

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Douglas Turner Ward

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Ward, Douglas Turner
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward,
Dates:	April 28, 2010, June 10, 2005, November 29, 2006 and September 21, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2005, 2006 and 2010
Physical Description:	19 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (9:06:06).
Abstract:	Playwright, stage actor, and stage director Douglas Turner Ward (1930 - 2021) was a Tony award-winning thespian and the founder of the Negro Ensemble Company. Ward was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 28, 2010, June 10, 2005, November 29, 2006 and September 21, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_135
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Negro Ensemble Company co-founder, actor, director, and playwright Douglas Turner Ward was born Roosevelt Ward, Jr. on May 5, 1930, in Burnside, Louisiana. Ward was a descendant of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, founder of the Ku Klux Klan; his great, great, great-grandmother, Elnora, owned as a slave by Forrest, bore a child with him. Ward's parents, Roosevelt Ward and Dorothy Short Ward were field hands, but they owned their own tailoring business. Raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, and attending Xavier Prep High School, Ward graduated in 1946 at the age of sixteen. Ward entered Wilberforce University in 1946, where he performed in two plays, *Thunder Rock* and *A Shot In The Dark*, and discovered his ambition to be a sportswriter. When Wilberforce began to lose its accreditation in 1948, Ward transferred to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he played football in his freshman year; he would later quit the football team. In 1949, Ward decided that he wanted to leave college altogether; at the age of nineteen, he went to New York City.

In New York Ward became politically involved and worked as a journalist. Ward eventually decided to become a playwright and studied at the Paul Mann Workshop in New York City. In 1956, Ward began his off-Broadway career as an actor in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*; he went on to perform and understudy for a part in *A Raisin In The Sun*. In 1965, Ward, Robert Hooks, and Gerald Krone formed the Negro Ensemble Company; he made his playwriting debut that same year with the oft produced *Happy Ending/Day of Absence*. In 1967, the Negro Ensemble Company was officially opened with Ward serving as artistic director; some of its notable productions include *A Soldier's Play* and *The River Niger*, which became the company's first play to go to Broadway. *The River Niger* eventually won a Tony Award for Best Play. Ward went on to write other plays, including *The Reckoning* and *Brotherhood*.

As a result of Ward and his colleagues' hard work, the Negro Ensemble Company went on to produce more than two hundred plays, and to become a place for Black actors to gain experience and prominence in the theatre. Some notable actors who have worked with the Negro Ensemble Company include Louis Gossett, Jr., Phylicia Rashad,

and Sherman Hemsley.

Douglas Turner Ward was interviewed by the *HistoryMakers* on April 28, 2010.

Ward passed away on February 20, 2021.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Douglas Turner Ward was conducted by Larry Crowe and Shawn Wilson on April 28, 2010, June 10, 2005, November 29, 2006 and September 21, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 19 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Playwright, stage actor, and stage director Douglas Turner Ward (1930 - 2021) was a Tony award-winning thespian and the founder of the Negro Ensemble Company.

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:

Ward, Douglas Turner

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Ward, Douglas Turner--Interviews

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews

African American dramatists--Interviews

African American actors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Negro Ensemble Company

Occupations:

Playwright

Actor

Director

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 Douglas Turner Ward, April 28, 2010, June 10, 2005, November 29, 2006 and September 21, 2006. 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 Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_001_001, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Douglas Turner Ward was born as Roosevelt Ward, Jr. on May 5, 1930 in Burnsville, Louisiana to Dorothy Short Ward and Roosevelt Ward, Sr. His maternal great-great-grandmother, Elnora, was a slave owned by Civil War general and Ku Klux Klan founder Nathan Bedford Forrest. She fled his Tennessee plantation after giving birth to Ward's great-grandmother, Dicie Forrest Short, and settled in Louisiana. Ward's great-grandfather, Isaac Short, also the son of a slave-owner, refused to use his father's surname and adopted his own. Short was a political leader in Burnsville before the Knights of the Camellias rose to power and drove his family to New Orleans. Most of the family remained in New Orleans, but Ward's maternal grandfather, Joseph Short, returned to Burnsville and married Ward's grandmother. Ward heard much of his family history as a child and researched it as an adult. Ward later changed his name in homage to Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass and to distance his artistic career from his political one.

