



Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Walter Mason

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Walter Mason
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason,
Dates:	October 31, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	6 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:48:21).
Abstract:	Production manager, stage actor, stage director, and stage production manager Walter Mason (1926 -) is the entertainment director at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel and the founder and artistic director of the Aldridge Theater Company, Inc. Mason was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 31, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_314
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Production manager, stage actor, stage director, and stage production manager Walter Mason, Jr. was born on January 26, 1926, in Detroit, Michigan. His mother, Joanna Columbus Mason, a school teacher, and his father, Walter Mason, Sr., a skilled laborer, reared Mason in a church and community-oriented environment. After graduating from Detroit's Northwestern High School, Mason attended Wayne State University, where he earned his B.A degree in theater and business administration. Years later, Mason attended the Detroit College of Law while he continued to pursue a career in theater.

In a 1952 adaptation of Richard Wright's book "Native Son," he portrayed its chief character "Booker Thomas" at the World Stage in Detroit, Michigan. His theatrical performances include his role as "Othello" in seven separate productions and "Caliban" in two productions of "The Tempest." Mason has also been an instrumental figure in notable Broadway productions such as "Purlie Victorious" and "A Streetcar Named Desire." Beyond acting, Mason served as a producer, director and artist for "The Good Book Sings" on WJR Radio and appeared on WXYZ TV's, "Showtime at the Apollo" as the master of ceremonies. He collaborated with choreographer, Alvin Ailey, in 1961 as the musical and production manager of "African Holiday." Six years later, Mason became the production manager for "The Emperor Jones," which starred actor James Earl Jones. Throughout his career, Mason has worked closely with many celebrities, including Sammy Davis, Jr., Duke Ellington, Frank Sinatra, Liza Minnelli, Jimmy Durante, Diana Ross, Dionne Warwick, Ella Fitzgerald, Lola Falana, Jackie Gleason and Gladys Knight and the Pips. As a private speech and drama coach, Mason has worked with many public figures and film and television performers.

Mason served as an associate to the dean of Yale University School of Drama at both Yale and on Broadway. In 1983, Mason produced and directed a theatrical presentation at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. featuring

aspiring young actors from black colleges and universities for The National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education. The following year, Mason directed the production of the Pulitzer Prize winning play, "A Soldier's Story," at Detroit's Fisher Theater.

Mason is the entertainment director at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel and the founder and artistic director of the Aldridge Theater Company, Inc.

Walter Mason was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 31, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Walter Mason was conducted by Jacques Lesure on October 31, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada, and was recorded on 6 Betacam SP videocassettes. Production manager, stage actor, stage director, and stage production manager Walter Mason (1926 -) is the entertainment director at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel and the founder and artistic director of the Aldridge Theater Company, Inc.

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:

Walter Mason

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews.
Walter Mason--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

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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 Walter Mason, October 31, 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 8/15/2011 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, October 31, 2007

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason, Section A2007_314_001_001, TRT: 0:29:09
2007/10/31

Walter Mason discusses his family history and childhood in Detroit, Michigan. Mason's mother, Joanna Columbus-Mason, a school teacher, was raised in Mangham, Louisiana and is described as being dedicated to church and family. She endowed Mason with self-confidence and encouraged him to develop good oratorical skills. Mason is not familiar with his maternal grandmother, Jenny Hayes, who he only remembers seeing in a photograph. His father, Walter Mason, Sr., a skilled laborer, was born in Mississippi and lived in Dermott, Arkansas. Walter Sr. was a quiet man with a good sense of humor. Like his mother's family, Mason knows very little about his paternal grandparents. He notes that his grandfather, John Mason, lived in Dermott. Mason goes on to discuss his childhood church Hartford Avenue Baptist church, which he says kept him grounded. He also talks about his years at Sampson Elementary School and his neighborhood in Detroit's Milford Avenue area. According to Mason, this section of Detroit was ripe with thriving black businesses, which consisted largely of poultry markets and convenience stores. Mason describes the community as comfortable with residents that were collectively responsible for raising the neighborhood's children.

African American families--Michigan--Detroit.

African American children--Michigan--Detroit.

African American neighborhoods--Michigan, Detroit.

