Academy Reward

Actor Clarke Peters came to Baltimore for *The Corner* and *The Wire*; he stayed for the people.

As soon as Clarke Peters steps off the porch of his North Baltimore row home, a passerby does a double take, stops in his tracks, and flashes a smile. "Hey, I know you," the guy tells Peters. "Well, I've been around," says Peters, gesturing vaguely to the neighborhood around him. "But I know you from somewhere," the fellow persists, in a tone that suggests, "And I know you are *somebody*." Peters—an acclaimed actor with starring roles in *The Wire* (Lester Freamon), *Treme* (Albert Lambreaux), and Spike Lee's latest film, *Red Hook Summer* (Bishop Enoch Rouse)—doesn't let on one way or the other. He smiles, politely takes his leave, and heads to the liquor store across the street for ice. After returning home, Peters takes a seat at a table in the front room and ices his aching knees—both of them were surgically replaced earlier this summer. "I get that a lot," he says of the sidewalk encounter. "The vague recognition will happen 90 percent of the time. Five percent just go nuts and scream, and the rest just say, 'Cool,' and keep walking."

Pictured: Actor Clarke Peters inside his Baltimore row home with artwork by Larry Scott, a local artist and friend.

The 60-year-old Peters, who's lived in London since 1973, bought a second home in Baltimore in 2006, while filming the fourth season of *The Wire*. It was basically an investment property Peters figured he could flip once the series wrapped, but two things happened that he hadn't anticipated: "All hell broke loose in the real-estate market," he says, "and I really started caring about this city."

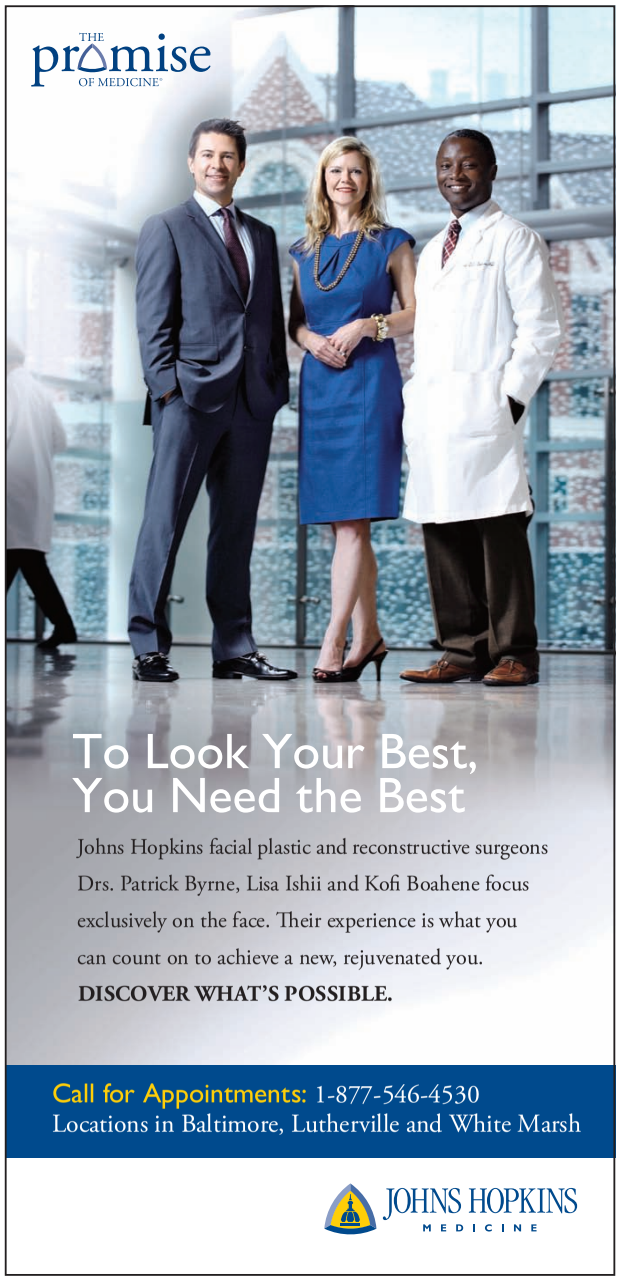
He cites meeting artist Larry Scott as a turning point. Scott, who passed away in 2007, was a prolific painter and the heart of a loosely associated group of African-American artists that included Don Griffin and Eugene Coles. "To me, Larry *was* Baltimore," says Peters, in a distinctively deep voice that resonates with meaning. "He's the cat that let me know there was culture in this town."

"Having spent so much of my life onstage, all this film work is new to me. *The Wire* opened a lot of doors."

Peters looks up from a cigarette he's rolling and points out an abstract painting hanging over a piano, a Cubist-inspired piece in the corner, and a portrait of a saxophonist, all done by Scott. Scott also introduced Peters to his artist friends, who began hanging out at Peters's house, talking art, history, and philosophy with folks from the neighborhood and *Wire* cast members like Sonja Sohn (Kima), Jim True-Frost (Prez), and John Doman (Commissioner Rawls). Peters didn't have a television or radio, so conversation was paramount.

