

Andrew Jackness

A Remembrance Unlocked

“The serendipity of those years, when you do something special. You don’t have so many wonderful moments in one’s life. I feel very privileged to have been a part of it.”

When Andrew was eleven years old, his mother arranged for him to take Muriel’s acting class at the 92nd Street Y as a way to boost his confidence.

At first he felt out of place, “everything was new to me and all the students had been together for a while always talking about the touring company of *Emil and the Detectives*.” He remembers Muriel as fairly stern and demanding. “I think she was frustrated with me. I was a dreamer, I didn’t work that hard. I was not that focused as a kid.” During a rehearsal for *The Servant of Two Masters* “Muriel got angry at me because I had to fall down in a sword fight and I cracked up every time. She was beyond annoyed with me and said, ‘That’s it, you’re not playing Silvio!’”

Muriel then cast him as Florindo Aretus, of Turin, Lover of Beatrice.

“Even as Florindo, my concentration was never the greatest, and during a tour performance I remember chatting backstage while missing my cue and everyone in the scene vamping until I ran on. Completely flummoxed, I think I skipped a lot of dialogue, screwed up the scene, having to end it by pulling out my sword and exiting offstage... However I never pulled out the sword which was in its’ scabbard, but raised my arm with an imaginary one as I was walking off stageagain cracking up. I seem to remember Muriel backstage after, and when I asked what it looked like, she said something like. ‘Exactly what you think it did!’”

He remembers the other students. “They were an amazing group of people. such a talent pool.” He remembers Wendy Rosenblatt as Beatrice in *The Servant of Two Masters*, “a lovely, kind person” and he especially remembers Malcolm Nagrin as Truffaldino in *The Servant of Two Masters* as he was serving a meal to Beatrice and Florinda, confused as to who got served what as he went in and out of two doors. “The scene was complex and cleverly staged and he did it brilliantly. Such wonderful staging, like Jerome Robbins’ *On the Town* or a Feydeau farce.”

He remembered Irma Jurist, the singing teacher, who taught alongside Muriel’s Tuesday class. He sang the song *Modern Major General* in the class and she said, ‘What are you doing?’ “And then I sang it crazy and she said, ‘That’s more like it!’”

Andrew became a set designer, so it wouldn’t be unusual to note that his memories were visual. There was The Studio Theater, “a room in the basement with padded sections covered in vinyl that formed the stage. The set of *The Servant of Two Masters* had two doors with a curtain on either side and spattered paint on it with lattice work.”

He remembers Esther Bialo, the costume designer of *The Servant of Two Masters* “as a rather large pasty woman who lived and worked in a ground floor apartment in Chelsea. It was long and narrow and had several rooms. One for fittings with a mirror, and one for fabric and construction. It was dark and chock a block with rolls of fabric. I think we had to go back two or three times. Once to be measured, once for a muslin fitting, and then a final fitting with the

real fabric. I remember her choosing the lace for the arm cuff, and the silk she used for the vest and pants. There were buckles on the shoes, and the heels were painted red as was the custom.”

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I received the following e-mail from Andrew a few hours after we spoke:

“I think that despite my memory of not working very hard, the class, and Muriel’s exactitude, was the first time I had really applied myself to learning something ... I had another memory of having to learn ‘*O for a muse of fire.....*’ and recite it in front of the class. I think it was the first thing I did there! I remember her cutting in and trying to enforce some understanding of what I was saying.

“So... there’s a remembrance unlocked.

“And....I think I did take those lessons into later life, perhaps more so than I realized.”

Editor’s Note: Betsy Hellman, a classmate of Andrew’s said, “We were a little snooty. We thought we were members of The Moscow Art Theatre. That changed as we rehearsed, we fell in love with everyone in the cast and the audience. It was brotherly love. Andrew gave a wonderful performance, so funny.”