

Newton-on-the-Lake

For eighteen years the Shaw Festival at Niagara-on-the-Lake was considered second-best, "the other one."

New York critics gave it an incidental look when they came to Ontario to cover Stratford, and the critics from the major papers in England didn't cover it at all.

Last year Christopher Newton took over as artistic director, and its status changed almost abruptly. Mr. Newton expanded the repertoire to include a greater sampling of Shaw's contemporaries: in addition to GBS's *Misalliance*, *The Philanderer* and the one-act *Overruled*, the season's program included Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*; Feydeau's classic farce, *A Flea In Her Ear*; *The Grand Hunt* by Gyula Hernady; *A Respectable Wedding* by Brecht; and *Canuck*, a long-lost Canadian work by John Bruce Cowan.

The response was impressive. The theatre, which had been losing money, played to ninety per cent capacity houses and diminished its deficit, and critics from both New York and London came and were conquered.

Clive Barnes, in *The New York Post*, liked the three main events—*The Cherry Orchard* ("admirable in its pungent simplicity and extremely well played"), *Misalliance* ("Carole Shelley moved triumphantly into her own"), *A Flea in Her Ear* ("chockful with neatly lined character sketches, all larger than life"). The English critics were even more enthusiastic: "Within a year or so," Michael Billington of the *Guardian* wrote, "Newton will have made the Shaw Festival a newsworthy international event comparable to its Stratford neighbour."

Newton was born in Dover, England, studied archaeology at Leeds University and at the age of nineteen came to the United States, where he went to Purdue and the University of Illinois. He then taught English at Bucknell and, bored with that, went on to Canada and the stage. He toured with the Canadian Players, acted at Stratford, the Manitoba Theatre Centre, the Shaw Festival, and the National Arts Centre (and in Mike Nichol's

production of *The Knack* in New York). He founded Theatre Calgary and was for six years the artistic director of the Vancouver Playhouse.

He is pleased with what he has accomplished so far. The Shaw Festival's strength lies in its strong company—the leads are cast from the basic group—a strength that derives at least in part from necessity. The company is less well-heelled than Stratford and has far fewer seats in its three theatres. It cannot afford imported stars.

"There is an analogy I like," Mr. Newton says. "We are building a great grand piano on which we can, with confidence, invite any pianist in the world to play." The pianists are, of course, the playwrights whose works are performed and the guest professionals who direct many of them.

Mr. Newton often does unexpected things. He wants to make visitors feel they are guests in an elegant private home, and he has planted rose bushes on terraces next to the theatre. He is also planning a production of Mae West's *Diamond Lil* for next year with the female impersonator Craig Russell playing Lil.

The Shaw's 1981 season opens May 7 with Shaw's *Saint Joan* in the Festival Theatre. *Tons of Money* by Evans and Valentine and *Suicide* by

Nikolai Erdman will be added later that month. The Court House Theatre will open July 4 with Shaw's *In Good King Charles' Golden Days*, later alternating with *The Magistrate* by Arthur Wing Pinero.

A musical will open in the Royal George Theatre on June 26 and will alternate with Shaw's *Man of Destiny* after July 14. *Camille* by Robert David MacDonald opens in the Festival Theatre on August 11, and special matinee dance programs will be offered on August 27, 28 and 29. The Festival runs through October 4th.

For ticket information, contact the Shaw Festival Box Office, Box 774, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, L0S 1J0, telephone: (416) 468-3201.



Still on Top by James Joseph Jacques Tissot, courtesy of the Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand.