

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Suzan-Lori Parks

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: | Parks, Suzan-Lori |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks, |
| Dates: | November 21, 2006 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2006 |
| Physical Description: | 4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:55:55). |
| Abstract: | Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks (1963 -) is the first African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for drama for her play, <i>Topdog/Underdog</i> . Parks was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 21, 2006, in Venice Beach, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2006_148 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks was born on May 10, 1963, in Fort Knox, Kentucky, to Francis McMillian Parks and Donald Parks, a colonel in the United States Army. As the child of a military officer, Parks spent some of her youth in German schools while her father was stationed in Europe. She attended college at Mount Holyoke College and studied fiction writing with James Baldwin, who recommended that she focus on writing for the theater. Parks began studying such playwrights as Ntozake Shange and Adrienne Kennedy, and she won honors for her experimental work *The Sinner's Place*. Several of her early plays often addressed issues of race.

After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Mount Holyoke College with her B.A. degree in English and German literature in 1985, Parks moved to London, where she began her career as a playwright. In 1987, her script *Betting on the Dust Commander* was produced in New York, and two years later, her play *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* was awarded an Obie Award for the best Off-Broadway play of 1989. In 1990, she also published *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole World*. Parks' script for *The American Play* was produced in 1994; it starred an Abraham Lincoln-obsessed character who works in a carnival dressed in whiteface.

In 2001, Parks' play *Topdog/Underdog* was produced to critical acclaim. It followed the story of two brothers and their growing tension, and starred Jeffrey Wright and Don Cheadle (who would be replaced by Mos Def when the play hit Broadway). Parks was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for drama, the first African American woman to do so. The following year, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation awarded her a MacArthur Fellowship of \$500,000, known as the "genius grant." During 2003, Parks published her first novel, *Getting Mother's Body*, an experimental retelling of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Parks also wrote screenplays for 1990's *Anemone Meand* 1996's *Girl 6*, directed by Spike Lee, as well as the radio plays "Pickling," "Third Kingdom" and "Locomotive".

Parks and her husband, blues musician Paul Oscher, live in Venice Beach, California. She works as a director at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia.

Suzan-Lori Parks was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on November 21, 2006.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Suzan-Lori Parks was conducted by Paul Brock on November 21, 2006, in Venice Beach, California, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks (1963 -) is the first African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for drama for her play, Topdog/Underdog.

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:

Parks, Suzan-Lori

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Parks, Suzan-Lori--Interviews

African American women dramatists--Interviews

African American women novelists--Interviews

African American women screenwriters--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Playwright

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 Suzan-Lori Parks, November 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 Suzan-Lori Parks, Section A2006_148_001_001, TRT: 0:28:00
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Suzan-Lori Parks was born on May 10, 1963 to Francis Ammon (nee McMillian) and Donald Roderick Parks, in Fort Knox, Kentucky. She has one older sister, Stephanie Ellen Parks, born on August 26, 1960 and one younger brother, Donald Roderick Parks ("Buddy"), who was born on March 18, 1965. Parks' mother Francis Ammon (nee McMillian) Parks was born on March 29, 1937 in Greenville, Texas. On her mother's side, Parks can trace her lineage back to her great-great grandmother, a Seminole Indian woman that everyone used to call "Granny". Parks' father, Donald Roderick Parks was born on May 31, 1934 and he passed away on June 20, 2004. Donald spent his career in the U.S. Army; he served two tours in Vietnam. On her father's side, Parks has fond memories of her grandmother and grandfather, who lived in Chicago, Illinois.

African American families--Texas.

Families of military personnel.

Video Oral History Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks, Section A2006_148_001_002, TRT: 0:29:00
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Suzan-Lori Parks' maternal grandmother, Kathleen, came from a wealthy family in Odessa, Texas. Kathleen's first husband, Julia and her brother, Michael's father, Walter McMillian left his family for an unsuccessful career in Hollywood. Kathleen went on to marry Albert Whitlock, move to Philadelphia, and have four daughters with him. Their names in order from oldest to youngest are Kathleen Whitlock Anderson, Maryellen Whitlock Hicks, Deborah Carol Whitlock Peoples, and Natalie (Cookie) Whitlock. In 1952, Julia attended a junior college in Texas, subsequently transferring to Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she met Parks' father, Donald. Julia and Donald courted throughout college, and while Donald was fighting in the Korean War. When Donald came home, the two were married and moved to Donald's post in Germany. The couple moved back to the United States when their first daughter, Stephanie was born in Fort Knox, Kentucky.

African American fathers.

African American soldiers--Korea.

Southern University and A & M College.

Delta Sigma Theta Public Service Sorority.

Video Oral History Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks, Section A2006_148_001_003, TRT: 0:29:30
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Suzan-Lori Parks moved around with her military family for the majority of her scholastic career. She became fluent in German when she attended a middle school in Germany. Parks spent the majority of her high school years in Aberdeen, Maryland and graduated from John Carroll School, in 1981. Throughout their travels, Parks' mother managed to earn a master's degree in sociology from North Carolina Agriculture and Technical University and her father earned his master's degree in education from the University of Vermont. In the tumultuous times that Parks grew up in, she is proud that her parents were able to instill a sense of pride and awareness of black culture, in she and her siblings.

African American social life and customs.

Families of military personnel.

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University.

University of Vermont.

Video Oral History Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks, Section A2006_148_001_004, TRT: 0:29:25
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Suzan Lori-Parks enjoyed reading and writing as a young child in Burlington, Vermont, but she never assumed that she would be a Pulitzer Prize winning playwright. In high school at the John Carroll High school in Aberdeen, Maryland she was discouraged from writing by an English literature teacher, because of her poor spelling. It was not until she arrived at Mount Holyoke College, that she began writing stories in earnest. At this point, Parks' writing began to take on a spiritual quality, she felt compelled to produce materials that could be experienced as a manifestation of a bigger spiritual presence. These notions are affirmed from the positive feedback that she received on the set of "Their Eyes were watching God" and after performances of "365 Plays in 365 Days".

Mount Holyoke College.

Spirituality.

African American social life and customs.

African American children—Vermont--Burlington.

African American high school student--Maryland.