

IRENE: No. That's a baby picture of one of Martin Luther King's children. I cut it outta the *Ebony* magazine . . . and framed it . . . Just cause it's cute.

TEDDY: Sorry . . . sorry to my heart. I'm sorry.

IRENE: I had to come and tell you, Teddy. . . . As hurtful as it is . . . it's your business . . . ain't nobody got the right to keep your business from you . . . even if it's painful.

TEDDY: You right. At least it put your mind . . . at rest.

IRENE: Oh, dear heart . . . it ain't that easy. Instead of one child . . . I had thousands. When she was two . . . I looked at every two-year-old I passed. . . . "Is that her . . . this one . . . that one?" When she was five . . . "There's one look just like Teddy." Years of lookin at strange, raggedy-ass children runnin round the streets . . . "That her?" Gets worse as the years pass. . . . Now I look at some baby-face hooker standin on the corner with her mouth fulla that tough talk . . . "Come on home with me, baby." I stand there wonderin . . . "Is that my daughter?" The hooker see me starin and say . . . "What you lookin at, bitch?"

TEDDY: (*Trying to believe.*) That wasn't her. She's with some lawyer or school teacher. That's what . . . a civil rights lawyer and his wife.

IRENE: (*Unpacking as he fixes drink for himself.*) I loved you so much, Teddy. I came here to let you know that much. I'm sorry I wasn't able to say it before. When we were around each other . . . it was all fightin and pokin fun . . . mockin ourselves. I believe niggers think it's disgraceful to love one another . . . fightin like hell to cover up what's in the heart. My daddy once said to mama . . . "Sheeeet . . . what's love, what's that? Better git yourself some money." Sayin them things right in fronta me. I'm tryin to eat the little bitta grits and bacon and make out that I don't hear what I'm hearin. She say . . . "Nigger, get the hell out." He slam the door and gone. She sit down and cry . . . then look at me and say . . . "Gal, you a mill-stone round my neck." Ain't like no Teevee story with us. . . . Love is hard to live round when a woman is washin out her last raggy pair-a drawers . . . and

her man ain't got a quarter to put in her hand. When it's like that it's embarrassin to love each other. . . . If you stop laughin at yourself for too long a time . . . they'll have to put you way in a strait-jacket. I passed through this world . . . and for what? I don't even know who I am.

Open Admissions

Shirley Lauro

Characters: Calvin Jefferson (18), Professor Alice Miller (late 30s)

Setting: A cubicle speech office at a city college in New York, late fall, 6:00 P.M.

Premiere: Ensemble Studio Theatre, New York City, 1981
 Publisher: Samuel French, Inc. (one-act version)

Calvin is a freshman in the open admissions program at the college. He is black, powerfully built, handsome. He uses "street speech" jargon. He knows this program is supposed to be his big chance, but finds "nothing is happenin to me in my head except I am gettin more and more confused about what I knows and what I don't know." He refuses to accept his "B" grade and insists Alice sit down and teach him.

Alice is a speech communications professor. She intended to be a Shakespearean scholar, but has landed at a city college where she has been teaching for twelve years. She is overloaded with work, exhausted, and right now wants to go home.

In describing *Open Admissions*, Shirley Lauro writes, "The play begins on a very high level of tension and intensity and builds from there. . . . The high level of tension is set by both Alice and Calvin and occurs from the moment Calvin enters. . . . Alice does not want the scene to take place. The audience's experience from the start should be as if they had suddenly tuned in on the critical round of a boxing match."

Note: *Open Admissions* was originally produced Off Broadway as a one-act. It was later expanded into a full-length play for Broadway. This scene is from the one-act version.

ALICE: It's "last," not "lass"; "first," not "firss." That's your friend, that good old "Final T"! Here it when I talk!

CALVIN: Sometimes. When you say it, hittin it like that!

ALICE: Well, you should be going over the exercises on it in the speech book all the time, and recording yourself on your tape recorder. (*She pats book sack.*)

CALVIN: I don't got no tape recorder.

ALICE: Well, borrow one! (*She turns away.*)

CALVIN: (*Crosses in back of ALICE to her right.*) On that Shakespeare scene I jiss did? Thass why I got a "B"? Because of the "Final T's"?

ALICE: (*Backs downstage a step.*) Well, you haven't improved your syndrome, have you?

CALVIN: How come you keep on answerin me by axin me somethin else?

ALICE: And that's the other one.

CALVIN: What "other one"?

ALICE: Other most prevalent deviation. You said: "axing" me something else.

CALVIN: Thass right. How come you keep axin me somethin else?

ALICE: "Asking me" Calvin, "asking me"!

CALVIN: I jiss did!

ALICE: No, no. Look. That's classic Substandard Black! Text-book case. (*She puts purse and booksack down and crosses to diagram on blackboard.*) See, the jaw and teeth are in two different positions for the two sounds, and they make two completely different words! (*She writes "ass-king," and "axing" on the blackboard, pronouncing them in an exaggerated way for him to see.*) "Ass-king" and "ax-ing." I am "ass-king" you the question. But, the woodcutter is "ax-ing" down the tree. Can't you hear the difference? (*She picks up his speech book from desk.*) Here.

