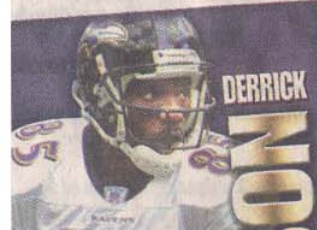


THE SUN



VOICE OF ELMO MODERN LIFE
INTERVIEW WITH PUPPETEER DUNDALK NATIVE KEVIN CLASH



WEEKEND EDITION

Kevin's World

Baltimorean Kevin Clash's early fascination with puppets brought him life with Elmo, and now a book

BY STEPHEN G. HENDERSON
[SPECIAL TO THE SUN]

MANY CELEBRITY MEMOIRS recount the by-now-familiar journey from rags to riches. However, in his just-published *My Life as a Furry Red Monster: What Being Elmo Has Taught Me About Life, Love, and Laughing Out Loud* (Broadway Books), Kevin Clash, the Emmy Award-winning puppeteer and long-time performer on PBS-TV's *Sesame Street*, offers a charmingly different twist on this genre. His is an Elmer's to Elmo story.

Clash writes of growing up in Turners Station, a mostly African-American neighborhood in Dundalk,

where he says he spilled "gallons" of Elmer's glue on his mother's carpets as he taught himself how to craft puppets. The expertise he developed would, after apprenticeships on a Baltimore show called *Caboose*, as well as stints on *The Great Space Coaster* and *Captain Kangaroo*, ultimately land him a plum job of creating Elmo, the fuzzy, red 3½-year-old who has been Clash's alter ego for nearly two decades.

"Most people don't understand the art of puppetry. It is one of the most difficult kinds of performance," said Carol Lynn Parente, *Sesame Street's* executive pro-

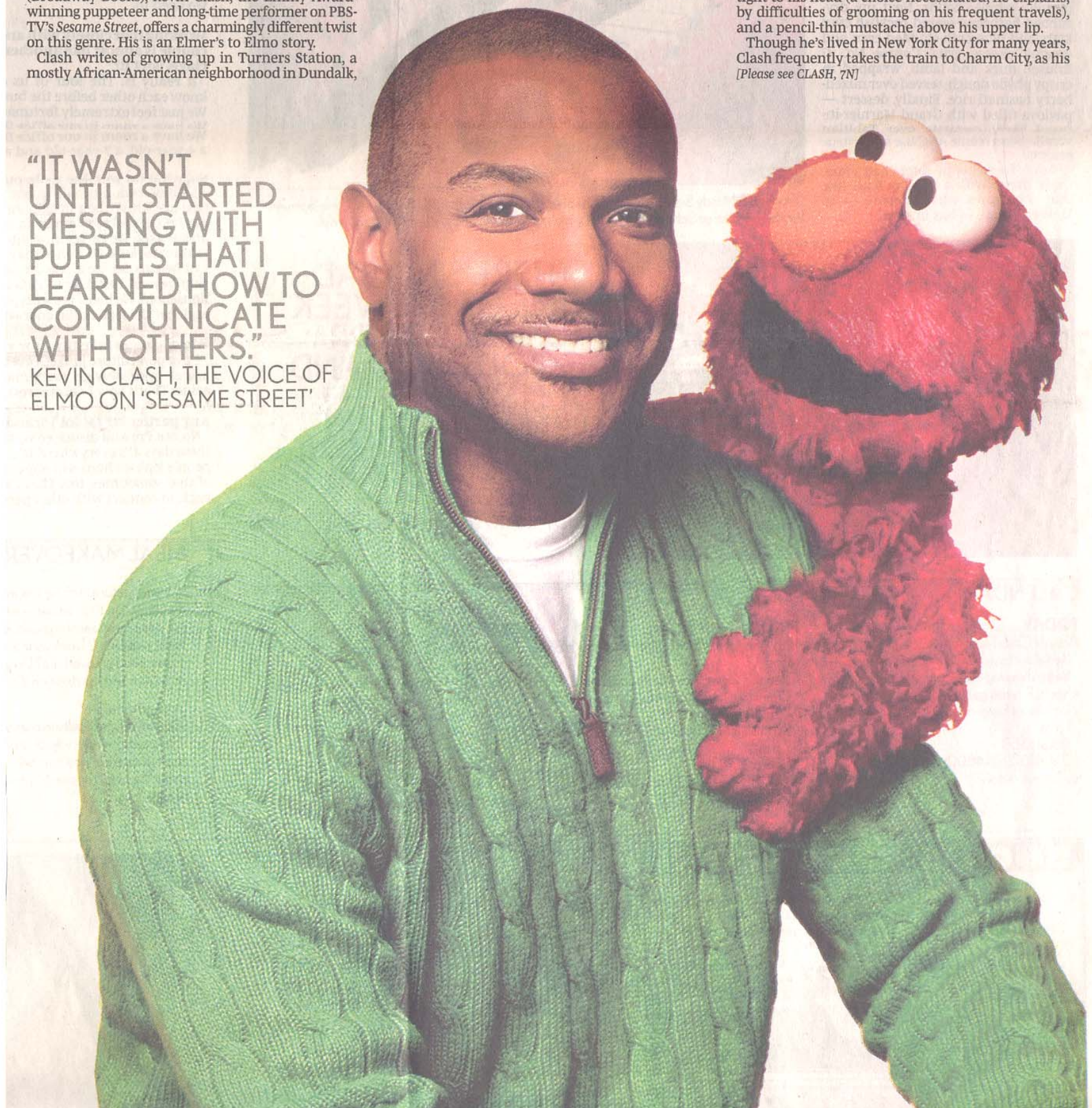
ducer. "Given the limited mobility of fur and felt, it is remarkable the range of emotions that Kevin is able to convey, from happiness to sadness and everything in between."

