
Joan Muyskens

Joan Muyskens kept Al Carmines organized as his secretary from 1969 to 1977. She lived at Judson House from 1973 to 1977. _____

My first experience with Judson House dates to 1967. I had come to New York on vacation and stayed with Alice Bosveld, with whom I had gone to college. Alice took me to Al Carmines's apartment in Judson House for the first reading of *In Circles*, for which Alice planned to do the lights.

In 1969, when I moved to New York, Alice told me that Judson Church was looking for a secretary for Al Carmines. I applied, and Howard Moody and Arlene Carmen gave me a typing test. I had never typed on an electric typewriter and did not know how it worked. None of the keys seemed to be functioning. After a while, Arlene returned to see how I had done, and I explained that all the keys were stuck. She then explained that I had to turn the machine on first. Howard and Arlene were willing to give me another chance because they were desperate. I was hired even though I typed only thirty-five words per minute. (By the time I left Judson, I had increased my speed to 110.) Al never interviewed me.

In Circles introduced me to Gertrude Stein. I had never read anything by her. Actually, that was the worst part of working for Al: typing Gertrude Stein scripts. You could never tell if you had left out three words or three lines, and I always had this terrible fear that I had left out three pages.

THE (IN)FAMOUS CAST PARTIES

One of the attractions of performing at the Judson Poets Theater was getting to go to Al Carmines's famous opening and closing night parties. During the years I worked as Al's secretary, one of my duties was to go over to his Judson House apartment half an hour or so before the show ended, straighten up a bit, pop a canned ham in the oven, pour bags of pretzels and chips into bowls, and put out various other finger foods (all of which would be consumed within the

first twenty minutes of the party). At the exact time the curtain would come down, I'd put frozen strawberries and peaches in two large punch bowls and begin opening bottles of champagne, which Al would then use to make a very lethal punch. Bowl after bowl after bowl of this punch would be consumed by the hundred or more people squished into Al's apartment.

These parties were the great social occasions of the theater, and as the majority of those attending were single people in their twenties and thirties, they marked the start of many a romance. Al delighted in observing all the pairings and took credit for any that ended in lasting relationships. He was less amused when someone would become fixated on him (this was a not uncommon occurrence) and not want to leave his apartment at party's end. Perhaps the most disruptive of these fans was the woman who locked herself into the bathroom about midway into a party and refused to budge, even though dozens of champagne-drinking partygoers were pounding on the door pleading for entrance.

After pouring the last of the champagne into bowls and mixing up his brew, Al would sit down at the piano and begin to play and sing—first his own songs, then some hymns or sentimental show tunes, and then always the blues. Conversation would cease, we'd each find a spot on the floor (Al's apartment contained one sofa, bookcases, a much-abused baby grand piano, and about a dozen carpet-covered cubes designed as seats and extremely uncomfortable) and escape into this incredible music for about an hour or so. When Al would finally wind down, we'd slowly leave.

AN APARTMENT IN JUDSON HOUSE

When Howard Moody heard that I was apartment hunting in the spring of 1973, he asked if I would like to live in Judson House. I could have the small basement apartment on the south end of Judson House for \$125 per month. The space was in terrible shape, and I would have to renovate it at my own expense. I had been working for Al for about four years. I worked not just days but also three or four nights a week ushering or house managing for the Judson Dance Theater and the Judson Poets Theater, so I jumped at the chance to live next door to the church. When I moved into Judson House a few months later, the only other occupants were Al, John

Tungate, and Mr. Jones (who surely had a first name, but I believe I never heard it used).

My apartment was on the basement level—right on the corner of Third and Thompson, down a half-dozen steps from the street. It consisted of four rooms: a 12- by 15-foot living room; a 12- by 7-foot bedroom; a similarly sized kitchen; and an L-shaped bathroom. It was a small apartment with a surfeit of doors. The living room had three: the front door opening onto the stairway up to the street, a door to the kitchen, and one to the bedroom. The bedroom sported the door to the living room, one to a closet, and one to the bathroom. The kitchen had a door to the living room, a door to the bathroom, and a door to a room that was always referred to as the “old kitchen,” a large basement room that in 1973 served as John Tungate’s workshop. My refrigerator sat in front of the door to the old kitchen. My bathroom also had three doors: the one between it and the kitchen, one to the bedroom, and one opening into a sunken area off the Judson Garden.