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews.

African American dramatists--Interviews.

African American actors--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_001_002, TRT: 0:29:53 ?

Douglas Turner Ward's maternal grandmother grew up in the Burnside, Louisiana area. She sent Ward's mother, Dorothy Short Ward, to school in New Orleans, but she left after middle school to work in the rice and cane fields. Ward's paternal great-grandparents lived in St. Francisville, Louisiana, where his part Native American great-grandmother was known as a healer. Ward's father, Roosevelt Ward, Sr., was born to Virginia Edmond Ward and James Ward around 1906 in St. Francisville, but he grew up in Burnside. Due to Ward's grandmother's frequent conflicts with her bosses, his father's family had moved around Louisiana to find work. As a teenager, Ward appreciated the Native American traditions in Mardi Gras parades as he felt the Zulu costumes were stereotypical and derisive. During the final years of his father's life, Ward asked him as much as possible about their family history. Ward also describes Louisiana history.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_001_003, TRT:

0:29:18 ?

Douglas Turner Ward's parents were initially forbidden to date by Ward's maternal grandfather. They continued meeting anyway, so his grandfather grudgingly approved their marriage and later appreciated Ward's father. Disliking farm work, Ward's father was a bootlegger in Louisiana. The authorities were unable to catch him because Ward's mother was actually making the whiskey. Ward was an only child but grew up with aunts and uncles who were close in age. As a child, he frequently heard ghost stories taken as fact. Because his family grew food for white people in the area, they often cooked dishes not considered traditional soul food. Ward read everything he could, and his preoccupation with books led to him being easily distracted. He was deeply influenced by Richard Wright. At Xavier University Preparatory School, his copy of the erotic novel 'Aphrodite' by Pierre Louys was confiscated by a nun. Ward expected to be punished but never was, leading him to speculate that the teacher kept the book for herself.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_001_004, TRT: 0:29:46 ?

Douglas Turner Ward attended a small school in Kenner, Louisiana when he was six years old. At the age of eight, Ward moved with his family to New Orleans and finished grades three to seven in two years. Richard Wright's 'Black Boy' and James Farrell's 'Studs Lonigan' impacted Ward with their realism and sympathetic rendering of relatable characters. Ward received magazines and other books from his maternal great-grandfather and other family members. He was also inspired by African American doctors and lawyers he encountered, the New Orleans Longshoremen's Union, which paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement, and Joe Louis' boxing victories. At age eleven, he entered Xavier University Preparatory School and graduated at age sixteen. His mother made him attend Sunday school as a child, but he could choose whether to attend the regular service. His reading and intellectualism caused him to question the church's insulation from social issues and the violence he witnessed.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_001_005, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

Douglas Turner Ward watched movies that depicted inequality, and this planted the seeds for his political consciousness. Unhappy with justice being preached but not enacted, he became agnostic. He did not participate in many activities at Xavier University Preparatory High School, although he did perform in the chorus for 'The Pirates of Penzance.' He graduated in 1946, having stayed an extra year to play football. Since the Big Ten Conference was more integrated than others, he wanted to attend the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. However, a policy restricting admission to in-state applicants kept Ward from his dream school. After searching for coed historically black colleges in the North, Ward chose Wilberforce University in Ohio. At Wilberforce, Ward was surprised to encounter segregation in the surrounding area, but appreciated President Charles H. Wesley's inclusion of African American courses and history. As a sixteen-year-old freshman, he learned to act more mature than his age.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_001_006, TRT: 0:28:39 ?

