

Nina Hellman
A Vivid Time in My Life

Nina was 8 years old when she started studying with Muriel. Nina remembered seeing *Alice in Wonderland*, a production of Muriel's Pocket Players theatre group, in The Kaufman Concert Hall at the 92nd Street Y. "I admired the performers and was envious of them." Abby Imber, who eventually taught mime alongside Muriel's children's acting class was one of the performers.

Nina also remembered seeing Abby Imber in *The Tale of the Donkey* written by Bette Butterworth and Muriel in The Kaufman Concert Hall in 1955. A vaudeville comedy based on the Aesops Fable, *The Man, the Boy and the Donkey*, Abby played the Donkey, Issaca Siegel was the Mom and Julius Novick the Con-Man.

"It was a vivid time in my life. I was a very shy child and I became engaged working with Muriel. She identified with shy children and connected with them strongly." Oh, and Muriel was her first employer! Hold that thought, we'll get back to that later.

As part of The Production Group, a precursor to The Production Workshop, in a cohort that included Elinor Reigart and Joy Wener, Nina performed in:

The Dyspeptic Ogre by Percival Wilde. Performed in The Kaufman Concert Hall. Year 1956. A modern fairy story about an ogre who ate a little girl every day for dinner. Nina was 8 years old when she played one of the little girls. It was directed by Issaca Siegel, who was a child actor in the previous cohort of students who studied with Muriel.

Gamer Gurton's Needle. Performed in The Kaufman Concert Hall. "It was a medieval play and I played Gamer Gurton."

Jonah and the Whale. Performed at The Kaufman Concert Hall and the Cyrillian Home for disabled children.

In *The Glass Slipper*, Year 1960, a Pocket Players production based on the Cinderella story by Eleanor and Herbert Fargeon, Nina was the prop person. She created some of the props, including invitations to the ball and also helped with the "very quick costumer changes. It was romantic." There was one performance at Fiske College before it went on tour with The Pocket Players. Abby Imber and her twin sister Michael Imber were the dancers. Florence Winston, Muriel's good friend, played the evil stepmother. Peter Kasten, a tiny, pubescent boy played the footman.

The following 2 one-act plays were performed on a double bill in The Studio Theatre:

Spreading the News, by the Irish writer Lady Gregory. Nina played Mrs. Fallon and Joy Wener was Bartley. "It was fun."

The Happy Journey by Thorton Wilder. Nina Played the wife, Joy Wener was the son and Jeannie Bartlett was the husband.

The following 2 plays were part of The Production Group, later known as The Production Workshop

Emil and the Detectives. Nina played the mother in the original Production Group production in 1961. Later when *Emil and the Detectives* toured the tri-state area as part of *The Pocket Players*, comprised of both adult and child actors, Muriel cast only adult actors in the adult roles. In this version, Nina played a young girl carrying a violin on the train and in various other scenes. Editor's Note: The Editor had a small, comical part as a teenager playing a violin as she walks down a staircase in The Production Workshop's film, "The Unborn". Perhaps the violin was a motif that Muriel used when a performer needed a spot! Nina later performed in *Emil and the Detectives* at The Gramercy Arts Theater in April, 1962.

The Play of Innocence and Change by Jonathan Levy. Performed in The Studio Theatre. Year 1967. Nina played the Turk and the Blind Man.

Muriel was Nina's First Employer

Muriel first hired Nina as the prop person for *The Glass Slipper* and she was still a teenager when Muriel hired her to teach the youngest children, the 5 and 6-year-olds in a little room in the basement of the Y, for about 2 years. Nina was in her twenties when Muriel, as the Artistic Director of the Junior School of The Neighborhood Playhouse, hired her as an acting instructor for the pre-teens.

"These are old memories," Nina said, almost apologetically as she remembered the students who were older than her, "Nick Hymes, Bill Barshan and Julius Novick" and then recounted the Production Group's annual outings to Coney Island, "walking on the beach" and to the boat lake in Central Park where Muriel announced to the children that she was getting married to Sidney Tillim. All those years later, she remembered that. Yes, she did. She remembered that!

"She was such an important person for such a long time in my life a pivotal figure in my childhood."