

LESLIE YEO

[I had been at Stratford but] they didn't give me the parts that I wanted to play in 1976, so I went to Shaw, where I directed Mrs Warren's Profession with Kate Reid, Roberta Maxwell and Barry Morse—a marvellous cast. Kate got the first standing ovation that anybody ever got at the Shaw Festival, and she got it every night, not just the first night. She was absolutely superb in it. I got along very well with Kate; she used to live across the street here [in Toronto]. I think the reason Paxton [Whitehead] asked me to direct it was that he thought Kate was undirectable. Some directors had had a fairly hard time with her and he knew that I knew her personally. I thought he was playing a bit safe. But she behaved herself perfectly with me.

She said to me one day, "Would you mind awfully much if I had my notes at the end of the morning at the house rather than in front of the rest of the cast?" I said, "Fine, Kate. No problem at all. When would you like to have them?" She said, "How about nine o'clock in the morning, before the rehearsal starts?" I said, "Okay." So I went along to her cottage and knocked on the door. The door was a little bit ajar. She said, "Come in. I'm in the bathroom." She was in the bath. I went in and she said, "Sit down." So I put the toilet seat down and sat on the toilet seat and I gave Kate her notes. I did that every morning for about three weeks. She never really challenged anything. She would sometimes say, "Are you sure about that?" I said, "Kate, I'm positive." She said, "Okay, okay." She did everything I asked her to do and she was absolutely wonderful in the part.

What brought me there in the first place—you probably know the Shaw Festival is going to publish a book of mine, which should have been out this week [May 1997] as a matter of fact. It is the story of a company I brought from England to Canada, an English rep company, in the fifties, and during that time we spent a couple of summers in Niagara Falls. In one of them, I think 1954, Barry Morse came down to see us do Present Laughter, which was Barry's favourite part and I was playing it. He wanted to come and see somebody else playing it. I had never met him before and he introduced himself. It was another 12 years before I really heard from Barry and that was the year he took over the Shaw Festival. He rang me up and by that time I had wound up the company and had moved to Toronto. I did a lot of television but didn't work in the theatre here [in Toronto] at all for the first seven years I was here. Suddenly out of the blue Barry rang me up. He said, "How would you like to come down to Shaw and play in Misalliance for a bit of giggle?" I said, "Barry, I haven't been on a stage for seven years." He said, "But you'll be fine. I know your work." It was a wonderful part and I was playing opposite Zoe Caldwell who was just a fabulous actress and a fabulous person too. I went down to Niagara-on-the-Lake and rehearsed it, and I remember standing in the wings on opening night and saying, "What are you doing this for? You don't have to do this." Suddenly you get so nervous if you haven't been on the stage for seven years.

But it turned out to be the first big sellout success. Calvin Rand still talks about it. He had a do in Buffalo not long ago and he referred to it and referred to Zoe Caldwell and said whenever he sees her in New York she always says, "How's Leslie?" We had a wonderful rapport. There's one scene where Zoe is supposed to make me cry, as old Tarleton. He's an old boy who's flirting with this younger woman. One night she really did make me cry, which is to me, for an actor, totally wrong. This you must never do; it's a no-no. You can pretend but you must never actually because you've lost control of yourself. When I came off I said, "Zoe, I'm terribly sorry. I promise you I'll never do that again." She said, "Oh, darling, it's so refreshing to hear you say that. In New York, every night you come off they apologize because they didn't cry real tears."

That was the first year I went there. Certainly it was the first year Barry took over and I think the attendance for Misalliance was about 105 per cent. They had people standing every night. They did incredible business. It's a very funny play and he cast it beautifully. He had Tom Kneebone in it, Paxton,

Susan Clark who went to Hollywood; it was really quite a cast. The following year [1967], Paxton asked me to go back there and I played with Kate Reid in Somerset Maugham's *The Circle*. My wife, who died in 1973, was a very good stage actress. She was the leading lady of this company I brought from England. Paxton wasn't paying us very much money. I was paying Edna Burroughs \$100 a week for her cottage and I think we were only earning about \$175 or something like that, maybe it was a little more. The following year [1968], Paxton asked me to play in *Heartbreak House* and I said, "Paxton, I have a wife who would be brilliant as Hesione or Lady Utterword, either of them." He said, "Well, I'm sorry, these parts are not available." I said, "Then, I'm sorry, Paxton, I'm not available either. I cannot afford, on the salary you're paying, to run two addresses. I have a home in Toronto and I don't want to live in digs down here." I had got past that stage in my life. So we sort of fell out, I suppose. I didn't move straight from there to Stratford, I went and did other things, and the next time I got called back was when Paxton rang me to ask me whether I would direct Mrs Warren's Profession. At the same time I played Boanerges in *The Apple Cart*.

