

# RON NIPPER

**Interviewer (Nancy Butler):** First of all, how did you get to be a stage manager?

**Mr Nipper:** I came back from England—I had been an actor—and I needed money. A friend of mine who was an actor working for the Canadian Opera said, “They’re looking for someone who can ASM and act to go on tour.” So I went and talked to Herman Geiger-Torel, “Papa” as I called him. I had just been to Argentina and we talked about the opera house in Buenos Aires where he had been the director. I never auditioned for him, he just said, “You’re hired.”

**Interviewer:** So you had had some career as an actor before that, in England?

**Mr Nipper:** And in Canada. I started off, because there was almost no theatre in Canada, and my first role was as a sex murderer on television on a show called General Motors Presents, which was an hour-long show in which I strangled young women and attacked them.

**Interviewer:** What live theatre did you do?

**Mr Nipper:** There was almost none. There was a theatre group in the east end, Broadview Players, and I did stuff with them through my theatre school. I’ve got my little awards as best supporting actor at the Dominion Drama Festival and things like that. It was mainly television in those days.

**Interviewer:** Was the Crest going?

**Mr Nipper:** That was the only professional theatre in Toronto at that time. Of course they had people like Charmion King, Bob Goulet, and there wasn’t much hope of many of us getting in that. That’s why I went to England, because I thought, “Well, everyone goes there,” but in England what I mainly did, because English actors wouldn’t do them, were commercials. At one point, because there were only two channels then, I had so many commercials on that they refused to use me for about six months because they said, “Every time you turn it on you’re either doing drugs or candies or Senior Service cigarettes.” Then I had a water skiing accident. I was up for a role in a Richard Widmark/Sidney Poitier film. I auditioned and they said, “Fine, we’ll talk to your agent.” I got a call from the agent, saying they wanted me to come back again. I went back and thought that was pretty good, a second call. They said, “We’ll be in touch with your agent.” Then my agent called and said, “They want to talk to you again.” I went and auditioned again with Sidney Poitier and Richard Widmark, and they said, “Could you wait in the outer office for a few minutes.” So I waited and thought, “This is looking really good.” Then Widmark came out and said, “You’re the type we’re looking for, what you’re doing with the role is lovely, but unfortunately you’re just too English.” I went, “I’m not English, I’m Canadian,” and he said, “Well, you sound like an English actor trying to sound American.” Because of the commercials I had developed a very English accent.

There was a cigarette company called Bachelor cigarettes in which every year there was a new man on the cigarette package, all the billboards, all the TV advertising. I auditioned for them. At that point I was getting a lot of medical bills because I had had this water skiing accident. My agent called and said, “You’ve got it.” The day my first commercial was to be shot, as I was just getting to leave my flat the phone rang and it was my agent. She said, “Don’t bother going. It’s cancelled. I know you’re not listening to the news but the white paper on cigarette advertising just came through and the whole campaign is cancelled.” At that point I went, “Okay, I’m going back to Canada for a while and then I’ll come back to England.” I went back to England a lot but just as a visitor. I never worked there again.

**Interviewer:** So you got into stage management because you were offered this split role.

**Mr Nipper:** And boy was it split. Not only was I ASM-ing but the opera company had an agreement with IATSI so the stage management actually did all the technical stuff of putting up the set, unloading it, loading it. I had to do that, plus I was playing my own part, which was a very small part, Jan Rubes’s aide-de-camp, and I was understudying Frosh in Die Fledermaus, which has a 13-minute monologue at the top of the third act. At the first dress rehearsal the actor who was doing Frosh hurt his back, so I had to do the second dress rehearsal and then start the tour. It was a bus tour, so I would get into town, unload the set—I would just throw my bags

into a hotel room and couldn't really remember where the hotel was; the company manager would tell me at the end of the show—go to the theatre, put up the set, then get into costume because my other character didn't come on until the second act, change the set between the acts, do my part—it was Ivan—then I couldn't help change the set for the third act because I had to change costume, change make-up and then come on and do my 13-minute monologue. I was very funny because when we did the rehearsal I said to Geiger-Torel, "Papa, some of these lines are just so corny I can't say them." He said, "For Christ's sake, Nipper, we're going to be playing Vegreville, not New York." Then they offered me the Toronto season as one of the stage managers and then another tour and then another tour. People started forgetting I was an actor. In the last tour I did with the opera, one of the ASMs and I had non-speaking parts as two servants. Papa Torel flew in to, I think, Vancouver and said, "Jesus Christ, what is this? You people don't even exist in the opera and you're getting reviews!"

Shaw kept asking me if I would be interested in coming and I kept saying no because by that time I had gone into industrial shows, which paid an awful lot of money. They would be something like General Motors presenting their cars, but it would be a big musical show and cost a million dollars, which was a lot of money in the late sixties. I worked with Michael Learned, Bruno Gerussi, Barb Hamilton, Don Harron, a lot of the big names—also Bobby Orr and Nancy Greene. They were big musicals. It would be split show because one day it would be Chevrolet/Oldsmobile and the next it would be Buick/Pontiac. I had to have signs put up in the orchestra pit so the performers would remember, because they were the same songs but they had to change the names of the cars. One time Tom Kneebone put his hand on the roof of the car and said, "Under this hood...." I said to him, "Tom, the hood is down below. That's the roof." He said, "What do I know about cars, except streetcars and taxicabs?" I was doing that for several years. I did General Motors, Christie's Biscuits, Esso, and I was also managing and doing budgets on a lot of these things.

