

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sylvia Waters

---

## 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>	Waters, Sylvia
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 27, 2010 and October 24, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2010 and 2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:42:32).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Artistic director and dancer Sylvia Waters (1940 - ) was a principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and served as the artistic director for the Ailey II dance company for 38 years. Waters was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 27, 2010 and October 24, 2016, in Chicago, Illinois and New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2010_108
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Artistic director and dancer Sylvia Waters was born in New York on January 22, 1940. She began dancing in junior high school and joined an after school dance group when she was twelve years old. Waters went on to attend The Juilliard School, where she studied with Martha Graham, José Limón, and Anthony Tudor. She received her B.S. degree from Juilliard in 1962, continuing her studies at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance.

Waters began dancing with Donald McKayle's dance company before touring Europe, performing in Langston Hughes' *Black Nativity* in 1964. Waters then settled in Paris, France for three years, where she appeared on television and danced in the Paris Opera Ballet under Michel Descombey. After performing at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, in Maurice Bejart's *Ballet of the Twentieth Century*, at which Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* was also performed, Waters returned to the United States and began touring as a principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company. In 1974, the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, later renamed Ailey II, was founded in order to help Ailey dance students transition into the professional world. A year after its creation, Waters was hired as the director. Ailey II has since toured all over the country as one of the most successful companies in the United States.

Waters has received numerous awards, including an honorary doctorate from the State University of New York at Oswego, the Dance Magazine Award, Syracuse University's Women of Distinction Award, and the Legacy Award from the twentieth Annual International Association of Blacks in Dance Festival. She has also served as a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, and has worked as a guest lecturer at Harvard University in 2001.

Waters lives in New York, New York.

Sylvia Waters was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 27, 2010 and October 4, 2016.

---

# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sylvia Waters was conducted by Harriette Cole and Larry Crowe on August 27, 2010 and October 24, 2016, in Chicago, Illinois and New York, New York, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Artistic director and dancer Sylvia Waters (1940 - ) was a principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and served as the artistic director for the Ailey II dance company for 38 years.

---

# 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:

Waters, Sylvia

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Waters, Sylvia--Interviews

---

African American dancers--Interviews.

---

African American Choreographers--Interviews.

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

---

## Occupations:

Dancer

---

Artistic Director

---

## 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 Sylvia Waters, August 27, 2010 and October 24, 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 Sylvia Waters, Section A2010\_108\_001\_001, TRT: 0:32:09 ?

Sylvia Waters was born on January 22, 1940 in New York City, New York. Her father, Benjamin Franklin Waters, was born in Upper Hill, Maryland around 1896 to Mary Francis Waters. Waters' mother, Britannia Rachel Waters, was born in Onancock, Virginia to Minnie Matilda Marshall-Hall and Mathew-James Hall. Waters' father was a social worker and her mother was a hairdresser. An only child, Waters grew up in Harlem, New York and attended P.S. 186, I.S. 164 Edward W. Stitt School, and Evander Childs High School. She ran track in the Police Athletic League and visited her grandparents' farm in Virginia during the summers. Waters began dancing at I.S. 164, and also took modern dance classes at the New Dance Group. In 1954, she first saw Alvin Ailey in the Broadway production of "House of Flowers" with HistoryMakers Diahann Carroll, Louis Johnson, Geoffrey Holder, and Carmen de Lavallade. She also saw him perform with HistoryMaker Donald McKayle. In 1957, Waters auditioned for The Juilliard School in New York City.

African American families--New York (State)--New York.

African American grandmothers--Virginia.

African Americans--Virginia--Onancock.

Eastern Shore (Md. and Va.)--Social life and customs.

New Dance Group (New York, N.Y.).

Ailey, Alvin.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters, Section A2010\_108\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:34 ?

Sylvia Waters enrolled in 1957 at The Juilliard School in New York City, New York to study modern dance. While a student, Waters performed in small companies with dancers like HistoryMaker Donald McKayle and Hava Kohav Beller. Her professors included Mary Hinkson, Helen McGehee, Ethel Winter, Bertram Ross, and Stuart Hodes, and during the summers she attended the Martha Graham School in New York City. In 1958, Waters attended the first performance of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. In 1962, she received her B.S. degree and began to audition for Broadway shows like "Golden Boy" and HistoryMaker Oscar Brown, Jr.'s "Kicks & Company." In 1964, Waters joined the European tour of "Black Nativity." From 1965 until 1968, Waters lived in Paris, France where she worked with Maurice Bejart and Walter Nicks, toured with American dancers, and auditioned for films. She recalls meeting "Buttercup" Edwards, Larry Rivers, Herbert Gentry, and Josephine Baker. In 1968, she joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Juilliard School.

Graham, Martha.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Paris (France)

Harlem (New York, N.Y.).

