

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Hooks

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: | Hooks, Robert, 1937- |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, |
| Dates: | March 30, 2006, November 21, 2006 and October 4, 2005 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2005 and 2006 |
| Physical Description: | 11 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:12:00). |
| Abstract: | Stage producer and actor Robert Hooks (1937 -) founded the Group Theater Workshop and The Negro Ensemble Company with Douglas Turner Ward and Gerald Krone. The father of film director Kevin Hooks, his theater credits include 'Raisin in the Sun' and 'Dutchman'; he also appeared in many films and television productions over his forty year career. Hooks was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 30, 2006, November 21, 2006 and October 4, 2005, in Toluca Lake, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2005_270 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Distinguished actor Robert Hooks was born Bobby Dean Hooks on April 18, 1937, in Washington, D.C. He was the youngest of five children. Hooks' father died while working on a railroad track. His mother supported the family by working as a seamstress. Hooks attended Stevens Elementary School. He performed in his first play, *The Pirates of Penzance*, at the age of nine. After graduating from Francis Junior High School, Hooks attended Armstrong High School in Washington, D.C. His mother remarried and moved the family to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Hooks attended his first integrated school at West Philadelphia High School. Hooks soon joined the drama club and began acting in plays by such authors as William Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett.

Hooks moved to New York City in 1959 to become an actor. That year, he debuted as Bobby Dean Hooks in a touring production of *Raisin in the Sun*. He made his Broadway debut in 1960 in *Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright*, and became well known for his role as Clay in LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* in 1964. With this play, Hooks became known as Robert Hooks. Also in 1964, Hooks formed the Group Theater Workshop, offering training in the arts to underprivileged youth. In 1967, Hooks founded The Negro Ensemble Company with Douglas Turner Ward and Gerald Krone. This important theater company has gone on to produce plays by Peter Weiss, Derek Walcott, Wole Soyinka, and many other playwrights.

His television career began in 1963 with the role of a police detective on the television series *East Side/West Side*. Hooks' television career spans over forty years. Some of his other television series credits include *The White Shadow*, *Trapper John M.D.*, *WKRP in Cincinnati*, *Sister Sister*, *M.A.N.T.I.S.*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Family Matters*, *A Different World*, *Clueless*, *Diagnosis Murder*, and *Seinfeld*. Hooks starred in several made-for-TV movies throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. His television movie credits include *Carter's Army* (1970), *Two for the Money* (1972), *A Woman Called Moses* (1978), *Madame X* (1981), *Words by Heart* (1985), *Appearances*

(1990), and *Abandoned and Deceived* (1995).

Hooks passed down his passion for acting to his sons, Kevin Hooks and Eric Hooks. Kevin Hooks is also a film director, and cast his father in two of his films: *Passenger 57* (1992) and *Fled* (1996). Hooks' other film credits include *Airport '77* (1977) and *Posse* (1993).

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Hooks was conducted by Paul Brock on March 30, 2006, November 21, 2006 and October 4, 2005, in Toluca Lake, California, and was recorded on 11 Betacame SP videocassettes. Stage producer and actor Robert Hooks (1937 -) founded the Group Theater Workshop and The Negro Ensemble Company with Douglas Turner Ward and Gerald Krone. The father of film director Kevin Hooks, his theater credits include 'Raisin in the Sun' and 'Dutchman'; he also appeared in many films and television productions over his forty year career.

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:

Hooks, Robert, 1937-

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Hooks, Robert, 1937---Interviews

African American actors--Interviews

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Negro Ensemble Company

Occupations:

Stage Producer

Actor

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers|EntertainmentMakers

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 Robert Hooks, March 30, 2006, November 21, 2006 and October 4, 2005. 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 Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_001_001, TRT: 0:28:59 ?

Robert Hooks was born Bobby Dean Hooks on April 18, 1937 in Washington, D.C. as the youngest of five siblings. His mother, Mae Bertha Ward, was born in 1911 in Rocky Mount, North Carolina and worked as a seamstress. His father, Edward Hooks, was born in Virginia, later moving to North Carolina. He died working on the railroad when Hooks was two years old. Hooks' earliest memory is of being in his mother's arms when she learned the news of his father's death. Hooks has limited knowledge of his family history on either side. Raised on Newport Place in Washington, D.C., he attended Stevens Elementary School and Francis Junior High School, both all-black schools. His neighborhood was very poor and when he was seven years old, Hooks and his brother were bitten by rats. He began acting at the age of nine, when his sister Bernice forced him to act in 'The Pirates of Penzance,' a play she organized as a summer recreational counselor in the neighborhood. Hooks loved the experience and joined the school drama clubs.