Clash, 46, is in town today, signing copies of his memoir at the Baltimore Book Festival in Mount Vernon Square. A few weeks ago, though, he sat for an interview at Cafe Luxembourg, a bistro near his apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. A tall, stocky man, with the quicksilver, broadly expressive facial features of a born clown, Clash wears his hair shaved tight to his head (a choice necessitated, he explains, by difficulties of grooming on his frequent travels), and a pencil-thin mustache above his upper lip.

Though he's lived in New York City for many years, Clash frequently takes the train to Charm City, as his [Please see CLASH, 7N]

"IT WASN'T UNTIL I STARTED MESSING WITH PUPPETS THAT I LEARNED HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH OTHERS."

KEVIN CLASH, THE VOICE OF ELMO ON 'SESAME STREET'



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Kevin Clash only sounds red and furry

ELMO [From Page 1N]

parents still live here, as does his ex-wife, Genia, and their 13-year-old daughter, Shannon.

"I love Baltimore. It has a quirky, small-town feel to it, which is very special," Clash enthused, as he sipped a club soda and fidgeted with a cell phone.

"Of course, back when I was a kid in Turners Station, it seemed like everybody knew each other. I was the kid who made puppets, so people were always bringing boxes and things over for me to use."

A similar gee-whiz feel is evident in *My Life*. Structured as a series of nine meditations on diverse topics such as cooperation, tolerance and learning, Clash interpolates his own story, including achingly real descriptions of what it was like growing up poor.

He writes of eating mayonnaise sandwiches, sharing shoes with his siblings, and even eyeing the kitchen's paper towel roll, wondering how many more sheets would need to be shed before he could harvest the cardboard liner and turn it into some sort of toy.

Trash to treasure

It was through such creativity that he literally first found his voice.