Douglas Turner Ward enjoyed his classes at Wilberforce University in Ohio, and he matured from living around older college students, many of whom attended on the G.I. Bill. He joined the Wilberforce Players, which included future opera

singer Leontyne Price, and acted in two plays. During his first year, conflict between President Charles H. Wesley, the state and the African Methodist Episcopal bishops led to the school splitting in two, and Ward spent the second half of his freshman year at Central College of Education and Industrial Arts at Wilberforce. Ward then transferred to the University of Michigan despite lacking enough money to pay for it. Although he played on the freshman team, he realized he could not pursue a football career. Initially interested in sports writing, he became radicalized after meeting a left-wing activist and reading Karl Marx. His exposure to world literature at the university library awakened his creative interests. After one year, he dropped out and moved to New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_002_007, TRT: 0:29:13 ?

Douglas Turner Ward, realizing that his athletic skills were not competitive enough for the University of Michigan football team, instead focused on politics. He was inspired by Karl Marx's 'The Communist Manifesto' and radicals like James Jackson, Jr., who organized tobacco workers in Virginia. Ward continued reading other communist and socialist writers. Studying world literature at the university library expanded his world view and his creative interests. Ward's journalistic ambitions waned as he grew less interested in sports and more interested in literature and politics. He was disappointed when his sports hero, University of Michigan all-American football player Julius Franks, Jr., disagreed with him about picketing to protest segregation. Ward left the University of Michigan to continue his education independently. He worked on the Henry Wallace 1948 presidential campaign in Detroit, Michigan. While visiting his family in Louisiana, he registered for the draft before moving to New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_002_008, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Douglas Turner Ward promoted the presidential campaign of Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace with his friend, playwright Lorraine Hansberry while living in Harlem, New York City. The campaign was unsuccessful as President Harry S. Truman adopted much of the civil rights platform that made Wallace initially popular. Ward continued advancing his political ideals as a socialist, founding the Labor Youth League in New York State in 1949. Writing about his experience as a representative at the World Youth Congress in Hungary that same year led to the publication of his first pamphlet, 'Toward Bright Tomorrows: World Youth Unites for Peace and Freedom.' Ward enjoyed Harlem's vibrant nightlife during his time as a street-corner speaker for the leftist movement. In reflecting upon the African American community's acceptance of radical political voices, Ward notes how this platform leads to black radicals being viewed as a greater threat to the power structure. In 1949, Ward was arrested for draft evasion.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_002_009, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Douglas Turner Ward began writing creatively during his political career in New York. He was jailed in New Orleans, Louisiana after his arrest for draft evasion in 1949. While released on bail, he was forced to stay in the city until 1953 when the U.S. Supreme Court exonerated him by tossing out his case. In New Orleans, Ward wrote his first major play, a four-act entitled 'The Trial of Willie McGee,' based on the infamous case of an African American man accused of rape and executed in 1945. Sharing his play with Lorraine Hansberry and Lonne Elder III on his return to New York City inspired their playwriting. Despite being

criticized by both the Harlem Writer's Guild and his political comrades, Ward decided to remain true to his artistic vision. After giving up his political organizing, Ward wrote for 'The Daily Worker' while taking acting classes with Paul Mann. Both developed his playwriting skills.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_002_010, TRT: 0:30:41 ?

Douglas Turner Ward left 'The Daily Worker' in the wake of internal conflicts in the Communist Party after Joseph Stalin's death. Alienated from the orthodoxy of the Party, Ward turned to his acting career instead. His classes at Paul Mann's Actors Workshop and a friendship with stage manager Philip Meister led to his first professional acting role as understudy to Robert Earl Jones in 'The Iceman Cometh' at Circle in the Square Theatre in New York City. When Jones was fired for missing shows, Ward took over the role. He appeared in 'Lost in the Stars' with HistoryMaker Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr. and Godfrey Cambridge. Lorraine Hansberry offered Ward an audition for 'A Raisin in the Sun,' and he was cast as Sidney Poitier's understudy for the role of Walter Lee and as understudy for Lonne Elder III's Bobo. Ward describes how the white audience's projection of racial stereotypes onto the characters affected the reception of the show.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_002_011, TRT: 0:29:56 ?

