

Tony Roberts

Crossing the Delaware as George Washington to Create America

“We adored her. We worshipped her like a goddess.”

Tony Roberts studied with Muriel at the age of 11 for “about a year, maybe more, maybe less, it could have been 6 months.”

Tony came from a family of actors. His father was a radio announcer for several CBS mysteries and as a child he would go to his father’s studio and “observe the professional actors portraying everything from gangsters, to cowboys, to policemen, acting out imaginary events and getting paid to do it. It seemed like a great way to make a living and have fun at the same time. I think that’s why I wanted to join the acting classes at the 92nd Street Y.

“Muriel’s lessons were made up fantasies which we were asked to ‘act out’ using our own imaginations. No scripts as I recall. We invented our own dialogue and physical movements. She was very kind, very gentle. She treated us with respect, she was not condescending to us. I had private school and public school teachers that were terrifying, but Muriel treated us as adults, she dealt with us as creative artists.”

Two moments stayed with him.

“Muriel had me improvise that I was George Washington crossing the Delaware in a small boat, made up of classroom chairs. There were about 5 other students, maybe Jessica Walter was one of them, I’m not sure. I had a pole, could have been someone’s umbrella, it was at night and we were going to create the U.S.A.

“That was the moment, crossing the Delaware as George Washington that might have led me to becoming an actor.”

And then there was the time “When I heard the news from a classmate in Muriel’s class that John Garfield had died the night before of a heart attack, I went to a phone outside the classroom and called my Dad to give him the news. I think he had already heard it because he was part of a weekly poker game with John Garfield earlier the same evening.”

He has a memory of his mother “who wasn’t a stage mother at all, but I remember her talking into a wall phone in our apartment and yelling, ‘he’s been taking classes for 6 months and he hasn’t been cast in a play!’” He did perform in *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* in the Kaufman Concert Hall in about 1950, “probably my first time on the stage. The children were the townfolks and there was one Equity actor who played the Pied Piper.”

Times passes ... years after Tony crossed the Delaware in the stealth of night to create America, he found himself at the California home of Jessica Walter, his childhood classmate from the Y, who suddenly and unexpectedly said, ‘Let’s call Muriel!’