

ELFIE NORTHEY

What I've been trying to figure out is what the whole purpose of the Shaw Guild was, which was basically to save money at the beginning and to make money in any way they could, which was very difficult. Saving money was particularly easy, of course. There were many ways they saved money. There was the ushering. That's the one thing that was done right from the beginning at the Court House. It has carried on and has been the big saver. Other things came up as the Guild got bigger. A lot of these things that are ones that are within the last 20 years because there was more stuff going on and there were more theatres involved. Gardening didn't start until a while ago. That has always been a big expense, particularly after the big theatre was built, just in I would say the last 10 years. But they now have a big group that does the gardening and that saves a lot of money.

Another one was accommodation for Polish and Russian directors who came out to direct a play here. Sometimes they would be here for two, three or four weeks, and we would put them up. That sort of started in my era, so if somebody was here for four weeks and somebody didn't want them for the full time, we would split it up. I had certain names of members who would take them. I always seemed to have a lot because in my previous house there was a lot of room. That saved a lot of money rather than putting them up at a hotel. One that I had was Gnady, about 1990 or 1990. He was the director general. Most of the Russians came from St Petersburg, which was where their theatre was. I had him for about 10 days. At the back of the house was an extra wing that was added and which had back stairs up and its own living room, bathroom and two bedrooms, so they accommodation up there. Gnady was 70; he had his 70th birthday while he was out here. It's great entertaining somebody who doesn't speak any English and you don't speak any Russian. They had interpreters with them but they didn't stay at the same place.

They might have two or three people out here at one time. It wasn't very often but occasionally. The directors were only in the house for breakfast and all Gnady wanted was a cup of coffee, so I would sit him down and give him a coffee and the Globe and Mail to look at the pictures. They were very interesting to have. There was one director who came from Poland, one of the first ever to come out, and came back many times. We had one last year. I don't know whether Guild people still put them up because there hadn't any out for a while. There were a lot of people willing to take them for a week. They were busy the rest of the day; you didn't have to worry about them for lunch or dinner. You just sort of gave them a key. I gave Gnady keys and he went off with them. I finally got the keys back, I think five months later, and it was via the USA and all sorts of places. I don't know why it took so long.

I used to get quite a number. One was Clare Boothe Luce. She hated hotels. She came up and stayed with my husband Jim and me. We had her from Friday to Monday. They put on *The Women* in 1985 I think it is. Incidentally, a new book is just out about her and it's written by Sylvia Morris, who was with her when she came up and stayed with her. A very delightful lady. They used to have the interviews in my backyard—CTV and all of those. She was quite a lady. She had all sorts of interviews when she came. As I remember, it wasn't the year that *The Women* opened because she couldn't come; it was the following year and then they put *The Women* on in Toronto. They had parties for her, with the board and so on. It was just a case that she had never

been up wanted to come up. She had a tremendous number of radio and TV interviews and they used to do them in the backyard. Jim and I would sit over on the patio and stay out of the way. The girls from the theatre would come down and do her hair. As I say, a very easy person to put up with.

Another one where we did a lot of saving of money was members' days when they started. When they started there was only one a season. Then Jock Sutherland, who was looking after those, and this was the time when I was helping with all those things, came and said, "I think we're going to put on two next year." I said, "Oh sure. Great." Then he said, "I think there are going to be three." And then he said, "I think it's going to be four." I said, "From one to four in one year?" We did a tremendous amount with those. We saved them a heck of a lot of money, basically just cleaning things up and getting things organized for the next round.

Another one is things I call special events. For instance, in 1984 we put on George Orwell's 1984. It just took over the town. It was really something. As the Guild, we served meals in the community hall. Orwell's a strange writer. Some woman came up and did that one. They just took over the whole town for the Sunday, I think it was the whole Sunday. All of the people were involved and all over the town we couldn't believe what was going on: airplanes going over; everything.

The 25th annual picnic, which was in 1986, we did a tremendous amount of organizing on that. It was held at the park on Queen Street and went sort of for two days. We did food for the luncheon table and at the bandshell we had entertainers in the afternoons. We did the decorating. I had my son and his wife come down and did all sorts of balloons all over the park. For the 25th picnic I must have had three meetings with people in Toronto who were on the board. The big thing too with things like this was getting donations—food, for instance, when we were serving lunches. ValueMart used to give us a lot of things, all the tea bags we needed and things.