Mrs Warren was a big success. Let's not be modest about it, it really was. It won the Buffalo Evening News best production of the year, not that those things really mean all that much. At the end of the year I said to Paxton, "What do you want me to direct next year?" Paxton said, "Oh, I don't think it would be good idea for you to direct two years in a row"—which surprised me. I said, "Fine, fine; that's okay, Paxton." I then had arranged to go to Stratford. After I had arranged that, which would have been my second year at Stratford, back to Robin Phillips, Paxton rang from New York. He said, "I am a fool. I find it very hard to deal with two things at the same time. You must come and direct *Thark*. We're going to do an Aldwych farce." Farce is very much part of my background in England; I was always known as a farceur or a light comedian. I said, "I'm awfully sorry, Paxton, but I'm not available, I'm going to Stratford." "Damn," he said. So that was 1977.

In 1978, Paxton had left. Richard Kirschner was running it and he really offended me. Douglas Campbell was playing three enormous leads that year: Shotover in *Heartbreak House*, John Gabriel Borkman and Undershaft in *Major Barbara*. Kirschner rang me up and asked if I would like to understudy Douglas. I wrote poor old Kirschner such an awful letter, saying that in 40-something years nobody had ever asked me to understudy anybody, particularly parts which I could perfectly well play myself. I really was a bit saucy. Poor old Kirschner was terribly upset.

Nothing more happened until the end of that season, when the second lot of plays came in. One of the plays was *Heartbreak House*, the one I had turned Paxton down on in the year when I said if he didn't take Hilary I would come. He had to go to England; he got Bill Fraser out from England to play the part that I would have played. So Kirschner said, "Will you come down and play Boss Mangan?" I said, "Certainly." So I came down towards the end of the season and I think the play came in somewhere about July or August. Pat Galloway was in it, Eric House, Amelia Hall, many old friends. By this time, Calvin had decided to appoint Christopher Newton as artistic director. Christopher couldn't come for a year so Calvin said, "What are we going to do for a year? We need somebody who'll run the place for a year." Christopher said, "He's in the company with you right now—Leslie Yeo." So Calvin announced one morning at rehearsal that I was going to be the new artistic director for the following year. Poor old Kirschner was really making an awful mess of things. Business was way, way down. Finally, Calvin came to me and said, "Could you take over the rest of this season and we'll sort of pay Kirschner off?" So I said yes, I didn't mind, and anyway I would need a lot of time to work out the following season.

I had six weeks to work out what plays we were going to do the following season—my year, as I call 1979—and in that six weeks I worked out what plays we would do. People still talk about that season because we did a lot of Shaw. It was very much a Shaw season. We did *You Never Can Tell*; *Captain*

Brassbound's Conversion, which had never been done because it has a very large cast; Dear Liar, which is not Shaw but it is about him, the letters he wrote to Mrs Pat Campbell. I found an actor, Donald Donnelly, who was doing a one-man Shaw show playing Bernard Shaw. I phoned around New York and tracked him down. He said he would come if we would bring his wife out from England. He would do the whole season, two performances a week. I paid him very handsomely. We brought his wife out from England and he was an enormous success. He did it very beautifully. He is an Irishman and he sounded Irish. He did that wonderful tape of Shaw giving a television interview on his 70th birthday. He says, "Hello. This is me and you're you," and things like that. He did an impersonation that was just perfect. He had a couple of dressers and a screen behind the stage and as he talked he walked behind the screen and, almost continuing to walk, he would be in a new costume by the time he came out the other side of the screen. They were flinging things on him and off him. It was marvellous show and a marvellous season.

I didn't go back again to Shaw, in fact I don't think I've played there since 1979. There was a slight difference of opinion with Christopher at the beginning, which is silly now but it's all been straightened out and now we're great friends.

My happiest memory is unquestionably the year I ran it, because I did several things. I started the lunchtime theatre, for one thing, which they had never done before. When Calvin said, "Will you run the theatre for a year?" I said, "Well, it's a thankless job. If I make a great success, you can't keep me on, and I don't intend to sit here with a holding pattern because that's not the way I'm made. If you want me to run it for the year I will run it as if I were going to run it for the next 10." So I brought in lunchtime theatre.

Another thing I did was, we used to do only eight performances a week, and the expensive thing about theatres is the plant. It's like any factory; you run night shifts because the plant is there and that doesn't cost any more. Somehow or other, and I've forgotten what it was, but we started doing nine performances a week and actors are only allowed to do eight. I arranged the plays in such a way that no actor ever did nine performances. We did nine plays, but by switching them about it never cost us anything in that way. I was looking at the 1997 brochure the other day and they are doing something like 12 performances a week now at the Festival Theatre, so they must be paying actors salary-and-a-half or something like that. Obviously they found that fruitful.

