

## Eugene Pressman Remembers Muriel

I was 11 years old when I participated in the Muriel Sharon's Children's Production Workshop at the 92<sup>nd</sup> St. YMHA in New York. My older brother by two years had been in two previous productions at the workshop, and I wanted to be a part of it, too. The show I was cast in that year was "The Prince Who Learned Everything Out Of Books", with original songs by Irma Jurist (lots of red hair, if I recall correctly). I was cast in the lead role and so had to sing – not my best skill. I still remember my uncle, a musician and composer, being bewildered upon seeing the play as to why Muriel and Irma had me singing everything in a falsetto. I never did have a good answer to that one.

When I think of Muriel, going a ways back now, three things stand out most immediately to me. The first is her cigarillos. She smoked these dark cigarettes, technically a "cigarillo" because I suppose they're part cigar. She was the first woman I'd ever seen smoking something like that. Act Two – that was the brand. Don't know why I remember that. I guess theater reigned supreme even in her choice of smokes, you could say.

The second memory I have is her shoes. Very sensible, practical, no nonsense rubber soled shoes. Muriel moved around a lot, darting here and there, so perhaps that's why I remember them. Maybe they squeaked.

But mostly I recall her energy and enthusiasm for the work itself. Teaching drama to kids, and directing a play with them might seem daunting to some, or a chore. But Muriel seemed to genuinely enjoy the process. She always treated you with respect, as if you were an adult with valuable insights and creative potential. You never felt talked down to, but quite the contrary, as if you were an important part of the whole creative and collaborative process. Muriel didn't coddle us, she just expected the same degree of personal investment that she was giving.

I also remember her as being a very understanding person. Working with children aged 10-14 can be pretty stressful to say the least, but I don't ever recall her losing it, or being harsh or unkind in any way. She was firm in the way she conducted the whole rehearsal process, but it was always appropriate and in service of getting where you needed to be.

One of my fondest memories of that experience was the fight scene my brother and I choreographed. He played The Ogre, and I had to rescue a Princess from him (I think), and there was a fight scene in the script. Fortunately, he and I had been sword playing and staging cowboy style fights for years, so we were like stunt men. It was a lot of fun.

That year I spent in Muriel's production workshop was a wonderful experience. You felt a part of something valuable and important, not least because it was valuable and important to her.