

## Finding Clara

by June Guralnick

When I was seventeen, I worked part-time as a switchboard operator in a hat factory in lower Manhattan. The pay wasn't bad, the late afternoon schedule fit snugly with my high school classes, and, best of all, I could tune out the factory clatter by placing a gigantic headset over my ears and plugging into a submarine-sized Bell Telephone console. "Good afternoon, Froehlich Brothers Company. May I help you?" I chimed, four hours a day, three days a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday).

Ignorance is bliss.

At the end of my senior year, the factory shut down, a victim of the new fashion trend of hatless heads. I quickly found another job (receptionist at Hertz) and didn't give another thought to the other laid-off employees, figuring they also would easily land another position. There's always another factory just around the corner, right?

It would be many years – twenty-five in fact – before I would again come in contact with factory workers.

In late 1997, I accepted a position as Artist-in-Residence at Rockingham Community College, a small two-year college situated twenty miles or so northwest of Greensboro. Upon cursory observation of the area – plenty of cows, plenty of corn, plenty of barbecue – it seemed that it would be a bucolic book-jacket kind of place to hunker down and work on a play I was sketching out about the Jazz Age in America.

It took a few months before I realized that a seismic volcanic shift – the end of the industrial era – was erupting in this corner of the world.

North Carolina's Piedmont had been a hub for textile manufacturing for a hundred years. Mills such as Cone, White Oak, Edna, and Washington (formerly Mayo) had created a social and economic fabric that was now rapidly breaking down. Beckoned by cheap labor and materials, the factories were uprooting operations to relocate business overseas.

During my first year living in the small town of Reidsville (a few miles from the college), I encountered hundreds of people who were affected by this societal sea change. I met them waiting uncomfortably at the local supermarket (ashamed to be seen using food stamps); I met them anxiously lining up at the college registration office. I met them wearily washing clothes and chain-smoking at the local laundromat. Frankly, I met them even when I didn't want to – haunting reminders that my idealized picture postcard was a very different landscape for long-time residents.

I wasn't sure how to either understand or respond to what I was seeing and hearing. To better grasp what was happening around me, I determined to find out more about the history of mills in the Piedmont.

Thus began a year of research, involving interviews with local residents – mill workers and their families, community leaders and town officials, etc. I collected stories and photographed artifacts. Pictures such as a woman (circa the '20s), hands on hip, standing proudly in front of Dan River Mill – or a faded copy of a wage stub – \$7.50 – for a week's

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

There are many people and organizations that aided me on my journey to create *Finding Clara*. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Rockingham Community College Foundation for underwriting the initial play development process, and Cone Mills Corporation and the North Carolina Collection Research Library at UNC-Chapel Hill for research help.

*Finding Clara* initially received a developmental workshop hosted by Greensboro Playwrights' Forum; Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre, after awarding *Finding Clara* winner of their national New Plays Contest, subsequently premiered the work.

*Finding Clara* also received a Piedmont Regional Artist award, Finalist Best New Plays Award-Mockingbird Theatre, Silver Medal-Pinter Drama Review Prize, and earned me a North Carolina Arts Council Literature Fellowship as well as a Tennessee Williams Scholarship at Sewanee Writers Conference, University of the South.

In 2009, Justice Theatre Project will be producing a staged reading of the play, to be performed at the renovated Pilot Mills site in Raleigh and the old Glencoe Mills site near Burlington, NC.

work.

I also searched through local archives, including materials housed at Cone Mills headquarters in Greensboro. In these archives, one late winter afternoon, I came across accounts describing the 1929 Loray Mill Strike in Gastonia. What struck me immediately was the heated language – I could palpably feel the steam spewing out as I turned the pages of a textile trade magazine. I sensed that I had unearthed a turning point – a fulcrum, if you will, which had subsequently set in motion a chain of events shaping mill history throughout the South.

That night, unable to sleep, I turned on Turner Classic Movies, the pixilated opiate for insomniacs. A silent movie from the '20s was showing.

