

Margaret Gruen

Memories in An Age of Horror

When I interviewed people for this website, along with their memories of Muriel and her classes and productions, they told me stories of their youth and childhood. I wanted them to stay on point, but then I realized, Muriel was so much a part of their childhood and youth, that they couldn't distinguish between the two.

Here's mine.

On Oct. 16, 1962, there was a military standoff in the Bay of Pigs, aka the Cuban missile crisis.

We were on the brink of extinction as my Home Economics teacher so kindly put it to her students as she gathered us around to tell us the news. Quaking in my boots hardly describes the fear that I felt on that day, the same day that I had an audition for *The Prince Who Learned Everything Out of Books*, a charming children's play written by the Spanish writer Jacinto Benevento that had been turned into a musical for The Production Workshop at the 92nd Street Y.

It was a singing audition and I couldn't sing.

After leaving my Junior High School on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and wanting desperately to be in the play, I hopped on the 86th crosstown bus and made a beeline to the East Side. My fear of the audition got the better of me and before crossing the park, I got out at Central Park West and crossed the street, intending to go home to wait for the end under my covers. My two competing fears, the end of the world and the audition, collided in my mind. I crossed and re-crossed 86th Street about 10 times, giving into one fear and then the other, finally determining that should this be the end of the world, I might as well audition.

I went on to perform as Queen Chuchurumbo an imperious Queen if there ever was one, and for the next five years, having the time of my life acting under the tutelage of the late, great Muriel Sharon, the greatest children's acting teacher and director of our time.

Along with Queen Chuchurumbo in *The Prince Who Learned Everything Out of Books*, I played a zany and the First Porter in *The Servant of Two Masters* by Carlo Goldoni, Pantalone, Prime Minister of China in *Turandot* by Carlo Gozzi, a comical girl playing a violin in an elegant Upper East Side townhouse in the film, *The Unborn* and a silent, all-knowing Madonna figure in *The Play of Innocence and Change* by Jonathan Levy.

We were a gaggle of public and private school kids performing the classics, including Commedia dell'Arte plays, *The Marvelous Adventures of Tyl* and *Emil and the Detectives* and in Muriel's Tuesday acting class, working on excerpts from *The Speckled Band* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Canterville Ghost* by Oscar Wilde and the monologues of Joyce Grenfell, among others.

There was Jeffrey, a baby-faced talent (cursing as he stumbled backstage in the "Servant of Two Masters"), Betsy who was a born talent, she didn't have to try, and a rather large 12 year old named Marjorie who got yelled at by Muriel, "What do you mean, you're not performing because you have 104 degree fever. You're in the theatre!"

As chronicled elsewhere, Muriel's influence extended to our lives off-stage. We were Merry Pranksters, roaming the city streets and getting into hilarious scrapes. I remember the time Jeffrey and Marjorie (at least a foot taller than me) were holding my hands as I inquired of doormen in various posh apartment buildings on Park Avenue if there were any available apartments for my children and me. We couldn't stop laughing!

What a time! All my dreams, my unfolding imagination, it was all Muriel; my centrifugal artistic force, the center of everything.

At this moment, as I write this, we are living in an era that makes the Bay of Pigs look like a delightful Disney film, a light, frothy animated romp through a wacky wonderland, all technicolor and hijinks, and I ask myself, is this a good use of my time? Should I be writing about such ephemera? Do these remembrances add value to our lives? Imagination and dreams in an age of horror? And does it matter?

In the cookbook, *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezin*, the starving elderly inmates of the Theresienstadt Ghetto shared memories of the recipes of their Jewish Czechoslovakian mothers and grandmothers. They cooked in their heads, when they had nothing to eat. These memories, along with foraging in garbage heaps for potato skins and other scrapes of food were part of their survival.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and say, it is to our memories, to our childhood, to dreams and imagination and most of all to Muriel that I answer with a resounding Yes, it most assuredly does matter.

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