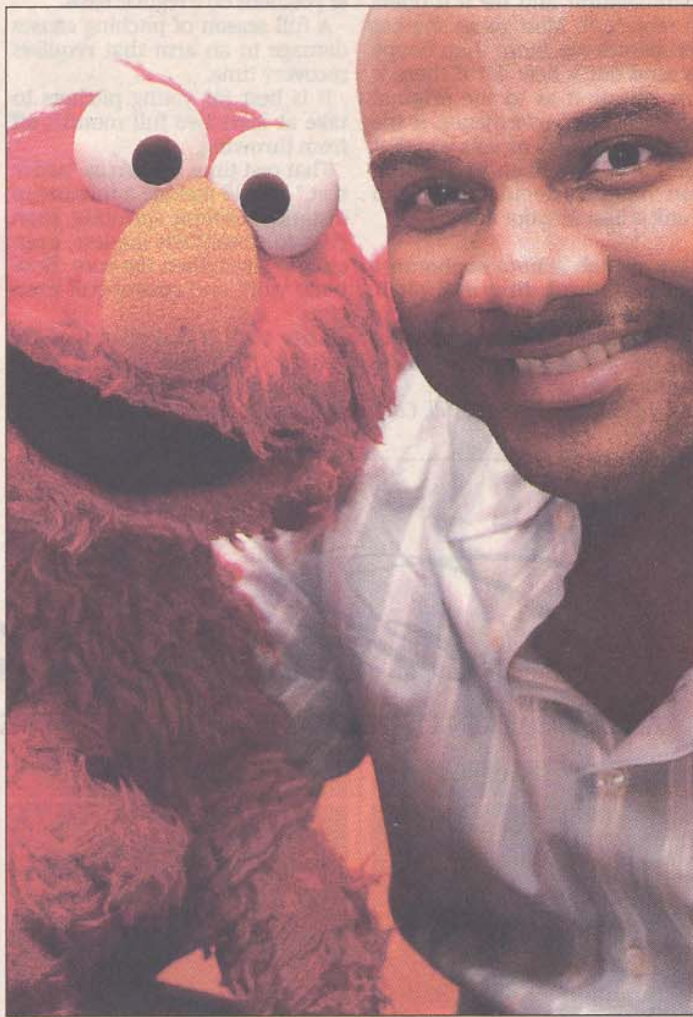
"I was really, really shy as a kid. If I had to go down the street to get a loaf of bread for my mother, I would literally duck until people would go past me," Clash said. "It wasn't until I started messing with puppets that I learned how to communicate with others."

Both his parents are creative in their own ways. His mother, Gladys, ran a daycare center out of their two-bedroom, one-bath home, and while entertaining and enchanting the children, she would sing and put on impromptu skits. She also taught Kevin how to sew on her sturdy old Singer machine.

George, Clash's father, was a welder by trade, but a talented illustrator, too. Known as the "Mr. Fix-it" of their neighborhood, he was also something of a packrat — which may explain why his son, from such an early age, had such terrific enthusiasm for recycling.

"Our house was along the shore of an inlet to the Chesapeake Bay, near Francis Scott Key Bridge," Clash recalls. "People used to dump what they thought was trash back there, but I would go out and find absolute gems!"

He turned these castoffs, as well as the occasional splurge at a nearby Jo-Ann fabric store, into characters such as Bartee, a pup-



"Sesame Street" puppeteer Kevin Clash grew up in Baltimore. SETH WENIG [ASSOCIATED PRESS]

way this puppet this made. It was incredibly natural-looking and real," she recalls. "We were amazed by his talent and could see something in him that was truly unique."

Help from Mom

Not all the anecdotes that Clash tells in his book are this rosy. Over several hang the specter of prejudice, as when he is cast as Sky Masterson in a high school production of *Guys and Dolls*, and a white classmate who is to be his co-star suggests that he should withdraw. Clash also remembers that his mother saw fit to hang to a picture of Angela Davis, the one-time Black Panther and civil rights activist, in the living room.

"My mom was socially aware and quite outspoken for her time," Clash said. "But her anger wasn't necessarily about color. She was just incensed that any human being would treat another as if they weren't equal."

The self-esteem she engendered enabled him to ignore teasing

KEVIN CLASH

Age: 46

Occupation: Puppeteer and producer of Sesame Street

Education: Dundalk High School

Marital status: Single

Family: daughter, Shannon, 13

what is incredibly inspirational is that it's a lesson of what can happen when parents foster their children's imagination," said Parente. "I mean, back then, who would have guessed you could have such a meaningful career and make a difference in the world with puppets?"

Clash agrees, but sees his experience as a puppeteer from a slightly different perspective. While he repeatedly offers profound gratitude to his parents, he's also quick to acknowledge the "magnificence" of the children he has met through his decades of traveling the world with Elmo on his