The Guild really grew after Christopher Newton came because he is such a backer of the Guild. As he says, he doesn't know how to get along without the Guild, and you know when you go to a meeting, the way he talks. And he is such a delightful person. But he feels a guild is very important to a theatre. In some other theatres directors don't like having guilds. Suddenly we were up to 250 or 260 people, and also after allowing men to come in in 1974, which is excellent because there are so many retired people and the men are just every bit as good as the women.

Then you have money-making. The money just went into a pot, whatever money we made, which wasn't a lot, till I think it was the late seventies or early eighties that the Guild decided any money that was made would go to The Academy.

One big thing was the lunchtime theatre. It started almost at the beginning and they did it first at the Court House. When I first became involved with that it was in the early eighties. It took a lot of work—the buying of the stuff, and we used to make the sandwiches, the cookies, and every day you'd had it. You had to be very careful; if you had chopped chicken or egg or anything with

mayonnaise, you couldn't take a chance on keeping it overnight. But we always had a place to keep those things and we had a fridge. When we started it, it was done at the Royal George, which we figured was the best place. We had it in the basement there; it was more of a basement in those days than it is now. Then we decided we had to move it upstairs, which cut back on the amount of room we had. In the last few years it was done, Bella at Luis House, who used to be at the Oban Inn and ran it, made the sandwiches. We decided at that stage that we just couldn't go around picking up sandwiches from everybody. One person was in charge for the whole summer and then we split it up. Each week we had a captain and a captain was responsible for getting other people there and making all arrangements, having a car and loading and unloading it. There was a tremendous amount of work involved with those things. A lot of people didn't want to take lunch in to the theatre and then we found some of the little restaurants started doing things like that too. We also did it for bus trips. If a bus trip was coming in we would let them know what kind of sandwiches we had. Each year we would stick to one kind of sandwiches. We had cookies and muffins, and then we added fruit. We always had iced tea, which was big. We needed a lot of equipment for all this stuff so somebody was always buying stuff. Then again certain things would be donated. It was a big job but kept making more and more money. I'm not sure when they cut that off, something like four or five years ago now. People couldn't take food into the theatre unless they bought it from us. There were certain things we couldn't use because they crunched too much and made too much noise.

With the fair and fête, I think it was the second year they came to us and asked whether we would do a tea table and antiques. We made a fair amount of money for them. We used to get a lot of donations for the lunchtime things. The antique giving is down too. There's been so much of that stuff in this town that people have run out of donations. We used to get some very good stuff but those are not moneymakers like they used to be but they still help the fair and fête a lot.

This would have started in the late seventies and I think we called it the Shaw Guild picnic. We had on a Saturday out at the Rand estate. They bought tickets to it and we made sandwiches. The first time it was done I remember a whole pile of us making sandwiches till they came out our ears. People were making cookies and cutting up fruit and this was all for the picnic. The men did a tremendous amount because there were games going on. I don't know how long it lasted, four or five years.

A big moneymaker, and this one I had quite a lot to do with, was cookbooks. The Toronto Star had co-presidents, David Galloway and David Jolley. David Jolley was on the board. It turned out I knew Dave Galloway; I hadn't seen him for ages but he grew up across the street and I was the same age as his mother. He still is president of the Star. Dave came and told the board they had a bunch of cookbooks and would be glad to donate them if we could use them because they weren't selling them. It was a set of three and you had to put it together. It was like rings. We started selling those things and when I finished president I took it over. It took you 20 minutes to put each one of these sets together. You had the three covers, which were hard covers, and the rings inside and these different packages. Once you figured out how they went together, I timed myself so many times, it took 21 minutes to do each one. And we had thousands of them. I think Dave

Galloway tried to sell them for around \$75 or \$80 a set. We decided that if we were going to make money on them we had to make it less than that. We sold them for \$39.95. Once the word got around, we really sold them. We did a tremendous amount of advertising by word of mouth, the board, everything. I think we finished with them finally in 1989; I think we had them for three years. I kept a whole bunch at my place and we sold them also in the Shaw shops but we put them all together. The majority were at our old building where The Academy used be, down on the waterfront, then they had a big fire there and the whole thing went. There used to be a lot of water get in there, so a lot of them were sort of soaked and had to be dried. I brought them all up to my place because I had a lot of space in my basement on shelves, and when they had run out at different places or I would get a whole lot of orders, I would either do it myself—they would phone from the Shaw and say, “We’re out and there are people wanting them.” So I would lay these things out in my kitchen and get them back together again, or I would get people in to help me. We ended up making \$11,200 on them.