Douglas Turner Ward first saw Sidney Poitier and Frank Silvera in the 1951 production of 'Longitude 49.' Ward and nineteen other actors formed the Manhattan Arts Club to advocate for better roles and productions. In 1959, Ward was in the first production of 'A Raisin in the Sun' directed by HistoryMaker Lloyd Richards. The play was not expected to be a commercial success, since it was drawing mainly on Poitier's popularity. The original cast included HistoryMakers Ruby Dee and Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr., as well as Claudia McNeil, Diana Sands, Glynn Turman, and Lonne Elder III, many of whom came from Paul Mann Actor's Workshop. During rehearsal, Cynthia Belgrave had to leave after her part was cut. After its off-Broadway opening, the play ran in New Haven, Connecticut, Chicago, Illinois, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. While in Connecticut, Ward advised Hansberry to remove extra lines added for Poitier. Ward reflects upon the growing presence of African American actors during the postwar period.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_003_012, TRT: 0:30:51 ?

Douglas Turner Ward and his fellow Manhattan Arts Theater members Diana Sands, Beah Richards, Frances Foster, and HistoryMaker Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr. traveled with 'A Raisin in the Sun.' While they were on tour, some of the club members in New York City attempted to put on an ambitious play, which lost money, and the group disbanded. The original cast of 'A Raisin in the Sun' hoped the play would run long enough for them to collect unemployment, and were surprised by its critical success. Ward was not concerned with the play appearing on Broadway since his objective was not entertaining a mainstream audience. After Sidney Poitier left the production in 1961, HistoryMaker Ossie Davis was hired to play the role of Walter Lee Younger although Ward had been the understudy. Ward did not mind, however, believing himself to be too young. Once Davis left, Ward was passed over again, this time for Elwood Smith whom Ward thought was perfect for the role.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_003_013, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

Douglas Turner Ward continued as an understudy in 'A Raisin in the Sun' in 1961. Claudia McNeil and Diana Sands joined the touring production, although the souring of their earlier friendship caused tension. Ward disliked when the director, HistoryMaker Lloyd Richards, lectured the cast about representing the race. Elwood Smith had a drinking problem that Ward, HistoryMaker Robert Hooks, and Lonnie Elder III tried to alleviate. Trying to temper Smith's consumption, Ward drank with him. The plan backfired when Ward wound up drunk and Smith refused to leave his room, which meant Ward, as understudy, had to go onstage. After returning to New York City in 1962, Ward performed in Jean Genet's 'The Blacks' when HistoryMaker Roscoe Lee Brown left the production for three months. Ward performed in several roles while writing plays. Hooks' Group Theater Workshop students performed Ward's play, 'Happy Ending.' After New York Post critic Jerry Tallmer's glowing review, Hooks and Ward decided to produce it professionally.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_003_014, TRT: 0:30:29 ?

