

CLARA

by David Christopher

I had almost completed casting of the play I was directing, “The 1940’s Radio Hour”, but I was missing a major character. I needed an African American woman who could sing the torch songs and blues numbers in the play. No one had shown up that fit this description and I was in a bit of a panic. But as I was packing up ready to leave the theater, in walked Jeanne. A stunningly beautiful, young, black woman, with an elegant demeanor. I thought, “*Oh please, I hope you can sing!*” As I took down her information, I noticed that her resume didn’t include any musicals, just straight dramas, and I felt disappointment coming. I asked if she’d ever sung on stage, and she told me that she only sang in nightclubs. “*Nightclubs!*” I thought. “Great”, I said, “did you bring any music to sing for me?” She handed the accompanist some sheet music, and sang *He’s just my Bill*, from “Showboat”. My heart sang, too. I had found my actress.

Not only was Jeanne excellent in our production, but we became friends, too. At the time, I was also the primary teacher in my Acting Studio, and she enrolled in one of my acting classes. A year later, after successfully completing Acting 3, Scene Study, she asked if she could take my private speech class. Although her speech was already quite good, this class is useful for actors to improve their vocal life, so I began to work with her on that, too.

She lived in a nearby, well-to-do suburb, but I knew that she lived humbly, as a single parent, raising two children and still living with her parents. She had a hard life, working all day and trying to become an actress in her spare time. She was talented enough, I thought, but that road isn’t easy for anyone. It’s difficult going to auditions when you have a full-time job, so her artistic life was not progressing as she would have liked. Taking classes with me at night helped fulfill her life, but not

necessarily her career.

My speech program was developed from the work of Arthur Lessac, but I used it in my own way. Basically, his concept of “feeling speech” was developed when he worked with deaf students, to help them learn to speak. His idea is that the muscles in the mouth and throat could learn how to make correct speech, without listening to the sounds. He went on to use this method to help hearing actors fix their speech problem the same way. His book, *The Use and Training of the Human Voice*, became a fixture in speech classes for acting schools around the country. I encountered his theories when I took speech classes at HB Studios in New York. So, my teaching used his concepts and many of the exercises from his book. I was happy with the way these exercises helped my students in correcting their problems, from just clarifying their diction to drastically altering their speech patterns, like foreign accents or getting rid of the *Noow Yawk* and *Joisey* accents.

At the end of one of her speech lessons, Jeanne told me that her mother would like to talk to me about taking speech lessons. I was a bit surprised, as I’d not heard anything about her mother before this. I had no idea what she was like or what she wanted to work on, but of course, I was happy to meet with her. A few days later, Clara came to the house and I met a woman who would become one of the most important people in my life.

I brought her into the basement, where I taught the class, and heartily welcomed her, but she was obviously scared to death and she barely spoke a word. I figured that she was probably in her late 50s, a sturdy woman who obviously had worked hard in her life. Her hair was only slightly grey at that time, and she moved with grace, like someone who is used to moving quickly. I learned that she was a waitress at a Howard Johnson restaurant, so that made sense. After we sat at the table that I use for the classes, I asked her what she wanted me to help her with. She told me that her grandchildren were starting to make fun of the way she talked,

and she wondered if I could help her speak better. The children were in the suburban school and like their mother, were well spoken. Clara said that because she never studied much, her speech embarrassed them.

It was certainly true. I had never heard anyone with worse speech. She mumbled and slurred her words, and she never had a finish to a word; the last sound was completely missing. There was a slight Southern accent, but not strong, mostly she just said as little as possible and made as few sounds as she could to get her thought out. I knew that we had some serious work to do if I was to help her at all. I told her what I told all my speech students, that we would only meet for an hour a week, so that much of the work had to come from her doing the exercises at home. She said that she would be able to do them when the children were at school. I told her that students who did the homework found that they really improved, but if the homework was neglected, little progress could be made. Clara assured me that she would do all the work that was necessary. So, we started out. I had no idea whether I could help Clara, but I certainly was willing to try.

