

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Earl Jones

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Jones, James Earl
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Earl Jones,
Dates:	August 10, 2016 and August 31, 2016
Bulk Dates:	2016
Physical Description:	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:08:26).
Abstract:	Actor James Earl Jones (1931 -) appeared in numerous stage, television and film productions, including <i>The Blacks</i> , <i>Othello</i> , <i>The Great White Hope</i> , <i>Fences</i> , <i>Gabriel's Fire</i> , <i>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</i> , and <i>The Gin Game</i> . Jones also provided the voice for Darth Vader in <i>Star Wars</i> and Musafa in <i>The Lion King</i> . Jones was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 10, 2016 and August 31, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2016_007
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actor James Earl Jones was born on January 17, 1931 to Robert Earl Jones and Ruth Connolly in Arkabutla, Mississippi. When Jones was five years old, his family moved to Dublin, Michigan. He graduated from Dickson High School in Brethren, Michigan in 1949. In 1953, Jones participated in productions at Manistee Summer Theatre. After serving in the U.S. Army for two years, Jones received his B.A. degree from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1955.

Following graduation, Jones relocated to New York City where he studied acting at the American Theatre Wing. Jones' first speaking role on Broadway was as the valet in *Sunrise at Campobello* in 1958. Then, in 1960, Jones acted in the Shakespeare in Central Park production of *Henry V* while also playing the lead in the off-Broadway production of *The Pretender*. Geraldine Lust cast Jones in Jean Genet's *The Blacks* in the following year. In 1963, Jones made his feature film debut as Lt. Lothar Zogg in *Dr. Strangelove*, directed by Stanley Kubrick. In 1964, Joseph Papp cast Jones as Othello for the Shakespeare in Central Park production of *Othello*. Jones portrayed champion boxer Jack Jefferson in the play *The Great White Hope* in 1969, and again in the 1970 film adaptation. His leading film performances of the 1970s include *The Man* (1972), *Claudine* (1974), *The River Niger* (1975) and *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings* (1976). In 1974, Jones portrayed Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* on Broadway. Jones also voiced the iconic character Darth Vader in the 1977 movie *Star Wars*, returning to the role in the subsequent sequels, *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. Jones portrayed Troy Maxson in the original Broadway production of *Fences* in 1987. Two years later, he appeared in the movie *Field of Dreams*, and was cast as the lead character on the television show *Gabriel's Fire*. Jones provided the voice for Mufasa in the 1994 animated Disney film *The Lion King*. He returned to the Broadway stage in 2005, starring in *On Golden Pond*. He then appeared in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 2008, and acted in productions of *Driving Miss Daisy* alongside Vanessa Redgrave in London in 2011 and *Angela Lansbury* in Australia in 2013. He also appeared with Cicely Tyson in a 2015 revival of *The Gin Game*.

Jones won his first Tony Award in 1969 for *The Great White Hope*. He then received his second Tony Award for his portrayal of Troy Maxson in *Fences*. In 1991, Jones received Emmy Awards for his roles in *Gabriel's Fire* and *Heat Wave*. In recognition of his fifty plus years in acting, Jones received an Honorary Academy Award in 2011.

Jones has one child, Flynn Earl Jones, with his late wife, actress Cecilia Hart.

James Earl Jones was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 10, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Earl Jones was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on August 10, 2016 and August 31, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Actor James Earl Jones (1931 -) appeared in numerous stage, television and film productions, including *The Blacks*, *Othello*, *The Great White Hope*, *Fences*, *Gabriel's Fire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *The Gin Game*. Jones also provided the voice for Darth Vader in *Star Wars* and Musafa in *The Lion King*.

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:

Jones, James Earl

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Jones, James Earl--Interviews

African American actors--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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 James Earl Jones, August 10, 2016 and August 31, 2016. 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 James Earl Jones, Section A2016_007_001_001, TRT: 1:28:50 ?

James Earl Jones was born on January 17, 1931 in Arkabutla, Mississippi to Ruth Connolly and Robert Earl Jones. His maternal family's ancestry was traced back to an Irish indentured servant, Parthenia Connolly, and an African slave, Brice Connolly, who adopted his wife's surname. Jones' mother was a teacher, and the oldest of eleven children. His father was a prize fighter and the sparring partner of Joe Louis during World War II. He then became an actor, meeting Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes. Jones inherited his father's green eyes and deep voice, but rarely saw him as a child. Jones' parents separated before his birth, and he was raised by his maternal grandfather, John Henry Connolly, who took him on long fishing trips. In 1936, his maternal family decided to move to Dublin, Michigan, and placed Jones in the care of his paternal grandmother, Elnora Jones Jackson, in Memphis, Tennessee. However, Jones insisted on accompanying his maternal family to Michigan, where he developed a stutter.

