

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Kevin Clash

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Clash, Kevin
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Kevin Clash,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 21, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:37:58).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Puppeteer Kevin Clash (1960 - ) created the character Elmo on Sesame Street. A multiple Emmy Award-winning puppeteer, he also performed on the television programs, Captain Kangaroo, and Dinosaurs, and in the films, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Muppet Treasure Island. Clash was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 21, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_268
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Children's educational puppeteer Kevin Clash was born on September 17, 1960 in Turner's Station, a predominantly black neighborhood in the Baltimore, Maryland suburb of Dundalk, to George and Gladys Clash. In 1971, at the age of ten, Clash began building puppets, after being inspired by the work of puppeteers on the *Sesame Street* television program, a passion that stuck with him throughout his teen years.

His first work on television was for WMAR, a CBS affiliate that produced a show entitled *Caboose*. Clash also performed a pelican puppet character for the WTOP-TV television program *Zep*. In his late teens, Clash met Kermit Love, a puppet designer for the Muppets, who arranged for Clash to observe the *Sesame Street* set.

In 1979, Clash became a puppeteer for the television program *Captain Kangaroo*, a role he would perform until 1985, working with puppeteer and future collaborator Jim Martin. In 1980, Clash was allowed a chance to work briefly as a puppeteer for *Sesame Street*, a program to which he would return after leaving *Captain Kangaroo*. Clash joined the cast of *The Great Space Coaster* in 1981, playing the characters Goriddle Gorilla, Rory and Huggle Scuffy. In 1983, Clash was offered another opportunity with *Sesame Street*, but was forced to decline due to his already-hectic television schedule.

The following year, Clash was able to join *Sesame Street*, playing the characters Hoots the Owl, Baby Natasha and Dr. Nobel Price. It was also that year that Clash created the character Elmo, using an old red puppet for whom previous *Sesame Street* puppeteers had failed to create a personality. Clash became a puppeteer for *The Jim Henson Hour* in 1989, working with the Leon and Clifford characters. Clash also worked on a variety of other Henson projects in the late-1980s, including *Muppet Time*, *Tale of the Bunny Picnic* and *Dog City*.

In 1990, Clash won his first Daytime Emmy Award for his work on *Sesame Street*, an accomplishment he would repeat eight times. The following year, Clash portrayed the character Splinter in the film *Teenage Mutant Ninja*

*Turtles*, and also performed a number of characters for the television program *Dinosaurs*. In 1993, Clash's daughter Shannon Elise was born to his ex-wife Genia. 1996 proved to be a very successful year for Clash, as the Tickle Me Elmo Doll, based on Clash's Elmo character, becomes one of the biggest-selling toys in history. Clash also was involved in the production of the television program *Muppets Tonight!* and the film *Muppet Treasure Island*. Also in 2006, Clash released *My Life as a Furry Red Monster: What Being Elmo Has Taught Me About Life, Love and Laughing Out Loud*, a biography ghostwritten by Becky Cabaza.

Clash was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 21, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Kevin Clash was conducted by Adrienne Jones on September 21, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Puppeteer Kevin Clash (1960 - ) created the character Elmo on Sesame Street. A multiple Emmy Award-winning puppeteer, he also performed on the television programs, Captain Kangaroo, and Dinosaurs, and in the films, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Muppet Treasure Island.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Clash, Kevin

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Clash, Kevin--Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Puppeteer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Kevin Clash, September 21, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

**Series I: Original Interview Footage**

Video Oral History Interview with Kevin Clash, Section A2007\_268\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Kevin Clash was born on September 17, 1960 in Baltimore, Maryland to Gladys Jones Clash and George Clash, Sr. Clash's maternal grandparents, Genevieve Jones and Clarence Jones, owned a trucking company in Baltimore, where his paternal grandparents, Mary Clash and Daniel Clash, also lived. Clash grew up in Baltimore, and visited both sides of his family on Sundays and holidays, although his paternal grandmother favored her fair skinned grandchildren over Clash and his siblings. In Baltimore, Clash's father worked at the Raymond Metal Products Company, while his mother ran a neighborhood daycare. She was politically active, and outspoken about the Civil Rights Movement, while Clash's father was a quiet, strict man who taught Clash and his siblings to be disciplined. Clash was interested in puppetry from an early age. He made his first puppet from a stuffed dog that he found in the street, and watched television programs like 'Sesame Street' and 'Kukla, Fran and Ollie' to learn more about building puppets.

