there. And no toilet facilities at all. In order to be able to use those facilities, we had to wait until the audience got into the house and the doors were closed, and then the actors would rush in prior to the act in that sort of two-minute period when the audience is seated before the play resumes, and then rush down the corridor that led by the side of the theatre, through the house which was just blocked off again by a curtain, I think it was--later it became a more solid wall but that year it was a curtain if I remember correctly--and rush on to the stage. But the season was tremendous success, particularly *Misalliance*. All were a financial success and an audience success, but *Misalliance* in particular was a great critical success.

Appointed artistic director

Then I returned to Manitoba that fall to do *Charley's Aunt*, having virtually now decided that I was a sort of Canadian actor I think, because I really enjoyed working with the Canadian people and the people I had met there. It was during that run that Calvin Rand rang me up and said, "Barry can't do the '67 season." What had happened was that Barry was on *The Fugitive* as Lieutenant Gerard chasing David Jansen across the screen, and in fact that 1966 season was the last of that show. Barry had been doing the festival for that one year on his hiatus as it were, in the period in the spring and early summer when they were not producing. He knew that was the case and he thought or hoped that *The Fugitive* would go on and he could come back and do more. But the season ended and he realized he couldn't really afford to do the festival when now he had to look for other work. He was living in Hollywood, being free to commit himself either to a new series or film or whatever was coming up. He couldn't block off the time. That's why he had had to leave us in August and was not involved in *The Apple Cart* in any way, because he had come to direct

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and act in *Man and Superman*, direct *Misalliance*--he wasn't involved in it--but then he had to go away and hand it over to Mr Gilbert and the other managers in the case of 1966. So he, rather reluctantly I think, withdrew and said he couldn't manage the festival and recommended me, I believe, as a possible candidate.

Calvin rang up and asked if I would be interested. I must say it didn't take me long to say yes. I thought that was quite an exciting idea, despite my first impressions of the place. That's basically how it happened. I then contacted as many famous people in Canada as I could. I first of all asked Martha Henry and Douglas Rain, who were together at that time, to come to the festival. Martha had been *Ellie* in *Heartbreak House* in Winnipeg, my first production in Canada. The most famous actress I knew in Canada at that time was Kate Reid, whom I had got to know through Leslie Yeo and Pat Galloway, who had been in *Private Ear and Public Eye* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* in Winnipeg also. So I asked her to come down and be in Somerset Maugham's *The Circle*. I'd also made a decision to introduce a non-Shaw play every year from then on. It had been done before; there had been an O'Casey done, but it wasn't a regular thing. I recognized pretty much that we'd run out of the major Shaw plays fairly quickly if we continued to do three or more a season, and so we had to expand the repertoire.

Taking the Shaw to Expo

Then the third production coincidence happened in that the Manitoba Theatre Centre was invited to go to Expo in 1967, in mid- or early September I think, and Mr Gilbert was worried because that was earlier than his season in Manitoba normally started and they would have to rehearse in August. Stratford was still running; I had expanded the season from three weeks to four weeks of plays, so we were still running up to Labour Day, so he suddenly thought, "I'm not going to have any actors that I want to do the sort of showcase production for Expo in Montreal." So he rang me up and asked would we be interested in a co-production. I leapt at this opportunity, because I was terribly anxious to try to, how shall we say, propagate the faith of the Shaw Festival and expand it when we couldn't really expand within Niagara-on-the-Lake itself at that time. The season couldn't start any earlier because of the Lord Simcoe ball and various other things that took place, and after Labour Day was really about as long as it was practical to go at that point. But I did want to get the word out about the festival, and going to Montreal was one excellent way of doing it.

Between us, Mr Gilbert and I, we selected *Major Barbara*, in which I was to appear and he would direct. It would open in Niagara-on-the-Lake, go to Expo and then go to Manitoba to open the season there. It worked out extremely well for us, although I was amazed that when I presented this to the board of directors there was some resistance to this, in the sense that we would be somehow made second-rate to the Manitoba Theatre Centre and would we have equal billing, equal rights. This a little surprised me because we were lucky to be asked, actually, but also I said, "We're doing a Shaw play, it's starting in the Shaw Festival"--as it turned out, that was perfectly true; people actually forgot it was the Manitoba Theatre Centre's engagement and all they really talked about was Shaw. That was the end of the first season, which was very successful as a result of these things.

Jessica Tandy and Bill Fraser

The next year, having appeared with Tony van Bridge in *Heartbreak House* in Winnipeg, I had seen his *Shotover* and was very anxious to get him to do that in the East. So in 1968 I asked him early, "We'll do *Heartbreak House* and I'll do *Hector*. Come and play *Shotover*," which I'm very glad he did. We couldn't get Martha Henry as she had gone back to Stratford, as in the previous year Tony had been at Stratford, but we assembled a cast for *Heartbreak House*. I had gone to

London in the interim and seen a production in the West End with John Clements and Irene Worth. There was an actor called Bill Fraser playing Mangan, which I always found was a very difficult part to do. He was magnificent. So I wrote to him and said, "You were just wonderful, the best Mangan I've ever seen or could ever imagine. Would you come to Canada and do it this summer?" To my surprise, he said yes, which was very exciting for me, although it didn't mean particularly very much in terms of the Canadian festival. But it turned out to be all right, because then I had the nerve to contact Jessica Tandy and ask if she would come and play Hesione. Again I got some interest. Usually I got, with the letters that I wrote to people--I'd written to Donald Wolfitt at some time to do Undershaft in Major Barbara and he couldn't come, of course. It was rather a nice letter back, but-- I asked everybody! At one time I had a bathroom filled with reject letters from famous people I'd invited to the festival. Hume Cronyn, as it happened, wasn't available--he was making a film--and it turned out it was a part she had always wanted to do. So she asked me to come down to New York and talk to her, which I did, in fear and trembling outside their apartment in Manhattan.