Video Oral History Interview with James Earl Jones, Section A2016_007_001_002, TRT: 2:29:32 ?

James Earl Jones' grew up with his maternal grandparents, Maggie Connolly and John Henry Connolly, in Dublin, Michigan. He was taught in a one-room schoolhouse, and stopped attending church after he was mocked for stuttering in Sunday school. Jones attended Dickson High School, where his English teacher, Donald Crouch, became his mentor. Crouch accused Jones of plagiarizing a poetry assignment, and asked him to recite it to prove its authenticity. When Jones did so without stuttering, he was vindicated, and gained an appreciation for school. He was awarded the Regents Alumni Scholarship, in spite of being the only African American to take the qualifying exam, and enrolled at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Jones took pre-med classes until his sophomore year, and helped build a local church as a mason's apprentice. As a young man, Jones wrote to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt about poor race relations, which caused the FBI to later investigate him, when he served in the U.S. Army.

Video Oral History Interview with James Earl Jones, Section A2016_007_001_003, TRT: 3:32:56 ?

James Earl Jones matriculated at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor, where he was one of two African American students. After giving up his medical aspirations, he continued taking acting classes to improve his speech, and became the first African American cast in a play at the university. Jones completed the Reserve Officers' Training program in college, and served as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He then joined the Manistee Summer Theatre Company, where he worked as a stagehand, carpenter and stage manager, before securing his first major role as the title character in 'Othello.' Jones' maternal grandmother supported his acting pursuits, but his grandfather questioned it as a career choice. Madge Skelly, the stage manager at the Manistee Summer Theatre, encouraged him to attend the American Theatre Wing conservatory in New York City, where he studied under Lee Strasberg and Will Lee. Jones' first Broadway role was as an understudy for Lloyd Richards in 'The Egghead.'

Video Oral History Interview with James Earl Jones, Section A2016_007_001_004, TRT: 4:29:35 ?

James Earl Jones performed his first speaking role in 'Sunrise at Campobello,' which won three Tony Awards. He lived briefly with his father, Robert Earl Jones, while starring in Gladys Vaughn's production of 'Othello.' Jones met Alan

Schneider when he was cast in 'Measure for Measure,' and was encouraged by Joseph Papp to try directing, although he chose to continue acting. Jones participated in Shakespeare in Central Park, a collection of free plays in New York City's Central Park, organized by Papp. Jones landed his first lead role in 1960 with the off-Broadway production of 'The Pretender' by Lionel Abel, where he worked closely with Roscoe Lee Browne. The following year, he was cast in 'The Blacks: A Clown Show,' alongside prominent African American actors like Cicely Tyson, Maya Angelou, Abbey Lincoln and Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr. Jones explains the challenge of managing his stutter in his acting career. He also talks about his marriage to Cecilia Hart and his son, Flynn Earl Jones.

Video Oral History Interview with James Earl Jones, Section A2016_007_001_005, TRT: 5:32:59 ?

James Earl Jones was asked by director Gene Frankel to audition for 'The Blacks: A Clown Play,' a play about race and power in Colonial Europe. It was particularly well received because the subject matter related to the Civil Rights Movement. Maya Angelou, who also starred, organized a protest of 'Subways are for Sleeping,' which did not cast black actors as leads or extras. Next, Jones performed in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' produced by Joseph Papp, and continued to work with Papp during summers. He performed alongside his father, Robert Earl Jones, in 'Moon on a Rainbow Shawl.' During that time, he met emerging playwrights Ed Bullins and Douglas Turner Ward. He also met Paul Robeson, who was a friend of his father, and later played in a production named after the great singer. Jones was inspired by the acting of his father, Marlon Brando and Sidney Poitier. Jones describes his philosophy about the relationship between the actor and the audience.

Video Oral History Interview with James Earl Jones, Section A2016_007_002_006, TRT: 6:32:32 ?