Video Oral History Interview with Kevin Clash, Section A2007\_268\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:06 ?

Kevin Clash's interest in puppetry was inspired by children's television shows like 'Sesame Street' and 'Kukla, Fran and Ollie.' He was also influenced by music, including gospel, jazz, Motown and blues; and often made his puppets lip sync to popular songs and jingles. Clash grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, and performed his puppet shows throughout the city, including at the Inner Harbor. He also performed at church functions, birthday parties and local organizations. Clash attended school in Dundalk, Maryland, where several teachers were very supportive of his puppetry, and allowed him to perform for class assignments and at assemblies. These performances brought Clash to the attention of the local media and television personality Stu Kerr. Clash was hired to work on Kerr's show, 'Caboose,' and soon obtained a position on another local program, 'Mr. Rainbow's World.' As Clash's reputation grew, he connected with other entertainers, including Bob Keeshan, the star of 'Captain Kangaroo.'

Video Oral History Interview with Kevin Clash, Section A2007\_268\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:12 ?

Kevin Clash obtained work as a puppeteer with notable television personalities, like Kermit Love and Frank Oz, through his early mentor, Stu Kerr. He was also introduced to Bob Keeshan, the star of 'Captain Kangaroo'; and, at eighteen years old, guest starred on Keeshan's show. Clash met his idol, 'Sesame Street' creator Jim Henson, while performing on the 'Sesame Street' float at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Clash was offered an audition for Henson's films, but turned down the offer, as he was already performing on several television shows. After graduating high school in 1979, Clash moved to New York City to work on Kermit Love's show, 'The Great Space Coaster.' Then, after Jim Henson began developing films based on 'The Muppet Show,' Clash joined the new generation of puppeteers on 'Sesame Street.' He went on to work as puppeteer and trainer on Henson's other films, including 'Labyrinth' in 1986. Clash describes Henson's personality and style as a puppeteer.

Video Oral History Interview with Kevin Clash, Section A2007\_268\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:14 ?

Kevin Clash became a regular performer on Jim Henson's 'Sesame Street' television program in 1984. Shortly after arriving, Clash was given the role of Elmo, who was previously a secondary character originated by Brian Muehl. At the time, Elmo was played by Richard Hunt, who disliked the juvenile nature of the character. Clash was inspired to create a new personality for Elmo, who soon became a phenomenon, and was known for his childish innocence and wit. Clash received his first Emmy Award for his performance as Elmo in 1990, just after

the death of his mentor, Jim Henson. Henson's death was a shock to Clash and his colleagues at the Children's Television Workshop. In the week following his death, Clash and the rest of the staff congregated in their office to commemorate Henson and his work. They held a large memorial for Henson in New York City, which included performances by Big Bird, Harry Belafonte and the entire cast of 'Sesame Street' and 'The Muppets.'

Video Oral History Interview with Kevin Clash, Section A2007\_268\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:19 ?

Kevin Clash first served as a puppeteer under Jim Henson on a short film featuring the comedian John Cleese. Clash was too nervous to remember his six lines, and feared that Henson would not rehire him. However, producer Karen Barnes explained Clash's nervousness to Henson, and he and Clash went on to collaborate on numerous projects. As a puppeteer at the Sesame Workshop, Clash performed with celebrity guest stars like Whoopi Goldberg, Rosie O'Donnell and Martha Stewart on the 'Sesame Street' television program. In addition, Clash helped produce the Sesame Workshop's international adaptations, including 'Takalani Sesame' in South Africa; performed as Elmo in New Orleans, Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina; and testified as Elmo before the U.S. Congress. Clash met his wife, Genia Loving Clash, on the campus of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and they dated for six years before marrying. They had one daughter, Shannon Clash, and later divorced.

Video Oral History Interview with Kevin Clash, Section A2007\_268\_001\_006, TRT: 0:11:57 ?

Kevin Clash guest starred as Elmo, his character from the 'Sesame Street' children's program, on numerous adult talk shows, including 'The Rosie O'Donnell Show' and 'Emeril Live.' Elmo became a semi-regular guest on Rosie O'Donnell's show, and Clash filmed several episodes with her in Los Angeles, California. In 2006, Clash published 'My Life as a Furry Red Monster,' an autobiographical account of his career as a puppeteer. He concludes the interview by performing as Elmo.