

Interview with Jenny Robinson
“With Love and Astonishment”

Jenny was eight years old when she started studying with Muriel at the 92nd Street Y. Her mother signed her up after Jenny’s elementary school teacher suggested she needed an outlet for her extra energy. “I was in Muriel’s youngest Tuesday class and at first I was a little afraid of her.”

Jenny has strong memories of The Studio Theater where the classes and The Production Workshop took place. “That little room created a small Broadway stage, a very real place to work, very powerful. Muriel had great reverence for the stage and taught me respect for the stage. She said never to put your school books on the stage and told us that we could never touch the stage when someone was on stage.

“She taught us not to be afraid ... to do what was intrinsic to each of us ... We’re all born with that ... we rose to the occasion ... we had presence, self-assurance the right to be there ... We were at the right age to be influenced ...

“I never had the courage to be funny. She taught me not to be afraid to be funny. We were all funny people in her classes and productions and we became the funniest group in the Western World. And we tried to crack her up!

“Working on a scene, she let us be free. I was in a scene with Taube Henry and didn’t know what to do. Muriel said to do it as if you were meeting on a street and with that we knew what to do. Muriel started laughing and said, ‘I got an idea.’ ”

She has a memory where a few of the students, dressed in the Commedia dell’Arte costumes from *The Servant of Two Masters* merrily cavorted on a fire escape. Jenny remembered this escapade as part of the classes, but which was actually an off-stage antic that took place in an apartment that Jeffrey Friedman lived in with his mother on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. It was so fun

Although Jenny was taking the Tuesday class the same year as the 1962 Production Workshop of *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “Muriel thought I was too young and too small to be in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. She said, ‘I’ll save you for the next one.’ ”

The Prince Who Learned Everything Out of Books, Year 1963, was Jenny’s first real acting show. “Muriel was feeling me out. I played one of the three daughters and I had a lovely costume made of satin and very little to say. It was half acting, half singing. The book was just as strong as the music, blending together beautifully, like *Carousel* or *My Fair Lady*. It was something Stephen Sondheim would write, you know the era of theatre operata. The Three Daughters sang a fugue with four melodies. ‘La, la la. Who has upset the fountain. La, la la. Laughing water a kiss for a King and a kiss for his Daughter.’ ”

“Irma Jurist wrote the wonderful score. I remember seeing her years later sitting on one of the islands on Broadway feeding the pigeons. She told me it was a regular group of pigeons and she knew each one by name.”

In *Turandot*, Year 1965, Jenny played one of the three Doctor of the Divans. “We didn’t know what we were doing. Just by looking at Connie Gruen’s face, who played one of the Doctors of the Divan, I got it, I knew what to do. We became triplets. We were all exactly alike. Muriel liked it and she said, ‘keep that. Whatever you were doing.’ ”

In *The Play of Innocence and Change*, Year 1967, “it was very medieval.” Jenny played Great Gerturde, The Leader of the Circus, the Old Owl Lady (“with a long beak”) and another character which she cannot recall. (Editor’s Note: Jenny’s performance as Great Gertrude was an urban legend, a finely calibrated comedic miracle. Don’t take my word for it. Ask anyone who saw her performance!)

Mildred Natwick, who was invited to the production by Muriel, told her that Jenny was ‘memorable as Great Gertrude.’ “She loved my part the most and said I was unforgettable.”

Muriel gave Jenny a photo of her as Great Gertrude and on the back of the photo, she wrote, “With Love and Astonishment.”

“Oh, and Muriel did all the makeup!”

Jenny went on to become a tap-dancer of unapparelled gifts and years later performing in *Girl Crazy*, she just waited, “and sure enough in the last rehearsal, the character showed up in the dressing room. And it all goes back to Muriel. She influenced me for my whole performing life.

“She was amazing, just amazing.”