

REID WILLIS

Interviewer: You were in *Forty Years On* in 1970. Could you tell me how you came to be picked for the role?

Mr Willis: The play was a musical and involved a bunch of young men who attended boarding schools. I happened to be attending a boarding school at the time and I also happened to sing in a choir, and I think because of my background—my parents both being actors—that Paxton Whitehead asked to interview me, thinking that inherently I would be able to do this at the age of 14 years old. I went to Trinity College School; some of the other boys were from Ridley and some were professional actors around 17 and 18 years old but they played younger.

Interviewer: Had you done acting before?

Mr Willis: Not professionally, no, but I had acted in school plays and stuff like that. I did my first moview when I was two, or something, and I screwed that up. It was a live CBC broadcast. I just had to sit there and there was one scene where my mother and father had to walk in and say, "Do you want some milk?" and I was supposed to take the milk. When it came to doing it live, I said, "I don't want any milk." That was the only professional thing I had ever done before.

Interviewer: Did you have many lines in *Forty Years On*?

Mr Willis: I had some lines. My character's name was Leadbetter. There were constant references to me because in character I've always had my shirt-tail untucked. Well, I mean, lately I try not to do that. It was almost typecasting in the respect that I was sort of the messy one, so it wasn't very hard for me to do. Whereas they would press everybody else's clothing before a performance, they would not do mine and I never knew the better. I had lines but there were more references made to me than I had lines. I think I had a duet that I sang and we all sang songs throughout the whole thing.

Interviewer: It must have kind of a nerve-wracking experience to work with these professional actors at that age?

Mr Willis: I wasn't aware of Alan Scarfe at the time, and Jennie Phipps, and the name of the actor who starred in it was Robert Harris—an older man who continually forgot his lines; he was a great, great actor and I think he was brought in by Paxton from England to do this role and he was absolutely terrific—so I was unaware of him. But the person I was most in awe of was Paxton Whitehead because in the past he had directed my mother in a lot of stuff and I was in awe of him. Strangely enough, in what I do now I do a lot of speaking engagements and sometimes I'm nervous and sometimes I'm not, and I wasn't nervous then. It was more fun than anything else. It was a learning experience. It was a gas. I was probably way too young to be doing it. Evan McCowan, Frances Hyland's son, and I shared a house together and I was 14 and he was 13. We were basically left alone. It was crazy.

Interviewer: Was your mother in the company that year?

Mr Willis: No, she was off becoming famous. Frances Hyland was in the company but while we were in rehearsal, because it was at the old Court House, she finished. She stayed on for a little bit. We weren't left alone, two 14-year-olds. It wasn't Children's Aid time or anything like that. But coming from the strict background that we both had in boarding school into this very, very loose environment of the theatre, which ironically was about boarding school, they were juxtaposed.

My mother always taught me that in order to be a good actor you have to listen, and in life I believe that's true as well. Those were always her words of advice, because in the theatre every performance is different and as long as you listen to what people are saying and you respond accordingly, it's hard to fail. I mean, it's different to be greatly successful—obviously I'm not an actor, but those words of advice made it a lot easier for me to get through the performances and I held on to them as a pillar and it eliminated the nervousness. So I listened and it got me through.

Interviewer: With 17 teenagers at the theatre, did you get up to any boarding-school pranks?

Mr Willis: I didn't, but a lot of it went on. I can't specifically remember what they were. There's one point during the play where the character I played and two other characters got sent off to a room somewhere. On the set itself, we got sent up the stairs exiting stage right but there was no exit; it was just part of the set. We had to sit there for about 20 minutes and, being young guys, the trouble we got into all the time was uncontrollable laughter, constantly, at just about whatever we happened to be talking about—to the point where people had to make reference to it on stage: "What is that noise?"

Interviewer: You said you were in awe of Paxton Whitehead. How was he at directing young people?

Mr Willis: Fantastic. I don't know what his background was in dealing with young men or children, but he treated you like an adult, as an equal. He never talked down to you. He had a way of making you understand everything he wanted to get across. I've always respected him and in working with him I wasn't disappointed. I had seen him work with my mother and I knew about her respect for him. Normally what happens in cases like that is that you're disappointed and I was not.