African American actors--Interviews.

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_001_002, TRT: 0:29:44 ?

Robert Hooks fell in love with the stage at the age of nine. At ten years old, he held his first lead role in a play at Francis Junior High School, in Washington, D.C. As a child, Hooks enjoyed playing sports and street games. He remembers being whipped after smoking his first and only cigarette. In 1951, he began attending Armstrong High School in Washington, D.C. After getting into trouble for joyriding in a car, he went to live with his mother, stepfather, and stepsiblings, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where he attended West Philadelphia High School from 1952 to 1956. This was his first experience in an integrated school. Hooks was very active in the school drama club, and had a crush on his drama teacher. When Hooks moved to Philadelphia, he left behind his first daughter in Washington, D.C. She was born when he was sixteen. Hooks had another daughter while in high school in Philadelphia. Although he has a relationship with his first daughter, he was not welcomed into his second daughter's life.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_001_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Robert Hooks developed an affinity for jazz music while a student at West Philadelphia High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Jazz pianist and HistoryMaker McCoy Tyner was a classmate. After graduating in 1956, he attended the Bessie V. Hicks School of Drama, in Philadelphia from 1957 to 1958. While in Philadelphia, Hooks saw Lorraine Hansberry's 'A Raisin in the Sun.' Moved by the play, he went backstage to meet the actors including HistoryMakers Ruby Dee, Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr. and Douglas Turner Ward, as well as Ed Hall, Ivan Dixon, Lonnie Elder III, and Sidney Poitier.

Following some of their encouragement, Hooks moved to New York, New York in 1959. His first night, Hooks watched Sonny Rollins at the Birdland jazz club and stayed at a local YMCA. He then moved uptown to Harlem. In New York, Hooks spent his nights working at Grayson Robinson, a sweater factory, while he looked for work as an actor during the day. In 1960, he met Malcolm X through the civil rights activist Yuri Kochiyama.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_001_004, TRT: 0:29:56 ?

Robert Hooks made his Broadway debut in 1960 in Lorraine Hansberry's play, 'A Raisin in the Sun.' As a cast member of 'A Raisin in the Sun,' Hooks met many influential African American actors, such as James Baldwin, Frances Williams, and Ja'net DuBois, as well as HistoryMakers Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis. In New York, Hooks remained active in politics and became exposed to actors who were socialists including castmates Lonnie Elder III and HistoryMaker Douglas Turner Ward. Hooks describes performing with the touring production of 'A Raisin in the Sun,' an experience that allowed him to visit African American communities across the country. During the tour, Hooks watched his good friend, Douglas Turner Ward take over the role of Walter Lee Younger. Hooks also describes tensions with fellow castmate Claudia McNeil. Hooks married his first wife, Yvonne, in 1961 while on tour in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1961, he returned to New York, New York and eventually landed a role in the Broadway play 'A Taste of Honey.'

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_002_005, TRT: 0:27:41 ?

Robert Hooks went on tour in 1961 with the Broadway play 'A Taste of Honey.' The play was the first opportunity he had to sing in a Broadway production. When the play did a show in his hometown of Washington, D.C., all of his family, old friends, and former teachers came to see him perform. In 1963, Hooks replaced HistoryMaker Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr. in Jean Genet's 'The Blacks.' His castmates included HistoryMaker Maya Angelou, Cicely Tyson, and Lex Monson. In 1964, Hooks performed in Amiri Baraka's classic play, 'Dutchman.' In 1964, he also founded the Group Theater Workshop with HistoryMaker Hattie Winston, a program to teach young people about all aspects of theater. HistoryMaker Barbara Ann Teer directed the G.T.W.'s first showcase, which was given great reviews, especially the debut of HistoryMaker Douglas Turner Ward's first play 'Happy Ending.' During this same period, Hooks raised funds to support the work of the Civil Rights Movement in the South. Hooks also talks about 'Voices of My People.'

