

Steve Cohen
The Greatest Fix-Up

Steve started studying with Muriel at the 92nd Street Y at about the age of 10. He also took mime classes with Abby Imber, who taught alongside Muriel in her Tuesday classes.

“I was very fond of her,” he said. “She was a big part of my life; she was direct, fun, very smart, and frankly, I was a little bit in awe of her.”

Steve performed in Muriel’s Pocket Players production of *Emil and The Detectives*, both at the Gramercy Arts Theater in Manhattan and later when it toured schools in the tri-state area. He played Big Mittler, one of the kid detectives. His real-life dog was in both productions.

Steve eventually became a motion picture editor, and maybe for that reason he remembers the tape recorder that was used in the production. The sounds worked almost like another character, expanding the scope of the show: the train whistle in the distance, the choo choo of the train arriving and coming to a stop, the sounds of kids playing. He remembers it as a portable reel-to-reel machine. The tape had been carefully hand-spliced, so the individual cues came up in order for the stage manager. “I haven’t thought of that in ages,” he said, “but I can still see it.”

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When Muriel and her team were touring *Emil and the Detectives* in Pennsylvania in 1964, there was a mix-up. Emil went on stage without the prop money, which should have been pinned to his jacket pocket. Since the stealing of that money by Grundheis, The Man in the Bowler Hat, was the crux of the play, this was a major problem.

Here’s how the performers solved it:

Emil (Jeffrey Friedman) whispers to one of the actors sitting next to him on the train that he has forgotten the money. Frau Tischbein (Dolores Bagley) ad-libs that she is “looking for a train” and goes off-stage. She looks for the money on the prop table and when she can’t find it, comes back to finish the scene. Later, after her real exit, she looks more thoroughly, finds it, and tosses it onto the stage behind the set. The Thin Lady (Abby Imber) and Frau Jacob (Isaaca Siegel) get off the train during a chaotic moment in the scene, and using that as cover, the conductor goes behind the set, finds the money and gives it to the Man in the Bowler Hat. With his back to the audience, he makes the switch and “steals” the money from Emil’s jacket pocket.

Although he wasn’t in the scene, the young Steve drew a diagram of the event after consulting with the other actors. “We all knew roughly what was happening. It was a big deal for us, and a potential disaster was averted. I thought it was an amazing example of resourcefulness during a live performance.” He labeled the drawing “The Greatest Fix-Up.”

Steve also performed in *The Servant of Two Masters*, both in the Production Workshop at The Y and at the New York Pavilion at the 1964 World’s Fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens. He played one of the waiters. In an acrobatic tour de force, he and Malcolm Nagin, who played Truffaldino, juggled trays with faux food glued to them.

Memorable Off-Stage Moments

Picture this — It's 1962, the subway costs 15 cents, and Steve, along with seven or eight young actors, are on their way downtown to The Gramercy Arts Theater to perform in *Emil and the Detectives*. Doing the math, they figured that if they took a cab and split the fare, they would come out ahead.

Knowing there were too many kids for a taxi, this is the ruse they cooked up:

They hailed a big Checker cab which had an additional two “jump seats,” which had to be pulled up from the floor. One kid sat up front with the driver and distracted him while the rest piled into the back. Two sat on the jump seats and others lay down on the floor. It was the only way to get enough people in. The kids had something else up their sleeves, as well. “There was advertising displayed in plastic pockets on the back of the front seats. Now that we'd effectively taken over the cab, the kids on the floor replaced the existing ads with flyers for *Emil*. When we were done we'd avoided a subway ride and co-opted the cab for our own advertising. We were very proud of ourselves!”

They pulled this caper a number of times. You tell me if these kids didn't have fun!

Then there was the time that a group of the child actors from *Emil* went to a production of the improvisational comedy, *The Second City*. “On the spur of the moment, we decided that since we were actors, too, we ought to be able to go backstage.” So they introduced themselves to the cast, who were quite taken with these precocious youngsters. Steve had all the *Second City* performers autograph a program, and he has held onto it to this day. The cast included a young Alan Arkin. “He wasn't a major star yet,” but “starting that night, he became a hero of mine, and I followed his career from then on.

“The experience with Muriel and the Y was formative for me in so many ways,” Steve said. “No question, it changed my life.”