

## Miss Joan Marie Moosy

The Joy of Ethyl Eichelberger

I first met Ethyl Eichelberger dancing on the bar at the Pyramid Club on Ave A. I had stopped by to leave something for my boyfriend, David Crocker, the Pyramid's lighting designer. When Brian Butterick aka Hattie Hathaway saw me, he asked if I could stay and dance since someone else was a no-show. I was wearing cutoff jeans and a tank top. I told him that I didn't have any costumes with me, but he said that Ethyl could help me. He took me and introduced me to Ethyl, who would also be dancing on the bar. I had seen Ethyl perform and I was thrilled to meet him. He said we should go into the tech office because the basement was full of children. I thought he was kidding, but there was a band from DC on the bill whose members were all children. When we got into the tech office, Ethyl hoisted his bag onto the desk and started rifling through it. We found a fabulous black dress that fit me, and then he looked at me with a face filled with glee, a look that would become familiar to me as I got to know Ethyl and experienced the joy he had in theater, performing, and entertaining. He had something in his hands inside the bag, and he asked me, "I don't know if you'd wear something like this...?" He pulled a large feathered headpiece out of the bag like a magician pulling a rabbit out of his hat. Now my look of glee matched his, and of course I wore the headpiece. Dancing with Ethyl was fun. He was flamboyant and hilarious. We played back and forth, leading and following, and dancing in unison in fits of faux choreography.

Gerard Little, aka Mr. Fashion, and I made a red gown with voluminous amounts of fabric in my apartment for Black-Eyed Susan in *Ariadne Obnoxious*, which Ethyl produced at the Joyce Theater. The next play Ethyl produced was *Fiasco* at P.S. 122 in the downstairs theater. Gerard was in the play, so I heard all about his experiences with Ethyl and the production. Then, three days before the first performance, Ethyl lost his stage manager, and Gerard lobbied for me as the last minute replacement. I happily took over as stage manager the next day. It was a whirlwind three days as I learned the play, the props, and how to deal with Ethyl's fire-eating equipment. I came up with an organizational system to accommodate all the entrances, exits, timing, and the needs and idiosyncrasies of Ethyl and the other actors. I had no training in theater, so Ethyl patiently explained up and down stage, stage right and left, no whistling in the theater and all the other theater superstitions, and how to cure any violation thereof.

During this experience, I began to get to know Ethyl and to see the depth of his commitment to building his talent, his craft, and his body of work. I saw his reverence to those who came before him and influenced his development. I saw him foster the development of other artists, including me. I saw his personal and professional generosity, and I saw the glee I first saw over that feathered headpiece in the tech office in the basement of the Pyramid Club. I also learned about Ethyl's professionalism and experience with live performing. One night an actor accidentally skipped ahead in the script and before we knew it was performing a song prematurely. Ethyl was playing the piano backstage to accompany the song. He was on his knees playing when I rushed up to him. Without missing a note on the piano, he looked up at me and calmly said, "Explain to me what's happened." I showed him with the script how we had skipped to the wrong song, and which other song and what in the plot had been omitted. At the end of the song, he jumped up and back onto the stage and adlibbed his way back to the previously skipped song and straightened out the sequence of events so the plot made sense. He wasn't even slightly shaken up by it all. I was impressed.

From that point I worked with Ethyl until he died. After *Fiasco*, he began writing parts for me in his plays, and he became my mentor. All the early impressions I had of Ethyl were supported by many other

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experiences over the years that illustrated those qualities in his character. I will always be grateful for the joyful experiences I had with Ethyl, both personal and professional. I hope that through this exhibit, many others can experience the joy that Ethyl felt and projected so beautifully to his audiences.