James Earl Jones played in 'Othello' many times over during his career, most notably in the performance directed by Gladys Vaughn, who focused on conveying the complexity of Othello. Jones continued to work with Joseph Papp, who cast him as a spear carrier in 'Henry V' when Jones was unemployed. In addition to his stage performances, Jones began acting in film and television. He was cast in 'Dr. Strangelove,' a satire film directed by Stanley Kubrick that critiqued the U.S. Air Force. After seeing Derek Jacobi's production of 'King Lear' at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Jones became inspired to direct it as well. He was invited to the White House Poetry Jam by President Barack Obama in 2009, where he performed a scene from 'Othello,' and met Lin-Manuel Miranda, who wrote 'Hamilton: An American Musical.' Jones talks about his desire to master acting in theater, television and film; and his white family members in Mississippi that never acknowledged their African American relatives.

Video Oral History Interview with James Earl Jones, Section A2016_007_002_007, TRT: 7:30:40 ?

James Earl Jones met his first wife, Julianne Marie, in 1964 during a production of 'Othello,' and they were married from 1968 to 1972. In 1967, he appeared in the film 'The Comedians' with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Jones was next cast as the lead in Howard Sackler's play 'The Great White Hope,' and trained in Europe to prepare for the role. It premiered on Broadway in 1968, and won a Tony Award. Jones reprised his role in the 1970 film adaptation, also written by Sackler. In comparing the film and the play, Jones argues that the movie adaptation excluded valuable original scenes. He gained sudden fame from the film, but preferred stage acting. After reading Alex Haley's 'Roots: The Saga of an American Family,' Jones contacted Haley to suggest turning the novel into a movie. The two became close friends. Jones talks about the times he

has broken character on stage, and his visit to the White House during President Barack Obama's administration.

Video Oral History Interview with James Earl Jones, Section A2016_007_002_008, TRT: 8:28:40 ?

James Earl Jones starred with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in the 1967 film 'The Comedians.' He later played the role of Troy Maxson in August Wilson's 'Fences,' which struggled at first to gain attention. The play premiered at Yale University with Lloyd Richards as the director, then opened at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. The play impressed theater producer Carole Shorenstien Hays, who decided to produce the show, and move it San Francisco. The production struggled again, and Jones suggested a change to the climactic scene, which was disliked by Wilson and Richards, but Hays pushed for the modification. With Jones' change, the Broadway premiere was a success, and Jones won his second Tony Award for his performance. The character Troy Maxon was of the few African American heroes in theater at the time, and Jones' portrayal elicited strong reactions from African Americans in the audience.

Video Oral History Interview with James Earl Jones, Section A2016_007_002_009, TRT: 9:28:26 ?

James Earl Jones became friends with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton during the filming of 'The Comedians.' In 1989, he moved to Los Angeles, California to pursue more television and film opportunities, and was cast in 'Field of Dreams,' 'Gabriel's Fire,' and 'The Vernon Johns Story.' He began voice narration, becoming the voice of Verizon Communications, Inc. commercials, and securing roles in animated films like 'The Lion King,' alongside Whoopi Goldberg and Jeremy Irons. Jones was cast as the voice of Darth Vader in 'Star Wars,' and hid his involvement until the trilogy was complete. It created many opportunities for him as a narrator, and he was asked to work with CNN and the Goodwill Games. Besides Jones, his father, Robert Earl Jones, Paul Robeson and Geoffrey Holder also possessed the unique timbre tone of voice. In preparation for his roles, Jones memorized his lines, and worked with the director. In reflecting upon his career, Jones considers the power of coincidence.

Video Oral History Interview with James Earl Jones, Section A2016_007_002_010, TRT: 10:34:16 ?

James Earl Jones starred in 'Cry the Beloved Country,' which was not well received because of race relations in South Africa at the time. Over the span of his acting career, he worked with Robert Duvall, Vanessa Redgrave and Cicely Tyson, and was awarded the Kennedy Center Honors. He talks about 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' and 'A Streetcar Named Desire' by Tennessee Williams, which were set in the South in post-Reconstruction America. As an actor, Jones was drawn to roles depicting the common Southern man, and hoped to be cast in 'The Man Who Came to Dinner' by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart. He talks about the superficiality of the entertainment industry and how he keeps himself working as an actor. In reflecting on the role of race in his life, Jones shares his views of racism in America, and how it has affected his own life. He also talks about his previous romantic relationships, his current wife, Cecila Hart and his son, Flynn Earl Jones.