

Robin Bartlett

It was So Potent, So Physical and So Tangible

As a professional actress Robin Bartlett has had many joyful experiences in her working life, but it was Muriel who laid the foundation for all that came after. “I learned all the basics, how to discriminate, how to create. I don’t know how I would have understood what I learned afterwards about acting without her. She was as good a teacher as I’ve ever had. One of the best teachers that I’ve ever had, even though she was teaching children.”

Robin used to take pottery and dance classes at the 92nd Street Y, along with her sister Jeannie Bartlett and following in her sister’s footsteps, at the age of 9 she enrolled in the acting classes with Muriel. “It was so potent, so physical and so tangible. It went right into my body.”

Oh, and she so loved Abby Imber’s mime classes, “she was wonderful,” which she took alongside Muriel’s Tuesday acting class. Debbie Offner, Bari Gilbert and Andy Jackness were classmates and she saw Chris Tabori and her sister Jeannie Bartlett perform in *Emil and the Detectives*.

Robin remembers improvising in Muriel’s classes. One time, Muriel had the students improvise waiting without looking at a watch. “We were at a train station, waiting for a train. How do you wait without looking at your watch? Not indicating, but doing. ‘Don’t tell us’ Muriel said, ‘don’t telegraph.’ It was sophisticated,” Robin said. “Muriel was brilliant at setting up a situation with a conflict at the center of it that the students had to improvise their way out of it.”

In another improvisation, Robin was in a prison and was talking on the telephone to an imaginary person who was accusing her of something and she couldn’t get away from the conversation. “I had a rage in my head at what this person was saying to me. It was at that moment I knew that I would be an actor. It took me.” From that improvisation to Robin becoming an actor was a straight line. “It was exactly right.”

Robin played one of the four Zanies in *The Servant of Two Masters*. Year 1964. The Zanies all wore Commedia dell’Arte masks and as Robin said, “it becomes all about the gesture. Abby was our mime coach. The Zani was a part that was close to me. It was like playing.”

In *Turandot* by Carlo Goldoni, year 1965, she played Altoum, Emperor of China and “I was totally transformed.” She remembers the costume vividly. “It had long, flowing sleeves. I had to work without using my hands, just by lifting my arm. It made me regal without trying. It was internal. I had a long white beard, white face makeup, which Abby did, black eyebrows, very exaggerated. I was inside this person, the costumes, the make-up, a child playing a man. Such a stretch. Totally transformed. I was still and contained and disciplined. I looked in the mirror and did not see me.”

Robin was in the film, *The Unborn*, year 1966, but she has no memory of it. “Nothing,” she said.

The last time Robin saw Muriel was in 1985 when she was performing in *Reckless* at The Circle Repertory Theater Company, a wonderful experience for her, and Muriel and her husband Sidney came to see her in the show. “She was so sweet. She said, ‘I’m so glad you became a working professional.’”

Robin circled back to this moment in her reminiscences. It was a strong memory for Robin, seeing Muriel, white-haired and older, after all those years.