Also during my year the Royal George people came to the board. The Canadian Mime Theatre had been running a summer season there for some time and was in great financial trouble and wanted Shaw to take over its commitment on the theatre. The board came to me and I said, "Not on my year. You get at Christopher if you like for next year. I'm not going to carry any losses from that theatre. My aim is to try and reduce your losses this year as well as give you a high-class season." Having run my own company, I was also a strange combination of an actor and a businessman, so I wasn't going to waste that kind of knowledge. In fact, I got rid of the manager about the second week of my tenure. He was about 26 and started telling me what to do. So I walked around the block from the theatre a couple of times and walked into his office. I said, "Let's get this straight. There is one captain of this ship in 1979 and that's me." So he said, "Well, that's not what I understood from Calvin." So I phoned Calvin. Poor old Calvin had to come down. I repeated what I had said and Calvin went a bit red because I think he may have told this guy that the authority was to be shared. I said, "No, sorry Calvin, I'll leave right now. That's not the way I can run a company. I have to have the ultimate say. If it comes to a decision one way or the other, that has to rest with me." This guy still was troublesome so I found Calvin and he said, "Do you want to get rid of him?" I said, "Yes," and so they did.

I did the two jobs for a while, because this was the winter season. When Calvin talked to me about the running the theatre in 1979 I said, "I've got a commitment in December to go and direct a play at the Alley Theatre in Houston." I used to do a production there almost every Christmas. He said, "That's fine. That's in between seasons. Artistic directors don't spend the winter here, you know." I said, "This one will. You're paying me a salary for a year's work. I have a couple of commitments that will take me away for a short time but I intend to spend the winter here. I intend to be in the theatre every day because there's a lot in the administration that wants putting right." And I did. I went into the theatre every day all through the winter. I rented a cottage not too far from the theatre and it was an absolutely gorgeous winter. There was snow, it was very peaceful and you don't get many tourists in the winter. It's a very, very pretty place.

I've only been back to Niagara-on-the-Lake three times since 1979. I hate going to the theatre to see other people working, which is a dreadful thing. Young actors get furious or they act so surprised when they hear me say this, but if you've been an actor for 57 years, which I have—and I've been involved in 600 or 700 different plays, because I started in an era where we did a play a week. I used to do 50 plays in one season, and I did that for six or seven years. That's a lot of plays. So I don't enjoy going to the theatre unless occasionally you see something that's so stunning that it's worth it. But it's very hard to be stunning for somebody who's mentally backstage all the time, or thinking what's going through the poor actor's mind who's playing the part, which one tends to do. But if it's so brilliant that you get totally lost and carried away and you're up there on the stage with them, that doesn't happen very often; but if it does, then of course that is superb, that I still enjoy, but how often do you see that kind of magic today? Not very often. You don't see it in London any more—you do see it but not—The same in New York. But the standard in both places on an average has dropped and I think the standard in Canada is frankly not as good as it was 25 or 30 years ago.

I don't know why that is. I suppose one of the reasons is that there's no training ground for actors any more. When I left England there were 450 weekly rep companies all doing a play a week. Each of them had a company of a minimum of 10 permanent actors. That's 4,500 actors learning how to act, watching the others in the company, learning sometimes what not to do—but you learnt. I was talking to old Patty Crane, who is the fencing master at Stratford and used to teach Tyrone Power and Errol Flynn all their swordfights. I saw him a couple of years ago at Stratford and I'd seen a production which I thought was just so abysmal and he agreed with me. But he said, "The trouble is they've got nowhere to learn their jobs. They're not like you, who did 300 or 400 plays before you came here. Where do they learn it?" He was really quite sad about it, and it is of course true. There's a little bit of summer stock but there isn't much of that any more. So I don't where actors learn it. You learn it in companies like Shaw with apprentices if they sit and watch and are prepared to learn. But they need to do something; I don't know what they're going to do.

Interviewer: Since you directed Mrs Warren's Profession some years ago, did you go to see the production this year at The Shaw?