"It was old time," says Peters, "like how I imagine people used to socialize, just intellectual and creative conversation. It developed into a kind of parlor situation, like *The Wire* salon." At Scott's urging, Peters even started painting. He also took a creative writing course at University of Maryland University College.

The participants called Peters's house "The Academy," and it, he says, "made



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me want to return to this country. It also made me want to stay in Baltimore."

Peters's first impression of Baltimore wasn't good. In 2000, he came to town to film *The Corner*, David Simon's first HBO project, and experienced a bit of culture shock. Though he was born in New York and raised in New Jersey, Peters had spent the previous 30 years in Europe and wasn't fully prepared for the devastation he encountered in West Baltimore.

"Clarke is one of the best stage actors of his generation. When he comes on, he lights up the stage."

"It was shocking and depressing," he recalls. "I was thinking, 'I'm sure glad we're just filming here.' When I left the States, the heroin thing was happening and had destroyed a few blocks of Manhattan, but there wasn't coke or crack. Coming here all those years later, and seeing what crack did to whole tracts of a city was shocking. I was removed from that; it wasn't my culture."

Though he started out in music, Peters soon turned to theater, which he'd loved since childhood. Coming from a creative family—his father was a commercial artist and bebop enthusiast, his mother aspired to be a dancer, and his brother became a professional dancer in Paris—he studied mime in New York and broke into musical theater in Europe, doing *Show Boat* in Geneva and *Hair* in Denmark. Peters eventually settled in London and joined the National Theatre in 1978.

"That's when my formal training really began," he says, noting that, at one point, he simultaneously juggled musical theater, straight drama, and an occasional action film, such as *Outland* with Sean Connery. "It was a real special time, a dream come true."

When talking about theater, Peters's entire affect changes. He brightens considerably, becomes more animated, and speaks in an evangelical cadence. "The theater is capable of taking you on a journey," he says, "where the audience is completely rapt, sitting on the edge of their seats, watching one person in a spotlight telling you a story. Five hundred people are silent, waiting for the next word. Man, there's nothing like that. *Nothing* like that."

He should know, because he's seemingly done it all—from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Othello* in England to *Chicago* and *The Iceman Cometh* on Broadway. He even wrote a Tony-nominated musical revue, *Five Guys Named Moe*, in the early 1990s.

On a production of *Carmen Jones* at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre, he met a talented young actor, just out of high school: Kwame Kwei-Armah, now artistic director at Center Stage. "I've known Kwame since he was 17," says Peters, "and it's been amazing to watch that young man grow and become a true artist. And he has the intellect and breadth of character to pull off the administrative nonsense that comes with being director of a theater."

Peters then does a spot-on impression of Kwei-Armah, repeating one of his friend's signature statements: "You see, there's a discussion to be had."

Peters can't help but chuckle—the impression is that good—before turning serious and saying, "I have a lot of time for that young man."

Kwei-Armah expresses mutual admiration. "Clarke is one of the best stage actors of his generation," he says. "When he comes on, he lights up the stage; it's pure ebullience. His spirit is just beautiful."

He's astonished that they've turned up in Baltimore at the same time. "It's bizarre," says Kwei-Armah. "Totally bizarre. What are the chances? But it's like Clarke said to me: 'We seem to be canoeing down the same river.' And that's true."

When asked if he's scheming to bring Peters to Center Stage, Kwei-Armah doesn't hesitate. "Absolutely," he says. "We're plotting to get him there, and we need to find the best vehicle for that. But he's a busy man."

Peters's phone rings a lot, these days. He fields a call from his agent about a new TV series, which he'd have to work around *Treme*. "Having spent so much of my life onstage, all this film work is new to me," says Peters, after hanging up. "*The Wire* opened a lot of doors, from the most insipid shit to things that are really necessary."

He praises David Simon for "putting together a group of actors that feels like a theater company, so it's not that bad. Other than that, working in film and TV has nowhere near the camaraderie and love you feel as part of a theater cast." But Peters is quick to add that "the money's good, and I'm not complaining."

His wife and 16-year-old son just returned to London, and he'll join them as his schedule allows. Beyond that, he wants to line up some stage work, film a version of *Five Guys Named Moe* in New Orleans—from working on *Treme*, he knows a lot of young musicians in that city—and start a new batch of paintings. Peters had his first art show in New Orleans last year and smiles at the notion that his old friend Larry would be proud.

Here in Baltimore, he hopes to install solar panels at The Academy and put a deck on the roof. Other than that, he just wants to sit on the front porch and chill with his neighbors. Peters speaks endearingly of them, as if they were fellow cast members. "We all have each other's backs," he says, "and we're all here together. I f--king love it." B

JOHN LEWIS is arts and culture editor at *Baltimore*.

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