The first step in my teaching the Lessac method of speech is to stretch the mouth into shapes for the “Structural Vowels”. This is done looking in a large mirror, which is placed in front of the table I used for classes. All students find this bizarre at first, but get into the game, enjoying it and finally getting it (if they do the homework). But Clara was just baffled. She had never even considered how words were made and looking into the mirror was very embarrassing for her. So, I skipped this process and we started by just reading words. First, she would pronounce the word, dropping some sounds and corrupting others. Then I would show her how the word should sound. I was very gentle with her, encouraging her and being playful and friendly. It took several lessons before she began to relax and be less self-conscious. And we started to have fun. We then went back to the mirror and tried the structural vowels

again, and this time she could get the hang of it and began to enjoy the process.

As you can imagine, progress was extremely slow compared to my other students, but Clara was determined to conquer every challenge I set before her. When we moved from the vowels into consonants, the challenges multiplied. She found it awfully hard to put a 't' or a 'd' at the end of a word. Even 'm' or 'n' was a problem. Medial 'v's and 'f's gave her great difficulty. But as we worked week after week, she made progress, and I could tell that she enjoyed the process of learning. It was a new sensation for her, and she was an eager student.

She obviously did lots of work at home but told me that if her husband or the grandchildren were in the house, she couldn't do any of it. She didn't want anyone but Jeanne to know she was taking these classes. As we were struggling with the pronunciation, I discovered that although she could read fairly well (silently), she had no grasp of grammar at all. She was bewildered when I mentioned things like the subject of the sentence, or the adjective to the noun.

So, the next step in our lessons began. I went to the high school where I had taught and asked the English department for a fundamental grammar book. I brought it to her class and began on simple grammar classes. I had asked her what her formal schooling had been, and she indicated that it was very little. She grew up in Alabama, and the local Jim Crow school was very poorly managed and attended. She got through 8th grade but didn't feel she had learned much at all. Everything I was teaching her was brand new to her, and she loved it. We were well into our second year together and I looked forward to her weekly lessons as much as she did. I'd never had a more enthusiastic student.

We eventually got to the point where I thought it would be good for her to read stories to me aloud and we could analyze the sentences that she found confusing. I would help her with pronunciation, too. This proved to be terribly slow going, taking us a full lesson to get through a

couple pages. But it was the perfect next step for us. I don't believe she had ever read anything for pleasure, although she told me she did look at newspaper headlines and photos every day. She said that more and more she was trying to read the articles that she found interesting but found the vocabulary confusing. I tried to find short stories that I thought she would become involved with and find the pleasure of reading. But since she was reading aloud, it took much longer to get through each story. Therefore, I gave her the books to take home so she could read the whole story to herself, to get the gist of it, so when she came in to read it to me, it would be easier.

In our time together, I learned some of her history. As a teenager, she decided to leave Alabama and come up North to look for work. She got on a bus (sitting in the back of the bus as ordered) and traveled to New York City. She got a job as a maid in one of the hotels, around 34th Street and 8th Avenue, and remained as a maid for many years. After marrying her husband, they moved to New Jersey, and she got a job at Howard Johnson restaurant near where they lived. That's where she was working when she came to me. She raised her daughter Jeanne, who now lives with her, with her grandchildren.

I asked her how Jeanne was, since she wasn't taking classes anymore. Clara told me that she was now living in New York with her boyfriend. I was pleased for her but surprised to hear that her two children were still living with Clara and her husband. Clara smiled wanly and said that she was happy to have the children with her because Jeanne wanted them to stay in the school system here. I still thought it was an odd thing for a mother to do. But I let it go.

Our process of Clara reading stories aloud to me continued for a few years, as she got better and better with her speech. Also, as she was getting more fluid with her reading, we moved to novels. The classes were basically just her reading as much of a novel as possible to me during our hour together. She loved these classes, and her reading and pronunciation

improved every week. I chose novels that I thought she would enjoy, hoping to encourage her to read on her own. One novel I gave her was a trashy Jacqueline Susan book, but we had fun with the smutty plot. One scene in the book took place in London, and I casually asked if she knew the capital city of England. She replied hesitantly, “Europe?”. I got out an atlas and showed her a map of Europe, and I asked her to show me where England was. She looked at the map, puzzled. I said, “It’s an island”. She still looked puzzled. “It’s surrounded by water.” She shook her head. I realized she had never read a map. She wasn’t even aware that the blue on the map was water.