Leslie Yeo: No. That's terrible because I couldn't bear to see it, to tell you the truth. It was such an outstanding production [in 1976]. In my CV I have some of my quotes which might be interesting. I don't think I was wrong in my assessment of Mrs Warren. People still talk to me about it in the business and anybody who comes from Shaw. This is interesting on Misalliance: "Best I can recall in Shaw Festival's history with superb players like Leslie Yeo as the dry, finger-snapping, change-rattling, self-made millionaire.—Ron Evans, Toronto Telegram" Isn't that terrible, reading out your own reviews? But there's a good review in here. Mrs Warren's Profession got absolute raves. It was very interesting

because, in the office upstairs, by that time The Shaw was highly organized and the reviewers had already got to the point where they were linked by telephone straight to the composing room. They typed their reviews, they always took a copy and at the end they would give a copy to the PR girl. So we read the reviews straight after the shows. I wouldn't go anywhere near where all the critics were at all, I just sat in my office, which was next door, and the PR girl came round to me and said, "They're raves. They're all raving. We've never had reviews like this before." John Fraser, who I still think is the best critic the Globe and Mail ever had and it's very sad that he only did it for about two years—he got sent to China and he wrote a couple of marvellous books on China—John Fraser I never met and he's never met me. On the first night of Mrs Warren's Profession I'm standing in the washroom at a stall and there's a figure next to me whose head is slightly turned, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. I did the same thing. He said, "Leslie Yeo?" I said, "Yeah. John Fraser?" He said, "Yes. I've never been so excited in my life. Don't you ever tell anybody you talked to me in the intermission," and he ran out. He went on to give us a marvellous review: "A glorious production that would stand up anywhere." They were all like that. We even got good reviews from people like Gina Mallet.

Interviewer: Paxton talked to me about Gina Mallet.

Leslie Yeo: Did he like her or dislike her?

Interviewer: Disliked her.

Leslie Yeo: Yeah. I got on very well with Gina. I don't know what it is; there's something about contrary people I get along well with. Nathan Cohen, the famous critic who blasted everybody, was fascinated with my background. I'm glad somebody was; it didn't seem to mean much to a lot of people when I first came here. I used to have lunch with Nathan. I said, "I'll have lunch with you provided you don't quote anything I say." He was a very knowledgeable man about the theatre. He said, "I know I'm hard but I do so badly want the Canadian theatre to get better and that's why I do it."

Gina Mallet was rather similar. I had lunch with her many times too, on the same conditions. She was a hard critic but she adored my production of *Blithe Spirit*. There was another thing I did in my year. The company was in a bad way financially. Under Kirschner it had really built up rather a big debt. He was a nice man but he chose the wrong plays, he didn't read the market correctly. I think he was all right as an administrator but he wasn't really a creative person, he was an administrator and he should have got somebody else to choose the plays. So I was concerned about not increasing the deficit. Number one, I wanted to get the box office back to where it was, which we did succeed in doing. We didn't succeed in reducing the deficit because we had a big jump to make, but we went quite close to it. We picked up a tremendous amount. One of the ways I did that was, I always thought what a terrible waste there is at Stratford where they do 15, 16 productions a year. Every one of those productions costs a set, a set designer, a costume designer, a fabulous amount of money just to stage the show. The Court House Theatre used to do three productions a year. I said, "I'm going to put one production on there that's going to fill the theatre. What is the point in taking it off and putting another production on if people are going to continue to fill it?" We opened *Blithe Spirit* there and we practically sold out the entire season. Gina Mallet came to see it and I thought, "She's going to hate this because everybody's seen *Blithe Spirit*." Of course, Gina Mallet at that time probably hadn't; she wasn't all that old. But she thought this was just fabulous. She gave it an absolutely fabulous review. I got on quite well with her. She gave some things bad reviews that I did.

Another play I did that year was *The Corn Is Green*, which is an Emlyn Williams, a play I've always been

very fond of. It's really autobiographical. It's the story of Emlyn Williams himself and his education. I had just directed that at Houston, with Kate Reid playing the lead, before Calvin asked me to run the company. In 1978, Kate had been fired from the company for getting into the booze. She did that quite a lot. Many, many times I got her out of her problem. It's a problem, it's an illness; everybody knew about it. She went down to Houston; I took her down there. She always behaved herself with me. I think she was a little bit afraid of me, actually. I said, "Kate, if you misbehave I'm going to tick you off in front of the entire company and tell them why I'm ticking you off." And also I think she respected me. She told Robin Phillips that only twice in her life had she felt she had been really directed and those were the two occasions when I had directed her, which is very nice. I don't think it endeared Robin Phillips to me when she said that, but she told me that's what she told him. I said, "Well, Kate, I'll never work there again." But she was so good in *The Corn Is Green* that I put it on specially for her in the program at Shaw, and then when I tackled her she said, "No, I can't." I said, "Kate, you've got to come; I've already announced the play." She said, "No, I'm afraid to." I said, "Kate, it would rehabilitate you with the management and everything else, because you behaved yourself in Houston, you'll behave yourself with me." She was absolutely superb in it [in Houston], but she wouldn't come. That was my biggest disappointment at the Shaw Festival, that she wouldn't come and play it, and it wasn't as good as it should have been.

