

Labors for Love in Children's Theater

By William Wolf

NEW YORK—Parents convinced that children merit entertainment more constructive than TV crime shows and westerns have a friend in Muriel Sharon, who has become a leader in the field of providing youngsters with live theater.

From Lakewood, O., Muriel has organized her own acting company, written her own plays and presented her productions before thousands of children. Recently she was named the new eastern chairman for the Children's Theater Conference, affiliated with the American Educational Theater Association.

Talent in the arts runs in her family. The dark-haired producer took Sharon as a stage name after dancer Martha Graham told her it was difficult to pronounce the family name. Muriel, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin J. Schochen, 1209 Hall Avenue, Lakewood, is the sister of Seyril Schochen, who has written a Broadway play scheduled for production this season, and her other sister, Dorothy, is an accomplished sculptress in New York.

There has been a major boom in children's theater in the last few years, with some 50 companies producing in the New York area, and numerous groups touring the country. For writers, producers and actors, it is usually strictly a labor of love. Anyone with ideas that such ventures are financially lucrative would be quickly set straight listening to Muriel expound on the subject.

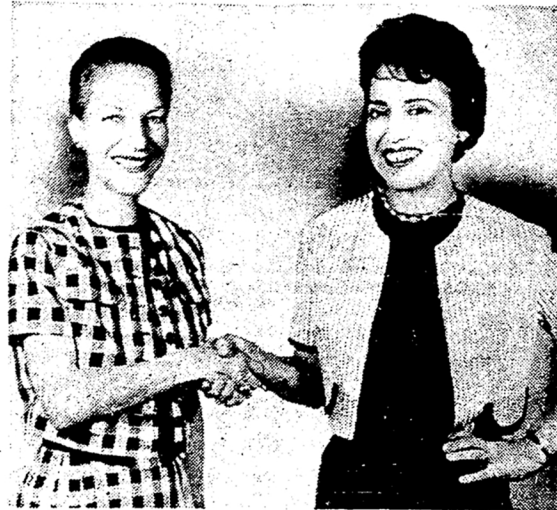
"I have been able to make enough profit to keep mounting other shows, if you call that profit, but it's worthwhile for me," she said, as she had breakfast with her husband, painter and art critic Sydney Tillim, who is a contributing editor of Arts magazine and much absorbed in his wife's theatric pioneering.

"In my show, 'The Glass Slipper,' I had 14 actors, which is artistic but insane. They say that if you want to make children's theater work financially you have to travel with three or four actors and scenery consisting of two garbage cans. It would help if the foundations would get interested."

Muriel's group, The Pocket Players, has been in existence since 1955, and she has managed to keep intact a company of actors—an unusual feat because of the financial pressures and desire for recognition that lead performers into Broadway shows and other jobs. Regardless of other attractions, there is nothing that can duplicate the alertness and spontaneity of a young audience.

"Children are much closer to their feelings," Muriel elaborated. "Adult audiences have become so intellectual, in the bad sense of intellectual, they can't respond as openly. In presenting shows for children,

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MURIEL SHARON of Lakewood (right), leading producer of children's shows in New York, takes over job as eastern director of Children's Theater Conference from Nellie McCaslin, who attended Western Reserve University.

we don't play down to them, but use farce in the tradition of Moliere, ideas stemming from the classics, and try to develop the rich world of a child's imagination."

Plays can make a strong impression, she is certain as a result of her own experience:

"As a child in Cleveland, we saw the marionette show brought to school once a year by the Tatterman Company. I can forget other things I have seen since then, but can vividly recall and describe the scenery of those shows and the way the characters looked."

Muriel disclosed that she became stage struck at 16 when she was in high school and obtained a job ushering at the Cleveland's Public Music Hall. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo came and she was "filled with the magic of the theater." She studied dance with teacher Eleanor Frampton, studied later at Ohio State, and then majored in music education at Western Reserve University, where she did considerable work with puppets. A course in children's literature she once took in Cleveland with Mrs. May Hill Arbutnot is credited by Muriel as an important direction-pointer toward her present field.

Life in New York proved exciting to her from the start,

and she became immersed in Settlement House work, studying with leading authorities in dance and acting, summer stock, and her all-important work at the noted 92nd Street YMHA, where she plunged into the extensive cultural program teaching children's drama and presenting plays. She became a lecturer on children's theater at Cornell University and one summer received a Fulbright Scholarship to England to study how children's theater works there. "In England, the London Country Council books theater companies," she reported enthusiastically, and told of current efforts to get the New York Board of Education interested and involved.

There is much discussion about whether shows with conflict are good for children, and Muriel is a firm believer that they are, provided that the conflict is genuine in terms of culture, myth and life's experience, rather than "good guy vs. bad guy" simplifications.

She doesn't go along with those who would strip violence from children's theater. Violence on TV is generally harmful, she points out, because it is in adult terms, while violence in a children's theater show corresponds to the youngster's imagination as a child.