(CALVIN follows her to desk.)

ALICE: Go over to page 105. It's called a "Sharp S" problem with a medial position "sk" substitution. See? "skin, screw, scream"—those are "sk" sounds in the Primary Position. "Asking, risking, frisking—that's medial position. And "flask, task, mask"—that's final position. Now you should be working on those, Calvin. Reading those exercises over and over again. I mean the way you did the Othello scene was just ludicrous: "Good gentlemen, I ax thee—" (*She crosses to the board and points to "ax-ing."*) *She chuckles.*) That meant Othello was chopping the gentlemen down!

CALVIN: How come I had to do the Othello scene anyhow? Didn git any choice. An Franklin Perkins an Sam Brown an Lester Washington they had to too.

ALICE: What do you mean?

CALVIN: An Claudette Jackson an Doreen Simpson an Melba Jones got themselves assigned to Cleopatra on the Nile?

ALICE: Everyone was assigned!

CALVIN: Uh-huh. But everybody else had a choice, you know what I mean? That Judy Horowitz, she said you told her she could pick outa five, six different characters. And that boy did his yesterday? That Nick Rizoli? Did the Gravedigger? He said he got three, four to choose off of too.

ALICE: (*Crosses to CALVIN.*) Well some of the students were "right" for several characters. And you know, Calvin, how we talked in class about Stanislavsky and the importance of "identifying" and "feeling" the part?

CALVIN: Well how Doreen Simpson "identify" herself some Queen sittin on a barge? How I supposed to "identify" some Othello? I don't!

ALICE: (*Crosses to blackboard, picks up fallen chalk.*) Oh, Calvin, don't be silly.

CALVIN: (*Crosses center.*) Well, I don't! I'm not no kind a jealous husband. I haven' got no wife. I don' even got no girlfriend, hardly! And thass what it's all about ain't it? So what's it I'm supposed to "identify" with anyhow?

ALICE: (*Turns to CALVIN.*) Oh, Calvin, what are you arguing about? You did a good job!

CALVIN: "B" job, right?
ALICE: Yes.

CALVIN: (*Crosses to ALICE.*) Well, what's that "B" standin for? Cause I'll tell you somethin you wanna know the truth: I stood up there didn' hardly know the sense a anythin I read, couldn't hardly even read it at all. Only you didn't notice. Wasn't even listenin, sittin there back a the room jiss thumbin through your book.

(*ALICE crosses to desk.*)

CALVIN: So you know what I done? Skip one whole paragraph, tess you out—you jiss keep thumbin through your book! An then you give me a "B"! (*He has followed ALICE to desk.*)

ALICE: (*Puts papers in box and throws out old coffee cup.*) Well that just shows how well you did the part!

CALVIN: You wanna give me somethin I could "identify" with, how come you ain' let me do that other dude in the play . . .

ALICE: Iago?

CALVIN: Yeah. What is it they calls him? Othello's . . .

ALICE: Subordinate.

CALVIN: Go right along there with my speech syndrome, wouldn't it now? See, Iago has to work for the Man. I identifies with him! He gits jealous man. Know what I mean? Or that Gravedigger? Shovelin dirt for his day's work! How come you wouldn't let me do him? Thass the question I wanna ax you!

ALICE: (*Turns to CALVIN.*) "Ask me," Calvin. "Ask me!"

CALVIN: (*Steps stage right*) "Ax you?" Okay, man. (*Turns to ALICE.*) Miss Shakespeare, Speech Communications I! (*Crosses upstage of ALICE.*) Know what I'll "ax" you right here in this room, this day, at this here desk right now? I'll "ax" you how come I have been in this here college three months on this here Open Admissions an I don't know nothin more than when I came in here? You know what I mean? This supposed to be some big break for me. This here is where all them smart Jewish boys has gone from the Bronx Science and went an become some Big Time Doctors at Bellevue. An some Big Time Judges in the Family Court an like that there. And now it's supposed to be my turn.

(*ALICE looks away and CALVIN crosses right of ALICE.*)

CALVIN: You know what I mean? (*He crosses up right.*) An my sister Jonelle took me out of foster care where I been in six homes and five schools to give me my chance. (*He crosses down right.*) Livin with her an she workin three shifts in some "Ladies Restroom" give me my opportunity. An she say she gonna buss her ass git me this education I don't end up on the streets! (*Crosses on a diagonal to ALICE.*) Cause I have got brains!

(*ALICE sits in student chair. CALVIN crosses in back, to her left.*)

CALVIN: You understand what I am communicatin to you? My high school has tole me I got brains an can make somethin outta my life if I gits me the chance! And now this here's supposed to be my chance! High school says you folks gonna bring me up to date on my education and git me even. Only nothin is happenin to me in my head except I am getting more and more confused about what I knows and what I don't know! (*He sits in swivel chair.*) So what I wanna "ax" you is: How come you don't sit down with me and teach me which way to git my ideas down instead of givin me a "B."