Hume was there and opened the door. We were sitting chatting, waiting for Jessica to join us, and he was pumping me with questions. He said, "With Jessica, it's very important who plays Mangan." I said, "Yes, I know, because they've got a lot of scenes together. I've asked this man from England who's just done it in the West End, his name is Bill Fraser, to come over." Hume looked at me very severely and said, "Was he in the one with Irene Worth?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Was he in the whole run?" I said, "Yes, I think so. I don't believe he was replaced or anything." Hume said, "Then we saw him." I thought, "Oh dear." And he said, "The best Mangan you've ever seen," leapt out of his chair and said to Jessica, "Guess who they've got?" It wasn't that easy but she was very interested again. We had to wait for some time to hear from her because she had an offer to do something else and she was debating and wasn't quite sure. I think it was a musical version of Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp* if I recollect correctly.

So we waited and we waited. In fact, at one point I had rung up Ann Casson, whom I had worked with earlier in the States, Douglas Campbell's wife, and just sort of tentatively said, "What are you doing next week? Are you available? Can I even think of you as a backup?"--which of course one hated to do, virtually saying to an actress, "You're not our first choice." But with only a week to go, she would have leaped to that conclusion anyway. I remember sitting in the little office we had up the street from the Court House theatre--I didn't have an office, the festival had an office; I had a wastepaper basket. There were only two phones, which were run by the general manager and secretary, and I would just drift in and use them occasionally. This phone call came through and Jessica Tandy said she would come up. All the people in the this one little room heard was a great shriek. People came running: "What's happened?" None of them knew exactly what was going on. I said, "Well, Jessica Tandy is joining the season." That put an enormous seal of attention on the festival. As I say, it was doing very well, but my whole intent was to get it publicized and have more and more people be aware of the festival. It's not necessary now, but in those days it was because Niagara was very much a backwater.

Building the Festival Theatre

Those are the early days and that's how it sort of started, and then I went on from there. We took as many out-of-town engagements as we could, sometimes just in the immediate area. We went to Rochester and Kingston as well as Ottawa and Montreal, just to tell the people in the surrounding community that we were around and that if this is the kind of theatre you want to see, this is the festival that is doing it. Of course different sets were sometimes needed because we would play a bigger theatre. When we went to Ottawa, for instance, once the National Arts Centre was open,

I think we went first with The Guardsman in 1969--not for the opening ceremonies but in the following winter--we had to build a completely new set based on the same design but the shape and size of the Court House were much smaller. And then we began talking about the new theatre. Even Barry had said, "One day there has to be a new theatre." Obviously, everybody knew that--at least the people who worked there knew it; the problem was convincing everybody else exactly how to get it going.

After the 1968 season, which was followed by a Feydeau that I had translated along with Suzanne Grossmann, which also was very successful as our non-Shaw contribution, I think we were now up to five weeks a play at that point or even longer, I can't remember exactly. We really only did two shows that year, Heartbreak House and The Chemmy Circle with Frances Hyland, and Micheál MacLiammóir came in for a guest appearance to do his The Importance of Being Oscar. We had put in more seats; we had increased the risers that were put in every year to even more than we'd had for 1966 and 1967. I think we got up to 355 or 360 people crammed into the Court House. So we began seriously to think about how we could get the new theatre designed, which of course was a long, long process. There was the money, which I don't know much about; you'd have to talk to Calvin Rand and the people on the board about that. And the other problem was where was it going to be; that was the big issue. Most of the land around there was owned by the federal government as far as I could tell, so we had to deal with them.

We didn't have much contact with the federal government really. The Canada Council didn't really support the festival at this time very much at all, in fact minimal. Rumour had it, and I think it was actually true, that in 1966 the festival did apply for a grant from the Canada Council--Barry Morse when he was taking over--and when they told him how much he was going to get he said, "Send it back," which for all I know he did. But it was ludicrously small and remained so for a long, long time. We went to northern affairs and various schemes were going on. There were three possibilities at one time. One was to expand behind the existing Court House and use the Court House as a front and build into what was then a parking lot, and still is, but unpaved in those days. They also told us that they were going to restore Fort Mississauga, which is one of the holes on the golf course at the moment. The federal government had a scheme to turn that into a national park. It would become a historic site and the golf course would be eliminated. They were curious as to whether we would be interested in building on that land, which of course we were, I must confess--very interested; it would have been a spectacular location, right on the water at the end of the street that comes into it near the fort. We would have shared parking with the restored fort in the daytime; we would have been operating largely speaking in the evening. That was very exciting.

