

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR EMERITUS CHRISTOPHER NEWTON PASSES AWAY AT 85

Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON (December 21, 2021) — The Shaw Festival is mourning the death of **Christopher Newton**, former artistic director, who died peacefully yesterday morning at the age of 85. Actor, stage manager, playwright, artistic director, Mr. Newton made a momentous impact and life-long contributions to the Canadian theatre landscape and performing arts. He served as the Niagara-on-the-Lake repertory company's artistic director from 1979 until 2002.

"It is no exaggeration to say that, without Christopher Newton, there would be no Shaw Festival today," stated Artistic Director **Tim Carroll**. "He set a very high standard in everything he did, and long after his retirement as artistic director in 2002 he continued to be a passionate supporter of the festival and the arts. He was an inspiring mentor to young artists and an unfailingly generous source of advice and encouragement to me. I will miss him."

"Christopher's first season at The Shaw saw my parents bring me to my first show here," reminisced Executive Director **Tim Jennings**. "Seeing his programs over the years ignited my own interest in a career in the theatre. I thank him for that and will miss his presence and visits."

Born in England and educated at Sir Roger Manwood's School in Kent, the University of Leeds and Purdue University in Indiana, he earned a Master of Arts from the University of Illinois. Mr. Newton made the move to Canada in 1961 and began his acting career with the Canadian Players, Manitoba Theatre Centre, Shaw and Stratford Festivals, and on Broadway.

Founding Theatre Calgary in 1968 and serving as Artistic Director until 1971, Mr. Newton continued west, where he took over as artistic director of the Vancouver Playhouse and, with his friend and mentor, the late Powys Thomas, established the Playhouse Acting School in 1975.

Appointed the Shaw Festival's artistic director in 1979, Mr. Newton directed many of the Festival's major works during his 23 seasons including *Cavalcade* (1985-6, 1995), *Misalliance* (1980, 1990), *Man and Superman* (1989), *You Never Can Tell* (1988, 1995), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1983, 2002), *Heartbreak House* (1985), *Major Barbara* (1987), *The Millionairess* (1991), *Pygmalion* (1992), *The Silver King*, *Candida* (1993), *Sherlock Holmes*, *Hobson's Choice*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Peter Pan* (2001), *The Return of the Prodigal* (2001, 2002), *Hay Fever* (2002), *The Cassilis Engagement* (2007) and *After the Dance* (2008). In 2003, he adapted and performed a dramatic reading of Horton Rhys' *A Theatrical Trip for a Wager* for the Bell Canada Reading Series and in subsequent seasons directed Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and R.C. Sheriff's *Journey's End*. Christopher revisited *Heartbreak House* and directed a new production for The Shaw's 50th season. Three years later, he returned to the Festival to direct St. John Hankin's *The Charity that Began at Home: A Comedy for Philanthropists*.

Mr. Newton brought a new vitality to the mandate of the Shaw Festival and was instrumental in re-examining the works of forgotten playwrights such as Granville Barker and J.B. Priestley. His programming mixed lesser-known playwrights and Canadian playwrights like Merrill Denison with well-known favourites such as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and Noël Coward.

In addition to developing distinctive Shaw Festival seasons, Mr. Newton established one of the foremost and permanent acting ensembles in North America and The Academy (now known as the Slight Family Academy).

As a statesman, Mr. Newton forged many international alliances between the Festival and other theatre companies including the Bolshoi Dramatic Theatre in St Petersburg, Russia; Stary Theatre in Krakow, Poland; Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Ireland; and Melbourne Theatre Company in Melbourne, Australia. He was also instrumental in establishing the annual International Repertory Theatre Conference and initiated the Festival's "Toronto Project", which developed relationships with various theatres like Tarragon Theatre, Factory Theatre, Young People's Theatre, Theatre Passe Muraille and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre.

Despite his responsibilities as artistic director, Mr. Newton continued to flex his acting muscle at the Festival. His credits included *A Flea in her Ear*, *The Philanderer*, *The Suicide*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Private Lives* and *The Marrying of Ann Leete*. In 1997, he appeared in the North American premiere of *The Secret Life* and stepped into the role of Sir John Faringford for the final weeks of the 2002 remount of *The Return of the Prodigal*.

During his post-Shaw Festival years, Mr. Newton continued to direct both opera and theatre, mentor students and support arts organizations. His post-Festival credits include directing *The Turn of the Screw* and *Albert Herring* (Canadian Opera Company); *The Innocent Eye Test* (Manitoba Theatre Centre and Royal Alexandra Theatre), *Macbeth* (Theatre Calgary), *The Price* (Theatre Aquarius) and *Glorious!* (Canadian Stage, Arts Club, Belfry Theatre), *Gaslight* (Vertigo Theatre), *Much Ado About Nothing* (Stratford Festival) and *Romeo and Juliet* (Vancouver Playhouse). Mr. Newton also had extensive television, radio and film credits. As a mentor and teacher, he worked extensively with the Birmingham Conservatory at the Stratford Festival. Mr. Newton also wrote several stage plays including *Slow Train to St. Ives*, *Trip*, *The Sound of Distant Thunder*, *You Two Stay Here* and *The Rest Come With Me*.

In addition to being named a Member, then Officer, to the Order of Canada, Mr. Newton was the recipient of numerous prestigious accolades and awards including the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal, the M. Joan Chalmers Award for Artistic Direction, the Gascon-Thomas Award from the National Theatre School, the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for lifetime artistic achievement, an honorary Doctorate from the University of Toronto and honorary degrees from Brock University, Wilfrid Laurier University, University of Guelph, Buffalo State University, Ryerson University and the Royal Conservatory of Music; the Molson Prize, the Toronto Arts Lifetime Achievement Award and the Thomas DeGaetani Award from the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT).

In recognition for his tireless work cultivating and developing the Festival, the Board of Governors conferred on Mr. Newton the lifetime title of Artistic Director Emeritus in 2002. His contributions to the Shaw Festival and Canadian theatre at large were further recognized with the establishment of the Christopher Newton Interns Program that launched in 2018.

Mr. Newton leaves behind his beloved husband Nicholas MacMartin. A celebration of life for Mr. Newton will be held at the Shaw Festival at an appropriate time.

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