

Sylvia Olden Lee

I first encountered Ms. Lee at a Master Class at the annual meeting of the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM) in Philadelphia, PA in 1976. Until that Master Class, I had only a vague idea who she was. However, as I witnessed her working with the aspiring young singers, and giving her no-nonsense, yet passionate critiques, exhorting them, and all of us singers in the room, to be better than we thought ourselves to be, I made a vow to take at least one private coaching with her. Little did I imagine that I would have the opportunity to work/coach with her experience her several times in future years.

A few years later I had my first opportunity to work with Ms. Lee, when I was in Philadelphia to perform an opera. I was there for six weeks, so, knowing that she lived there, I managed to find time to work with her each week, which was both challenging and frustrating. I first worked with her on arias from Porgy and Bess, which I was preparing for an audition. Now, I had been singing arias from Porgy and Bess for years and had even sung major roles in a couple of productions. However, when I had my first coaching with Ms. Lee, she made me feel like I was learning them for the first time. She challenged my “dialect” and my presentation. An exchange we had, which I relate to people often, concerned my “dialect” and went something like this:

Ms. Lee: Mr. Honeysucker, where’re you from?

Me: Originally, Memphis.

Ms. Lee: Well, how do they say “I Got Plenty of Nuttin” in Memphis?

Me: I speak it in Memphis “dialect.”

Ms. Lee: Well, just sing it like that! Where do you live now?

Me: Boston.

Ms. Lee: For how long?

Me: Twelve years.

Ms. Lee: Mr. Honeysucker, you’ve been in Boston too long!

During my Porgy and Bess series of coachings with Ms. Lee, I also brought Mendelssohn’s Elijah to work on with her. When I presented the score to her, the following dialog ensued:

Her: Uh, uh!

Me: I beg your pardon?

Her: You don’t know what you just did. I coached Laurence Tibbett on this piece.

Me: Oh!

For those of you who may not recognize the name, Tibbett was a famous American baritone who sang at the Metropolitan Opera until the 1950s.

For the next six weeks that I worked with her, we worked on Elijah every week, finally reaching the end of the oratorio by my last coaching. Exhausting, yet exhilarating! I still have the score with her signature sun bursts for expression and emphasis (I’m told by others who worked with her), and breath marks. I treasure it to this day.

Several years later, I made a second trip to Philly to sing another opera. I sought Ms. Lee again, and this time I brought her an aria that I had worked on for several years and with several different coaches whom I respected, and one of whom was a conductor. When I sang the aria for her, her first comment was, "You're not ready to work with me." I was disappointed, and a little miffed. She noticed that and said, "Are you upset because I brought you down a peg? Get over it!!" I understand what she was saying, and it inspired me to work harder. She was saying that I had to be more than just good, or even excellent. I had to be spectacular!

Ms. Lee was a unique presence on the opera scene: A person you might not know much about, since coaches are the unsung heroes of any singer's success; An African American coach at the Metropolitan Opera before the first African American singer was ever hired; A musician of the highest caliber who worked with some of the best in the operatic field and became a wonderful teacher to some, a mentor to others, and a source of inspiration to those like me. I am so grateful to have been present in her orbit, to take what she had to offer, to help me become the performer I am today.

I salute you Ms. Lee. You are missed.

Robert Honeysucker