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters, Section A2010\_108\_002\_003, TRT: 3:29:57 ?

Sylvia Waters played the role of the Virgin Mary in the European tour of

Langston Hughes' 'Black Nativity' in 1964. She later met Hughes while performing at the Novello Theatre in London, England. Waters went on to appear at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in Paris, France, and the Berlin Philharmonic, where she and her company shared the stage with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Throughout her travels in Italy, France and Germany, she was generally accepted by the people. In 1965, Waters settled in Paris, where she joined the Alliance Francaise Paris Ile-de-France, and appeared on the television show 'Chaka Zulu,' which was directed by Michel Descombey of the Paris Opera Ballet. After auditioning for director Maurice Bejart, she was accepted into the Ballet of the 20th Century. While there, Waters performed in the ballet version of Ludwig van Beethoven's 'Symphony no. 9 in D minor.' Waters then worked with her former classmate Donald McKayle and his company during their 'Black New World' tour in Europe.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters, Section A2010\_108\_002\_004, TRT: 4:28:35 ?

Sylvia Waters lived in the sixth arrondissement of Paris, France near the Saint-Germain-des-Pres during the time that Malcom X visited the city. Waters left the city just as the labor strikes began, and traveled to Estoril, Portugal. There, she and a dozen others performed at Casino Estoril. At this time, she learned of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. In Portugal, Waters noticed the tensions between the Portuguese and Angolans due to a civil war, and the subsequent mistreatment of Angolan migrants. Waters also encountered an American soldier who made racially charged remarks against African students and Waters' friends' long hair. Waters toured with the Ballet of the 20th Century to the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, Mexico. However, unable to join the company in Cuba, Waters returned to New York City, where she encountered Alvin Ailey and was offered a position as a dancer in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater alongside Judith Jamison, George W. Faison and Ernest Pagnano.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters, Section A2010\_108\_002\_005, TRT: 5:27:40 ?

Sylvia Waters left Europe in 1968 and joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City. She began rehearsing seven hours a day at the Clark Center for the Performing Arts in the Westside YWCA in preparation for the company's first Broadway appearance. The Ailey School was founded as an educational branch of the theater a year after Waters' arrival. In 1970, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater disbanded, as it was unable to pay dancers a living wage. Waters was forced into temporary unemployment until the U.S. Department of State intervened to save the company. At that point, the U.S. government sponsored a tour of the company to North Africa, the Soviet Union, Paris and London, drawing necessary attention to the company. In addition, Waters talks about the importance of exploring other forms of artistic expression to develop one's own artistic sense. She also talks about her diet and schedule as a professional dancer and Alvin Ailey's perspective on different body shapes in dance.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters, Section A2010\_108\_002\_006, TRT: 6:27:57 ?

Sylvia Waters toured to the Soviet Union with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1970, where the company faced strict censorship of their scheduled performance, including modifications to Geoffrey Holder's 'Prodigal Prince' and rejection of Judith Jamison's solo 'Adagio for a Dead Soldier.' After touring nationally and internationally, the company reestablished itself in New York City. In 1972, Waters gave birth to her son, which introduced questions about Waters future as a dancer. In 1975, Waters was appointed as director of the company's new ensemble of twelve student dancers, the Alvin Ailey Repertory

Ensemble (Ailey II). The group toured universities nationwide. For the bicentennial of the United States, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater held 'Ailey Celebrates Ellington' with the assistance of choreographers Gus Solomons jr, Cristyne Lawson and Milton Myers. Additionally, Waters describes her experiences in the Soviet Union, and other individuals who assisted with the bicentennial production.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters, Section A2010\_108\_002\_007, TRT: 7:29:44 ?

Sylvia Waters was named artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's small ensemble group, Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble (Ailey II), after the birth of her son. As director, Waters oversaw a production of Ailey's 'Revelations' performed by the ensemble. Upon Alvin Ailey's death in 1989, Waters was named the executor of his estate. She spent the next five years learning how to manage his estate, which included helping the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater obtain his ballets from Ailey's mother, Lula Cooper. Waters went on to assist in the development of the programming at The Ailey School, as well as institute the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program. After leaving her position as a director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2010, Waters began an Alvin Ailey oral history project and The Ailey Legacy College Residencies program. Additionally, Waters describes the challenges of keeping Ailey II viable as a small ensemble and the changes in performance venues in New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters, Section A2010\_108\_002\_008, TRT: 8:14:56 ?

Sylvia Waters taught a wide variety of successful dancers, including Desmond Richardson, Yannick Lebrun and Sarita Allen. In 2012, Waters stepped down from her directorship of Ailey II at the Ailey American Dance Theater. At this point in the interview, Waters reflects on her life and legacy, and provides advice for aspiring dancers.