In 1971 I was doing a ghetto musical called *A Me Nobody Knows* with a friend of mine, Grania Mortimer??, at the Crest and I said to her, "All my industrials are cancelled," because a recession was setting in, "so I think I'm going to give the Shaw a call and tell them that yes, I will come." She said, "You're too late. I decided I didn't want to go back to Stratford. I've already called the Shaw and I'm going now." I was out in Winnipeg visiting my parents and I got a call saying that Grania had been hit by a taxicab just the day they were starting or she was starting. She was walking across Front Street and this cab came along and she went flying. They said could I come over and start the season and I said yes, I would. Poor Grania, she died a couple of years ago but she never recovered. She was married to Bob Christie and was Dinah Christie's stepmother. She didn't know who here kids were or anything. It was a sad way for me to get the job.

Seventy-one was the Shaw's tenth anniversary. We had borrowed a sword from a military man in town, Brigadier Moog??. He had this wonderful ceremonial sword that we used in a show we were doing. Shaw was having a big tenth-anniversary birthday part on Queen Street in front of the Court House and I stood there in complete horror because they used the sword to cut the cake, without telling me they were going to do it. The man never loaned us one military thing again.

**Interviewer:** Who was artistic director at the time?

**Mr Nipper:** Paxton Whitehead.

**Interviewer:** How many stage managers were there then?

**Mr Nipper:** Well, there was me, and because Shaw didn't have enough money, and it was entirely illegal, the production manager was called the production stage manager, and I was actually the production stage manager. There was a second stage manager but I didn't find out until years later that he actually only had an assistant stage manager contract. We had all these kids from Niagara College who came in, and there was one little girl whom I called Bernina because the only thing she could do was work the vacuum cleaner.

**Interviewer:** How many shows were there?

**Mr Nipper:** There would be two and then two, switching over in August. There was one a night but on Wednesdays and Saturdays we would do the first show, the matinee at four o'clock and then do a second show

at 8:30. When we got to the big theatre, when we were doing *Caesar and Cleopatra*, of course it took so long and as then actors walked off stage I would say, “Half hour for second show,” and Shaw would have food waiting for them, from the Oban usually. The thing with *Cleopatra* was that I had to say, “Okay, all those not in act two will have dinner now. All those in not in act three will have dinner now.” The crew, Caesar and Cleopatra, and I would just have a plate and I would be sitting at my console ready for the second show as I tried to eat something and Caesar and Cleopatra would be doing the same thing in their dressing rooms. We had no time.

**Interviewer:** That sounds like poor scheduling.

**Mr Nipper:** Well, it eventually changed because it got expensive for Shaw with the catered food and it wasn’t working all that well. But it didn’t change that much until Chris came and we started doing regular matinées. Now, of course, we’re doing tons of matinées.

**Interviewer:** Have you noticed a big change in stage managing from the early years until now, or is it pretty well the same business?

**Mr Nipper:** It’s still as stressful as ever. In opening the new theatre, a friend of mine phoned me from Ottawa and said, “It must be exciting.” He had been a stage manager. I said, “I wouldn’t know. I’m so tired. I’m spending 18 hours a day here.” In stress value, no, it hasn’t changed that much. The first couple of years here actually to me seemed more relaxed, though I was basically *the* stage manager. We always used to rehearse in Toronto because there was no space here. Then we would go on tour first and then bring the show to the Court House. When we opened the Festival stage I was doing *You Never Can Tell* and supposedly *The Glass Butterfly* but I had to say to my ASM, “You’re going to do the rehearsals for that show because we’re in two different spots in Toronto and I can’t be in both places at the same time. But I will come in on production week and take over.” He did just a good job I said to him, “Do you want to run the show? You won’t get credit for it. My name will be on it.” He went, “Yeah, yeah, please.” When we were in Toronto the rehearsal hall we had was at the St Lawrence—not in the building but what they used as the rehearsal hall. I was filthy and you had to climb stairs. Stanley Holloway was 84 at the time and said, “I just can’t make those stairs,” so we found a rehearsal space at St Paul’s Cathedral at Bloor and Jarvis. They have a hall behind the church that you really can’t see from the street. It was wonderful. It had a great kitchen, and a green room with all chintz furniture. Stanley Holloway walked in and looked and said, “It pays off, working for an old man, doesn’t it?” He was wonderful.

**Interviewer:** Are some actors easier to stage manage than others—

**Mr Nipper:** Oh yeah.

**Interviewer:** —or are they all very professional?

**Mr Nipper:** No.

**Interviewer:** You have difficult personalities.

**Mr Nipper:** Oh yes. But a lot of the ones we have here at Shaw, especially over the years, are really very good, but there are the occasional SOBs that will just drive you crazy.

**Interviewer:** My experience here is that it is often the young ones who are the most difficult.

**Mr Nipper:** Yes, quite often it is because they think they know everything. We had one actor who one year just go me so angry it was the first time I’ve ever raised my fist to a man; didn’t hit him but I was really tempted, and he backed down because he saw I was just so angry at what he had done. Then I get other actors that I play on psychologically if they’re doing something wrong. I’ll say, “Oh, it’s not what I expected from you. I thought So-and-so had stepped into your body and taken over your soul because I would expect it of her but not of you.” They stop doing it immediately.