However, that caused huge problems in the town; that was not a popular move at all, not only with the golfers, who at that time were going to lose their golf course anyway and they had been renting for I think \$1 a year from the federal government. But everybody said, "No, it's open space. Even though it's a golf course, it's still open space. We don't want a building up there." So there was quite a hooah. Although we had a design by Mr Adamson--or a scheme, it wasn't a particular design but an artist's rendition of how you could sort of cantilever a theatre and make it look like hanging gardens rather than a great, huge building, and could dig down into the cliff. It was actually fascinating to look at; I wonder if the drawings still exist in some archive somewhere. Mr Adamson was consulting with us on architecture and who to get, and was very helpful and useful and a nice man to talk to. At one point we were even thinking of having to go to Queenston, again because there was certain resistance from people in the town who did not really want the festival encroaching on them very much. Although we had many adherents, we also has some strong pockets of resistance. Somebody kept writing letters saying Shaw was a communist and that was

why we shouldn't, not because it was encroaching; it was the choice of Shaw that offended him greatly. Some people were content to have the festival remain in the Court House and just be like that. It would have died by now, because if you don't have momentum it doesn't take off.

There was also talk about a place on the other side of Fort George from where the theatre is now, south of Fort George much farther down the Parkway. I resisted that very strongly. If I had any say in the matter, usually it was forces that blew you one way or the other. I definitely wanted the golf course, I must admit that, purely selfishly, but I really resisted being on the other side or even over by John Street because to me it would not have been connected with the town. I did feel very strongly that one of the festival's strengths was the village itself, unlike some places. It's a pleasure to go to Niagara anyway, and if you don't like the show you still have a pretty good time if the play has bored you. It takes a wonderful pressure off the actors and the producers because they know you're going to have a worthwhile experience and say, "Oh well, maybe we didn't like this one but we might like the next one and it was fun anyway." If we'd been somewhere else we'd have had to build our own restaurant probably; we'd have been self-contained. It would probably have been very attractive, but it wouldn't have been the same. People would have driven in through the vineyards and fruit trees and probably ignored the town completely; they could have come in from the QEW right to the theatre and not been involved at all. Despite the town's resistance to some of us, I was very keen on the town and did want very much to be involved.

Eventually a compromise was set up and they said, "Well, have a section of that Fort George land that is connected to Wellington and the main street," and I said, "Yes, that's acceptable."

All this going on, we were interviewing a wide range of architects. Arthur Erickson was there. There was a man whose name I've forgotten who was into geodesic domes, really a sculptor; I ought to remember his name, he was very famous. Not Buckminster Fuller, although he was the geodesic dome man. I think Barry Morse at one time had talked about that because he wanted something very quick, a temporary structure that just was bigger and was thinking Buckminster Fuller's ideas might work out with that. By then we were into more permanent things and we selected Ron Thom to design the Festival Theatre even before we quite knew where the site was, but we talked to him and he had been around the place and from then on the designs went ahead. Then the money had to be raised and it took a long time. I think eventually the federal government came through with a sort of finishing grant that enabled us to break ground and let us start building. As I say, I was involved in the design of the theatre and what we needed; I wasn't really involved in the mechanics other than the site and working with the architect a little, and his associate Peter Smith, about our needs and the backstage where the designers and everybody were. Everybody had a department at that time. I wasn't really privy to the negotiations, I was also running the season and having to get on with that. Indeed, at one point, during the two years prior to that, I was running the Vancouver Playhouse in the winter as artistic director there and commuting back to do the Shaw in the summer, so I was fairly busy producing the plays and some of the tours we did as well.

Lila Kedrova

I mentioned that in 1969 we went to Ottawa for the first time with *The Guardsman* with Lila Kedrova, which was a great fun production. She had married a Canadian. At this time she was an Oscar winner for *Zorba the Greek*. She was living I think in Belleville. I rang her up and asked whether she would be interested in doing *The Guardsman*. We met in Toronto and I realized that the accent was very thick. But we talked and I liked her. I had this scheme since I was going to play opposite her. The actor who plays the guardsman has to disguise himself. In one script that the

Lunts did, they spoke English or American and he turns himself into a Russian to disguise himself. I worked out a scheme that we should do it in reverse. Since I had to do an accent anyway, it didn't matter where I did it, so we would all play with middle-European accents when we were the sort of ordinary people, and when I disguised myself I would speak with an English accent as the contrast. This would accommodate Lila's voice. But I thought this was going to be very tiresome if you got all these people putting on heavy accents that were not natural to them. So I thought we should get more like Lila and hired Hanna Sarvasova, who had just emigrated from Czechoslovakia; and Tibor Feheregyhazi, who had come over from Hungary earlier I think and was not acting, because he couldn't get enough work, but was a general manager and was working in offices for theatre; and a Russian called Carl Don, who came from the States. So everybody in the play, with the one exception of the maid, was in fact middle European and did in fact speak with--probably contrasting accents if you were expert and said, "That's Hungarian. That's Czech," but we didn't really know so it didn't matter. I had to learn a Hungarian accent, which Tibor coached me in, and I'm never very good at accents anyway. But it was a rather marvellous conceit of how to get around this problem and it became a tremendously fun production.