Another thing was the Shaw Guild weekend. In Toronto the Shaw Festival always had two big dos. They had one in the spring, which is the men’s boxing; the other is the big dinner. It used to be at the Four Seasons when it started. Before you went into dinner they had things laid out that you bid on, a silent auction type of thing. Then they had a big auction inside with an auctioneer after dinner. It was a very fancy rig. You used to pay about \$100 a ticket, now I think you pay about \$250 or \$300. I know the men’s is still going on but I don’t know about the fall one. They used to make \$150,000 out of it. We used to put on the Shaw Guild weekend. We got the Prince of Wales to do that with us. We had accommodation for, we’d say, two couples. Two couples would buy it or one couple would buy and it take along another couple, so it would be for four people. They used to stay in a place the Prince of Wales owned at the corner of Front and Victoria, which is a beautiful spot, and we would entertain them from then on. They would come on a Friday afternoon and we would arrange golf games for them, and theatre—of course those were donated. The first few times we had them, we took them one place for cocktails at somebody’s home and then they always came to my place for dinner and then would go someplace else for dessert and brandy. It was quite an evening, I can tell you; it got to be very popular. With them at the dinner we would have certain people involved with the Shaw; maybe Chris Newton or somebody like that, or people on the executive of the Shaw Guild. So we were always feeding about 16. They all loved it. It was usually board members who bought it. That made quite a bit of money.

Just before and when I arrived in the Guild we were doing a whole study of it and trying to change the whole executive layout so that some person is responsible for each thing. With all this stuff coming up, there was so much. We did it one way and it didn’t work out because one person was responsible for the Festival/Shaw Guild stuff together and that just had too much involved. I said, “Nobody can do this in one year. It’s just too much. You’ve got to split this up more.” So that’s why it is laid out differently and it has changed a lot since that time. It’s a matter of learning. You get rid of your executive because they have run out of ideas, so that other people coming in with new ideas can present them. When I was involved it was time of change. Howard Martin was excellent on all those things and he was very much involved too in the changes that

were going on at that time....

If you get around to doing a nice little book, have Chris Newton do the frontispiece or the dedication because he's so good at writing. His command of English is just beautiful. He's amazing that way....

The Saturday of the board meeting is always out at the scene shop at Virgil because a lot of the new board members haven't a clue. They think that when they go to the theatre all it is is what they see on the stage. They have no idea that 99.9 percent is behind the scenes....

In the wintertime we used to have movies once a week. They would bring in busloads of senior citizens from St Catharines and all around. It seems to me at Christmastime we always had Bing Crosby in *White Christmas* and all the oldtime movies. We used to have a lot of people in the Festival Theatre and we used to look after that for them in the wintertime. The film man was there but we would ask the people what they wanted to see. I don't know how long that went on but I think it was quite a while because a lot of people in town said, "Why did they give it up?" because it was such fun going to the theatre for a movie on I think it was Saturday afternoons. I can remember Jim and I were running it one year and somebody had a heart attack. You had to be ready for anything because you had a lot of seniors there. This was a group from St Catharines that had come in on a bus. Jim and one of the other men whipped him over to the hospital—they had an emergency room in those days—and then he was taken in to St Catharines. He had had quite a heart attack but he came through it. I remember he and his wife came back to our house in the spring, because I had talked to them both at one stage, and brought me a teacup to say thank you. But I think it was just too expensive keeping the theatre open. Of course you had to pay the staff to work and that's all under ACTRA.

Curtain

When plans for the Festival Theatre got underway...the members sold “Shingles for Shaw” using the slogan “Help put a roof over our heads.” The shingles—buyers actually received one—sold for \$1 each and netted the group \$3,214.

1974 and a time of change for the guild:

Well established by the mid-70s, the guild took the official name of Shaw Festival Guild, which has since been shortened to simply The Shaw Guild. For the first time members drew up a set of bylaws and became sexually liberated by allowing men to join the ranks. In 1974, membership stood at about 160.

1988:

Today, 72 of the 239 members are men. The volunteer hosts and hostesses used to be called ticket tearers since they tore the ticket in half and saved the stubs as records. Now with the advent of computerization, they no longer tear the tickets. For 32 special noon-hour performances in July and August at the Royal George, the members bring in sandwiches and homemade cookies and muffins, fruit, iced tea, coffee and soft drinks. Patrons buy their lunch in the lobby, put it into a box and take it into the theatre to eat while watching the show. Bus tours also book for the luncheon performances and the guild provides prepackaged box lunches for those tourists. The lunch theatres are a main fundraiser for the Guild, which turns over \$3,000 to \$4,000 a year, says president Elfie Northey.