**Interviewer:** You’re there, of course, at the very beginning of the rehearsals, when they start doing production rehearsals. By the time the show goes on, do you have a very strong idea of how different parts should be played, so that if they get too silly or too wild—

**Mr Nipper:** Only from what I know the director wants. Then it’s my job to see that they keep to that

schedule.

**Interviewer:** Does the director usually give you notes or anything, or is it just by watching and observing?

**Mr Nipper:** No, they don't give me notes unless they are technical things, but it's just my listening to what they're saying to the actors, so they know what they want. Last year was an extraordinary year. Joe Ziegler was doing the murder mystery and I said to his wife, Nancy, "When you're through with him can I have him?" He is just the most thoughtful director with actors. So I had a company that ran for eight months and they never fought, no one bitched to anyone. It was quite extraordinary that by the time the end of November came they were still all friends. It was the same thing in my other show at the Court House with Neil Munro. Neil and I have known each other for about 25 years but it was the first time we'd worked together. I always used to tease him and say, "Well, you realize that Newton thinks we're lovers and he's afraid we might get into an argument. That's why we don't work together." Again, the company that Neil directed was all so together and so friendly with each other. That doesn't always happen. I've had shows where they kvetch at each other or go around giving notes to each other, which, when I catch them I put my foot down and say, "No, no. I'm the stage manager, I give the notes; you don't. If you have a problem, come to me. I'll deal with it." But basically a lot of them have been quite a good company.

Working with Chris is great. I love working with Chris because he never loses his cool and he's always very patient. The only thing that he keeps saying is, "Give me something. I can't teach you to act but give me something and I'll tell you if it's too much or too little but I have to have something from you." One year we had one young actor who had a big movie out at the time and I said, "Chris, what are you going to do about it? There's nothing. It's not even an English accent. It's not even an attempt." He kept going, "Oh, well, we'll give her another week." Finally we were getting to a week and a half from the previews and I said, "Chris, something's got to be done." It was a Sunday, and he said, "I'm taking her for a walk." I went, "Well, we'll never see her again." And sure enough. I had told him who the replacement should be, someone we had in the company and she's a wonderful actress and she's been doing lead parts since. I just said to the cast, "You won't be seeing her again."

**Interviewer:** In the early days, before I took reports to the archives in Guelph I used to have to make sure everything was complete and I would read the show reports from the stage manager. With some of them, you really got an idea that the audience wasn't aware that anything had gone wrong but things did go wrong and seriously wrong. One of them I believe was last year when somebody noticed that when they were smoking a cigarette while wearing gloves that when they struck the match their glove was flammable and they asked for it to be changed or coated so it wouldn't burn.

**Mr Nipper:** When Cameron Porteous was putting up a display and he was using the original production that Chris did of *Saint Joan* and Cameron went, "I was looking at your show reports. You could probably be sued so I can't use them, but they're funny as hell."

**Interviewer:** Do you remember the stage manager who I think ended up with an alcohol problem?

**Mr Nipper:** Alan. He's legally blind.

**Interviewer:** Is he? Well, his stage reports were very amusing.

**Mr Nipper:** Alan is living in Vancouver but he can't work because he can't see so he just sort of does charity work. He was my boss when I went out to work for Chris in Vancouver.

**Interviewer:** So you left the Shaw?

**Mr Nipper:** No, I just went out during the winter season. I had been out to Vancouver before for a couple of shows when Paxton was running Vancouver Playhouse. He asked me to come out and stage manage *Arms and the Man* and assistant direct. It was his last season there. Then I did another show and Alan said, "Would you be interested in coming back?" and I said, "I love it here. It's like a daydream compared to Shaw." So we opened the Festival Theatre and I didn't hear anything and didn't hear anything. Finally I phoned Alan, because Chris

was taking over, and I had known Chris for a long time. I said, "What's going on? I haven't had a contract or anything from you." He said, "Oh, Chris has decided he's going to try a local stage manager who's been with Disney." I said, "Why didn't you call and tell me? I've already told Paxton I can't take the show on tour because I'm going out to Vancouver." He said, "I'm terribly sorry. I didn't want to upset you." I said, "Well, you're upsetting me now. I'd rather know from the beginning." I had to go to Paxton and say, "It's okay, I can do the tour." He said, "I'll have to think about it." I said, "More than two seconds and I'm outta here."

I did the tour and then I did a trip around the world and came back, and I was doing another tour of *The Devil's Disciple*, a co-production with Neptune Theatre in Halifax. It was just hell. I left all the company except the crew and wardrobe in Fredericton to keep rehearsing *Charley's Aunt*, and I arrived in Belleville. The hotel reservations through the Canada Council were all screwed up. The hotel people had decided they would just double people up. We had Alan Scarfe staying with our truck driver. Alan said, "I'm not a snob but I don't even know who the hell our truck driver is." I gave up my room to our wardrobe girls.

I had rented a car because there were no train reservations from Montreal to Belleville and I phoned up the office and said, "What the heck's going on? Where are the tickets?" The secretary said, "We thought you could just buy the tickets when you got there." I said, "It's the Rapido. It's the most used train in Canada." She said, "Well, I'll call them up." When she got off the phone again she said to me, "It's full but they said you could stand." I said, "We're not standing. I will rent a station wagon and we'll drive." I don't know if Shaw liked that. I said, "I don't give a damn. We are not standing on a train. When we got to Belleville there was the whole screwup with the hotel and finally my carpenter and I found a motel room—the last one, because the Shriners were in town, there was another convention, and it was out on the 401. It was what was called the showroom. It was two beds and this long bowling alley where the clothes samples would usually hang.