Stanley Holloway

Following that, I think one of the things I was most proud of was getting Stanley Holloway over to appear in *Candida*. Again, I was trying to invite to the festival international figures because I was also ambitious for the festival to be known internationally as well in North America. That was the time when Frances Hyland was sick. We didn't have understudies in those days, we couldn't afford them. Unfortunately, she couldn't perform and I didn't know what to do. We would have to cancel; we didn't know how long she would be out. On the same program that summer, Tony van Bridge, who was playing Morell in *Candida*, was going to appear as GKC. I asked him to do a selection or a part of his GKC to fill in for the *Candida* performances, and I went along to Stanley Holloway and asked, knowing he had been a co-optimist and done revues and all these things, whether he had any material to fill out half or three quarters of an hour as the second half of a bill. "Tony's going to do part of his GKC, which will be a good preview for his full-length version later; maybe you could entertain us." The nerve! I don't think I would have the courage to do it any more, the sheer gall, but I was very young then and completely ignorant so just ploughed ahead. His eyes twinkled and he said, "Well, I happened to bring some music with me." So I found Peter Orme from St Catharines, who had played for us sometimes, to accompany him on the piano. It went out over the radio: "*Candida's* cancelled, but Mr van Bridge and Mr Holloway will be entertaining tonight." We got two queues outside the Court House theatre: people returning tickets who wanted to see *Candida* and another queue waiting for the returns, because the local people had heard and said, "Oh, I want to see that. I've already seen *Candida*." I can't remember how often they did it--not many times, because Franny came back--but each time any ticket that was turned back was immediately snapped up by somebody else, which was a lucky thing.

Forty Years On

We also did *Forty Years On*, which also employed Peter Orme to play the organ for that production, which was my first--I suppose it was a contemporary play because it was written by a living author who wasn't a Shavian contemporary, but since its whole dramatic history was sort of starting with Oscar Wilde, the parodies within *Forty Years On* in the school play right through the Second World War, I thought it was exactly the right period even though it was written by Alan Bennett, whom I'd been with in *Beyond the Fringe* and had known for years. I'd written to Alan to say I'd seen the play with John Gielgud in London and thought it was just wonderful and could I do it? Alan said, "I'd love you to have it and of course you could, but it's under option. Three managements are bidding for it for Broadway and talking to Sir John about coming over and

playing it, so it's out of my hands." About three months later I got a letter saying, "Do you still want to do *Forty Years On*?" I said, "What happened?" Clive Barnes, then the critic for the New York Times, had gone over to London and written a non-flattering review of *Forty Years On* even though it was a huge hit in London. Alan said every management just dropped it like the hottest potato you can imagine, lost all interest even with Gielgud. They said, "No, without the Times," which was possibly true then, not so much now, "you're not going to be able to sell this play." It was a big production with 18 or 21 schoolboys. They dropped it; there was no further interest. So Alan said, "Do you want to do it?" "Oh yes!" I said. I couldn't get Gielgud, he was busy; in fact I think he had eventually withdrawn from the possibility of a Broadway production. I went over to England with a very short list, to see Alan, discuss the play and cast the headmaster, which I didn't think we could do here. He had gone through one too, because they had replaced Sir John in London as well, with another actor whom Alan did not care for so he didn't suggest that I use him.

This is an ironic little story. I'm trying to remember names; getting senile. We had a short list of people, one of whom was Alec Clunes, who had fairly recently replaced Rex Harrison as Higgins in *My Fair Lady* in Drury Lane and was an actor I admired very much. We settled on that. There were one or two others. I was about to call Mr Clunes and didn't for some reason. I waited till the next day, when it was announced on the radio that he had died. I'm not saying I had any spiritual experience at all, because I don't think so, but it was a great shock to everybody because nobody had known he was that ill. I wouldn't have known anyway, but in London there is the gossip and Alan Bennett, who lived in London, didn't know that he was in any way ill. I think he died very, very suddenly. I thought, how awful if I had rung up the night before and said I wanted him and been told, "Well, he can't." Also on the list was Robert Harris, whom I asked to come over, and gave a wonderful performance. That was a great joy, working with him. Then we went to Ridley College in St Catharines to find the schoolboys who could look correct for an English public school. They weren't all from Ridley, some were local boys and sons of friends. One was Kate Reid's son and one was Franny Hyland's son. We had about 18 and about 14 or 15 of those came from Ridley. It was a great joy, that whole production.

The Philanderer

Another one that was a surprising pleasure was *The Philanderer* in 1971. I think that was the first time we had put a relatively obscure Shaw play into a major chunk of the festival. We'd done some odd things but usually for a limited run or a few performances, not for the full chunk of a major play. *The Philanderer* was carrying 50 percent of the season almost and was a play that at that time most people had not really heard of. Tony van Bridge directed it. It was an achievement because it was a breakthrough for me to know that the audience now was strong enough to come and see a play that it hadn't heard of. They knew it was Shaw but they didn't know anything about it at all. That happens now, and how they manage to do the full-length *Back to Methuselah* or *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* I think is incredible. We couldn't have done that, I don't think, at that time. We did the first act of *Methuselah* at one time for a short period but not the whole thing. But this was the first indication that the audience was really going with it completely in terms of its devotion to Shaw and appreciation of Shaw. It turns out to be a very funny play but we didn't quite know that at the time.

