

Betsy Hellman
A Tremendous Secret

Memorial Day, 2017

Editor's Note: It's been 2 years since the genesis of this website, and sitting at a café across the street from the 92nd Street Y, the scene of our crimes, the beginning of it all, I'm thinking, it was Betsy Hellman with her remarkable historical and emotional memory of Muriel Sharon that I first called with this brainstorm.

Betsy was a dance student at the 92nd Street starting at the age of 6 years old and she would go down to the children's theatre in the basement to watch her sister, Nina Hellman rehearse in various Production Workshop plays, where she saw:

Gamer Gurton's Needle, "about some medieval guy." Her sister Nina Hellman played Gamer Gurton.

The Happy Journey, by Thornton Wilder, a one-act play that took place at the turn of the last century about a family that was going to Camden, New Jersey in a Model-T Ford. Chairs were set up on the stage, and beautifully choreographed, the actors jiggled from side to side to simulate the movement of the car.

The Glass Slipper, by Eleanor Farjeon, "a beautiful production" of the Cinderella story with scenery evoking a Watteau painting or a Fragonard.

"I have been carrying around a tremendous secret," Betsy confides. "I feel a relief, so grateful that we will let her be known.

"It was an amazing childhood, truly amazing. Muriel was my artistic mother - she influenced my entire creative development. Her expectations were that I could exceed beyond whatever I had already accomplished; she thought that I could morph into everything. She put me in front of audiences, the greatest teacher and got amazing performances out of everyone, whether they were destined to be actors or not.

"I knew she was a genius."

Because of her shyness, her parents wanted her to join the Tuesday acting class and Wednesday's Production Workshop and in 1961 she auditioned for a part in Muriel's Pocket Players production of *Emil and the Detectives*. Developed out of the Production Workshop of 1961, Emil, a young German boy in the 1920's, robbed on a train of money his mother pinned to him for his journey, enlists a gang of young Berlin kids to find the thief.

Touring the tri-state area and eastern Pennsylvania for two years in an unheated bus, Betsy played Deinsteig, the smallest boy in the gang from a bourgeoisie family. "They had a phone!" The costumes designed by Esther Biolo "were gorgeous", but she hated hers. She wore a navy blue hat, itchy Bermuda knee socks and a scratchy navy blue midi.

Betsy was in the following plays as part of The Production Workshop:

Midsummer Night's Dream, By William Shakespeare. Year 1962. She played Puck, aka Robin Goodfellow

The Prince Who Learned Everything Out of Books, By Jacinto Benavente. Year 1963. Originally cast as Queen Chucharumbo - Margaret Gruen was recast as Queen Chucharumbo. "I didn't resent Margaret taking my role of Queen Chucharumbo. I thought she was

wonderful. I loved her doing it.” Muriel then cast her as Tony, Buffon to The Blue Prince, “the sidekick to the Prince”, where she had to walk heel, toe, heel, toe. This was a bone of contention for Betsy as she initially had great difficulty doing it and “led to a fight that I had with Muriel.” She was finally cast as the Old Woman.

The Servant of Two Masters, By Carlo Goldoni. Year 1964. Betsy shared the role of Smeraldina with Julia Chasman and they became best friends.

Betsy performed in *The Servant of Two Masters* at The New York Pavilion of The World’s Fair at The New York Pavilion. Year 1964. Also performed excerpts from *The Servant of Two Masters* on the children’s program of Channel 13, PBS, hosted by Ms. Judy Golfman - a perky blonde, “your TV teacher,” fall of 1964.

Turandot, By Carlo Gozzi. Year. 1965. Played one of the Chinese Eunuchs. She also moved the scenery.

The Unborn, a film written by Betty Jean Lifton, cinematographer Jerry Pantzer, Year 1966. She remembers weeping over a dead bird in rehearsals and had difficulty recreating it when the cameras were rolling.

Betsy’s memories of the Tuesday acting class included working on scenes from the novel *Jane Eyre*, *The Happy Prince* by Oscar Wilde and *The Wizard of Oz*, where Muriel had the students improvise the stories.

She used her mime training from Abby Imber’s Tuesday mime class to portray *The Happy Prince*. “He was a statue and couldn’t move and not moving was so physical”. In *The Wizard of Oz*, she played Glinda, the good witch, where, not having access to a toilet at the crucial moment and in the tradition of “the show must go on” she stayed in character (“it was not too noticeable”) and peed on stage.

Adventures

There was a class outing to see *The Cherry Orchard* by the Moscow Art Theater at City Center. “I sat in the first row of the mezzanine and understood it completely. Even though it was in Russian!”

Other adventures included taking the number 1 subway with Roxanne Lynne and Jeffrey Friedman (Pony and Emil) to the Gramercy Arts Theatre where *Emil and the Detectives* had a run in the spring of 1962, sitting in the balcony of the Kaufman Concert Hall of the 92nd Street Y during a rehearsal of *Emil* and eating turkey sandwiches from a deli on Lexington Avenue, and a marvelously memorable moment during a technical rehearsal for *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. “The rehearsal started at 9:30 in the morning and by 11:30 that night everyone was punch drunk with exhaustion, including Muriel. At her wits end, Muriel, meaning to give the cue, ‘Fairies, skip, hence’, instead, screamed out, ‘Scaries, hip, fence!’

“We were all on the floor, rolling with laughter!!!”