In Houston they have a Greek stage and a sort of walk-up around behind the audience which is continued right down to the stage. In *The Corn Is Green* you never see the miners, you hear them singing coming home from the pits. In the very last time you hear them I had them come down the ramp. Little kids, old men, all with miners' lamps; it was tremendously moving. When I said to Kate, "How important is it to do that?" she said, "Absolutely tremendously important." I was very tempted to see if we could build some sort of ramp in the Shaw Festival Theatre but it was just too expensive. It lost by not having that wonderful last moment in the play.

In the lobby of the Festival Theatre the other night when I saw *Will Any Gentleman?*, I met lots of friends, other actors, and one of them was teaching somewhere in Alberta at a drama school. I often get asked, "What advice do you have for young actors? You say the theatre isn't as good as it used to be. Why isn't it as good?" Number one is that they don't have the same training opportunities, but number two is they do not trust the text. I've done some teaching, directing anyway, students and graduating classes at Ryerson and the University of Alberta, and I love teaching students because they want to learn and they want to do what you tell them. You don't have to tell them to do it; they want to do what you want them to do. They realize that they've done it better because of that. I say to them, "You must trust the text. Somebody took a lot of trouble to write those lines. Every word has been changed several times by the writer so that line is perfect. Why don't you just trust the line instead of trying to help the line along by doing something grotesque while you're doing it?" Being simple is a term I use a tremendous amount when I direct.

I loved directing that year. I directed two of the plays myself, *Blithe Spirit* and *The Corn Is Green*. I prefer directing to acting—well, I don't want to act any more. The last thing I played was *Hobson's Choice*, which the Shaw Festival is repeating this year. I did that at Barrie about four or five years ago and I said, "I don't want to act any more." I still do television and film but it's a different thing. The theatre is very, very demanding. It requires enormous concentration. It's something one has learned, how to behave in front of an audience. I'm now trying to learn how to behave in front of a camera, which is very, very different. With an enormous stage background, it's so hard to try not to do anything except think in front of the camera. If you're in a big close-up like this, the audience doesn't climb up on the stage and pee at you six inches away; they're sitting a long way away. If you do what you do on the stage in front of a close-up camera, it would be much too broad. It's very hard, if you've been a stage actor for many years, to prevent yourself from doing what you do on the stage. It's taken me a long, long time, and

when I see myself I never like the result. I hate seeing myself on television. On the stage you never do see yourself, fortunately probably sometimes.

So you've talked to Paxton. There's a marvellous light comedian. He kept things simple. I saw *Will Any Gentleman?* Farce is the hardest thing to do; people think it's the easiest. I found quite a problem with it. This is the sort of thing I mean about where I think we're going wrong. All the people on the stage were eccentric. They shouldn't be; it's the situations that are eccentric. Some of those people should play absolutely straight but they all seem to feel that they've got to be eccentric and pull terrible faces and help the line along. They don't have to do that. Otherwise it was brisk and it moved along, but I felt it missed because everybody was being strange. Of course, the number of people who can play farce now is getting less and less because nobody writes any farces any more. You don't have the old Aldwych team from London to do it, and where does a Canadian actor have the chance to go and see a farce, except modern ones like *Noises Off*?

Interviewer: Paxton was quite reluctant to do *Thark*, wasn't he?

Leslie Yeo: He was reluctant to do it, yes. I just wish I had gone down and done it and hadn't agreed to go to Stratford because that's absolutely my cup of tea. From then on they did several farces and I probably would have come each year and directed the farces, which I would have enjoyed doing because that is very creative. Every time you do the same farce, it's different from the time you did it the last time. You've got a different actor who does different things and they want to be helped without being shown. A director should never show an actor what to do, but you've got to try and get it out of him. There are all sorts of ways of telling him without letting him know that you're telling him, which is one of the secrets of directing.

Interviewer: Can you recall any situations when working in the Court House Theatre?

Leslie Yeo: Yes, in *Blithe Spirit*—and this was very, very naughty—I can remember one afternoon. This is a very difficult play for the actors to do because there is somebody like Elvira the spirit, who is talking on the stage, one actors hears her, the others don't officially hear her. So the cues are all non sequiturs and the actors find it an incredibly difficult play to concentrate on. Joseph Shaw, who was one of my original company I brought from England and stayed on in Canada, was playing the lead, Charles. He was doing quite a difficult scene at a matinee and it happened to be one afternoon when I just walked in at the back, I wasn't playing at the Festival Theatre, just to check on the production and see if people were getting a bit naughty, which they tend to do if you don't keep an eye on them. Joe was playing this complicated scene and there were two ladies in the front row. At the Court House you can pretty well lean out and touch them. These two were chattering away to each other. Joe stopped, turned and looked at them, walked slowly down to the footlights and looked at them. They didn't know he was looking at them and they suddenly realized there was no dialogue going on. They looked up and stopped talking and said, "Thank you," and then he went back on with the scene. Well, I gave him absolute hell. I said, "Joseph, I don't care how irritated you were, the audience is never wrong. You must never ever do that again." If somebody hadn't noticed them I think they would have gone on talking. By this time the audience was beginning to enjoy it.