At which point the phone rang and it was Alan Wallace from Vancouver saying Chris wants to know would you be willing to come out and do the season in Vancouver. I said, "Yes." He said, "We haven't talked salary yet." I said, "I don't care. You've caught me at the right time. I just want out." And that's how I went out to Vancouver and stayed there for six years of Chris's reign and then went back once with his successor to do one show.

**Interviewer:** And you stayed on with Shaw during the summer all that time?

**Mr Nipper:** Oh yes.

**Interviewer:** Do you think computers really have helped in stage managing?

**Mr Nipper:** They probably do, for those who use them. I don't use them. I just say to my assistants that I don't have the time. The funny thing is that before a lot of our little stage managers were born I was working for James Richardson in securities running one of their IBM departments, but it was a different kind of computer then. I kept saying, "It's not that I'm stupid because I used to have to take different machines and rewire the boards to get them to do what I wanted. It wasn't a mouse but with this little mouse I keep going, 'What the hell am I doing?'"

**Interviewer:** What was the town like when you first came here in 1971?

**Mr Nipper:** It was a sleepy town. The first two seasons I was here I shared a house with the box office manager who was a friend of mine from Toronto. She and I decided we would get a house together. We had a house on the corner of Mary and Butler, a two-bedroom house, furnished, for \$200 a month. Where the Buttery is, I forget what the name of the restaurant was but it was a sort of greasy spoon, there was a Chinese greasy spoon restaurant, and the only decent place to eat was the Oban, or the Pillar and Post, and it wasn't a hotel yet, it was just a restaurant. So on Mondays on our days off we used to go over to the Clarkson House in Lewiston. On Sundays we only did a four o'clock show, which meant we had Sundays free and we could go to the movies. The Royal George was then the Brock. When you went in it was dark and you sat down and you fell on the floor because half the seats were missing.

**Interviewer:** Don't tell Marjorie McCourt that.

**Mr Nipper:** It's true.

Of course they hated us.

**Interviewer:** Did you really feel that?

**Mr Nipper:** Oh yes. Not all of the people, but there was a big segment. When they were starting to build the new theatre there was a letter sent to most of the townspeople—no idea who sent it—saying, "Do not rent your house to anyone at the Shaw Festival because they'll vomit on your floors and they'll destroy everything." Even the local police used to come around and circle the houses of our people: "Oh, they're in theatre, they must have dope."

**Interviewer:** Do you think there was a lot of antagonism on the part of people who began the theatre and then saw it taken away from them?

**Mr Nipper:** No, I think it was the Mennonite mentality around here.

**Interviewer:** You just think it was a different crowd, because I would think the people who started the theatre would be very pleased to see it take off.

**Mr Nipper:** Yeah, and at that point they were still very involved. I remember some of the ladies who would sit in front of the Court House to help build the Festival Theatre. They were all very sweet. Now they might feel resentful, except I think that Chris has always tried to make them feel that they're still part of it and there's appreciation for what they did.

**Interviewer:** I think a lot of us moved on to different issues and different organizations, but I remember interviewing another person and she was saying that when they were choosing the site for the Festival Theatre there was a great deal of animosity and entire women's guild resigned, because they were threatening to put it on the golf course. But I would have thought that when they decided on the site that they did, people would have come around. I remember even when I first came here in 1981, Christopher and Paul Reynolds were proposing that outdoor theatre beside the theatre, and that got everybody's knickers in a twist.

**Mr Nipper:** Oh yeah, especially Pat Rand, who formed a committee. And of course, what have they done? They've built on the Common and they're not paving it all over. What we were proposing was a tent that would be temporary, to be taken down, and improving the creek, making it prettier, and it would be behind the trees so it wouldn't be seen from Queen's Parade. It was very strange. They completely misunderstood what Chris and Cam and Paul were trying to do. Because we really did need—we do need a bigger theatre. That's why Stratford is not doing as good shows as we do but they're better off financially in a way because they've got three big theatres. Their second smallest theatre seats as many as our main theatre.

**Interviewer:** It's true, they do have bigger theatres. Mind you, they have to fill them too, but at least you don't need to put in so many shows.

**Mr Nipper:** Even when they don't fill them, they still have enough. Financially it makes it must more viable for them. The funny thing is when the Festival stage was built I said to Paxton, "Why only 855 seats?" He said, "At the Court House there are only 300 there." The first year, or course, we sold out and then they realized they hadn't built a big enough theatre.

**Interviewer:** Do you not think that in the early days there was still a mentality of it being just summer theatre and then it sort of shifted when they built the Festival Theatre, it became then "big" theatre.

**Mr Nipper:** Well, I think that took them by surprise, as to how well we did. Then they figured, well, they're coming because it's a new theatre, they want to see what it looks like. The second year we were still doing great business and then they went, "Oh dear." I love that theatre, except for the balcony. You know why the balcony is like it is? They wanted to make sure that no seat was more than 150 feet from the stage, so they built it steep. Instead of spreading it out further and flatter, they just built it steep. I just loathe sitting up in the balcony. There's no knee room. Downstairs I love it; you can sit anywhere. I prefer sitting near the back, usually because I don't want to be near the front in case the actors see me and then they'll start reacting to my being there.

