

Late

Ruth Miller

“Late! You’re late! Take it again.” The director is snapping at me. He’s not satisfied with how I am picking up on my cue. He’s been at me during the whole rehearsal and I’m getting more and more flustered and despondent.

We’re in rehearsal for *Mambo Italiano*, and there are two weeks ‘til opening night. The pace of the scene is fast, and I can barely keep up. I know my line is coming and I’m hanging on with my fingernails. I have to jump up and say my line, but evidently I’m not jumping and saying fast enough.

It’s at this point I wonder what the heck I am doing here. I’m 73 years old, playing younger and playing it in an Italian accent. I’ve played Russian, German, French and Jewish, and now I’m playing Lina Paventi, a big, brash Italian mother with a foul mouth. I love the part, but I’m beginning to doubt myself. Up ‘til now in the rehearsal process I’ve been feeling pretty good. The accent isn’t a problem. I even get to utter a few Italian words and expressions. “Zitto... Andiamo... Fa schifo...” A special pleasure for someone who loves languages and thinks she has a pretty good ear for them.

But I’m late! And part of me wonders if I’ll ever be on time.

It’s community theatre. When you are in community theatre, you get to act, to paint and build sets, sell tickets, load and unload the sets into the theatre and strike the set at the end of the run. You don’t get paid, and, in fact, it costs you money. The first show I was in cost me \$1,000. Among other things I had to get contact lenses so I could see the music director from the stage.

On the way home from rehearsal I am in a funk. Will I ever get the pacing of the lines? And why do I get so flustered and down? The roads are dark and deserted as I drive. It’s 11:00 PM. I’m tired. I want to be in bed.

“How did the rehearsal go?” my husband asks from his sleep as I crawl in beside him. “The director yelled at me tonight. It wasn’t so great,” I say and then I lie awake replaying the scenes, replaying my lines, replaying my life.

I see myself as a 10-year-old girl taking Marjorie Purvey’s classes in radio drama, waiting anxiously for the call to tell me I have a part in her CBC radio show *Peter and the Dwarf*. At summer camp I was Laurie in *Oklahoma*, and Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*, with a necklace of light bulbs as part of my costume. I sang, danced and acted in shows at the University of Toronto. I see myself waiting in the wings at Hart House, heart beating like crazy, preparing to step onto the stage for the *U.C. Follies*. One night I had my picture taken with Frank Shuster, who got his start on the same stage.

“You must have loved this stuff,” I tell myself, tossing around under the covers. And I do. Why else would I have joined The Groupe de Theatre Antique de la Sorbonne when I was studying in Paris for a year after graduating from U of T? It took guts. It was 1960. I was the only étrangère in the troupe. Being in the chorus permitted my not so perfect French to blend in, as we performed Greek plays on tour around France and Europe. We played in East Berlin before the wall went up.

Some of my fellow actors subsequently appeared on North American screens. Years later, sitting in the movie theatre with my husband watching Woody Allen’s *Love and Death*, I was amazed to see my fellow thespian Henri in the role of Ivan. And on another day to see Jean Pierre in Costa Gavras’s *Z*.

And now here I am once again, experiencing the joy and terror of a show, hoping my friends will come to see me, and hoping that I won’t flub my lines. Am I trying to make up for the years I didn’t pursue this dream?

When I was my twenties, pregnant with my first child, I took acting classes from a transplanted New York teacher. But then I gave up performing, and only came back to it

40 years later after attending the voice recital of our youngest son, a tenor. There were six singers in that recital, two of them women around my age. "I can do that!" I said to myself as I listened to them. I was 54. I started voice lessons that week and haven't looked back.

Soon I was performing in musical theatre productions: Golde in *Fiddler on the Roof*, Marie in *Most Happy Fella* and my favorite role of all, Fraulein Schneider in *Cabaret*. And now that I am retired from my work, I'm taking acting classes again, in an acting program for people 50 and over. Last week I was that endearing tramp Vladimir in a scene from *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett. "You're a hard man to get on with, Go Go."

Lying beside my sleeping husband, I start to relax. I realize that something in me loves this life and yet is terrified by it. At least once in the rehearsals for every show, I reach the depths I am feeling now. But when I'm on stage, all the fear goes away. I am determined to come in with my line on time at the next rehearsal. I can and I will. The director won't have a chance to shout "late!" again.

As I'm about to fall asleep, I suddenly remember that there are auditions soon for *Young Frankenstein*. The director had mentioned that there was a role for me if I was interested—Frau Blucher.

I'm interested. I'm 73. Why the heck am I doing this? But Frau Blucher in *Young Frankenstein*! Could be fun!