

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Kenny Leon

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Leon, Kenny
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Kenny Leon,
Dates:	September 9, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:07:20).
Abstract:	Stage director and theater chief executive Kenny Leon (1956 -) was the artistic director of Atlanta's Alliance Theatre and the founder of the True Colors Theatre Company. Leon's directorial achievements included the Broadway revival of Lorraine Hansberry's <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> ; productions of an assortment of August Wilson's plays; and the world premiere of Toni Morrison's first opera, <i>Margaret Garner</i> . Leon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 9, 2007, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_250
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Theatrical and television director and actor Kenny Leon was born Kenneth Leroy Leon on February 10, 1956, in Tallahassee, Florida, to Annie Ruth and Leroy Leon. The oldest of five siblings, Leon's family moved to St. Petersburg, Florida, when he was nine years old. At Northeast High School in St. Petersburg, Leon got involved in the federal government's Upward Bound Program which encouraged him to pursue his dream of becoming a lawyer. In 1978, Leon graduated from Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia, with his B.A. degree in political science. He attended Southwestern University School of Law in Los Angeles for a brief period before returning to Atlanta.

In 1979, Leon returned to Atlanta to try his hand at theater. He soon became a member of the Academy Theater in Atlanta where he worked as an actor and director. Often times, Leon would run outreach programs at prisons and schools; one such play was performed entirely by the homeless. All of the profits from the homeless-cast play were contributed to local homeless shelters. In 1988, after years of touring and directing across the country, Leon was offered a job as associate artistic director at the Alliance Theater in Atlanta. By 1990, he was the senior artistic director and would lead the company for the next ten years. By selecting a wide range of multicultural plays for the theater, Leon increased the minority attendance and the national reputation of the Alliance, and quintupled the endowment.

In 2002, after leaving the Alliance, Leon founded his own theater company in Atlanta, the True Colors Theater Company, which focused on promulgating and preserving Negro-American theatrical classics. Leon has continued to make waves in the theater world outside of Atlanta. In 2004, he directed his first Broadway play, reviving Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* for which he cast hip hop mogul, Sean Combs in the role of Walter Lee Younger; in 2007, Leon directed a television adaptation of the play. Between 2004 and 2007, Leon directed the world and Broadway premieres of August Wilson's final two plays, *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf*; he also

directed the world premiere of Toni Morrison's first opera, *Margaret Garner*. While he continues to ensure the success of *True Colors*, Leon plans to put together all of August Wilson's ten plays at the Kennedy Center as a tribute to the deceased playwright.

Leon was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 9, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Kenny Leon was conducted by Denise Gines on September 9, 2007, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Stage director and theater chief executive Kenny Leon (1956 -) was the artistic director of Atlanta's Alliance Theatre and the founder of the True Colors Theatre Company. Leon's directorial achievements included the Broadway revival of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*; productions of an assortment of August Wilson's plays; and the world premiere of Toni Morrison's first opera, *Margaret Garner*.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

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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:

Leon, Kenny

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Leon, Kenny--Interviews

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews

African American television producers and directors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Stage Director

Theater Chief Executive

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 Kenny Leon, September 9, 2007. 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 Kenny Leon, Section A2007_250_001_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Kenny Leon was born on February 10, 1956 in Tallahassee, Florida to Annie Wilson Holtzclaw and Leroy Leon. His mother grew up on a farm in Tallahassee with twelve siblings, and his father was also born in Tallahassee to sharecroppers Alice Leon and Zack Leon. As Leon's mother was fifteen years old at the time of his birth, he was raised by his maternal grandmother, Mamie Wilson, on the family farm. He began his education at the one-room Rainey Elementary School. At nine years old, Leon joined his mother; stepfather, Johnnie Holtzclaw; and siblings, Jackie Leon Henderson and Antonio Leon, in St. Petersburg, Florida, where he attended Campbell Park Elementary School. Leon went on to become student council president at Northeast High School, and studied drama through the Upward Bound program, where he met actress Angela Bassett. He also acted in Christmas and Easter plays at the Macedonia Freewill Baptist Church. His extracurricular activities included playing sports, and studying the violin.

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews.

African American television producers and directors--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Kenny Leon, Section A2007_250_001_002, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Kenny Leon matriculated at Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia, where he majored in political science and minored in theater. He also met actor Samuel L. Jackson, filmmaker Spike Lee, Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson and Congressman John Lewis. Upon graduating in 1978, he enrolled at Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles, California. After one year, Leon returned to Atlanta, and joined the Academy Theatre, where he acted in 'Richard III' and 'The Queen and the Rebels,' and made his directorial debut with 'The Wishing Place.' He also established an acting program for the homeless with playwright Barbara Lebow. Leon worked at the Academy Theatre for nine years, and then left Atlanta to complete a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship at Baltimore Center Stage in Maryland and the San Jose Repertory Theatre in California. In 1990, he was hired as the associate artistic director of the Alliance Theatre, where he directed August Wilson's 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone.'

Video Oral History Interview with Kenny Leon, Section A2007_250_001_003, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Kenny Leon diversified the staff and programming of the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia while serving as the associate artistic director. During his tenure, he produced the musical 'Aida,' 'The Last Night of Ballyhoo' by Alfred Uhry and 'Flyin' West' by Pearl Cleage. Leon left the Alliance Theatre in 2001 to found the True Colors Theatre Company with the encouragement of Riley K. Temple, who was the head of the Arena Stage board in Washington, D.C., and theater producer Christopher B. Manos. He went on to direct Lorraine Hansberry's 'A Raisin in the Sun' on Broadway. First, he cast Phylicia Rashad, whom he had previously directed in 'Blues for an Alabama Sky' and 'Medea,' in the role of Lena Younger. He then chose Sanaa Lathan as Beneatha Younger, and Audra McDonald as Ruth Younger. Leon was initially hesitant to accept acting coach Susan Batson's suggestion to cast rap mogul P. Diddy as Walter Lee Younger, but was soon impressed by his commitment to the role. Leon also

describes his directorial style.

Video Oral History Interview with Kenny Leon, Section A2007_250_001_004, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Kenny Leon acted in Woodie King, Jr.'s production of 'A Raisin in the Sun,' which starred Esther Rolle, before directing the play himself on Broadway. Leon also directed the television adaptation with Phylicia Rashad, P. Diddy, Sanaa Lathan and Audra McDonald reprising their roles. In 2004, August Wilson invited Leon, who was directing a play in Washington, D.C., to also direct 'Gem of the Ocean' in Boston, Massachusetts after the previous director, Marion McClinton, fell ill. Leon agreed as a favor to Wilson, and travelled daily between Washington, D.C. and Boston. Leon went on to direct the opera 'Margaret Garner,' starring Denyce Graves; Wilson's final play, 'Radio Golf'; and 'The Wiz.' He received Tony Award nominations for 'A Raisin in the Sun,' 'Gem of the Ocean' and 'Radio Golf.' Leon admired playwrights such as Lonne Elder III, Tennessee Williams and Pearl Cleage. He describes 'Radio Golf,' and his mission to produce diverse plays through the True Colors Theatre Company.

Video Oral History Interview with Kenny Leon, Section A2007_250_001_005, TRT: 0:11:00 ?

Kenny Leon shares his concern that young black theater students will not learn about the legacy of African American playwrights like Lloyd Richards, August Wilson and Woodie King, Jr. He also reflects upon his life and legacy, and describes his plans for the future. Leon concludes the interview by sharing a message to future generations.