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_002_006, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Robert Hooks obtained financing from HistoryMaker Clarence Avant and Al Bell to produce two of HistoryMaker Douglas Turner Ward's plays, 'Happy Ending' and 'Day of Absence,' which opened to great reviews in 1965. In 1967, Hooks, Ward, and Gerald Krone founded the Negro Ensemble Company with a grant from the Ford Foundation. Hooks was the executive director, Krone served as the administrative director, and Ward was the artistic director of the company. The N.E.C. established a permanent space for African American theater; notable alumni include, Denzel Washington, Samuel L. Jackson, Debbie Allen, and Phylicia Rashad. The first movie Hooks acted in was, 'Sweet Love Bitter,' an independent film about Charlie Parker which premiered in 1967. Hooks continued to be active in fundraising for the Civil Rights Movement and developed close friendships with HistoryMaker Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier. Hooks acts out the plot of the play 'Happy Ending' and compares the work of Ward and Amiri Baraka.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_002_007, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Robert Hooks first acted on television in 1963 in 'East Side/West Side.' Between 1966 and 1967 he acted in a number of plays, including 'Where's Daddy?' [William Inge], 'The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui' [Bertolt Brecht], 'The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here' [Tennessee Williams] and 'Hallelujah, Baby!' [Arthur Laurents]. Hooks filmed two movies, 'Sweet Love Bitter' and 'Hurry Sundown' which were both released in 1967. Hooks received a call from director Otto Preminger to act in the movie 'Hurry Sundown' opposite HistoryMaker Diahann Carroll. 'Hurry Sundown' featured an interracial cast and was filmed in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. During filming, he experienced instances of racial hostility including being shot at while driving back to the hotel, being kicked out of a restaurant, and having the 'N-word' scrawled on his hotel room door. In 1967, Hooks was cast in the television series 'N.Y.P.D.' Hooks met Harold Curlman while acting in 'Where's Daddy?' Hooks talks about his admiration of Sidney Poitier.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_002_008, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Robert Hooks played the title character in 'Henry V' [William Shakespeare] opposite actress Ellen Holly, who played Katherine, in the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1965. Hooks convinced the director, Joseph Papp, to allow students from the Group Theater Workshop to perform their own work, a performance based on Gwendolyn Brooks' poem 'We Real Cool,' on the same mobile stage. In 1967, Hooks was approached by David Susskind to star in his own television series, 'N.Y.P.D.' The show would run for two very successful seasons and part of the third, 1967 through 1969. The show was filmed on the streets of New York City, and there would often be large crowds around. Hooks met Whoopie Goldberg when she was a young girl at one of the tapings. In 1970, Hooks moved back to Washington, D.C. where he began raising money and putting together a board for a black community theater. Hooks was very busy during this point in his career and he was raising his son Kevin Hooks.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_003_009, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Robert Hooks returned to Washington, D.C. in 1970 to form the D.C. Black Repertory Company. He saw a need for an African American theater company as a cultural institution in D.C. after the riots in 1968 devastated much of the community. He recruited Vantile Whitfield as the artistic director. Ed Murphy, an African-American club owner, was one of the company's early benefactors and gave the company a building in which to operate. In 1973, the D.C. Black Repertory Company's first production, 'Changes,' debuted. Actress Lynn Whitfield is an alumnus of the company. The company successfully attracted a large black audience from the community around where it was located on Georgia Avenue, but struggled financially. In 1977, Hooks moved with his wife, Rosie Lee and young son, Robert Jr. to Los Angeles, California, where he continued to act and pursue his interest in producing. His son Kevin Hooks began acting professionally when he was eight, and has had a successful career as an actor and director.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_003_010, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Robert Hooks owns his own production company, Robert Hooks Productions, and also is the co-founder with his son, Kevin Hooks of another production company, Rock Creek Entertainment. At the time of the interview, he was writing two books, his autobiography, 'Life For Me: At the Crossroads of Politics, Culture, Civil Rights Movement,' and 'Blackbusters: Hollywood, the Last Plantation.' Hooks reflects on the reason Hollywood only produces certain types of stories about the African American community and the reason it is a struggle to produce good films about the African American experience. He

shares his experience struggling to convince influential African Americans to read his scripts and the obstacles for independent African American filmmakers. He suggests alternative ways for African American filmmakers to complete their project and talks about his idea for a cooperative production company. At the time of the interview, Hooks was engaged to Lorrie Marlow. The two married in 2008.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Hooks, Section A2005_270_003_011, TRT: 0:22:30 ?

Robert Hooks reflects upon the highlights of his career, his favorite plays and movies in which he has acted, and how he would like to be remembered. He also shares part of a tribute he gave to his good friend, the playwright, Lonne Elder III.