

Deborah Offner

## She Treated Us as Professional Peers

Deborah heard about Muriel through the grapevine and started taking classes when she was about 11 years old.

As a child she was involved in extra curricula activities, including acting and at the age of 9 started classes at The Neighborhood Playhouse. She had vivid memories of the commute. “I took the train at 103<sup>rd</sup> Street to 59<sup>th</sup> Street, crossed the platform, took the D to 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, went downstairs to take the E train to 53<sup>rd</sup> Street and walked to The Neighborhood Playhouse.”

Deborah remembered that “I was a dissatisfied customer at a young age, I didn’t like the way the children were treated there, ‘Pretend you’re a piece of candy being eaten by a piece of chocolate from a box’. I was hungering for a lot more.”

Her connection to the other students were numerous and intertwined, long before she went to the Y. She met Robin Bartlett in kindergarten at the New Lincoln school where their parents who already met would run into each other. Before she studied with Muriel, Deborah took guitar lessons at the Y from Bari Gilbert’s mother, Mira. And her parents vacationed at Fire Island with like-minded people, including Julia Chasman’s family, Michael and Eugene Pressman’s family and Bari Gilberts’ and Maia Danziger’s family, all classmates at the Y.

She remembered hearing about “the lore of the productions” before her time at the Y. The kids talked about *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and how “young and great Betsy Hellman was in it, and how Michael Pressman as Bottom was terrific.”

In *The Servant of Two Masters*, year 1964, she played a Zany. “We were so comfortable performing in a Commedia dell’Arte play. Working with Abby Imber (Mime Prologue Director and Style and Mime Coach) and Carlo Mazzone-Clementi (Commedia Style Director) was amazing. I can see them both so clearly ... again, they treated us like professionals ... never talked down to us, they were so great at what they did and we learned so much about movement and economy, and story-telling and humor. Carlo was the crème de la crème.”

Deborah auditioned for the part of Clarice in *The Servant to Two Masters* and didn’t get it. “I experienced rejection, but it was fleeting. What does it feel like to not get something? It was a life lesson.” She remembers Andrew Jackness, who was in the production “with passionate fondness, he had incredibly beautiful smiles and curls, a cleft in his face and I feel to this day that he is a friend.”

In *Turandot*, Year 1965, she played Schirina, Mother of Zelima, which she does not remember. She does remember Mayo Mandel who played Adelma, Slave to Turandot, former Princess of Tartary as “very talented” and “how great she was in the play.”

In *The Unborn*, Year 1966, Deborah, along with the other students was asked to tell personal stories. Her bit took place in a bedroom where she talked about her sister, how she envied her and wanted what she had.

Looking back from a mature perch, Deborah said, “The productions were great. I remember them so clearly. What I loved so much, was that Muriel treated us as professional peers,

complete performers. She didn't talk down to us, she never made us feel that we weren't going to achieve it. It was as if we were rising up to it, and we did, we rose up to it.

"In rehearsals, repetition was so important. We learned how to be outside it and then, as in the Italian period pieces, the classic comedies, we entered into it and we found ourselves in it. We understood how clear we needed to be. It was like developing a muscle, like a dance class. Such a great lesson.

"Muriel was fabulous, she was passionate; she introduced us to literature.

"Because you're children, doesn't mean you don't appreciate quality. I learned things that I didn't have the vocabulary for until years later.

"Amazing that we had that."