Interviewer: Any special challenges in playing Shaw compared to other authors?

Mr Whitehead: Not really. Only because I suppose it is prose, it is dialogue, but there are immense speeches. You do have to have a wonderful vocal facility to be able to make it conversational, which I think it should be. It should be idiomatic within its period. The biggest mistake is the cold

actors who pontificate and see it as platforming, which was always the criticism that Shaw received in the past. I often put it down to bad acting, that the actors haven't humanized it enough and made it sufficiently real, sufficiently funny, sufficiently sexy or whatever the moment was, and were just falling back on this tidal wave of language, which you can get snowed under by. But I think that's the actors' job to come to grips with it, and certainly if you can get actors who may not be experienced with Shaw but are experienced in verse speaking, even though it isn't verse, or are Shakespearean actors, they don't look at a page with a whacking great speech in it and sink immediately; they have learned how to get this over to an audience, so I suppose you have to have that kind of breath control, that kind of intelligence to see through the thread of the line and get the point across. This was very much demonstrated by Tony van Bridge and Ian Richardson in the Don Juan in Hall section of *Man and Superman* much later on in 1977 after the new theatre was built when they were able to do this. That's the main challenge, I think, and to exploit the wit. You also need actors with a comic sense to play Shaw because you have to mine those nuggets of humour in all of them. It's all there, but if you don't have that, then it does become just too dry and seem like speechifying.

Interviewer: And he did have his tongue in his cheek a lot of the time.

Mr Whitehead: Oh certainly, you could never believe a word he said. He was arguing the other man's point of view just to provoke himself if necessary.

Coping with catastrophe

By this time the theatre was being built and we went to Washington. I'm talking about the 1972 production of *Misalliance*, which I directed and didn't participate in. I found someone old enough to play Lord Summerhays this time. The last season of the Court House alone finished up with *Misalliance*, which we took to Ottawa first and then to the Kennedy Center in Washington which was our first engagement there. In Ottawa, the actor Noel Howlett had what turned out to be a mini-stroke on stage. We didn't know that at the time; we thought he had dried severely and had lost his way. I was sitting in the audience and suddenly Lord Summerhays went out of the scene. Noel Howlett was elderly although he wasn't *that* old, but he was elderly so it was a matter of concern. 'Wenna Shaw, who was playing Hypatia in her first performance for the festival, was amazingly cool in the way she managed to sort of string all her speeches together and do the bridge and somehow get their scene together, which was the bulk of when it happened, so that other people could come on and we could get to the intermission and find out.

We didn't know then that his mind had completely gone, as it were; it wasn't just the words, he couldn't speak coherently to us backstage. Jean Roberts was running the National Arts Centre at the time and was in the audience. She had known Noel Howlett from 1956 or earlier in Stratford-on-Avon, where Jean had been stage manager and Noel had been in the company. She came into his dressing room, where we all were to make decisions about what had to be done, and she was the only person Noel recognized--but not from Ottawa; he thought he was in Stratford. He said something like, "Jean, what are you doing here?" and it was about the only cogent sentence he said. He was taken to hospital and it was realized that he had had a small stroke. We got him out of his clothes and got him to the hospital. I got the suit on--fortunately we were approximately the same size--and had to play the latter act sort of with the book in my hand to refer to at least. I'm afraid I didn't remember the lines, it had been eight years in between, although some of them came back. I looked quite wrong because I had a beard at that time. But it was one of those things. I don't know how long we did that; not long because he recovered very quickly and came back and never had a moment's problem. He went on to play in *Getting Married* as well and it was fine.

From Ottawa we went to Rochester and then down to Washington. I think the performance that was given at the opening night in the Kennedy Center was the best thing I've seen. The company was just wonderful. They were good later on too; I don't mean they just did it once, but that was absolutely the right pace and it was just stunning to watch. I had seen it many times by this time and was quite prepared to just look in on the production, but found, "Oh my goodness, this is going well. I don't know if they can keep it through the second half." It did get tremendous reviews. That was a sort of milestone in a way because that was our first engagement in Washington and got a lot of attention. I was very proud of that.

The Festival Theatre opens

The following season was the opening of the new theatre, which was building up to the last minute almost. We rehearsed in Toronto and tried to stay away as much as possible to let the people work and just hoped it was going to be ready by the time we came down with *You Never Can Tell* with Stanley Holloway returning and Edward Gilbert directing. Trudeau came first, I think, and brought Indira Gandhi and gave us a final cheque I think at the same time to pay the bills. Then a little later in the season Queen Elizabeth II came at the end of a long, long day. In fact, we were told she probably wouldn't stay through the show because she had been up at something like 5:30 in the morning to do a train trip from Toronto to London and Windsor, and then back along the south coast, and got into St Catharines, where she was staying on the royal train, and then was driven to the theatre. I think we were scheduled to go up at 8 o'clock, the normal time, but she was delayed and it was well after 9:30 before we started. I may be wrong but it seemed like an hour and half; it may have been more or less but it was a long time that we had to hold the curtain. The RCMP were all around with all those security measures, and that's when they said she had already been on the go for 14 hours and she might stay for just the first act. But it wasn't; she stayed through the whole thing and came backstage, with Prince Philip as well, and was introduced to the cast. I had to go along behind her and mention everybody's name. I must say they were marvellous, it was something to remember. It was gracious of them to have stayed. She may have snoozed during the play, I don't know; I hope so almost. I know he didn't because we could hear him laughing.

