

Constance Gruen  
She Took Us Seriously

Constance Gruen began studying with Muriel when she was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, at the age of eleven.

Along with the Tuesday acting class, she performed in a number of The Production Workshops that met on Wednesday to rehearse.

The classes and productions were a refuge from her life and it gave her a venue to be creative in. Editor's Note: Constance is her sister and she remembers her as a happy-go-lucky go kid. That she needed a refuge was news to her. Constance saw herself as a creative kid as a result of working with Muriel. She had a lot of fun going to classes. "It was very involving for a young creative kid. Muriel expected a lot, sometimes too much. She expected you to come to rehearsals even if you were sick. She was like Miss Brodie in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, a dominating person, but she took us seriously."

Muriel asked her to play one of the child detectives in *Emil and the Detectives*, which was produced by Muriel's theater, The Pocket Players, and toured the tri-state area from 1963 - 1964, performing in schools on the weekend for young people. She has memories of riding on the tour bus with the adult and child actors. "It was a lot of fun, I enjoyed myself." She remembers Issaca Siegel who played the lady with a chicken in a cage as "memorable because she was droll as both an actress and as a person." She also remembers Jeffrey Friedman as Emil, Muriel as a tough lady, Malcolm Nagrin being very funny as one of the child detectives and Nina Hellman, well Nina Hellman was in the production!

She performed in The Production Workshop in the following plays:

*The Prince Who Learned Everything Out of Books* by Jacinto Benavente. Year 1963, played The Page to Queen Chucharumbo.

*Turnandot* by Carlo Gozzi. Year 1965, played one of The Doctors of the Divan.

*The Unborn*, a movie written by Betty Jean Lifton and the only film Muriel produced as part of The Production Workshop. Year 1965. Her character went through many adventures and saw the good and bad in life. In one scene shot in Central Park, Constance is seen throwing an apple in the air, while a voice-over of her character is thinking out loud as to whether it is worth it to be born.

*The Play of Innocence and Change*, By Jonathan Levy. Year 1967. She played The Fat Lady Who Lost all Her Weight and The Beggar. The costume for The Fat Lady Who Lost all Her Weight had sleeves with hanging material where the fat had been. The costume designer was Martha Edelstein.

In 1964, along with other students from Muriel's Tuesday acting class, she performed on the Public Broadcasting Station on their Children's Program, Adventures in Language in *Christopher Columbus*, playing a fish monger's wife, which she really enjoyed.

Muriel's students were a hodge-podge of city kids who went in many directions after they left her fold.

Although her creative life began with Muriel, Constance eventually found her groove as a painter of immense gifts and went on to teach the next generation of visual artists in the city

where it all started for her. She said that becoming an artist “was a continuation of creative expression into another medium. Acting is a narrative and “a lot of visual art is narrative.”

As one of the child actors in *Emil and Detectives*, Constance romped through the underbelly of 1930 Berlin, was a touching Beggar in *The Play of Innocence and Change* and inhabited a Chinese royal court playing a stock Commedia dell’Arte character as a Doctor of the Divan - all productions filled with color, intricate scenery and gorgeous costumes ... and boy did they tell a story!

“It was creative, it was a lot of fun and I enjoyed myself.”