Jennifer Phipps was fantastic. Alan Scarfe was phenomenal in the play but I think for him, dealing with a bunch of young men who were not necessarily professional, even at that time I could tell it pissed him off once in a while. If anybody was offended by our actions it would have been Alan. I think everybody else had an understanding—excluding Robert Harris as well, I think. All of that played into it, it was all a perfect fit; it was a performance because that was exactly what it was all about. In character with everything that everybody had to play within the play, what happened outside of it was exactly how it was. We never saw Robert Harris except during the show. Alan Scarfe in the play was sort of the man below him who had to give us crap all the time and he was looked upon with a little bit of fear and also held in high esteem at the same time. Jennifer Phipps was more of a mother to us all. It was like the living movie or whatever.

Interviewer: While your mother was performing at Niagara-on-the-Lake, did you live down there?

Mr Willis: Yes. I think 1968 was the first time I remember it and we lived off the Rand estate in a coach house. It's a beautiful community but my memories of it are vague.

Interviewer: What is your happiest memory of the play or Niagara-on-the-Lake?

Mr Willis: It wouldn't have been that year [of the play], it would have been time spent with my family and with my mother and would go back a couple of years to the time I was talking of previously. Growing up sort of like gypsies in stock theatre you never ever finished a school year

anywhere and you were lucky enough to live in a nice house and to get into a good school. We were blessed to live in this beautiful little coach house and have access to the Rands' swimming pool on a daily basis. The Rands had a beautiful young daughter whom I had one of my very first crushes on. My mother got her first Hollywood movie from the Shaw Festival in the year we lived at the Rands'. A lot of wonderful things happened to us that summer. Sgt Pepper's came out that year. It was a magical summer and the Shaw Festival was intricately involved in that.

Those are my fondest memories of the Shaw Festival—that, and a performance that my mother gave years later in Mrs Warren's Profession with Roberta Maxwell. Being one of my mother's harshest critics, it gave me great joy to sit in the theatre and watch her perform it. Because I grew up in the theatre, often the curtain goes up—not often, but when the curtain goes up I fall asleep and my mother came to judge her performances by how much I slept through. My sister and I always used to go backstage and the first question would be not to me, it would be to my sister: "Which parts did he sleep through?" I didn't sleep through any parts of Mrs Warren's Profession. It was creepy; it was an unbelievable performance. Besides being my mother and how proud I was of her, just to be there.

The only other performance that has ever really wowed me was when, just offhanded, I happened to go to see a matinee of Of Mice and Men with James Earl Jones on Broadway and it was performance that blew my mind. That's the only other one I can compare to this one. It was just unbelievable, unbelievable—and she knew it. You know when you hit a note or something like that? She hit it, she had a hold of it, and I was so happy for her. It's weird that I can't have memories that are concrete about physical things; I have memories about what happened to people and what happened during performances. Although I love the Court House, more than I have feelings for the new building, because the Court House was something very special and something very old and had great representation of the community itself, most of my memories are about things or about ideas and about people, how kind or how cruel they were. Those are the things I hold dear.

Interviewer: I asked Leslie Yeo [who directed Mrs Warren's Profession with Kate Reid] whether he had gone to see this year's version and he said he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Mr Willis: No, that's why I could never go to see Death of a Salesman with Al Waxman and Martha Henry at Stratford, because I saw it with my mother and Dustin Hoffman. Not even to compare whether one is greater than another, I will never be able to see Death of a Salesman again for that reason, if that makes any sense whatsoever. That's the performance I want to remember; I don't want to remember any other performance. I could go see Mrs Warren's Profession, and I don't think it could be matched. It could be done differently.

Interviewer: But you'd still remember the one with your mother.

Mr Willis: Absolutely. And Leslie did a remarkable job with it too. As a director, I don't know when you decide to let people go or go up to them and say, "Less is more." I don't know what he did. She was a hard woman to control but if anybody could have done, Leslie could have done it. We all lived on the same street, we all grew up together. His wife was my mother's best friend at the same time. He was also my mother's accountant for a great number of years. Her phone bill was always more than what she made.