Douglas Turner Ward began writing 'Day of Absence' after visiting Montgomery, Alabama during the bus boycott and being struck by the absurdity of the empty buses continuing to operate normally. At his aunt's funeral, her white employer wept at the coffin, not realizing Ward's aunt was wearing one of her dresses. This inspired his play, 'Happy Ending.' His initial reaction to his aunt's sadness at their employers' divorce led to the creation of the play's militant character, Junie. Ward and HistoryMaker Robert Hooks raised ten thousand dollars to stage Ward's 'Happy Ending' and 'Day of Absence,' and Philip Meister helped them gain the remaining funds. Ward's aim was to attract a mostly African American audience. The show opened November 14, 1965 at St. Mark's Playhouse. The play received mixed reviews in New York newspapers, but word of mouth and several good magazine reviews grew the audience. Hooks black-centered Group Theater Workshop served as the precursor to the Negro Ensemble Company.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_004_015, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Douglas Turner Ward describes the legacy of 'The Blacks A Clown Show.' His work 'Day of Absence' developed from his interest in writing a Brechtian play about the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Since 'Day of Absence' was too short to run by itself, he wrote 'Happy Ending' as a companion piece and to portray his aunt's relationships to their white employers honestly. Some African American viewers worried that he was sharing private information with a white audience, but appreciation for the play's humor helped defuse these concerns. In August 1966, Ward's 'American Theater or Whites Only?' was published in The New York Times and became the manifesto for the founding of the Negro Ensemble Company, which he formed with HistoryMaker Robert Hooks. While working with the NEC and raising young children, Ward spent summers at Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts so that he could be with his family and write. In the early 1970s, Ward began working on his trilogy of plays about the Haitian Revolution.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_004_016, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Douglas Turner Ward's editorial 'American Theater: For Whites Only?' in The New York Times served as a manifesto for the Negro Ensemble Company. As artistic director, Ward selected which plays the company would perform from the many submissions he received from across the country. He remembers

choosing Ray McIver's 'God is a (Guess What?).' Ward opted for widely varying plays, and many differed greatly from his satirical style. Ward's decision to address an African American audience in his writing gave him the artistic freedom not to explain things overtly or teach the audience. The Negro Ensemble Company performed 'The Great MacDaddy' by Ward's friend HistoryMaker Paul Carter Harrison. In describing Harrison's work, Ward notes his appreciation for Harrison's theatrical writing while remaining skeptical of his academic theories. The NEC also performed Lonne Elder III's 'Ceremonies in Dark Old Men,' 'Ododo' and 'The River Niger' by Joseph A. Walker, the latter of which provided its first commercial success.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_004_017, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Douglas Turner Ward, HistoryMaker Robert Hooks and Gerald Krone decided not to take Lonne Elder III's 'Ceremonies in Dark Old Men' to Broadway, instead focusing on building up the Negro Ensemble Company as a permanent fixture less concerned with hits than with quality. In its sixth season, the company was established enough to bring 'The River Niger' to Broadway, which garnered financial support for the NEC. The play stayed on Broadway for a year and a half with glowing reviews, but it exhausted its African American audience and never attracted the white audience needed to keep it running longer. Ward wanted the company to earn enough to sustain itself, but was not concerned with excess profit. Ward also describes AUDELCO's work and how NEC preceded it in developing techniques for audience outreach, his frustration with the lack of national policy for arts funding and the relatively short runs of shows like 'Fences' due to the limited number of white people willing to attend.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_004_018, TRT: 0:22:24 ?

Douglas Turner Ward wanted the Negro Ensemble Company to sustain its training program and productions. After thirty years, the company ran into financial problems due to new laws about nonprofit financing from the Reagan administration. The NEC lacked access to private funds due to majority-white companies' and patrons' disinterest, and faced fundraising obstacles because the small number of wealthy African Americans tended to support social or educational causes rather than the arts. Ward subsequently selected low cost productions. The final major production of the NEC was Charles Fuller's 'WE' series. The Internal Revenue Service's imposition of stricter standards finally ended the company's production, although it still existed on paper at the time of the interview. While not working for the NEC, Ward focused on his Haitian trilogy, three plays about major figures in the country's fight for independence. Ward explains his interest in and identification with the Haitian general Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

Video Oral History Interview with Douglas Turner Ward, Section A2005_135_004_019, TRT: 0:18:15 ?

Douglas Turner Ward studied the Haitian Revolution extensively to write his three plays comprising the Haitian trilogy. In describing how Haiti never reached its potential after independence, he notes how the class divisions between blacks and mulattos prevented unity and how the debt extracted by the French stymied economic development. Ward talks about his two children and the friendly relationship he maintains with his ex-wife. He concludes by reflecting upon his life, his legacy, his hopes and concerns for the African American community, and how he would like to be remembered.