The Court House is a lovely theatre to play in, actually, but very tough backstage. I don't know how they did those set changes. We had one dressing room. There was a curtain dividing it in half. The men were on one side and the women on the other. And of course you could hear what everybody said. I must say it was very matey and everybody was very pally, but the conditions were quite awful.

If you're doing Edwardian plays or even plays of the 1920s, don't send them up. If you trust them and do them as they were, they will work. They worked then and they will work now. Why is it, if they do a period play, they send it up? They overplay it. People have told me they've done that to a couple of the Agatha Christies. You can't send up Agatha Christie; you have to believe her situations otherwise how are you going to enjoy it? How are you going to create any suspense? There is a tendency to do that with actors today. Because they thought everybody overacted in that period, they feel they must now do that today. But of course it isn't true, because I've been through both periods. But also I'm probably prepared to admit that when I was young I thought the people 50 years behind me were overacting their socks off too—and I think they were, in the old days of Irving and Tree and Terry and these great big voices; as long as they sounded good, that was the important thing.

The one thing, and this sounds like Method, which is a system I really have no time for at all, but on the other hand, what Method actors don't realize is that we've all been Method actors but we don't let that rule our lives. We all believe the person that we're playing and we all try to be absolutely real. It's the whole secret of acting, believing you're that person. Now, they carry it to extremes and they believe they're that person offstage and when they go home. I've been in a company where, as I've walked into the theatre I've seen a little girl sitting in a blue light, which she has kidded the electrician to leave on. I said, "What are you doing here?" This was two hours before the play. She said, "I'm just getting myself into the mood."

I can remember being with a bunch of students at the University of Alberta drama class, where I directed there graduating production, which was a Shaw, Heartbreak House, and one of the boys in the show of course played Boss Mangan, which I had played. I never told him. He would have been embarrassed to play it. I never told him I'd even been in the play before. But while I was there, they said, "You're an actor. Can't you give us a short performance yourself, before you go, so we can see you do a bit of acting?" I said, "What have you got in the library here? I would have to read some of these excerpts of characters I've played." So I went to the library and got a bunch of plays out and did these scenes, all the parts I'd loved playing. What they couldn't understand at all was that I would say, "I'm now going to do a little scene from Elwood P. Dowd in Harvey," and I would walk to the side of the stage, put a hat on and walk straight back and play the scene. They said, "How could you change?" They have to get into a corner, shake their hands, release their fingers, do deep breathing; they don't know any other way. They couldn't understand how you could go from one character to another. If they'd been in weekly rep for 10 years, they'd know. We didn't have time for all that. There's so much nonsense that they're taught.

Interviewer: Were you at The Shaw when Stanley Holloway was there?

Leslie Yeo: No, but I played the same part he did several years later, in fact it was the year I ran it, 1979. I played the waiter; I'd already played him in Houston. I remember I was a bit horrified because there's a scene in *You Never Can Tell* where they're all having a meal at some big hotel in Eastbourne, outside on the balcony or somewhere. William, the head waiter, is the great gent of all times. There is a scene where he is laying the plates very properly all round the table and the sound effects tell you it's at the seaside. There were a couple of seagulls that Stanley Holloway wanted to have fly over, and he'd hold the plate and look at it, and obviously what the seagulls had done on it, and then get a cloth and wipe it and put it back in its place. I'm sure it got an enormous laugh, but William no way would ever do that.

Tony van Bridge, whose 80th birthday it is tomorrow—incidentally, I'm 82 and my birthday's tomorrow—directed *You Never Can Tell* and hired a designer, I've forgotten her name, and when the sketches came round for the costumes she had William the waiter in a long, butcher's apron. I said,

"Tony, I don't want to pull rank as the artistic director—it's your production and I hate interfering—but I cannot go on in a butcher's apron." William is the great gent of all time. He is *the* gentleman all through the play. He would never wear this. So I've got hanging on the wall in my house her design. She didn't want to repaint it, so she turned my apron into the corner of the table and painted a frock coat over the top of it, and there am I in my proper outfit standing by the corner of the table. Tony said, "I knew it was wrong but I didn't want to upset her." I said, "I'm afraid you're going to have to, Tony."

