

Thanks to the coach, actors sing their way to higher pay

By Karen Feld

LOS ANGELES—For almost 30 years, David Craig, who calls himself the "Mr. Chips of show business," has been teaching actors and actresses how to sing.

"It's like being reborn." "I really had to dig down deep to know myself — like analysis," and "It's like est." Those are a few of the comments made by students in Craig's class.

And his students include or have included some of the biggest names in the business: Rock Hudson, Carol Burnett, Shirley MacLaine, Lee Remick, Jean Simmons, Alexis Smith, Lee Grant, Eleanor Parker, Tony Perkins, Jack Klugman, Raquel Welch, and Eva Gabor, among others.

What does Craig do that has such a therapeutic effect on his students?

On my way to Craig's office and studio, I ran into Eva Gabor and other students, most dressed in jeans and T-shirts, carrying portable Sonys, and all deep in thought as though the experience was a heavy one.

The first thing one sees upon entering Craig's studio is a stage draped with red velvet curtains. Chairs are arranged for the audience, but it somehow resembles an old schoolroom, rather than a theater. A piano is piled high with sheet music. On the right side of the room below the stage is a director's chair.

Adjoining the studio is his office, a spacious suite with a bar, desk, and comfortable sitting area. The walls are covered with photos of his wife of 26 years, actress-comedienne Nancy Walker, whom he met when she was his student 27 years ago, and with Broadway playbills and costume design sketches.

Craig, a white-haired, articulate man of 53, dislikes the label "voice coach" or "singing coach."

"I don't know what I call myself," he said. "I think of a singing coach as someone sitting at a piano and saying, 'Let me have a little more on the word "love," baby. That's the way coaches used to talk. When you get to the word "love," pour it on. I can't teach that way.'"

He teaches a performance demeanor onstage that is almost exclusively taught to the actor, to the nonsinger. If an actor also can sing, it is worth more dollars on the market. When Craig first started teaching in New York in the mid-1940s, he didn't teach any actors, because there were none who wanted to sing.

In Craig's class, each individual experiences something personal and unique. "I teach them how to stand on the stage and sing and fool enough people into thinking they've been doing it all their lives. I don't teach them how to sing."

What he does is how to stage and perform a song, what he calls "style."

David Garfield, who played in "Fiddler on the Roof" and "The Rothschilds" on Broadway, is a former Craig student. "Craig teaches you his technique," said Garfield, "and then teaches you how to artfully throw it away and go beyond it."

Craig is sympathetic with the actors' job problems and insecurities. His goal is to teach them so that they can sell their singing to make a buck.

"[Rex] Harrison's performance in 'My Fair Lady,'" Craig said, "is the most optimal description of what I do — the nonsinging actor in an exceptional musical, singing for a buck."

Craig interviewed more than 300 actors to find 26 students for his current class. Ideally, he teaches 26 persons in the technique class and 15 in the performance class. Technique meets twice a week for two hours; performance meets daily. He lets in only those with professional acting backgrounds.

At the beginning of his class, he says, "the most hardened pro looks like a raving amateur. As soon as they start to sing, the terror destroys their life. That begins to diminish as they gain knowledge. You don't gain self-confidence by doing something, but by learning how to do it."

Craig reminisces about the old days when there was a definite demarcation between legit and musicals, when singers sang and actors acted.

At that time, nobody studied. After World War II, however, show business began to shrink, "TV murdered it," Craig said. "It closed movies. There are fewer and fewer films being made. There's no product." Actors who also can sing will get the jobs today.

The whole notion of going to Los Angeles to study voice technique is only 10 years old, according to Craig. Most of the major teachers were in New York, as was Craig until six years ago, when he and his wife moved to California because of her career. "All the young actors — Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman — are from the stage, trained in New York or some other major metropolis."

At the conclusion of his current class, he is taking an



David Craig

unlimited sabbatical [not retirement] to write a book about what he teaches. It will be a "how to" book with overtones of where we are in the musical scene in the '70s.

Craig says he got into teaching by default. He had been a writer and lyricist, and had played clubs in and around New York. He had a little success in the business in the days when Stephen Sondheim and Sheldon Harnick also were just starting. The old guard — Berlin, Porter, Rodgers, and Hammerstein — was still writing, so it was difficult for new young writers to break in.

He finally wrote two shows that were produced. One was a successful revue for his wife, Walker, titled "Phoenix '55." The other was a book show, "Copper and Brass," also for his wife, that was not so successful and was "responsible for getting me back to teaching again. I don't think of it now as an avocation. I think of it as the best of me. I put everything into it. I earn every buck I make" [\$80 a student each four weeks].

Singing is one of Craig's favorite things. Cleo Laine and Lena Horne are his all-time favorite vocalists. On the contemporary scene, he favors David Bowie.

He is not optimistic about the future of the industry. "Where we are in literature is exactly where we are in theater," he said. "People are reading nostalgia."

He is thrilled that current popular musicals such as "A Chorus Line" and "Chicago" are hits because his friends and students are doing them, but he thinks they are "death rattles. They are old-hat shows done breathtakingly, without saying anything to the world that we live in right now. 'Chicago' is nothing but Bobby Fosse's brilliant staging. It's not 'Cabaret' by a long shot, and 'Cabaret' is already nostalgia. We're now doing nostalgia shows based on the '50s and '60s."

He talks about the yearning to see Fred Astaire and Cary Grant, to see "Gone With the Wind." "People want a Clark Gable of the '70s, a show where everybody is a winner." He thinks the nostalgia craze is a search for quality.

Craig sees this search all over the country. He had gone to a theater conference in Tulsa, Okla., with actor-director John Houseman last year and had been asked to teach a master class. He declined because "I had this nightmare of a thousand kids with long hair and beards, strumming guitars and singing an Elton John number at me."

But when he got here, he was surprised to see the 17, 18, and 19-year-olds singing Noel Coward, Cole Porter, and Rodgers and Hart. "Cole Porter is a living composer today," he said.

Craig pleads embarrassment when students compliment him. "The impression we always wanted to give in our generation is that we were born perfect. That was what we were selling. If you see a doctor doing an operation, you don't ask what medical school he went to."

With teachers Craig doesn't think that is important either. "But today, they tell me I'm in. If you put down on your dossier that you studied with me, that is sort of like government-tested meat. On your rump, it says 'David Craig approved.' I think that's ridiculous."

He himself did study with Kay Thompson for a while many years ago, but claims his generation never studied, they worked — and worked anywhere. "Kids today edit the work they get," he said. His advice to them is "do it." He'd rather see somebody performing, in front of an audience, than studying five years.