

# MARY COLTART

April 2, 1986

**Interviewer:** Mary, what was the year you were first involved?

**Mary Coltart:** Was it 1960? The very first year there was a very small festival that Mary Walsh and such were involved.

**Interviewer:** The first one was Man and Superman.

**Mary Coltart:** And Androcles and the Lion.

**Interviewer:** That would be the second year, I think.

**Mary Coltart:** Yeah, well that was the second year. The first one, nobody seemed to know anything about it.

**Interviewer:** No, it was just a reading in street clothes, and just lasted a few weeks, and Andrew Allen was the artistic director.

**Mary Coltart:** And Larry Schafer, I think, was costume designer with Martha Mann. She was a very large girl, who never had any cigarets and smoked herself to death.

**Interviewer:** So that would be 1963.

**Mary Coltart:** That would be 1963.

**Interviewer:** And you were involved with the costumes, were you? Making them?

**Mary Coltart:** Making them. It started out we had a few gals who sewed, and we farmed them out. Betty Clarkson was one, Betty Taylor, but that seemed to dribble off and it all finished up in my kitchen. I had these masses of fabric all over the place, and then the fellows used to come up to my house to be fitted. It was really crazy in those days.

**Interviewer:** So you'd work on men's as well as women's costumes?

**Mary Coltart:** Yes, yes, all the togas and things.

**Interviewer:** But did you go from designs? Did someone give you a design to follow?

**Mary Coltart:** Well, there wasn't much design in a toga. It was in the year when everyone was wearing those shifts, so we just made them bigger—huge—and put different braid around them, that was more or less the togas. There was one lady who made the most exquisite gown. You know Margaret Tallman? Her mother. I can't remember which play it was for; black lace and I never saw roses like she made. They were all in black lace, the most exquisite things I ever saw. I think she was the only professional sewer amongst us. And then we had all the local children for the scenes. Androcles had a lot of children in it, teenagers, and they were all up in their

little togas. I don't remember the other plays, but there must have been another play.

**Interviewer:** Well, the first year ran for three weeks, did it not?

**Mary Coltart:** Yeah, I think so, but it seemed to go on forever and ever because we had to start early. I mean, I suppose we started much earlier than the professionals start..

**Interviewer:** Did any funny things happen where you perhaps sent someone on stage with a pin sticking out of the back of their clothes?

**Mary Coltart:** No, but I remember every morning we had to take the men's white shirts down, you know those very stiff white collars? We had an old lady in town who did the laundry, so that had to be taken up in the morning and then it had to be back that same day. I've even forgotten that woman's name. I remember this young man on the stage. We had sewn him on at the back and then somehow or other we got the stiff collar all fixed on him. He was just expounding—well, the language that came out of that young man's mouth—and everything just popped. That was the year that Gerard Parkes was in this too, and Sean Mulcahy—Sean with his built-up shoes.

This was all in the Court House, of course. We had little steps going behind the curtain, and there was one dressing room there, and one at the other side for the men. We all helped to make them up, and we would dash from one end and get round the back of the stage. I think it was in the men's side they had this chemical toilet, so if any of them rushed off we would start making noises to cover a noise. It was absolutely crazy.

We had no curtain, so they bought thousands of yards of navy blue fabric and I made the curtains. I didn't have an electric sewing machine in those days, it was just an old treadle. I didn't know where to put all this fabric so I moved it into my bedroom—

**Interviewer:** Your kitchen being full of the other material?

**Mary Coltart:** —so I could put all this fabric on my bed. You can imagine the amount of fabric for that stage. So that would be on the bed, and I'm pedalling away like a crazy woman.

Jimmy Beggs was the Lion. They had his head made in Toronto, a gorgeous thing. We got a little pair of swimming trunks and we couldn't figure out how to make the tail, so I got a metal coat-hanger, took it apart and wrapped cotton wool all around it. Then I got a panty-hose and pulled it all over this thing, and then, how to get it attached to the metal hanger? We got it sewn on and poor Jimmy, he sat down and the end of the coat hanger caught him in an awkward place. "Jimmy, you have to learn to sit sideways," I said. The only difficulty was that he had to fall down and all. We lost Jimmy one day. I remember Brian was very much to the fore and this lunchtime he had arrived and was in the kitchen. We started to scoot around town to look for Jimmy. You know Brian, he'd had a few drinks, and we get down to the beach and you know those buoys. He said, "There's Jimmy!" and I said, "That's not Jimmy. You mean he's swimming over from Toronto?" Anyway, eventually we found Jimmy. He was a nice fellow, though, Brian.

