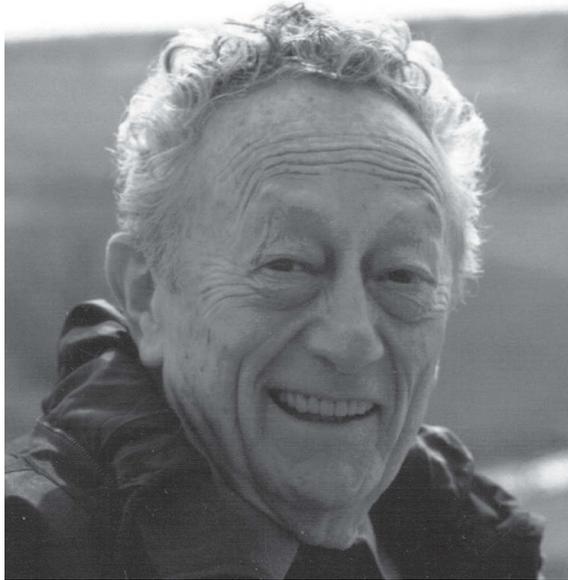


Arthur Lessac

Ol' Man River and Me

By Nancy Krebs, Lessac Master Teacher

Arthur Lessac filled many roles in my life: teacher, mentor, inspiration, colleague, guide—and fortunately, also a dear friend and father-figure. I first became acquainted with, and fell in love with his work in 1972, when I was in graduate school at the Dallas Theater Center. I never thought I would actually meet him personally. But when I began teaching voice at the Baltimore School for the Arts in the theatre department, the Director of the school—David Simon, saw me carrying the Lessac voice text out of the school one afternoon in early 1991, and struck up a conversation in which I discovered that he had been Arthur's illustrator for the first printing of his book. One thing led to another, and soon David arranged for Arthur to come and conduct master classes with my students. When the time came, Arthur actually stayed with my husband and me for a night or two when we discovered that there were no available hotel rooms near the school for the first couple of nights of his stay. So I picked him up at the airport, and as soon as I saw him, I knew I was going to like him. He was about my size in height, with curly strawberry blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. We came back to my house and talked for half the night about the work, life, and every imaginable subject. His intelligence, (genius actually),



Arthur Lessac is among the most highly regarded teachers of voice, speech, singing and movement in the training world. His two books, *The Use and Training of the Human Voice: A Bio Dynamic Approach to Vocal Life and Body Wisdom: The Use and Training of the Human Body*, have become required reading for countless students and remain a lasting contribution to the field of acting and performing. Professor Emeritus at SUNY, he taught and lectured world-wide in both academic and professional programs. He was honored with numerous awards from professional organizations, published articles in many professional journals, worked with many well-known stage and film actors; and trained hundreds of teachers—celebrated in their own right—who carry on his distinguished legacy.



good humor, unflagging energy and effervescent personality kept me mesmerized for hours. Even back then he referred to himself as *Ol' Man River* because he never ran out of steam! He just kept rollin' along. Watching him teach over the next few days solidified my opinion of his genius and of his energized stamina; and I knew that I had to study more in-depth with him to advance my knowledge of this wonderful training that he so artfully presented to my students. That short visit began a relationship with him

that only became more important to me over the next 20 years. I became certified in 1993, and was then invited to join the Summer Intensive Workshop faculty by Arthur in 1995. I learned how to teach this work watching him over the years, observing first-hand how he shared the fruits of his *labor of love* with participants, problem-solved, diagnosed vocal and physical issues, coached ever so gently to enable each person to fully realize his or her gifts. It was always a life-changing experience for those who attended the workshops—for Arthur taught people to teach themselves—to rely upon cues from their own inner environment for guidance. And he did that for me as well. I am a better teacher, a better human being for having had the honor of knowing him all these years.

I don't think I'll ever be able to refer to him in the past tense—for he will always be present with me in spirit. His spirit and love energy will always be with me. I'll hear his words coming out of my mouth and smile, knowing that *Ol' Man River* is still rolling alongside me.

Nancy Krebs is a certified Master Lessac Teacher, and received her graduate training at the Dallas

Theater Center. She has been a professional actor/singer since 1975. She continues to work as a vocal/dialect coach for numerous professional and university productions in the Baltimore-Washington region and teaches in the Theatre Department of the Baltimore School for the Arts.



