

Marjorie Thau

She More than Deserves a Tribute

“I have such fond memories of Muriel, even though I don’t remember anything.”

Marjorie recently saw the 1945 French film, *Children of Paradise*, an historical romance that takes place on the Boulevard Du Crime in 1820’s Paris, with Jean-Louis Barrault as a lovelorn Pierrot and Etienne Decroux, (considered the father of modern mime), as actors performing pantomimes at The Théâtre des Funambules. “It brought me back to my experiences with Muriel at the 92nd Street Y.”

“My immediate reaction when I heard from you was what a wonderful thing. She more than deserves a tribute.” Marjorie’s introduction to mime was at the Y where she performed in the Commedia dell’Arte play, *The Servant of Two Masters*, a production directed by Muriel and where she studied mime with Abby Imber. Abby had been a student of Etienne Decroux’s and she later taught a mime class alongside Muriel’s Tuesday acting class. “I saw *Children of Paradise* for the first time with you when we were kids”, Marjorie said to the Editor. “You were so excited.”

Aside from not remembering anything, the main thing she said, as she couldn’t stop talking was “the continuing and lingering, wonderful influence Muriel had on my life, even up to this point.” Marjorie’s interest in film, spanning the silent era to the early 1960’s led her recently to see *Emil and the Detectives*, a 1931 German film about a rag-tag gang of children in Berlin who help Emil, a young small-town boy, find money that was stolen from him. The screenplay was by Billy Wilder shortly before he fled Germany after the rise of the Nazis, which made Marjorie wonder, “10 years later, what happened to those children?”

As it happened, interestingly, her first involvement at the Y was in Muriel’s Pocket Players touring company of *Emil and the Detectives* where she worked on wardrobe - costumes, ironing and props. “It was unforgettable, I loved traveling and watching everyone, being behind the scenes. Muriel knew that everyone makes a contribution - it wasn’t just performing. Without making a big deal, she got the young people to take it seriously. She had such an understanding of youngsters ... of all different backgrounds and brought out the best in us ...Let’s face it, we were all nuts, that’s for sure.

“I was so influenced by Muriel, that for one summer when I was eleven years old, I walked around as if I was Hamlet!”

Marjorie played Doctor Lombardi, a stock Commedia dell’Arte character in *The Servant of Two Masters*, both in Muriel’s annual Production Workshop in 1964 and at The New York State Pavilion at The World’s Fair in the Spring of 1964. “I loved the business of masks and there was that Italian guy, can’t remember his name, very funny, whoever he was, a romantic figure for me, romantic as in capital R, who came and taught us about masks. (Editor’s Note: His name was Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, the Commedia Style Director and yes, for us kids, he was Romantic).

“I didn’t like being on stage that much. It was the behind-the-scenes work that opened up a world to me. It was culturally so rich and I liked the other kids, Jeffrey, Malcolm, Simi, Connie.” I read Eric Bentley’s book of Italian theater.” (*The Genius of The Italian Theatre*).

She said she loved improvising in the Tuesday acting class. “It made a big impression on me. We worked on a scene from *Jane Eyre* that takes place in that ghastly boarding school that she went to. It was such an eye-opener for me, a ten-year-old. I was really impressed when Muriel had us work on how a child in that era would sit and stand. You know, body language. I can still see it. Muriel went on stage and wearing a skirt that came to her knees, demonstrated the effect of long dresses of that period, how it felt.

“What a good childhood I had. It’s like a book on a shelf; the capital from which one draws. I loved the Y ... it resonated on a lot of different levels, a real turning point for me a sense of discipline ... very enriched

“It was a great intellectual privilege to work with her.”