So, our new classes began to include geography. We got out a globe and an atlas and studied maps of many places she had only heard of, but never understood where they were. This absolutely fascinated her, and she picked up the concept quickly. I’ll never forget the day she came into class beaming. This was during the first Gulf War, and she said, “I watched the news last night and they showed a map of Iraq and recognized it from our lesson. I knew what the map meant!” She was so proud of herself, and I felt the glow of a successful teacher.

As we continued our reading together, another gap in her education became evident. She had absolutely no concept of history. She honestly believed that the world started with the birth of Christ. Even the Old Testament, that she knew bits of, didn’t register in any historical timeline. So, the next phase of our studies began.

The world history book that I borrowed from the high school became our new text. The idea of evolution and prehistoric life was completely foreign to her, and she was fascinated to hear about it. The “Adam and Eve” myth was the only pre-history she had ever contemplated. Once we got through the prehistoric age, we began on the Egyptian civilization, which gave us so much to talk about. I was able to show her photos that I had taken on our trip to Egypt, of the tombs, pyramids, and The Sphinx. But then I wanted her to see some of this firsthand, so I planned a “field

trip” for us.

On one of her days off at Howard Johnson’s, we arranged to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art together. She hadn’t been into New York City much since she stopped working at the hotel many years before, so even a train ride into Manhattan was a treat. She also had never taken a subway, always walking to the small apartment where she lived on the West Side during her hotel maid days. The E train took us up to 5th Avenue and 53rd, and we took a glorious walk up 5th to the museum on 82nd Street. Clara said that she had never been on this side of town, so had never seen St. Patrick’s Cathedral or Rockefeller Center or the Plaza Hotel. She didn’t know that Central Park was so big or that there was a zoo on the corner. To Clara, this walk was showing her a city she had never been a part of, and she was amazed and thrilled.

When we got up to the museum, and we climbed up the long stairs to the lobby that was filled with tourists and museum goers, Clara just stood in awe. “Don’t these people work?” was all she said. The idea of idle time in New York, going to museums, was completely foreign to her. The main purpose of our outing was to see the Egyptian section of the museum, and she was fascinated. All the things that we had talked about and seen photos of, suddenly came alive when she saw the real things in the exhibits. The mummies, of course, are the most dramatic, but everything simply made her ecstatic. We must have spent 2 hours in the Egyptian section before I took her to the museum cafeteria for some lunch. The whole time, she couldn’t stop talking about what we’d seen. I hoped that this would open her life to begin coming back and exploring the rest of the museum. Sadly, this was not to happen.

It was shortly after this that she came to a lesson with a sad face, telling me that the Howard Johnson restaurant was closing, and she was out of a job. Meaning that she felt she couldn’t come back for more lessons if she didn’t have an income to pay for them. She had been paying me \$10.00 a lesson all these years, and didn’t feel she could afford that

anymore now that she wasn't making any tips. Evidently, she didn't want her husband to pay for the lessons, because she'd never told him she was taking them. I practically shouted, "Oh Clara, don't be silly! From now on you will be a scholarship student, for as long as you like." There was no way I wanted to end our classes, as they had become as important to me as they were to her.

We then continued our history classes, now moving on to the Roman Empire. I thought the best way to make this meaningful to her was to show her the BBC series "I Claudius", starring Derek Jacobi. This proved to be a wonderful teaching method and loads of fun for both of us. As we watched the series, I would pause the tape often (yes, VHS), to explain what that scene meant in terms of Roman history. Or just to explain what was going on. This was a type of TV that Clara was not used to, and I think the British accents were a bit confusing to her, but she eagerly watched every episode, asking many questions. With all the stops and starts and rewinds and questions, this series took months of our lessons, but they were extremely happy months.

When we concluded our history lessons, we went back to reading novels. I chose a book that I had loved called "Crazy in Alabama". I thought the story would amuse her, and the setting in Alabama would be fun for her, particularly since it took place not long after she left there. I was right, she just loved the book, but I noticed that her reading became more and more tentative. Then one day, when we were about halfway through the book, she broke the news that she had been diagnosed with cancer. She didn't know how much longer she could come for classes.