From Across the Desk: Remembering Arthur
By Crystal Robbins

I remember meeting Arthur for dinner & a play in Los Angeles with my first voice teacher, Anita Jo Lenhart. I looked into Arthur's eyes, the exact color and life in them as my recently- deceased father. We three chatted on the long, crowded 10 freeway across town. No wonder it is so hard to see people regularly in this town. We picnicked at the theatre: salad, panini, pizza, sparkling water, chicken, cake; and never stopped talking & laughing. Arthur talked about his dream of playing King Lear. I talked about playing Cordelia. Jyo declared I'd be good for him to have around. Or maybe that he'd be good for me to have around. We sang as the sun began to sink and the night grew colder, even on a LA summer.

By the time I dropped them back off in Santa Monica, Arthur asked me to consider working for him in his office. I told him I didn't think I was the right person. I said it a few times. I was on my way to a travel-writing workshop north of San Francisco; capitalizing on my 3 years of backpacking around the world. I remember sitting on his couch trying to convince him I didn't know enough to teach him. He said that what we didn't know, we would learn together. Throwing in his lessons, how could I resist?

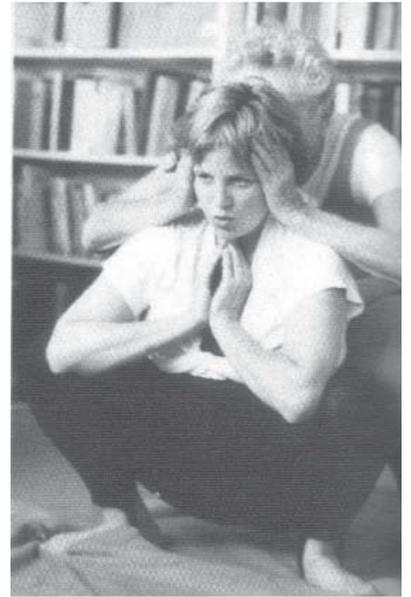
Every day I learned. I felt vibration on my hard palate in a palpable way that never again left me and began to guide me. I began to taste music. I began to move away from understanding the work as metaphor and move towards understanding it as music. I discovered the freedom and release of smelling the flower and in feeling the breath move around the back and up the spine. I liked the physical work and had fun and felt good. I liked feeling like a dancer again. I liked feeling like a singer again. Even when walking and talking.

When I found out I was pregnant, my workouts with Arthur took on the added dimension of exploring sound and movement with my pregnant self. Here was a place of wandering with real newness and experimental learning for us both. I remember explaining something I'd noted about the work in my own way, Arthur simply and quietly stated that I would be a good teacher. I fervently disagreed, said I had no leanings that way, no interest whatsoever. He just smiled.

Two years later & many hours of working with him privately, I was able to attend my first workshop, nursing daughter & husband in tow. What a wonderful immersion experience to exit the Intensive and immediately begin teaching, with Arthur as my mentor, visiting my classes, consulting and problem-solving as I grew. If you had told me that I would love teaching, that I would be on this

path, I wouldn't have believed you.

I don't feel that I chose this work. It has consistently chosen me. And like the boy I ran into accidentally, crying on his shoulder, who now is my husband; and like the friend who was assigned to be my roommate in a London hostel and who became a sister of my heart; and like the old man from Corfu who ended up seeing through me on an Athens bench; and like the wild white horse that greeted me on hillside north of Dublin, some things just happen because they are supposed to.



Crystal Robbins, a Certified Lessac Trainer and Lessac Board Member, worked as Arthur's secretary and assistant for the past 12 years. She helped him research & prepare for every major workshop/project/event. But her favorite task was reading aloud to him his favorite book, The Hobbit. She teaches at Santa Monica College and was the co-creator of the first Lessac One-Week workshop, which she still leads at Woodbury University, in Burbank. Crystal is a founding director of the Burbank Youth Summer Theatre Institute, a Shakespeare camp for children 9-16 years old and of a salon reading group in LA, Bard In The Yard. A frequent contributor to the Lessac newsletter & VASTA publications, she is currently working on two Lessac-related books. www.crystalrobbins.com

Parts of this are adapted & previously published in Crystal's article about how she came to the Lessac Work in "Collective Writings on the Lessac Voice and Body Work: A Festschrift". Available at: <http://www.lessacinstitute.com/resources.html>

A Brief Remembering of a Father
By Michael Lessac

When my father died the loss was more than personal. It felt as if I had finally lost my grasp on time. It made me fear for my own mortality. Why you may ask, how can you worry about that? --- Are you nuts? The man was 101+ and dancing in the streets of Croatia two weeks before he died!

