

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ossie Davis

PERSON

Davis, Ossie

Alternative Names: Ossie Davis;

Life Dates: December 18, 1917-February 4, 2005

Place of Birth: Cogdell, Georgia, USA

Work: New Rochelle, New York

Occupations: Actor

Biographical Note

Writer, director, actor, and producer Ossie Davis established a phenomenal career, remaining throughout a strong voice for artists' rights, human dignity, and social justice.

Davis was born on December 18, 1917 in Cogdell, Georgia to loving parents and a supportive extended family. Graduating in the top five percent of his class with an already-burgeoning interest in theater, Davis had to earn enough money before venturing on to college. A year after graduation, with his savings in tow, Davis hitchhiked from Georgia to Washington, D.C. to live with his aunts. There, he received the National Youth Administration scholarship and enrolled at Howard University in the fall of 1935.

At Howard, Davis would find a nurturing environment to cultivate both his ideas and his talents. Impatient to try his luck on the actual stage, Davis left Howard for New York City. It was in Harlem in 1939 that he became involved with the Rose McClendon Players.

Davis made his Broadway debut in 1946 in *Jeb*, where he met his wife and fellow actress, Ruby Dee. Davis went on to perform in many Broadway productions, including *Anna Lucasta*, *The Wisteria Trees*, *Green Pastures*, *Jamaica*, *Ballad for Bimshire*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Zulu and the Zayda*, and the stage version of *I'm Not Rappaport*. In 1961, he wrote and starred in the critically acclaimed *Purlie Victorious*. Davis was inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame in 1994.

Davis wrote and directed numerous films, including *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Countdown at Kusini* (co-produced with his wife), the first American feature film shot entirely in Africa by black professionals. He later appeared in the films *Dr. Dolittle*, *Get*

on the Bus, and I'm Not Rappaport.

Davis was a leading activist in the civil rights era of the 1960s. He joined Martin Luther King, Jr., in the crusade for jobs and freedom and to help raise money for the Freedom Riders. He eulogized both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X at their funerals and remained an activist throughout his life.

Davis received innumerable honors and citations, including the Hall of Fame Award for Outstanding Artistic Achievement in 1989; the U.S. National Medal for the Arts in 1995; the New York Urban League Frederick Douglas Award; NAACP Image Award; and the Screen Actor's Guild Lifetime Achievement Award in 2001. He enjoyed a long and luminous career in entertainment along with his wife and fellow performer, stage and screen collaborator, and political activist, Ruby Dee. They published a joint autobiography, *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together*, in 1998.

Ossie Davis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on March 9, 2001.

Davis passed away on February 4, 2005 at the age of 87.

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