Going back to Kate Reid, like many actors she never opened her mail, afraid to find bills. Her mail was piled so high, and inside would be cheques as well, some of them stale-dated because she couldn't face opening bills. She was terrible at paying bills, and sometimes she had the money. Every time she did a film, she opened a bank account. I'm sure she's got back accounts all over the States that nobody knows about. I couldn't stand this, many years ago, and I said, "Kate, either open your mail or I'm going to open a set of books for you," which I did. I did it for about a year, until Bell started ringing up, saying, "Miss Reid has not paid her bill so she said we were to call her manager." I just took all the books and went over to Kate and said, "Kate, I'm not your manager. You're on your own."

When she died, Reid Willis, her son, asked me if I would do the eulogy at Kate's funeral. This was the night before. I said, "Reid, these are the sorts of things you have to do some homework on." I've done a lot of public speaking, to Rotarians and other groups about the theatre, but I really have to do a lot of homework. People think it's off the cuff but it isn't, and I think most speakers are the same. Churchill used to sit in his bath thinking up witticism. He inserted them at the right moment but they were by no means impromptu. Anyway, Barbara Hamilton, who was Kate's great friend, said, "Whatever you do, make it funny." Well, Barbara went on before me and was anything but funny. She was almost in tears. So I went on and I made it funny, and everybody was absolutely delighted. They said, "Thank God you gave us the real Kate." I said there were times when she used to be a bit naughty and how I used to deal with it, and everybody thought this was the real Kate. I remember David William, who was then the artistic director at Stratford—I had gone there to see Pat Galloway in something and I was at the party after the show—he was giving notes to them and he saw me. He came over and said, "I thought you did such a marvellous job at Kate's funeral because you gave us Kate. She was irritating, wasn't she, but she was so good." That's the whole point: she was.

The extraordinary thing is that people said, "Oh well, she's a natural." She was a natural but she was so much more than that. To me, you're underselling somebody if you say that; in other words, it's no trouble for her to act. It was a lot of trouble. But one of the differences between Kate and me is that she would do work on a script, particularly film scripts, I did two or three films with her, and she would arrive not knowing a line. If we knew what the next shot was going to be, there's usually a half an hour while they're setting up the lighting. I would sit down with her and rehearse our scene. I had known mine for three weeks. At my age I find now I have a photographic memory, which is the thing that saved me when I was doing a play a week; I don't know how some people did that who didn't have a photographic memory. But I find now, being older, where I could learn an act a play a night, which I did for many years, to do one scene in a film I need the script two weeks beforehand. I need to be absolutely certain of what I'm saying. Kate never did that, but she always did beautifully. She was quite incredible. She was so real. She was just marvellous to work with. She gave you a tremendous amount, and we used to have a lot of fun. I'd be doing a little dance with her and the camera's moving—I remember in a film we did called *Bye, Bye Blues*, when I was playing her husband, we had to do a little dance ending up in an embrace. The camera was moving round all the time. So when we finished she thought my face was facing the camera. She said, "Ah, you knew how to end up, didn't you?" I said, "Look there, Kate. That's where the bloody camera is." She said, "Oh, really!" The camera was facing her.

Kate had had so many opportunities. She had played with all the greats. People like Alec Guinness, even though she went on drunk a couple of times in *Dylan* when she played with Alec Guinness, when the stage management told the management and the management wanted to fire her, Guinness said, "If she leaves the show, I will leave too." They adored working with her, even when they knew there was always this danger that she was going to go on and be a bit tight.

Some actors are difficult. I had difficulty in *Mrs Warren's Profession* with Roberta Maxwell. She used to call me Chief, for one thing, which irritated me no end. "How are you this morning, Chief?" *There* is a Method actress who never fixes anything. In those scenes with Kate and Roberta, these are the two wonderful scenes in *Mrs Warren's Profession* where she first tells Roberta that she is a madam and then there is the second scene where Roberta finds out that she's still doing it and Roberta had assumed she had given it up. They two scenes are absolutely rivetting. We worked on these scenes for hours and hours and hours. I'd say to Roberta and Kate, "This is a concerto or a symphony. There are four movements. The first one stops here, the next one there," and I told them exactly where those four movements were. I told them they had got the first and the third right but the second and the fourth still needed work. Then one morning I said, "You've got three of them right. We're nearly there." Roberta said, "What do you mean, nearly there? When are we going to get there?" I said, "We still haven't got the fourth movement right." One morning they arrived and got all four right and the stage management was spellbound. There wasn't a sound. I said, "That's it. Now, saw it off, come back tomorrow and do the same thing." We came back next day and Roberta gave a totally different performance. She drove me mad. I said, "What on earth do you think you're doing?" I used a few adjectives in between there, which they're always used to when they work with me. I don't mean them but I do stick in a few bad words here and there. Roberta said, "I'm experimenting." I said, "We've been experimenting for four bloody weeks. The experimenting is over. We got there. You saw the reaction you had on the stage management yesterday. What are you mucking about for? Leave it where it is."