Interviewer: I heard there was a bomb threat or some kind of threat when Indira Gandhi was there.

Mr Whitehead: Oh, possibly. It didn't loom very large. Now you mention it, yes, I believe there was something about that. They did a sweep. I don't think they had to evacuate anybody. It wasn't during a time when an audience was involved, I don't think. Wow, I should remember something like that. Oh, in England you're so used to bomb threats. Somebody else might have a better recollection. There might have been, yes.

The theatre was magnificent in its design and very successful. I think Ron Thom did a wonderful job. But it turned out fairly soon not to be big enough, not in terms of the audience but they've had to make adaptations with larger scene shops and extra rehearsal rooms because we had only one rehearsal room and were mounting three plays in the main theatre, two Shaws and one non-Shaw. Occasionally it was four or two but now they're up to 11 and 12 overall and the main theatre wasn't originally designed to accommodate that. They've adapted it very well.

One thing that was corrected was that we did set the curtain too far back on the proscenium, which was a sort of hangover from the Court House where we had this apron and we'd come to rather like it. The designers were very instrumental with me fairly regularly, Maurice Strike on the sets and Hilary Corbett on costumes, and they had become quite fond of this apron and we sort of preserved this with side entrances and a curtain four feet up from the edge of the lip of the stage.

This was probably a mistake and I think they have corrected it now and brought it down. What happened then was that your setting line for the scenery was too far back and you couldn't set any furniture unless it was already out in front of the curtain or you didn't use the curtain. But the whole point of the proscenium is to use the curtain.

Proscenium versus thrust

That was another fixation that I had. I'm not saying anybody necessarily disagreed with me but it was fashionable in the sixties to build a thrust or around. The Vivian Beaumont in Lincoln Centre was being built at that time and all the new theatres were looking at that. It had started with Tyrone Guthrie at Stratford, and then Minneapolis, and grown so that this seemed to be the way to go. I was a reactionary in that in saying, "No, no, no, proscenium, proscenium. I've played on them all. First of all, the plays we are going to be doing were written for the proscenium, they were not written for anything else. But second and most important is that finally proscenium gives you more variety than any other form." This was what people said it didn't so, that it was locked behind a picture window. Ah, but you can change the picture in the window; you cannot change a structure outside of that. So with the troubles that the Beaumont has had, fitting plays in there, you know damned well that was the right thing to do. The argument for it, which I would have argued under any circumstances, was helped by the fact that the plays and the period were a picture-frame period and the plays were written that way. It didn't become a controversy in any way but it still was a decision that had some people arguing another point or thinking it was fashionable to go another way.

On having a permanent company

I never wanted a permanent company. I've never been very happy with large companies. I'd been at Stratford-on-Avon for a season in a very lowly capacity and I'd been at Stratford, Connecticut, in a Shakespeare season in the early sixties as a member of the company and I'd never been terribly comfortable with that. I wasn't really comfortable with Stratford, Ontario, somehow with the people who there year after year after year. I know Mr Newton and I have different viewpoints on this but inevitably it turned out that since you were doing so many Shaw plays and you can categorize Shaw very easily from one play to the other as to what type of person the actor is--women in particular because you have the new woman, the character woman and so on--and so inevitably one or two people that I found I liked very, very much as actors continued to reappear in the productions, although there was never any attempt on my part to make this a formal arrangement or anything that I particularly sought. It just seemed that Patrick Boxill was suitable more often than anybody else, or James Valentine and Tony van Bridge and Heath Lamberts whenever they were available, although not Heath so much until later. I preferred to bring in guests who would be there for a season. To me, I think it's more interesting for an audience, that's my personal opinion, to see different people rather than the same people. Others disagree and say, "Oh, no, no, we love to see the same person do different things."

The Brass Butterfly

I made a mistake in the first season after the new theatre was built, I think, by producing a lovely play called The Brass Butterfly, which I liked a lot. I'd done it in New York with Sam Waterston, off Broadway in the intervening years, and I played the emperor. It was written by William Golding, who wrote Lord of the Flies. I thought it was a lovely play. It was contemporary but it was very Shavian in manner, in its language and everything like that. I didn't play the emperor this time because I wanted it played by somebody who was the right age, but I did produce it. The critics and the audience didn't take to it. It didn't do too badly because we had the new theatre and people were coming to see it. As I said about Niagara, they had a nice evening in the town anyway. I

enjoyed it a lot myself as a play; maybe we didn't do it right, I don't know.