Yes...but with him, it felt like he had died prematurely. It

felt like I now had to rush to finish things.

Dad had made time another dimension for himself. He never considered time as an investment nor as something that had to be protected against or feared. In his work he fought against negative energy and looked for ways of making being optimally human an effortless thing. Politically he did not believe in choosing the lesser of two evils. As a teacher he did not believe in recognizing impossibility. Everything I ever started he expected me to finish. I always had him as a wind against my back. Having him around was a little like having Peter Pan genes.

I miss the wind against my back.

Time will tell about the genes.

He refused to age. Because he seemed to be living forever and because he never himself would ever recognize age as getting in the way of anything, he therefore never got old.

There was a trick to that. He just loved what he did. He loved teaching...he loved searching...he loved being curious.

To be sure he kept himself in superb and flexible condition almost without effort. This he did through his work. He stretched rather than pushed. He buzzed rather than shouted. He found what was familiar to the natural use of the body rather than accepting and pursuing limitations or defining abilities by the barriers we faced or by what tradition dictated.

Yes, his life force was helped by that uncanny ability to energize himself through the voice. Yes...of course he floated on the buoyant conviction that if we can walk we can dance, if we can talk we can sing. But what connected all this was something even more profound...something that crosses borders in this world of ours that threatens to destroy us through our own devices.... the overwhelming belief that if we can hear... we can listen.

He listened. He shut no one off. He never developed that academic/historic/art vs. science certainty that often threatens to choke new ideas. He listened to everyone and learned from everyone and his birth-given ability to stay young and vital was about that. It was about a child-like curiosity that blossomed with age. It was his weapon against fear...his weapon against depression...his shield against aging.

...and his belief that as humans we can break any barrier that others have set for us.

...and his belief that as humans we should defy any force that oppresses us.

He probably believed in magic, although he would never admit it.

I remember, one summer I spent time with him at one of his workshops. A fox got trapped inside the house. It ran at the walls and amazingly, like the iconic Donald O'Connor dance with Gene Kelly, literally ran up the walls in its attempt to get out of the place. It almost made it to the ceiling before it ran back down the wall. We were amazed. But dad had that toad-of-toad-hall look in his eyes. He came to the belief that if the fox could do it...so could a human... so could he. So for the rest of the summer he practiced. He practiced running up the wall perfecting back flips as he went.

To this day...well...to the last days in Croatia when he was dancing in the streets outside the new drama department he was co creating just a few months ago...to that day... he still believed he could have reached the ceiling if he had had enough time. It's been said the man was foxy.

The last ten years I have been working in theatre and film, crossing borders and working with music and humor and creating stories with actors who once looked down the barrel of a gun at each other. Dad came with us in the early years and taught and learned from a new nation being created by Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and others. I am convinced they accepted us Americans easily because he was the white Elder who would not age. He was the white American who danced and sang and hoped. He was the elder who stared at a group of dancing children and simply said, "aren't they wonderful". He saw wonder in everything and wanted more. He liked being called "old man" because he still could stand on his head and roll out from a fall. Yes, he liked to show off. He was also a flirt. He became emblematic of a word The South Africans taught us. UBUNTU!

Ubuntu means "I am because you are".

He believed, he taught, he diagnosed by practicing around that theme...always trying to see the world through his students' eyes. This kept him alive because he never got bored because he always knew he *was* because you *are*". His work is being taught now in other cultures because it is about music and song in speech, it is based on optimizing being human and seeks to enhance the mystery rather than teach the form of our individuality and culture.

All you need is one human being to do one miraculous thing once and it becomes easier forever after. This is true of nations. This is true of the Four Minute Mile.

That is what I try to remember as I find myself missing that wind against my back. And when I feel it ... I feel it again.

Arthur Lessac

And one last thought to all of you...teachers as well as students...those who appreciated his work and those who couldn't...close friends and extended family of thousands around the world.

He loved learning from all of you.

Michael Lessac

