

-Jerry Pantzer

*The Unborn*

\* Jerry Pantzer had a brief scene as a passenger on the train in *Emil and the Detectives* where, sitting next to Grundeis, The Man in the Bowler Hat, he says to Emil, "I suppose you deposited your brains in a bank." He had difficulty remembering those lines! *Emil* was a production of The Pocket Players, Muriel's theater group that included both adult and children actors and toured the tri-state area on a bus. "It was bedlam on that bus." Watching Muriel play a Lotte Lenya character in *Emil*, Jerry saw "her develop before my eyes. And you believed it. That's all."

Abby Imber, The Thin Lady in *Emil and the Detectives* and also the mime teacher for the Tuesday children's acting class at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y, introduced Jerry to Muriel. Both Jerry and Abby had studied with Etienne Decroux, the renowned French mime who taught in New York City from 1957 to 1962.

Jerry later became a cinematographer and it was as a cinematographer and editor that Jerry worked on *The Unborn*, Muriel's first and only film as part of the annual theatrical offering of The Production Workshop at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y. The film was written by Betty Jean Lifton, based on interviews and improvisations with Muriel's students, who imagining themselves as an unborn child and after witnessing and experiencing the good and bad of life, decide whether to be born. Spoiler alert: The children decide to be born!

"Muriel drove me batty. Working with her was a creative challenge and I'm obliged to her for her tenacity. She was relentless in terms of cutting and changing slots, very direct in what she wanted, how she saw it from moment to moment, always with the big picture in mind, to the point, I was beginning to lose my mind. After a while, I couldn't look straight.

"She had certain concepts and I used cinematography to enhance those concepts."

For example, using a few shots, Jerry filmed a scene of a bicycle accident in Central Park. One was a "point-of-view shot" of a boy happily riding a bike through Central Park which he filmed from the side of the boy. The "subjective shot" was filmed from the boy's point of view as a few older people got in the boy's way and he falls off his bike. The "stunt shot" was filmed while Jerry was riding a bicycle, holding the camera in his right hand and looking through the camera from his right eye, as his left hand steered the bicycle. He then pulled the handlebar to him and flipped over onto the ground, all the while filming the wheels going around as people came towards the boy. "I got it on the first try."

"As to the sounds and the actor's lines, I believed we recorded most of it afterwards in a small studio under Muriel's direction. I had fun dealing with sound. Some of the emotional scenes required tender songs or music which we added later." An example: a girl and a boy are in a party scene that took place in a brownstone on the Upper East Side. Filmed as a medium shot, the sound expands as they approach each other on the stairs and make eye contact. As they gaze at each other the sound slowly fades into silence with the discovery of their love. Only they exist. "It was a touching moment."

The visuals and soundtrack were dramatically blended for a stronger emotional effect, as in the opening sound, where, as a yet unborn child pondering whether or not to be born, a special visual background was used as we hear the child's voice and that of a high spirit. This shot was a medium close

up of stunning backlit ocean waves, almost like moonlight with reflections of the sun, which Jerry filmed at Brighton Beach in Brooklyn.

### **Technical Information**

The machine that Jerry used to edit looked like a Singer sewing machine. One reel had the sound tape and the other had the images. Shot in 16 mm black and white reversal film Tri-X. The format was almost "square" with an aspect ratio of 4 x 3. Today it would be predominately a 16 x 9 aspect ratio. Jerry borrowed an Arri-S 16mm camera. The camera made some noise but it was never meant to be shot with live sound.

The green Moviola editing machine which Jerry worked on, "appeared more like a deranged series of interlocking Singer sewing machines, with huge multiple rollers and out of control spools which had a gift for tearing up spliced film. Ergo, we had to employ an enormous BRAKE to stop it from wreaking havoc in the editing room!

"The editing process took over two years to complete. In the evening Muriel would come in every other night or whenever, to view and give feedback. She and I struggled through this most creative experience in a truly positive manner."

### **In Jerry's own words, *not* abbreviated and *not* annotated:**

"Muriel was such an inspiration to me. I loved her dearly. She provided the challenges to make me rise to what I was capable of. She helped me understand action better, on a higher level than before. As a cameraman, as a director she influenced me in working with actors. She recognized each individual actors' qualities and brought out each actors' individual talents of communication and their individual soul. Muriel had that way, each individual had certain traits that she brought out, the flow of their spirit. Her way with actors was inspiring. I still feel it. She could get actors to act with each other on a humanistic, spirit level.

"Muriel had a truly deep and hearty laugh!! More than a laugh. She did comedy as none other could; she had an extraordinary sense of humor and could get actors to break up. She was good at extracting stuff that they didn't know that they had; getting actors to do shtick for want of a better word. The actors trusted her. She laid herself bare so as to allow other actors to lay bare themselves."

### **Taking Flight**

Jerry went to see the adventure film, That Man from Rio, starring Jean-Paul Belmondo with Muriel and her husband Sidney. "We were all hollowing with laughter, it was so funny. At one particularly comical moment, both Muriel and Sidney shot up vertically, as if taking off in flight. They were such a close duo."

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\* "Usually, when I sat down next to the Bowler Hat Man, I held a large newspaper. During one particular performance, I entered with the newspaper totally folded to one column which was about 2 inches wide and quite narrow. I sat down and leaned over to him and said, 'I'm narrow minded', to which he lost it and spritzed all over me. The audience howled quite wildly!"