I have many fond memories of life in Judson House: John Tungate raising tomatoes on the roof and sharing them with the rest of us in the building; warm summer nights in the garden nattering with whoever happened to stop by; watching the garden squirrels, whom John had trained to eat out of his hand, go to work each morning and return each night (they religiously climbed a tree, leapt onto the House roof, over to the fire escape, down it to Thompson Street, and on to Washington Square Park for the day, and returned at night for John’s handouts). There was Al’s period of cooking—several months when he would appear almost nightly at my door to borrow an electric mixer, a casserole dish, eggs, milk, whatever. For someone who kept forgetting how to turn on the oven he whipped up some amazing and wonderful things. Mr. Jones sometimes knocked on my door late at night having forgotten his keys and needing to go through my apartment and the garden to the unlocked back door of the House.

A BURGLAR AND THE WINOS

Then there was the night I returned from vacation a day early. Exhausted, I dumped my bags in the living room, put on a nightgown, and fell into bed only to hear a clamor in the kitchen. I jumped up to

investigate and upon throwing on the kitchen light discovered John Tungate perched atop my refrigerator in his underwear with hammer in hand. He muttered an apology, crawled down, and disappeared through the door behind the refrigerator into the old kitchen, leaving me to spend the night wondering why he had staged this bizarre appearance. The next morning he explained that he had heard my gate (it had a distinctive squeak), seen a light go on in my apartment, and, believing I was out of town until the next day, thought someone had broken in. To catch my robber in the act, he entered my apartment the only way he could without breaking in himself.

Generally congregated in front of my apartment, leaning against the fence and gate by my front door, were a group of homeless men—what in the 1960s we termed “winos.” These men lived between the liquor store on the corner of Bleecker and Thompson and Washington Square Park. Before I moved into Judson House, they had tended to use my front door as a urinal. The regulars and I soon got to know each other, and when I’d go in or out, one of them would usually open the gate for me and give a little bow. I’d smile, say thanks, and go my way. This polite live-and-let-live relationship went on for a year or two, until the morning that I ran into Cornbread Givens on the sidewalk between my apartment and the side door of the church.

Cornbread, a tall, attractive black man, had been the previous “occupant” of my Judson House apartment. He had never lived in it, but he had used the rooms as a temporary office. If my memory is correct, Cornbread was involved in getting assistance for cooperative farms in the South. At any rate, he had been gone for several years when our paths crossed that morning. Upon seeing me, Cornbread called “Joan,” ran to me, picked me up, spun me around, and gave me a big kiss. We chatted for a while, then went our separate ways. The next morning, as I walked from my apartment to the church, one of the winos yelled “Joan,” grabbed me, spun me around, gave me a big kiss, put me down, and doubled up laughing. This ritual went on for several weeks, much to the amusement of the other hangers-out.

TIME AND AGAIN

Because my windows were at street level, I had little privacy; on the other hand, I was privy to all the conversations on the street (I had

no air conditioning and my windows were open a lot). Listening to the winos was an education in how the legal system worked. They had all been in and out of jail so many times that they knew exactly what their rights were and which Legal Aid lawyers were best. They referred to various judges by first name. I also overheard many an amusing conversation at 4 A.M. when the Raspberry Freeze, a jazz bar on Third Street next to the church garden, and the lesbian bar across from it closed and the two groups of patrons collided.

My favorite sound, though, was that of horses' hooves echoing through my bedroom early each Sunday morning as New York City's mounted police went to work. A fan of *Time and Again*, I would listen to the passing horses, then slowly open my eyes to see if I would be in a different time—if perhaps I might find myself in a just-opened Judson House in the city that Edward Judson knew and loved. Alas, it never happened. But early each Sunday morning as I lay in my basement bedroom, I'd have a fresh chance to dream.

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lives in New York City.