

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Vernell Lillie

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Lillie, Vernell A. (Vernell Audrey), 1931-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Vernell Lillie,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 15, 2008
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:24:00).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Stage director Vernell Lillie (1931 - 2020) was founder and artistic director of Kuntu Repertory Theatre, which produced drama that entertained while examining Black life from historical, social and political perspectives. She won the University of Pittsburgh Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award and the Outstanding Award for Women in the Arts from Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Lillie was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 15, 2008, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_108
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Founder and artistic director of Kuntu Repertory Theatre, Vernell Audrey Watson Lillie was born on May 11, 1931, in Hempstead, Texas. Lillie attended Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she earned her B.A. degree in speech and drama. In 1958, she completed a six year graduate study at Texas Southern University. She earned her M.A. degree in English from Carnegie Mellon University in 1971, and her D.A. degree in English from Carnegie Mellon University the following year.

In 1974, Lillie established the Kuntu Repertory Theatre with the intent to examine Black life from a sociopolitical-historical perspective. Lillie used drama to educate while entertaining. The theatre naturally developed into a supportive community for black writers, actors and artists. Since its establishment, the theatre has sponsored countless activities which highlight the African American community. Lillie has directed many productions including: *The Buffalo Soldiers Plus One*, *Little Willie Armstrong Jones* and *Whispers Want to Holler*.

Lillie has been the recipient of many prestigious awards including the University of Pittsburgh Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award; the Outstanding Award for Women in the Arts by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.; and the 2003 Career Achievement in Education Award from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

Lillie passed away on May 11, 2020.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Vernell Lillie was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 15, 2008, in

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Stage director Vernell Lillie (1931 - 2020) was founder and artistic director of Kuntu Repertory Theatre, which produced drama that entertained while examining Black life from historical, social and political perspectives. She won the University of Pittsburgh Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award and the Outstanding Award for Women in the Arts from Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

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## 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®.

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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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

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

### Persons:

Lillie, Vernell A. (Vernell Audrey), 1931-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Lillie, Vernell A. (Vernell Audrey), 1931- --Interviews

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African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews

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Women theatrical producers and directors--Interviews

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Acting teachers--Interviews

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# Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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# Occupations:

Theatrical Instructor

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# HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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# 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 Vernell Lillie, August 15, 2008. 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).

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# 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.

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# Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Vernell Lillie, Section A2008\_108\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:30 ?  
Vernell Lillie was born on May 11, 1931 in Hempstead, Texas to Lillie Benjamin Watson and Walter Watson. Lillie's maternal great-grandparents,

Cecilia Jackson and Robert Jackson, were prosperous landowners and farmers in the all-black community of Brazos Bottom in Bellville, Texas. When Lillie's mother was in high school, the bank in Bellville seized possession of a large portion of the family's land through falsified documents. Lillie's maternal family, including her grandmother, Julie Jackson Williams, spent the next few decades fighting for the return of the land. As a result, the family stressed the importance of education, and Lillie's mother attended Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College and Houston Colored Junior College. Lillie's paternal great-grandmother was the daughter of a Native American and Irish overseer. Her father was born on a Native American reservation in Keokuk Falls, Oklahoma, and moved to Hempstead, Texas when he was five years old.

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews.

Women theatrical producers and directors--Interviews.

Acting teachers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernell Lillie, Section A2008\_108\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Vernell Lillie's paternal great-grandmother, Ida Davis, migrated from Rich Square, North Carolina to Hempstead, Texas before settling in Keokuk Falls, Oklahoma. Lillie's paternal grandparents, Ella Sheridan Watson and Ferdinand Watson, met in Keokuk Falls, where Lillie's father, Walter Watson, was born. The family then returned to Hempstead when Lillie's father was five years old, and bought a forty-three acre farm. Lillie's parents met in Bellville, Texas and moved to Houston, Texas when Lillie was three years old. Her father worked as a farmer on his family's land, and operated his own business, Watson Funeral Home, as a funeral home director and licensed mortician. When the family moved to Houston, Texas, Watson worked for Hughes Tool Company while Lillie's mother, Lillie Benjamin Watson, found employment at Battelstein's Department Store. Lillie grew up in Houston's Fifth Ward, and visited her paternal grandparents in Hempstead during the summers.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernell Lillie, Section A2008\_108\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Vernell Lillie began her education at Crawford Elementary School in Houston, Texas, where she excelled in storytelling. The teachers at Crawford Elementary School also lived in the neighborhood, and closely monitored their students' progress throughout their academic career. Lillie then attended Houston's Phillis Wheatley High School, where she was actively involved in dramatic arts, band and oratorical contests through the University Interscholastic League at the University of Texas at Austin and the local chapter of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks of the World. Lillie's interest in the theater began in high school when she was cast as Becky Thatcher in a production of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.' During this time, there were several well-known educators working at Phillis Wheatley High School, including historian Benjamin A. Quarles, Principal John E. Codwell, Sr. and debate coach Ashton Olivier, who also mentored politician Barbara Jordan.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernell Lillie, Section A2008\_108\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Vernell Lillie attended Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston, Texas, where she participated in the theater club, the Sweethearts Club and oratorical contests like I Speak for Democracy. One year, Lillie became a city-wide finalist, and represented Houston's all-black schools in the speech competition. There, Lillie was separated from the white competitors, and withdrew from the competition in protest. Lillie joined the local chapter of the NAACP at fourteen years old, and was inspired by the civil rights activities led by NAACP organizers Christia V. Daniels Adair and Sid Hilliard, who was the uncle of psychology professor Asa Hilliard, III. Through her involvement with the NAACP and her speech courses

in high school, Lillie was able to attend the Sweatt v. Painter trial in 1950, where she admired Thurgood Marshall's stature and oratorical skills. She was mentored by drama teacher, Robert T. Holland, who encouraged her to study Voltaire and Jean Jacques Rousseau to improve her rhetorical talents.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernell Lillie, Section A2008\_108\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Vernell Lillie graduated from Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston, Texas in 1948 with the hopes of becoming a Broadway actress. She then matriculated at Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she was recruited to the theater department by playwrights Thomas D. Pawley, III and Thomas E. Poag. However, soon after her arrival, both professors left Dillard University, and she was instead taught by a French woman named Frances Perkins White. As one of only four theater majors in college, Lillie performed in numerous productions, but was never cast as the lead. After graduating in 1952, Lillie returned to Houston to develop adult and children's theater groups at the Julia C. Hester House. She also worked closely with the local chapter of Jack and Jill of America, Inc. In 1956, she left the Julia C. Hester House to replace her former drama teacher, Robert T. Holland, at Phillis Wheatley High School. There, Lillie produced her first African American play, Douglas Turner Ward's 'Day of Absence.'