

"Yeah, yeah," said Clarence Williams III of *The Mod Squad* as he bolted his poached eggs and hash. "They're always layin' that one on me. About how do I feel about being black and playing a cop because of all the things that police do to black people in ghettos and blah, blah, blah.

"I spent 10 years to become an actor. I *am* an actor and I play the part. When I leave this series, I may play a criminal. I'm gonna play that one. I'm an actor.

"Now if you're gonna ask me about my politics, deal with that. But I accept a part and I play it."

He talked like a machine gun. I didn't interrupt him.

"Now when this show came along, I was not deluged with 75 scripts. I wasn't sayin', 'Yes, David, I'll do this,' and tossin' that one aside and sayin', 'Sweetheart, call Darryl for tomorrow, I might wanta do that.'

"I wasn't *in* that kinda thing, you know. I was struttin' around on Broadway. I'd do a show; it'd bomb; I'd go off-Broadway; then I'd come back; the whole thing.

"Then came the offer to go into television. I looked at it from a straight point of view. I never saw the script."

You mean, I asked, that they said, "You wanna be in television, kid, or don't you?"

"Didn't say it quite that way, but a reasonable facsimile thereof. They told me what it was about: 'There's three young people runnin' through whatever,' and I said, 'That's groovy!' Growing up in the street, you learn to protect yourself. So I never signed my contract until I read the script, which was after the first day's shooting. That was in case there was some-

Clarence Williams III on

'How I feel about being black and playing a cop and blah, blah, blah'



by John Riley

thing offensive, so I could get out without being stung."

He pauses to order a beer.

"So we're shootin' it. I play a cop. You ask about image? Prior to Bill Cosby's image and prior to my image, there were no black images. As long as you're not doin' something negative, you're something. Our show is a little more than that. We've done some very good things, some non-sensical things, too. That's what television is about.

"We have to try to say something and still make it palatable for this vast area of the country they keep talkin' about, the Bible Belt or whatever. But I shouldn't say that because there are squares in New York and California, too. It's a struggle."

The monologue was temporarily over. Clarence adjourned to the Western street at Paramount, where, his fuzzy head held high and his tailored togs clinging to his powerful body, he dodged windmachine-blown tumbleweed and fake bullets as a joking crew shot pieces of a chase sequence.

Clarence's father was a musician. His parents were divorced when Clarence was an infant. The child grew up in his grandmother's care in Harlem. She worked as a chambermaid.

"We didn't have fancy clothes, but we did have shoes," he recalls. There was always stew or beans in a pot on the stove. "I didn't have to run around the streets and steal. My grandmother worked her tail off and the money that came into the house was her own."

He grew up in front of the city's movie screens, watching white faces flicker before him. By accident, almost, he became interested in theater through

YMCA productions.

With two years out for a stint in the paratroops, Clarence worked at his trade. Eventually he appeared on-stage with such actresses as Ruth White and Geraldine Page. Critics said nice things about him. But New York success meant nothing in Hollywood. Clarence visited the Coast, had a brief audience with an agent who "spent 20 minutes telling me what he couldn't do for me."

Later, the right words from the right people in the right places accomplished what Clarence sought.

Aaron Spelling needed a black actor for *The Mod Squad*. He asked Cosby for a recommendation. Cosby hadn't met Clarence but had marveled at his performance in "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground" on Broadway two years earlier.

"Clarence Williams is the best young black actor," Cosby declared. He offered to reimburse Spelling for importing Clarence from New York to test for the role. (Actually NBC ended up paying for it.) Spelling brought Clarence West for a *Danny Thomas Hour* role, using that performance as a test for the part of Linc Hayes, a Watts-riot alumnus who goes to work for the Los Angeles police as an undercover agent.

"He can explode like charged lightning," says Spelling, a man who is not afraid of superlatives. "He's not a black actor, not a white actor, not a colored actor; he's an actor, the most professional I've worked with in my life. There are things Clarence does like nobody else. He's so good."

Cosby, who has become a close friend of Clarence's, says: "Clarence is an honest human being. He's →

looking for other honest human beings. If you're honest, if you have a sense of privacy, you can get along with Clarence. That's exactly what he is." Cosby and Clarence, with their wives, toured London and Paris last fall.

After the filming, Clarence and I went to his canary-yellow dressing room, formerly Cosby's in the *I Spy* days. Spelling has decorated it for Clarence with new furniture and umber drapes. A hi-fi blared. I noticed a Do Not Disturb sign from a London hotel on a doorknob. Pictures of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Cosby smoking a corn-cob pipe adorned the yellow walls. His wife, Gloria Foster, a talented Broadway and Hollywood leading lady, arrived.

Clarence offered some more observations:

- "I don't expect anything more of black performers than I expect of white. All of this is escapism, fantasy. This is what the box is about. People come in from a hard day's work to sit down and fantasize with a couple of cold beers so they can face that grind for another day."

- "When I first turned on television, I wasn't shocked by all the white people in it. Twelve years ago I had no problem watching *I Love Lucy*. I don't see why everybody's talking about [black actors appearing] overnight. Overnight! A lot of people have died, bled, suffered and gone into poor states of mental health over this damn problem. You see, the cultural acceptance of black people has not happened yet. The black person's culture has not been put on television. Most black parts on TV could be rewritten for whites. Anything the guy does on *Mission, Bold Ones*, this show and *Room 222*: it would take the writers about four days to make every character white without harming the story one iota."

- "Nobody who writes for television knows any black cat in Watts like

Linc. It's like it would be difficult for me to write about the Russian revolution or the junta that's taken power in Greece."

Clarence says exactly and completely what he feels. That is Clarence.

He wears his hair in an Afro style, the way he has worn it, except in the Army, all his life. Last season management made him cut it shorter than he likes. With the show on firmer footing this year, the hair is bushier.

Three or four successful seasons will not make him a millionaire, but further success in films or television might. He admits the thought doesn't depress him. He and Gloria have been shopping for a country retreat from their Manhattan apartment; they rent a canyon house above Beverly Hills when filming in California.

At 29, he finds he is famous. He can't go to a New York theater without drawing an unmanageable crowd. While walking across Harlem from where his wife was making "The Angel Levine" (as Harry Belafonte's girl friend) to visit the location shooting of "Cotton Comes to Harlem" ("Just to say hello to Ossie Davis"), his star appeal touched off a near-riot in a high school. Classes were delayed two hours. Clarence was forced to address a school assembly to cool things down before escaping in a cab.

One night, recently, a basketball team Cosby coaches was playing the Lock High School team in the school's gym in south-central Los Angeles. Cosby was on the floor when Clarence entered the gym in mid-game. Recalls Cosby: "Girls started screaming, man. He stopped the game. And with another star on the floor!"

Clarence stared into space for a moment, then mused:

"It's kind of nice for kids to see a reflection of themselves. I enjoy being an image of something positive. I want the black kids, and the white kids too, to say, wow, I enjoy him, I'd like to try that."

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