

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ossie Davis

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Davis, Ossie |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ossie Davis, |
| Dates: | March 9, 2001 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2001 |
| Physical Description: | 3 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:25:54). |
| Abstract: | Film director, screenwriter, stage actor, and film actor Ossie Davis (1917 - 2005) established a phenomenal career, remaining throughout a strong voice for artists' rights, human dignity, and social justice. Davis appeared in countless theatrical performances and feature length films and 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.' Davis was a passionate activist throughout his life, and had the honor to eulogize both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X at their funerals. Davis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 9, 2001, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2001_026 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ossie Davis was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 9, 2001, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 3 Betacame SP videocassettes. Film director, screenwriter, stage actor, and film actor Ossie Davis (1917 - 2005) established a phenomenal career, remaining throughout a strong voice for artists' rights, human dignity, and social justice. Davis appeared in countless theatrical performances and feature length films and 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.'* Davis was a passionate activist throughout his life, and had the honor to eulogize both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X at their funerals.

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®.

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.

Controlled Access Terms

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

Persons:

- Davis, Ossie
- Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)
- Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
- Davis, Ossie--Interviews

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- African American actors--Interviews.
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- African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews.
-
- African American theater.
-
- Country life--United States--Anecdotes.
-
- Georgia--Social Life and customs.
-
- African Americans--Segregation--Georgia.
-
- African Americans in motion pictures--History.
-
- Racism in motion pictures.
-
- Segregation in education--Georgia.
-
- Dee, Ruby.
-
- Anti-communist movements--United States--History--20th century.
-
- McCarthy, Joseph,--1908-1957.
-
- Robeson, Paul,--1898-1976.
-
- African Americans in literature.
-

Organizations:

- HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Actor

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Ossie Davis, March 9, 2001. 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).

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.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Ossie Davis, Section A2001_026_001_001, TRT: 0:29:37 ?

Actor and activist Ossie Davis shares memories of his childhood in southern Georgia during the 1920s. He recounts a near-idyllic rural childhood with memories of the swimming hole and "borrowing" fruit from neighbors' orchards -- but also fear of the church bell that was tolled for a death and heralded the creaking wagon of the undertaker. He describes his segregated African American community as a friendly enclave, but surrounded by a hostile white world, and his childhood was punctuated by incidents of racism and cruel

treatment by whites. He sometimes saw movies from the segregated balcony, but the only black characters he saw onscreen were clowns or buffoons. Davis sees himself as having been a "dreamy" youth, who loved reading and imagining. He feels fortunate that his segregated school put an emphasis on African American history and authors so that he grew up with an awareness of these things. Another advantage in his strictly segregated town was that he was able to see black people in positions of authority and respect, as doctors, dentists, preachers, and teachers. Davis also talks about the importance of the church, the center of the community.

African American actors--Interviews.

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews.

African American theater.

Country life--United States--Anecdotes.

Georgia--Social Life and customs.

African Americans--Segregation--Georgia.

African Americans in motion pictures--History.

Racism in motion pictures.

Segregation in education--Georgia.

Dee, Ruby.

Anti-communist movements--United States--History--20th century.

McCarthy, Joseph, 1908-1957.

Robeson, Paul, 1898-1976.

African Americans in literature.

Video Oral History Interview with Ossie Davis, Section A2001_026_001_002, TRT: 0:29:55 ?

Actor and activist Ossie Davis recalls his high school years in Waycross, Georgia at the all black Center High. He describes two of his early mentors -- chemistry teacher Lucius Jackson and English teacher Wilhelmina Gaines, who taught him to love language. He wrote his first play and put it on with his classmates in school. Davis reveals more about his exceptional father, an ex-convict, self-taught railroad engineer, who also used knowledge of herbal remedies passed down to him to create his own medicines and eventually had his own herbal pharmacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Ossie Davis, Section A2001_026_001_003, TRT: 0:26:22 ?

Actor and activist Ossie Davis tells about meeting actress Ruby Dee and getting to know each other during the national tour of the play Anna Lucasta and back in New York when they were again cast together. He tells about their marriage in 1948 and their life and work during the early years of their marriage -- and their experiences during the McCarthy era when, as friends and supporters of Paul Robeson, Davis and Dee and many other colleagues and friends faced investigation and persecution in the witch-hunt for communist sympathizers. Asked about his legacy, Davis says he prefers not to encumber future generations with a heavy legacy and urges that they instead look forward; but he would like to be known as a lover of mankind and creative spirit. He is at peace with his view of his own very small temporal role in the "current of existence." Ossie Davis quotes W.E.B. DuBois on "life lit by some large vision of goodness, beauty, and truth" and says he hopes black people will participate in this vision.