**Interviewer:** About four or five years ago they called me up and asked me if I would usher there as a volunteer and I ended up being the only usher who would be willing to usher upstairs; the other women all refused.

**Mr Nipper:** The sad thing is, you see some little old lady who's got a seat up there and the ushers usually have to help them down because they're frightened to death. You do look down and it's just so steep.

**Interviewer:** It's a very attractive theatre but of course I think the theatre's outgrown it by leaps and bounds. They've been adding on and adding on bits and pieces, and as you say, we are so short of rehearsal halls.

**Mr Nipper:** That's my *bête noir* is our rehearsal space. I hate the loft. It's just so confined. It's nice that we have it but it feels like there's no air, you can never get the heating right or the cooling, and you start going brain dead after a few hours rehearsing in there. Everyone, the actors hate it. It was just not a good design, the fact that there was nothing air-feeding about it.

**Interviewer:** The library is bad too. After working in it for three hours you get very logy.

When you first came to the theatre you had Paxton Whitehead as your first artistic director and then there was a period where you had a changeover of several people.

**Mr Nipper:** In the middle of Paxton's reign, Tony van Bridge took over for one year. Tony decided, since he had charge for a year, to see if we could do bigger shows. And we did. We did *Pygmalion*, *Caesar and Cleopatra* and *Leaven of Malice*, a Robertson Davies play which I know Tony is fond of but I was running the show and I went, "Thirty-eight scenes of boredom!" Paxton left on sort of a bad note, because it was our most successful year and the board offered him a one-year-more contract. Paxton just said, "No, I might as well leave on a winning streak."

Then we had Dick Kirschner, who was a disaster. He wasn't called artistic director, he was called producer. Dick's way of solving a problem was to go home, unplug the phone and drink a bottle of Valium and lie on the floor and go to sleep. We had to get a friend of his from Italy, a writer, to come and take care of him. He just couldn't cope. He kept talking to me about, "Oh, I've got to find something for Liv to do," and I said, "As an omen?" and he said, "Yeah, and Dame Judith." I said, "Isn't she dead yet?" He had no concept. He was sending limos. He said, "Tom Kneebone's very upset. He had to share his limo with someone." I said, "What limo?" He said, "Well, Ron, they're stars. I sent limos for them." I said, "No, no. We pay them their bus fare. There are no stars here, Dick.

After Dick left, Leslie Yeo took over temporarily because Chris couldn't get away at that point. Leslie did a good workmanlike job. He tried, except his rehearsal schedules were hysterical. He said, "No, no, it's okay, I'll do the rehearsal schedules." I said, "You've got Mary Savidge and Mary Haney running from the front lobby to the rehearsal room for two different shows because they've got 20 minutes," and he said, "Yeah, I don't want to waste any time." I said, "They need a break." Both of them had said, "My mind was reeling. I didn't know what show I was bloody well in, running back and forth."

END OF FIRST SIDE

**Interviewer:** What was it like when the Queen came?

**Mr Nipper:** She was going to a banquet at the Pillar and Post and the first problem was—we had been investigated by the RCMP, and I went to go to the theatre and the police wouldn't let me through. I said, "But I've got my pass." "Well, how do we know it's real?" So I had to go back home, phone the theatre and say, "You'd better send someone to see me through the lines. The cops won't let me through." My assistant called me at home, he was living out in Virgil, and said, "Ron, they won't let me through. They keep saying, 'What does that pass mean?'" I said, "Tell them the RCMP gave them to us. We're okay." So we had to send someone for him, someone for me.

The whole thing is that the Queen must be the first to leave a banquet and she must be the last to come

into a theatre. Everyone at the banquet was invited to the performance. She left and they ushered everyone through the back door of the Pillar and Post into buses and got them to the theatre. Once she got to the theatre—what’s now the accounting office; it used to be the board of directors’ room—there was her own water (she always brought her own water and her own gin), and our house manager, John Brook, was to call me when the last person was seated and I would call the board room and tell Tom Burrows that, as I called her, Betty Windsor could be seated. John called me up and said, “Okay, they’re all in.” So I called up the board room and said, “Is Tom Burrows there?” because I thought I was talking to a security man. The voice said, “No, he’s just stepped out for a moment.” I said, “Could you take a message?” He said, “Surely.” I said, “Would you tell him that Her Majesty”—Tom was always worried I would say “Betty Windsor”—“can be seated; the audience is in.” He said, “Oh well, she’s just getting ready to go.” I said, “Well, thank God, because they’re going at the heat waiting to see her and they might ruin our new seats.”

After the performance, which was very late, Stanley Holloway said, “Ron, do I have to stay? I met her when she was a little girl, I’ve met her grandmother and her mother.” I said, “Stanley, you stay.” Jimmy Valentine, who was in the third act, which didn’t start till midnight—we didn’t think she was going to stay that long but she stayed for the whole thing—I said, “Jimmy, you’ve just had your day off.”