In life, upon rare occasions, we have one of those light bulb epiphanies. Watching Hollywood's "It Girl" Clara Bow flash her radiant talent across the screen – that overt sexuality, combined with working class spunk and extraordinary vulnerability – I knew instantly that I would write a play linking Clara Bow with the story of a Loray Mill factory girl, circa 1929.

Six months later, *Finding Clara* emerged. The play counterpoints the life of Mary Victoria Woolson, a North Carolina "lint-head," with her idol, silent screen actress Clara Bow, against a background of labor and racial unrest in pre-depression 1929 America. It is also an intergenerational story, following the journey in 1990 of Mary Victoria's granddaughter, Clara Henderson, to discover the truth about her family – and herself. And finally, it is a story about two people – one black and one white – who fall in love in exactly the wrong time and place.

Let me say right up front that this play is fiction. Yes, two of the characters (screen star Clara Bow and labor balladeer Ella May Wiggins) are based on real people; and yes, there was a textile strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929; and, okay, I admit it, silent films were replaced by talkies in the late '20. – All right, enough arm-twisting, I confess that a little truth snuck in with the fiction. What's a writer to do?

Go to the source, of course.

As I was preparing a final draft for the premiere production at Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre (SART), a member of the North Carolina Preservation Society introduced me to Lucy Penegar and other Gastonia residents who were working to save the old Loray Mill building (most recently owned by Firestone). Lucy arranged for me to go inside the shuttered mill.

Talk about ghosts. With only grey shafts of light illuminating the interior, I felt as if I was touring the *Titanic* – after it sunk. Pieces of the past floated by as I crept through this cavernous mill – none so shocking, however, as the stretchers, carefully mounted on the walls, on every floor.

How many people were carried out of Loray, never to return?

The responsibility to people I would never meet – to capture something truthful about the time and place in which they lived, struggled and died – shaped the subsequent changes and final draft that I wrote for the play. On opening night, one of the ghosts returned – Ella May Wiggins's

descendants attended the performance.

As part of SART's production, actual images from the 1929 strike were projected on stage – including a picture taken at Wiggins's funeral. Her family had never seen this particular photograph; I can still hear their gasp from the audience when it suddenly appeared on the screen. The past and present were torn nakedly open to confront one another, and for a moment, the imaginary veil that separates drama and real life vanished.

For those of you continuing to search for clues to the turbulent past of this state that many of us call home, I invite you to discover *Finding Clara*. A play about lost hopes and dreams, about labor violence and racial hatred, and about the power of Hollywood to influence our actions and desires, the echoes of Ella May Wiggins's "Mill Mothers' Lament" might still be heard – if you listen closely between the lines.

**JUNE GURALNICK** is the author of ten full-length plays performed at venues including the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, Henry Street Theatre in New York, Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre in North Carolina, and the North Carolina Museum of Art. In addition to her career as a theatre artist, she has received various commissions to create cultural outreach projects with a diversity of communities in the US including an oral history project ("Food for Thought"), a mural-creative writing project ("Growing Up In America"), and an interstate interdisciplinary arts project ("Dreams of Flight") with over one thousand children in North Carolina and Ohio. A member of the The Dramatists Guild of America, Theatre Communications Group, and the Playwrights' Center Minneapolis, Guralnick currently resides in Apex, NC.

***Finding Clara* is a tragedy with humor in three acts and sixteen scenes. The action on stage is complimented by projections of historical images and headlines, as well as 'recreated' Clara Bow silent films. The music of the 1920s permeates the play, as well as music from a somewhat later period – Madonna. *Finding Clara* unfolds in three time periods: 1929, 1990, and Heaven Movie-Land (a kind of eternity). There are ten characters in total; however, one actor plays two roles in the different time periods – James Henderson (1990) and Jimmy Conlon (1929). Some of the characters span the play's entire sixty-year period of time. Two of the characters are based on "real" people (movie star Clara Bow and labor balladeer Ella May Wiggins). The first act primarily takes place in 1990, the second act in 1929, and the third act again in 1990. Letters serve as a bridge between all the time periods.**