Thark

But for the following year, we had already done a Feydeau farce in earlier times, *The Chemmy Circle*, and then I brought in *Charley's Aunt*, which from the turn of the century was the classic farce. I had always liked farce and that was certainly of the period the Shaw Festival was doing. It turned out to be a huge success. By and large I think this has continued on and there has been almost a farce a year, and still is; I know Mr Newton is continuing that. It was *Charley's Aunt* pretty much that started it because even though *The Chemmy Circle* was earlier, there was a gap without farce.

This tradition was reinforced by *Thark* in my final season, which I had always wanted to do as a play, a Ben Travers. I wasn't brought up seeing them, I was brought up hearing about them with some nostalgia from my parents. I'd always wanted to do it but I did know that until you got the right group, this wasn't going to get anywhere. I'd talked 10 years earlier with Tony van Bridge about them and he loved them too, and about doing a Travers. So I read them all and selected *Thark* because I thought it had a little extra dimension that some of the others didn't--they were simply boy meets girl, boy breaks up, boy gets girl back. Because of the house, *Thark* itself, with its sort of ghostly air it had a different tinge to it that I liked and thought would be more palatable. But again it was collecting the right people to come in and do it. We waited and waited, and it was only in 1977 that I managed to get it together. I'm delighted they are still doing them and have done other Travers.

In that summer of 1977 I was determined that Carole Shelley had to play *Cherry Buck*, which is a small part. She was very leery about it because she had made a name for herself in America as a Pigeon sister in *The Odd Couple*, which she did on the Broadway stage originally, in the film and in the first season of television, and ever since then she was extremely leery of being labelled a Pigeon sister, of which *Cherry Buck* is an offshoot or precursor. She knew she would be very funny and, now that she was doing wonderful things like *The Elephant Man*, she was frightened she would be very funny and great parts would go back 20 years and she would never get another serious one. I had wanted her to play in *Man and Superman* anyway, but I hadn't particularly planned her to be in *The Millionairess*, thinking that would be a carrot for another actress, but I gave it to Carole as well but I said, "But only if you play *Cherry Buck*," and she said, "Oh, okay." But she also said, "But I won't go to New York with it after it's a success. I will not transfer and play Broadway with it," because at one time I was trying to get it transferred because it was so successful. She said, "It would just set me back all that time."

Heath Lamberts played a tiny but integral part, and Tony van Bridge and Ann Casson were in it. It was difficult to get them but you needed them. We were lucky in our choice of director, which was one of those shots in the dark, Michael Meacham, who had come over to do it and had talked to Ben Travers, who was still alive and knew about the production. We tried to get him over to come and visit and do some publicity. He said he wanted to come very much but I think he was 83 by then--no, that wasn't it, it wasn't age at all, he said he was too busy. He had a success with a new play he had written in London so he was suddenly the flavour of the month, or the year in fact, they had rediscovered him. "No," he said, "I haven't got the time."

The festival and the critics

Interviewer: I read a review of *Thark* in *The Globe and Mail* of the time that criticized the festival as being too frivolous.

Mr Whitehead: Yes, that was an overall thing. I know Herbert Whittaker definitely thought we were too frivolous, perhaps we were; but when it came to the actual production, that was a huge success. The only paper that didn't like it was the Toronto Star because I had had a big row with the Toronto Star a few years earlier. I didn't really make a habit of this but the critic there, Gina Mallet, had written an article about the festival criticizing it for being frivolous, before we did *Thark*, and for not doing major Shaw plays, which was odd. The only one we hadn't done was *Saint Joan*, which we couldn't do until the new theatre was built, and when the new theatre was built, Stratford did it almost immediately. So it was off limits for a little while so far as I was concerned.

But she hadn't actually seen anything at the festival when she wrote this article, which rather ticked me off--and not only myself, there were many others involved at the festival. This went on for two seasons and eventually we said, "I don't see the point of this at all." With the press who come from a different place, you invite them, you pay for them, you accommodate them, you give them typewriters and phone lines. People don't realize that you make tremendous efforts to assist them in every way. By then we were getting press from England too, because Robin Phillips used to bring a junket of them over to Stratford and, although we never invited them specifically, they used to come here the following weekend, which wasn't our opening, but they would come and cover the Shaw once they had finished at Stratford. I said, "It's not that we're going to ban the Star or your critic," and we talked to the editors about it and said, "There's a great prejudice here and I don't think it's very accurate. You can come and review, send who you want, but we're not going to provide you with these facilities any more. We're not going to make any effort; I don't see the point." And we didn't in 1977.

But of course she came and always bought her own ticket and always saw a preview--which was a bit cheeky, but that's all right--and so produced her review the day before anybody else. As you were going to see the opening night you could get the Star review. We opened with *Man and Superman*, which she detested, and followed it the next night with *Thark*, which she detested. By this time I think the other critics went into the theatre saying, "Oh, this is going to be dreadful," and found out it wasn't and wrote rave notices. It almost worked in our favour because they reacted to that. A month later she came back when we did the full-length *Man and Superman*, which by this time was very successful, and said, "How can a production have changed so much?" Of course it hadn't changed at all. It had changed in the sense that the *Don Juan in Hell* scene was now in the middle of it, but the surrounding play had really changed very little. Of course it had improved, everything improves over time, but all the mechanics were there and it was exactly the same.