Of course, we were all presented to the Queen and Prince Philip. He said to me, “Seats okay?” I said, “Yes.” Tom Burrows came running to me and said, “What did you say to Prince Philip?” I said, “What?” He said, “On the phone, Ron. What did you say to Prince Philip? You didn’t call her Betty Windsor, did you?” I went, “No-o-o,” and I told him. He said, “Well, they must have a good sense of humour because when I came in the room they were both rolling on the sofa laughing and saying, ‘We must go because your theatre is in danger.’”

When the Trudeaus came with Indira Gandhi, that was another thing because we had what we used to call the big bear, that big rope curtain we used to have. They had decided there would be sort of a lottery of photographers allowed backstage. The curtain came down and as Trudeau and Indira Gandhi were coming around, suddenly there was these men pushing the curtain. They knocked me over and knocked my stand over, which was an ironing board because they forgot to build a console for the stage manager. I was yelling, “Security! Security!” It was these photographers who didn’t want to share their photos and wanted to get their own. It was hell that whole week.

**Interviewer:** Where was your console?

**Mr Nipper:** It was on stage, stage right, down-stage. I used to call the shows basically from on stage in the wings, which I miss doing. I hate being in the booth because if I’ve got an assistant who is not that experienced, an actor walks by me and I can tell, just from being in the business so long, what mood they are in or what problems they might be having. It was just a closeness. When I went back to Vancouver for Chris’s successor, Allen MacInnis, who has directed for us here, he had just got his Equity card and he was acting, and he and one of the young actresses went to the director and said, “Roger, the stage manager is sitting in the wings,” and Roger said, “Yes, isn’t it wonderful? Most of them like to be in a little booth, protected. Ron still likes to call it from the stage, which I find wonderful.”

**Interviewer:** Who prompts the actors?

**Mr Nipper:** We don’t.

**Interviewer:** What if they forget a line?

**Mr Nipper:** We hope that the other actor on stage will get him out of it. We can, and I have. Dougie Campbell was doing *Major Barbara* and he dived in the third act. He started climbing these ramparts to get to me and I just belted out the line to him. After the show I said, “Dougie, I was trained as an actor and I know how to give it so that most of the audience won’t hear my giving you a line. You don’t have to climb the ramparts. You’ll hear me.” We very rarely ever have to do it any more. Actors can usually get out of it.

The funniest one was during *The Children’s Hour* with Jennie Phipps. Jennie is notorious. I adore her,



we've worked together so often, but she had this phone conversation and I said to our sound men, "Do you think we can get a line in so that when she picks up the phone I can be saying, 'Hello, this is So-and-so.'" Her name in the play was Amelia and she would say, "Hello, Amelia? This is Amelia." No, Jennie, you're Amelia, you're talking to So-and-so. The actors who have been here for a while and have worked with Jennie can deal with it, especially Tony van Bridge, who is my hero as an actor.

**Interviewer:** I know Christopher once told me that that is his great fear, forgetting his lines, and when he is starting to notice memory problems, as we all are at his age, he is starting to worry because he thinks that—

**Mr Nipper:** It doesn't even matter what age you are. I was doing summer stock at Port Carling and we did a show a week. You'd be doing one show and rehearsing a second one. You only had a week's rehearsal. We were doing a murder mystery, and came the time when the wife and I were setting up the plot of how to murder him, all she ever had to say was, "Yes. Yes." I suddenly dried. I kept going, "The phone," because I knew there was something to do with the phone. "We've got to think of a way to use the phone." I walked over to where the stage manager was and said, "What the hell are my lines?" I could hear him flipping pages and he said, "I'm looking for it," because he was reading a novel instead of following the script. That panicked me so much that I came right back, but by that time the audience knew I had dried.

Also, when I was doing General Motors, a singer-actress named Roma Hearn was really worried because they kept changing the Cadillac through the tour. We were in Winnipeg and she was worried the fellow she was doing scenes with—she was always in this Cadillac and it was a big Arabian Nights number—and she suddenly dried. I threw the line to her. No response. I threw it again and finally she came off stage and said, "It's not the line, it's the whole bloody paragraph."

In another General Motors show I had an actor-singer who has been here. It was a truck spiel after the big musical number. There was one place he always dried, so I was carefully on book and suddenly people were coming and saying, "Ron, the station wagon's broken down. What do we do?" I said, "Just a minute, just a minute." He got through it. I said, "Okay, haul the station wagon off, tell the dancers they don't have to flip over it, think of something. I can't tell them what to do choreography-wise but there won't be a station wagon on the stage." At which point there was dead silence on the stage and I thought, "What was the last thing he said?" I went, "Oh, yeah," and threw out the line, and he said, "I've already said that." So I said, "Well, say it again and we'll both know where you are."

**Interviewer:** Is it really difficult to stage big productions like *Cavalcade* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and even *Lady Windermere's Fan* last year?