**Interviewer:** What about the social? Edna (Burroughs) must have been involved in the entertaining.

**Mary Coltart:** Every night was party night; all the people used to come in. A party every night up at the Inn.

**Interviewer:** It must seem very dull to you now, it runs so smoothly.

**Mary Coltart:** Of course, Edna was always here to welcome everyone, and she always gave a party in the dining room at the end of the festival. She'd make a big buffet supper for them all.

I remember poor old Andrew Allen, who was a dear man, but he had bad feet, dreadful feet. You'd see Andrew going to the post office, shuffling along in his bedroom slippers. There was Andrew, and Sean Mulcahy, Gerard Parkes, Noni Griffin; there must have been more. Of course all the local people lent their furniture. You'd be sitting in the theatre and say, "Look, there's my chair. And that's my sofa over there. I hope they don't damage it." Everything was lent to them. Just the same, when they had opening night parties, nothing like what we have now, everybody made something. Margherita Howe was involved at that end of it, and Audrey Wooll. Was it Brian who said, "I want more silver, Go home and get more silver." Nobody had silver in their house. It was all at the theatre.

**Interviewer:** Some of those parties would be at Rands'.

**Mary Coltart:** Yes, most of them were there, of course. Calvin was very active in those days. I remember we called a dress rehearsal for Sunday afternoon in the small hall, so we got everyone down and we collected all the clothes from everyone. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention. How it ever got off— We all had a lot of fun. It was a lot of hard work because I don't think any of us had done anything like this before.

**Interviewer:** I'd heard of someone being handed a man's suit and somebody telling her, "Now that has to be Edwardian."

**Mary Coltart:** I think that was Ina Chambers. She's a dressmaker. She was another one of the girls that helped. There were quite a lot of us at the beginning, but then you know how as it goes on, a lot of them fall by the wayside.

**Interviewer:** Well, The Shaw also had its own costume department.

**Mary Coltart:** We got stuff from Malabar's, so we just had to alter things.

**Interviewer:** Were you ever involved in making weird things, like wigs, or bonnets?

**Mary Coltart:** No, they were all from Malabar's.

**Interviewer:** Or any props of any sorts?

**Mary Coltart:** No, I don't know who did those. I don't think there was very much apart from the borrowed

things. All the furniture on the sets was from houses.

**Interviewer:** I think it's so nice that it started that way and it's ended up as great as it is now.

**Mary Coltart:** Oh, yes, there's not the challenge. Well, I mean, none of us are involved any more. And the girls used to stand down there and sell that bloody lemonade.

**Interviewer:** And orangeade.

**Mary Coltart:** But you know, they made two or three thousand dollars on it.

**Interviewer:** I was talking to Margherita, and she said she remembered handing Calvin a cheque for \$2,000. That took a lot of cartons of lemonade. There were no bars; there was no liquor at all. I don't know if either of you were in the theatre in those days: the heat, and the hard chairs!

**Interviewer:** They finally got a fan or two, didn't they? It wouldn't help much, but it did help the sales at intermission, I must say. That was the first thing I did for The Shaw. That's where I met Marjorie Earl; she instructed me in how to open those little cartons.

**Mary Coltart:** I made the front page of the Globe and Mail—a picture of me in my kitchen with all this material. I had several pictures sitting on different costumes, I must look them up—and pictures of the whole cast and all the girls dashing around.

Before the curtain went up—of course we had no experience of all this—everybody was yelling, “Get that out of the way.” And then you know how they have to make quick changes. Well, we had to be down just at the other side of the curtain, and then you'd hear somebody “Shhh” all over the place and, “Get these girls into their other costumes.”

**Interviewer:** Did you ever have anything to do when they moved to the big theatre?

**Mary Coltart:** No, it was all professional, no more borrowing. Of course we sort of felt a little left out. I can't imagine it only went for four weeks; it seemed to be the way of life for that one summer. You felt, “What have you let yourself in for?” I don't even remember who got in touch with us, how we got a group together. George must have been about three or four, and I don't even remember what I did with him. I mean I had the other children but I don't remember what I did with George—almost every day, out doing something. Of course the young children in town were just thrilled, they all thought they'd died and gone to heaven, putting make-up on, those costumes—

**Interviewer:** What was your feeling when they first said they were starting a theatre here, Mary?

**Mary Coltart:** I thought it was super. The townspeople all felt involved in it because we were asked to do something. I think it was a real community thing. I'm sure none of us dreamt that it would develop into what it is now.