I wanted Clara to get to the end of "Crazy in Alabama", but I knew she couldn't drive to my house anymore, so I went to her house to let her read to me there. I could tell that she was in pain, so after a few times, I went and read to her instead of her reading to me. It was heart-breaking to watch her try to concentrate on the story when she was really in pain. Then I got the call that she had passed away.

I had grown so fond of Clara over our years working together that the news really broke me up. I remembered that one of my wishes had been to take her to England one day. After all our discussion of London, I wanted to show it to her. Of course, this never came about. And now we wouldn't even be able to read together anymore.

Then I got a call from Jeanne, her daughter, asking me to speak at her funeral. I was surprised by this since I'd hadn't seen much of Jeanne during these years with Clara. But I said I'd be delighted to, and she asked me if I wanted to come to the Eastern Star ceremony in her memory, the day before the funeral. I hadn't even known that she was a member, and I realized that I didn't know much about her current life, we had spent so much time talking about history and novels that she never really talked much about herself. She never talked at all about her husband, and I had never met him. Since he was a Mason, I found out, Clara had become a member of the Eastern Star, so they were giving her a funeral service. This was before the Baptist service the following day.

When I walked into the room for the Eastern Star ceremony, I was dazzled by the colorful outfits and symbolic decorations in the room. The ceremony was lots of mumbo-jumbo with Masons and Grand Masters proclaiming "pontifically" and majestically through the Masonic rituals. It was like nothing I'd ever witnessed, and I didn't understand a word of what they were saying. But it was impressive. I stayed to the rear of the auditorium, as I was obviously an outsider, and slipped out as soon as it was over.

The next day was the Baptist funeral service that I was to speak in. I assumed that like the many funerals, I would be one of many who would stand and say a few words about Clara. I had a good anecdote prepared about our time together. When I walked into the church, I realized that I was the only white person there. And I was getting lots of strange, and even hostile, looks. Jeanne greeted me and sat me near the front of the church. Clara's coffin was open, which I'd never seen before. I was

deeply saddened as I sat down. I had been handed a program, but I didn't look at it right away.

As more people came into the church, I decided to look at the program, which I guess is called an Order of Worship. I was shocked to find that my name was listed. It was listed as the ONLY speaker, beside the pastor. It said, "Eulogy by David Christopher." What? The one anecdote I'd prepared would certainly not be enough for a full eulogy; why hadn't Jeanne told me I was to be the only speaker? I'd wished that I'd had a chance to talk to her before the service, but she seemed to be avoiding me. I think she knew that I would be surprised and didn't want to face me. I saw that the only thing preceding my talk was a solo performance of "Over the Rainbow". Then my turn. What the hell was I going to say?

The soloist got up and gave a heart-rending, gospel version of "Over the Rainbow", which was beautiful. But then it was my turn. I realized that everyone was waiting for "David Christopher" to make his appearance. There was a murmur of people asking, "Who is this?". I realized that Clara had told none of her friends or family about our lessons and they didn't know a thing about me. As I got up and walked to the pulpit, I had the strongest case of stage fright I've ever had. What the hell was I going to say to these total strangers?

After a moment to look at the confused and clearly hostile crowd, I began to speak, with no knowledge of what I would say. "Over the Rainbow. That is what Clara longed for. She wanted to be the best person she could possibly be, and she worked hard to achieve that goal." And I went on from there, improvising. I don't remember all I said, it was just a blur of inspirational talk, but I do remember how the congregation slowly shifted to appreciating what I was saying. By the end of it, the folks were raising their hands and shouting "Hallelujah!"

When the service was over, many of the people came up to me and congratulated me on my speech. I even met Clara's husband for the first

time, and he shook my hand vigorously. He told me that Clara never really talked about what we did together, but he noticed a great change in her over the years. I told him that the time we spent together was the most fulfilling teaching experience I'd ever had.

And that was the truth. When a teacher finds a student as hungry for learning as Clara was, it's the best kind of experience he can have. Clara's thirst to improve herself and to know more about the world that she lived in, was inspiring beyond belief. I'd also learned to really love this woman, and our time together was a highlight in my life. I will always be grateful to her for enriching my life, as I was enriching hers. That's what teaching should be.