**Mr Nipper:** Oh yes, *Cavalcade* was hell. With *Cavalcade* and you're relying on electrical sets. I did *Pygmalion* in Vancouver when Cameron first decided to use electrical sets. In the Vancouver Playhouse you have very little time. We had a day and a half to tech and dress the thing and then we had the preview. I went out to say to my ASM, "The pillar's not moving. Run out in the dark and push it up stage," and she would because the set just wasn't working. The last show I did for Chris in Vancouver, and it was his replacement who was directing it, was a thing called *Tales of the Vienna Woods* and it was so complicated. There were sets that had to come on to make a street scene; there was revolve that had so many revolves that the guy working the revolve kept going crazy never being sure where he should stop; then another revolve with an orchestra on it; three girls doing a nightclub scene in pasties on the revolve; a Zeppelin coming down. The whole thing was, there was this stupid cheap white curtain which they used at the last minute. There also were slides, and Cam never gave me a slide plot so I kept saying to him, "You have to sit in the booth because I don't know if the slides are out of sync or not." I would say, "Stand by light cues 53 through to 67, sound cues blah, blah, blah, and I'll be back in a minute," and I would rip off my headset, run on stage, grab this curtain and pull it across to close it. Chris had an autopsy, as he called it, after the opening. He said, "What went wrong? Ron, you're the—" I said, "We're trying to be too ambitious for what we've got here." And Cam said, "Well, maybe I should leave the theatre." I said, "Cam, it's not that but you've got to realize the limitations. You're finished, your set's

there, but I've got to deal with it for the next four weeks. I doesn't always work." With the scene where the two streets came together I would have to say to Leon Pownall, because suddenly his butcher shop wouldn't come on, "Would you mind doing the scene without your butcher shop? and he would say, "Why not, it's not there half the time." So he would go out and do the scene and the actress he was doing the scene with would exit into her bookstore and he would turn and suddenly the butcher shop would come on stage.

**Interviewer:** Do you find these things happen here?

**Mr Nipper:** Oh yes. They always will with an electrical set.

**Interviewer:** Do you think it really adds that much to the production?

**Mr Nipper:** It can. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, when it was working was just wonderful. And *Cavalcade* too, without that set and the revolve— There would be days when it just takes one little bit of dirt or something. It may work fine when they are testing it out but comes the show and there's hell to pay.

**Interviewer:** In *Lady Windermere's Fan* I guess it couldn't stop, I mean the people would still be dancing.

**Mr Nipper:** Well, it did.

**Interviewer:** With things like fireworks in *You Can't Take It With You*, aren't they a real concern?

**Mr Nipper:** No, they're special. The most thrill I ever had was early on at the Festival stage when we were doing *Too True To Be Good*, which is a very difficult play. For the ending we had this wonderful thing where, as he's making his last speech, the stage starts filling with smoke. We managed to time it so that just as he finished he stepped back and the smoke closed in. Well, when the curtain went up for the curtain calls, the audience couldn't see the actors and the smoke went right into the audience, so we had to get fans in the portholes and open the back door to push the smoke back. But then we got the people who had sold us these smoke things. They said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, he was a munitions expert in Korea and he sawed them in half because they are just too much for what we need." They went, "It could blow up." But there was just too much smoke if we didn't cut them in half.

**Interviewer:** Gordon, our son, was running crew for one season and he did it with *Caesar and Cleopatra* with Marti Maraden, and she said when she had to lean over the parapet and wave goodbye, Gordon and the kids were trying to make her laugh.

**Mr Nipper:** It's very easy to get Marti to laugh.

**Interviewer:** They would do all these things. She said the final one was in the final presentation when she was waving goodbye and they were standing there with shirt cardboards and they would flip them up and they said "Goodbye, Marti." She said, "I laughed."

**Mr Nipper:** Dougie Chamberlain can make Marti laugh at anything. A lot of times, because I was running that show, Marti would turn her back to the audience and I could just see her shaking because Dougie could crack her up like nothing.

**Interviewer:** She said she would like be lying there and Herb Foster and Doug would throw their pits down. She said she hated that.

**Mr Nipper:** When we did that production was when they had to dive into the sea. The first time we did it the actors were a bit nervous and I said, "It's all very padded and very safe," and I dove in. When we did the second production the hole was much smaller. I turned to Chris and said, "You're the director, you dive in." I suddenly looked down and realized, "I'm older now and it just makes me a bit nervous. I'm sure to crack my head."

**Interviewer:** Did you actually have a pool there?

**Mr Nipper:** No, it was foam. The first time we did it we had an actor named Jan Muszynski playing Apollodorus, the super-glam hero, and he literally dove head first into the foam. I kept going, "You're gonna hurt yourself." The actor he was replacing had hurt himself because he hadn't paid attention to what I was telling him and had broken or fractured his ankle and Jan had had to take over the part. Jan was much better for

the part. He had this fabulous chest and was very handsome; the other was sort of this skinny little runt. He was quite a good actor but just really did not fit Apollodorus. Jan would just take this leap and I would go, “Wow, there’s guts.” Stupidity, but guts.

**Interviewer:** But he never hurt himself.

**Mr Nipper:** No.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any other stories?

**Mr Nipper:** I’ve got to have a million. Sharry Flett keeps saying to me, “You’ve got to write a book because the things you’ve done in theatre”—all the touring I’ve done with various companies—“these things don’t happen any more and young actors don’t even understand about it.” I said, “Well, I can talk but I can’t write. I’m just not good at putting it down on paper. When I talk it’s funny; when I put it down on paper it’s not so funny.”

When we were doing *You Never Can Tell* for the opening show at the Festival, Stanley Holloway said to me, “Ron, you know when I come on in the second act and there are all those seagulls. I was thinking it would be very funny if I threw them a fish into the wings.” I said, “Well, Stanley, props are so busy”—we were all so tired—“what I can do is get a frozen fish and we’ll put a wire in it and you can throw it until props calms down and we’ll make a rubber one.” Pat Gage was playing Gloria, the oldest daughter, and she would come stage right, go upstage and then come down left for her entrance, and she didn’t know about the fish throwing. It was a matinée and she was walking up and suddenly this fish came flying past her. She yelled out, “What the fuck was that?” which of course went right out into the audience.