(*ALICE rises and crosses up right.*)

CALVIN: I don't even turn no outline in? Jiss give me a "B." (*He rises and crosses right of ALICE.*) An Lester a "B"! An Melba a "B"! An Sam a "B"! What's that "B" standin for anyhow? Cause it surely ain't standin for no piece of work!

ALICE: Calvin, don't blame me!

(*CALVIN crosses down right.*)

ALICE: I'm trying! God knows I'm trying! The times are rough for everyone. I'm a Shakespearean scholar, and they have me teaching beginning Speech. I was supposed to have twelve graduate students a class, nine classes a week, and they gave me thirty-five freshmen a class, twenty classes a week. I hear 157 speeches a week! You know what that's like? And I go home late on the subway scared to death! In graduate school they told me I'd have a first-rate career. Then I started here and they said: "Hang on! Things will improve!" But they only got worse . . . and worse! Now I've been here for twelve

years and I haven't written one word in my field! I haven't read five research books! I'm exhausted . . . and I'm finished! We all have to bend. I'm just hanging on now . . . supporting my little girl . . . earning a living . . . and that's all . . . (She crosses to desk.)

CALVIN: (Faces ALICE.) What I'm supposed to do, feel sorry for you? Least you can *earn* a livin'! Clean office, private phone, name on the door with all them B.A.'s, M.A.'s, Ph.D.'s. ALICE: You can have those too. (She crosses down right to CALVIN.) Look, last year we got ten black students into Ivy League graduate programs. And they were no better than you. They were just *perceived* (Points to blackboard.) as better. Now that's the whole key for you . . . to be perceived as better! So you can get good recommendations and do well on interviews. You're good looking and ambitious and you have a fine native intelligence. You can make it, Calvin. All we have to do is work on improving your Positive Communicator's Image . . . by getting rid of that Street Speech. Don't you see?

CALVIN: See what? What you axin me to see?

ALICE: "Asking" me to see, Calvin. "Asking" me to see!

CALVIN: (Starts out of control at this, enraged, crosses U.S. and bangs on file cabinet.) Oooooee! Oooooee! You wanna see? You wanna see? Oooooee!

ALICE: Calvin stop it! STOP IT!

CALVIN: "Calvin stop it"? "Stop it"? (Picks up school books from desk.) There any black professors here?

ALICE: (Crosses up right.) No! They got cut . . . the budget's low . . . they got . . .

CALVIN: (Interrupting.) Cut? They got CUT? (Crosses to ALICE and backs her to the downstage edge of desk.) Gonna cut you, lady! Gonna cut you, throw you out the fuckin window, throw the fuckin books out the fuckin window, burn it all mother fuckin down. FUCKIN DOWN!!!

ALICE: Calvin! Stop it! STOP IT! YOU HEAR ME?

CALVIN: (Turns away, center stage.) I CAN'T! YOU HEAR ME? I CAN'T! YOU HEAR ME! I CAN'T! YOU GOTTA

GIVE ME MY EDUCATION! GOTTA TEACH ME! GIVE ME SOMETHING NOW! GIVE ME NOW! NOW! NOW! NOW! NOW! NOW!

(CALVIN tears up text book. He starts to pick up torn pages and drops them. He bursts into a wailing, bellowing cry in his anguish and despair, doubled over in pain and grief. It is a while before his sobs subside. Finally, ALICE speaks.) ALICE: Calvin . . . from the bottom of my heart . . . I want to help you . . .

CALVIN: (Barely able to speak.) By changin my words? Thass nothin . . . nothin! I got to know them big ideas . . . and which way to git em down . . .

ALICE: But how can I teach you that? You can't write a paragraph, Calvin . . . or a sentence . . . you can't spell past fourth grade . . . the essay you wrote showed that . . .

CALVIN: (Rises.) What essay?

ALICE: (Crosses to up left files, gets essay and hands it to CALVIN.) The autobiographical one . . . you did it the first day . . .

CALVIN: You said that was for *your* reference . . . didn't count . . .

ALICE: Here . . .

CALVIN: (Opens it up. Stunned.) "F"? Why didn't you tell me I failed?

ALICE: (Crosses to desk, puts essay down.) For what?

CALVIN: (Still stunned.) So you could teach me how to write.

ALICE: (Crosses down left.) In sixteen weeks?

CALVIN: (Still can't believe this.) You my teacher!

ALICE: That would take years! And speech is my job. You need a tutor.

CALVIN: I'm your job. They outa tutors!

ALICE: (Turns to him.) I can't do it, Calvin. And that's the real truth. I'm one person, in one job. And I can't. Do you understand? And even if I could, it wouldn't matter. All that matters is the budget . . . and the curriculum . . . and the grades . . . and how you look . . . and how you talk!

CALVIN: (Pause. Absorbing this.) Then I'm finished, man.