Clive Barnes always used to preface his articles in the New York Times with, "I don't like Shaw but if you are going to see Shaw, this is the best place." He always actually gave us quite a good review, but always the first thing was, "It doesn't appeal to me." That started with *Candida*, I think. "If you have to do a Shaw play, I suppose *Candida* is the most palatable and, if you are doing it, it's nice to have Frances Hyland, Tony van Bridge, Stanley Holloway and a production by Harris Yulin, and this is the place that is doing it well." At one time he said, "I don't know why I'm invited," and you wanted to write back and say, "Well, you're not invited, actually; the New York Times is invited. It's not you, but they send you. Why don't you deal with your editor and get them to send someone else? We'd be quite happy." And indeed they did; Julius Novik came up eventually because they sort of said, "Well, it Clive doesn't want to go, Don't send him."

Leaving the Shaw

I don't know whether the Shaw is frivolous or not. Just to conclude, that is perhaps the reason why at the end of 1977 there were people, I don't know whether they were a majority or a minority

really, who were thinking it was time for a change. There are many reasons as to why I left, there's no one reason by any means. It was a whole series, some of which were totally personal; some professional, thinking, "If I stay now, it's been almost 12 years, I'm now"--whatever age I was, I can't remember, late thirties--"if I stay on for another five, ten years, I might as well stay forever and retire. Or do I get back in the swim as a commercial actor?" Then there were personal reasons. Then there was the fact that at the beginning of the 1977 season they came said, "What are you going to in '78?" And you said, "I don't know, I just don't know yet what I'm going to do. I haven't got '77 on yet and I've got Thark to worry about and the full-length Man and Superman to deal with." I think people did feel that perhaps after 1978 it would be time to make a change in terms of the artistic directorship and I certainly decided not to argue the point. On the board of directors, anyway, there were certainly a number of people who supported me and, had I said, "Wait a moment, I'm not ready to pack this in," would have certainly come to my defence and insisted. And I'm quite sure there were one or two who thought no, perhaps we should go in a different direction.

I think one thing was that there was some dissatisfaction with the level of Canada Council support--in fact I know there was some, from all sides; I know there was that--and some perhaps felt this was because of the so-called frivolous reputation that we had got, which personally I think was unjust. There was a farce, yes, but now there's one every year, and maybe we hadn't counterbalanced it with quite enough of the more esoteric Shaw plays, which is now done, along with the Barker and the tone that is there. But I didn't think frankly that the audience was ready for it. I did believe very, very strongly that you take small building blocks and you move along, which is also why we never had a deficit, because I felt we never bit off more than we could chew. You made gradual progress and you led them with *The Philanderer* into a different thing, and you led them with another play into another era, and so on. They were small but significant steps and I think that is what we were doing.

So I never felt that, and it wasn't as if by then we did a farce every year. But yes, the thought was out there, and perhaps they felt that by taking on a more serious tone they would improve their grant level, which of course didn't happen at all. It was still minuscule; we're talking five figures, and if I remember, even with the new theatre, low five figures. Ontario was pretty good, I should say that; but the Canada Council was not. It was many years later and I think it had nothing to do with the policy of theatre, it had to do with a change of regime in the Canada Council, in which I believe it was Mavor Moore who finally said--this was long after I had gone, so it's hearsay--"No, it's time. This theatre has grown and grown, and with Christopher Newton doing a wonderful job there, it's time it got the kind of commensurate support it should surely have with other organizations of its size." And finally it did, without any basic change in policy because in fact the policy hasn't really changed at all since 1967 or even earlier.

I hated the idea of a lame-duck season. I hated the idea of entering the 1978 season knowing it was my last. I didn't mind entering the 1977 season and it being my last, because I didn't know it going in--and nobody else knew it, and this is the main point, not me. I didn't want to do a season in which all the people--crew, actors, press, anybody--said, "This is his end," because the concentration then is not on the work at hand, it's on what is going to happen in the future. I was even guarded about what would I do? The temptation would be to be a little bit vainglorious and say, "Well, now I'll show you. A whole season of Ben Travers!" No, but I might suddenly do *Saint Joan* just because I hadn't done it, even though it had been done only two years earlier at Stratford. I didn't really trust my own instincts, so I said, "I've done this season, I'm very happy with the '77 season, maybe we should do it right now," and so it happened. The argument was that it didn't give

them time, which actually isn't true, because it was very early in the 1977 season and there was quite sufficient time to have appointed somebody else. There were people who were eligible. Chris Newton wasn't eligible, although they asked him eventually in 1979 or even 1978, but they had to wait until 1980 when they finally made that selection. But that would have been true the year earlier as well. Anyway, I didn't think there was insufficient time to appoint an artistic director for the 1978 season. God knows, I'd been appointed in a much shorter time, although I know it was a little different situation.

We were invited to take Thark to the National Arts Centre and then Montreal in the spring of 1978 and I did stay on, or at least come back, to do that. Right after the 1977 season I had gone to Buffalo to do a new Sherlock Holmes play called Crucible of Blood, which was tried out in Buffalo and in the fall of 1978 went to Broadway. But in the meantime, I came back to do the tour of Thark and this was when the talk came up about possibly transferring it into New York for that summer and Carole said, "Not with me. I daren't."