

Chris Tabori

How Did Muriel Become Muriel?

Muriel Sharon was a good friend of Chris Tabori's mother, Viveca Lindfors. A well-known star of stage and screen, Viveca Lindfors did not think the acting environment "was a safe work space for children" but nevertheless Chris' introduction to Muriel "was initiated by my mother" where at the age of 6, he began taking her Tuesday acting classes and performing in The Production Workshop at the 92nd Street Y.

Following in his mother's footsteps, Chris, using the name Kristoffer went on to success in film, television and radio, both as an actor and director, but his memory of Muriel was that she had a big impact on him during his formative years. "What was she up to?", Chris asked repeatedly and in numerous ways throughout the interview. "Where did her passion come from?"

Chris played Little Mittler in *Emil and the Detectives*, Muriel's Pocket Players production at the Gramercy Arts Theatre in 1962. His love for the theater came early and was supported by his family, but with *Emil*, his passion mushroomed. "That was pretty heady stuff, being in an Off-Broadway show with costumes and scenery. There was a door that could be wheeled around the stage from one place to another, indicating different rooms and places, pretty complex." The costumes? "They were serious costumes. Not made by some women's committee."

Chris was impressed with Michael Pressman who played Gus, the Newsboy in *Emil*, "a handsome guy, he played kind of an Artful Dodger character, cool pants." Michael, (whose father David Pressman was the Director of The Neighborhood Playhouse) and Chris had this in common - they were both child actors born into acting royalty. Their parents' theatrical life skirted the post-war political climate in America. In a production called *Brecht on Brecht*, which Chris' stepfather George Tabori translated, adapted and acted in along with his mother, Viveca Lindfors and Lotte Lenya (iconic German actress and wife of Kurt Weill), Brecht's work was reintroduced to the American public. Perhaps that was why the image of Muriel's character in *Emil and the Detectives* "with the stylized German makeup of the 1930's gestalt" stayed with him. Editor's Note: Muriel's character, a kind of Gangster Moll which she created herself was called Lotte.

Chris played Thisbe In Muriel's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and he remembers "being on that little stage and I couldn't stop smiling." As Francis Flute, a bellows-mender, he was chosen by his fellow craftsmen to play Thisbe, the young girl in love with Pyramus in *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play-within-a-play put on for Theseus's marriage celebration. "I was so embarrassed. There I was, a 9-year-old kid dressed in drag, committing suicide over my dead lover, a tragedy, and I couldn't get that shit-eating grin off my face. The beauty of it is that Thisbe's character is supposed to be a bad actor. As an adult director, I would have tried to get the actor to do what I did. Did she know? Muriel should have taken full credit for my performance. A good director lets things happen and does not get in the way of a great choice."

Muriel was 42 years old when she directed Chris in *Emil and the Detectives*, and as he said, "she was not of her era. It was pre-women's liberation, a difficult transition point for women in terms of identity and sexuality. What was she up to?", he repeated, trying to decipher her all these years later. Not a question I heard others ask. "She was fraught with ambition. She

had real ideas, and we were expected to live up to them. I guarantee you that if you looked at any community arts theater at that time, you would see productions of *The Music Man* or *The Sound of Music*. Muriel was working on a higher level. That was what was all so intriguing about her - she saw the bigger picture. Think of it. She produced and directed *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Servant of Two Masters*, *Emil and the Detectives*, an obscure German novel, not terribly well-known in the 1960's .. “

How did Muriel become Muriel? That's what Chris wanted to know.