

Remembering Muriel

by Jeffrey Friedman

In 1990 I visited my creative partner, Rob Epstein, in Wilmington, North Carolina, where he was an American Film Institute directing intern on the Martha Coolidge movie *Rambling Rose*. Rob was very nervous about bringing me to set, even though I had been working in the film industry for almost 20 years by then and was confident I knew how to comport myself. “Just be invisible. Don’t talk to anyone.” I promised.

I wasn’t on the set more than 10 minutes when I heard someone call my name. It was the first assistant director, arms open for a hug. It turned out to be someone I’d known two decades earlier, when he was lovers with my mother. (Ah, the 70s.) It turned out this was just a harbinger of things to come.

That evening the director and crew assembled to watch the previous day’s dailies in a screening room. Again, I was invited as long as I kept a low profile. As the new face in the room, I was introduced to one or two crew members, including the editor. “Jeffrey Friedman?” he said. “Jeff Friedman? You look very familiar.” I said I thought he looked vaguely familiar too, but I figured it was just because we were both New York Jews. After a few minutes of curious glances he asked me, “Were you in *Emil and the Detectives*?” No one had asked me that in, literally, 25 years. I said “yes.” Steve Cohen reintroduced himself as a fellow former cast member.

Then he told me that another *Emil* cast member was also in Wilmington, directing a Muppets movie. I was invited to join the *Rambling Rose* dinner table that night at a local restaurant, where the crew from the Muppets movie was also dining. And so I met Michael Pressman again after 25 years.

That day I had the uncanny feeling of my life flashing before my eyes. As startling as it was to encounter three people from my distant past on a random movie set, I started thinking about the fact that three of us were alumni of the same off-Broadway show, and the 92nd St Y drama group that incubated it, under the direction of Muriel Sharon.

In a sense, we’re all Muriel’s children. She mentored us. She gave us our first lessons in acting, in theater, and ultimately in what it means to work as an artist in the real world. We were children—9, 10, 12, 14—but she treated us as professionals, and expected us to comport ourselves appropriately. We often did. The only time I remember her really angry was the time we all started giggling uncontrollably for some reason in the climactic scene and could barely sputter out our lines. It never happened again.

I thought of Muriel that day in Wilmington, where the paths of three of her protégés converged on a movie set, and thought she would be proud.