On another Wednesday matinée, very blue-haired, Dolly, one of the twins, says to William, Stanley’s character, “Oh, keep on your toes, William, there’ll be fireworks tonight,” and Stanley suddenly came up with the line, “Oh, that’s okay, miss, I like a good bang now and then.” Well, the little old ladies went hysterical and Stanley’s wife Laney used to stay in the wings—she was always with him—and Stanley came off, looking a bit sheepish, and Laney said, “I think a little more Mr Shaw and a little less Mr Holloway would be better.”

Stanley was just so wonderful, and one of the things I loved was that several years ago Ray Wickens had gone to England and saw Stanley and Laney before Stanley died, of course, and he said Stanley Holloway wants to know if that crazy stage manager, Ron Nipper, is still there, and I went, “He remembers?” Ray said, “Yes. He said you were one of the funniest stage managers he ever worked with.” In those days we used to page the actors and for Stanley, “Mr Holloway, the seals have just finished, the pianist is on next and then you’re on, so please stand by.” He would come off and say, “Why do you know music hall? You’re too young.” I said, “My father worked vaudeville.” He was a stooge for Olsen and Johnson, the old comedians.

**Interviewer:** But you were born in Winnipeg.

**Mr Nipper:** Oh yes. He only stayed in Winnipeg. They kept wanting him to go on tour with them but he said, “No, I can’t leave Winnipeg.” He must have been crazy. As a kid, there was vaudeville at the movie theatre.

**Interviewer:** There was vaudeville when I was young. Vaudeville came to Puerto Rico on tour.

**Mr Nipper:** Is that where you’re from?

**Interviewer:** As a child, I lived there. That was about the only vaudeville show I ever saw because my parents didn’t approve of it. I remember going to one when I was about 12 or 13; it must have been even after the war and must have been one of the last ones.

**Mr Nipper:** It was after the war. It was at the Beacon Theatre in Winnipeg. It must have been on Wednesdays when they had vaudeville between movies.

**Interviewer:** I don’t remember it in Toronto in the late forties. The theatre had been torn down then because Shea’s, where the organ used to come out and there was the sing-along, was going; they were thinking of tearing it down for the city hall. There was another theatre south of there, sort of across—

**Mr Nipper:** The Casino, I think it was called.

**Interviewer:** Yes, and it was torn down really before I even got there. The Royal Alex just had touring shows.

I have a programme autographed by Tallulah Bankhead. She was playing at Vineland, where they used to have summer stock. They would have stars come in and play with local actors. A bunch of us went because we knew Colin Fox was going to be playing a small part in *Craig's Wife*. It was a dreadful production, but afterwards there was an opening-night reception. Tallulah came out: "Hello, darlings, so nice to see you all." We said, "We'd like to throw a party for you." She said, "Darlings, I've got a fucking interview at six o'clock in the morning so I'm afraid I can't." And a woman came up and said, "Oh, Miss Bankhead, your lashes are so long. Are those really yours." Tallulah said, "Yes, darling, but they're full of shit right now." She suddenly turned to me, and I was all of 21 or 22, and she said, "Well, darling, I have to go to my room and you will accompany me." I went, "Oh, my God." So we went to her room and I opened the door for her and she said, "Thank you so much, darling. Scared the hell out of you, didn't I?"

They used to have a lot of big stars, or semi-big stars come there, usually on their way down. It was what they used in the winter as their curling arena but they had a theatre there and it was a very popular summer theatre place. It's in Prudhomme's, I should say, rather than Vineland, but we used to just say we were going to Vineland.

**Interviewer:** That was a popular place for a few years.

**Mr Nipper:** Except that they kept burning it down by bits and pieces.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember when they did *Naughty Marietta* here? They wanted to use the original script but ?? Widmark had taken back all the original scripts and just put out a revised one. So Christopher and Judy Richardson were desperately looking for the original and got me on the phone. They asked me to look for it. I called up everything and the only thing we could figure out—they really had pulled back every one of the original scripts. If you had the original script you just had to pay the copyright but if you had to revise one you had to pay a whopping big copyright. I remember saying to Judy, "The only way we can do it is for you to fly to Washington and copy it out by hand at the Library of Congress. They would let you do that; they won't let you Xerox it." She said, "Okay," and I said, "It will cost us an awful lot of money," and she said, "It will cost us an awful lot of money to pay the copyright." So then I said, "Let me try a little harder," and I went to a fellow in Buffalo who ran the Melody Fair in Grand Island. Ian remembered going to them and he said, "I think they used to do musicals. It's just a chance but he might have kept the original script." Well, he had the original. He had not sent it back. He had had copies for all the actors and had sent back some of them but there was one he kept and he gave it to the Shaw and that is that they used.

**Mr Nipper:** Well, Chris wanted to do *Diamond Lil* at one point and he said, "I can't find a script. Even the Library of Congress doesn't have a script." I said, "You could go to the movie script." He said, "There's no movie of *Diamond Lil*." I said, "It was called *She Done Him Wrong*, with Mae West and Cary Grant. Now, aren't you glad you've got someone who's a movie fan who's just as old as you are?"

END OF INTERVIEW