So we came to the opening night, and she is noted for this. John Hirsh phoned me after she played *Mrs Warren's Profession*, because she was at Stratford the following year. He said, "How did you get on with Roberta Maxwell?" I said, "Are you having trouble?" He said, "Am I ever having trouble." So she does it with everybody. He described how she was doing exactly the same thing. She even went on stage and gave different performances every night. Come the opening night, she's supposed to be a little short; she's efficient, she's a business girl. In the opening scene in the garden in the Warrens' house, Vivie is on a hammock reading a book and Praed, a great friend of Mrs Warren comes to the garden gate and leans over and says, "Is this the Warren house?" Not looking up from the book, she is supposed to say, "Yes." "And would you be Vivie Warren?" "Yes." She's a bit short. I'm sitting there with my wife on opening night; this is going to be *the* opening night of all opening nights. The curtain goes up, Praed comes to the gate and says, "Is this the Warren house?" "Y-e-e-s." That's all she said. I gripped my wife by the arm and said, "We've bought it. I know what she's going to do." She played for sympathy the whole way through.

I was so angry. After the show, she and Kate shared the same washroom. They had two separate dressing rooms but they both led into the same common bathroom. I went in to see Kate and told her how absolutely superb I thought she was, and I said, "I'm not going in to see her." Kate said, "You've got to." I said, "I'm not, because if I do, I'll be very rude to her." Just at that moment, Roberta walks through the washroom and said, "Well, Coach, any notes?" Kate scuttled out of the room. I said, "Yes, Roberta, I've got some notes for you. You went on tonight and you didn't give a damn about anybody else but yourself. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner you leave this business, the better," and I walked out. I was absolutely cruel to her. When I think of it now, I think how cruel I was. But she needed to be shocked out of it. She didn't speak to me for six weeks. I looked in on the performance a few times and she hadn't

changed it. Then she came up to me in the pub one night, the George I think it was, in the square. She said, "Can I talk to you?" I said, "You can talk to me any time you like." She said, "I think I understand what you mean now." I said, "Oh. Well, that's good. It's taken six weeks but do you think you really understood what I mean." "I think I do." I went and watched the performance that night and she played it the way we had got to that morning, and from then on she did it every night during the season. I run into her now and we're great friends. She's forgotten it. Quite extraordinary, isn't it?

Sometimes you have to shock people. Directors are psychologists; they're all sorts of things but they are psychologists too. I used to have to shock Kate to stop her going on to the bottle. I did a show with her in Vancouver and we were sharing the same accommodation. She had bottles stashed all over the house. I went round and just smashed them all and poured them down the sink. Such a good actress. So many good performers have that weakness. I think it's because as they get older they get more and more nervous. The extraordinary thing with actors is you have all the confidence in the world when you begin. I don't know if that's the same with other professions but it's certainly true of actors. Then, as time goes along and you realize the number of things that can go wrong, you get more and more nervous. I was talking to Tony van Bridge the other night and he's now 80 and he says really this is going to be his last season, because he finds the nervous strain in going on at all now. Having been on stage and made so many entrances in his life, it's extraordinary that it gets—and I can understand that, you get more and more nervous because you realize how many things can go wrong.

One of the things that strikes me about The Shaw is it seems to be a very happy place to be. Certainly any of the times I've been there and once or twice when I've been down since I've not been there, I found they're a bunch of very, very happy people. Actors bitch about each other normally; they don't seem to do that down there. They all adore Christopher, obviously, and they all adore each other. They get on terribly well. That's a very good thing to have, particularly if you're in a company for as long as they are. I did two seasons at Stratford; I couldn't wait for the season to be over, particularly if you're playing a part you hate, and I was. I played Capulet in Romeo and Juliet one year in a production which I absolutely hated. We started rehearsing in February and the last performance was October 15. I didn't dislike them as people, but I didn't like some of the performances of people I was playing with, I didn't like the production. I had a special calendar in my dressing room with all of Romeo and Juliet's days marked in black. As a performance went by I would cross it off. It got to the point that at the end of the season, in the intermission I would cross half of it off. I think it must be one of the secrets of success of the Shaw Festival that everybody gets on so well. They certainly seem to.