African Americans--Baptists--Michigan--Detroit.

African American business enterprises--Michigan--Detroit.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason, Section A2007_314_001_002, TRT: 0:28:31
2007/10/31

Walter Mason discusses his social experiences as a young adult in Detroit. He graduated from Northwestern High School in 1943 intent on going to college. Mason was encouraged to further his education by Reverend Charles Hill, who later became the president of the Detroit Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Through his church involvement, Mason had an opportunity to meet actor Paul Robeson and intellectual leader W.E.B Du Bois. Such exposure informed his understanding of U.S. race relations and the relegation of African Americans to second class citizenship. Inspired by the Tuskegee Airmen, Mason entered the Air Force, where he experienced racial discrimination. Mason recalls how African American soldiers were assigned menial and laborious tasks, preventing them from fully participating in all facets of the war. As a writer for the military base's newspaper, Mason wrote about the mistreatment of African American servicemen. After World War II, Mason returned to Detroit and enrolled in Wayne State University, where he developed a strong affinity for theater. He describes his theatrical training at Wayne State as unique because it merged literature with musical expression in its productions. Mason notes the influence of Canadian-American theatre director Lloyd Richards, who became his mentor. Mason goes on to talk about his early directing and acting experiences, which includes his performance as "Bigger Thomas" in a Broadway adaptation of Richard Wright's novel "Native Son" and the lead role in "Othello."

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--Michigan--Detroit.

Hill, Charles Andrew, 1893-1970.
African American civil rights workers.
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Detroit Branch.
Du Bois, W.E.B.(William Edward Burghardt),1868-1963--Political and social views.
Robeson, Paul,1893-1976--Political and social views.
United States--Race relations--History.
United States. Army Air Forces--African American troops.
United States. Army Air Forces. Composite Group, 477th.
World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.
Wayne State University.
African Americans--Education (Higher)--Michigan--Detroit.
Richards, Lloyd, 1919-2006.
Acting--Study and teaching.
Othello (Fictitious character)--Drama.
Bigger, Thomas (Fictitious character)--Drama.
African American actors.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason, Section A2007_314_001_003, TRT: 0:28:54
2007/10/31

Walter Mason discusses his training and professional experiences in theater. Mason mentions his work on the production of "Othello" and the rave reviews it received from African American publications such as "The Pittsburgh Courier," "The Detroit Tribune," and "The Michigan Chronicle." Additionally, he was employed by the University of Detroit Mercy (then Mercy College) as a theater instructor. At this time, Mason's parents were concerned about his future in theater and prodded him to consider a more "honorable" profession. During the 1956-1957 academic year, Mason attended the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law. He then reflects on the social and political impact of the Civil Rights movement. Mason goes on to discuss his first time meeting and working with Alvin Ailey in 1961. In his view, Ailey was professional and devoted to teaching and to the craft of dance.

African American actors.
African American newspapers--Detroit.
Acting--Study and teaching.
African American teachers--University of Detroit Mercy.
University of Detroit Mercy. School of Law.
Civil rights movement.
Ailey, Alvin.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason, Section A2007_314_001_004, TRT: 0:29:38
2007/10/31

Walter Mason continues to discuss the expansion of his career in acting and theater. Mason was interested in productions that included a mix of jazz music and art. As such, he worked with "Free Sound of 63'," a show created by jazz double-bassist John Levy. The show included performances by singer Nancy Wilson and composer and pianist Ramsey Lewis, Jr., among other artists. He also performed in Ossie Davis' musical "Purlie" with actress Ester Rolle, which was lauded by white and black theatergoers. Mason reflects on his collaborations with Sammy Davis, Jr., who he states was misunderstood as an

“Uncle Tom” because he hugged President Richard Nixon at the 1972 Republican National Convention. Mason goes on to discuss Davis’ role in the “Rat Pack” and how he suppressed his talent to accommodate Frank Sinatra and others in the collective. Davis, according to Mason, was one of the most generous individuals in the entertainment industry. Mason also worked with actor James Earl Jones in the production of "The Amen Corner," which toured in Europe. He also talks candidly about racial discrimination in the theater business.

African American actors.

Levy, John, 1912-.

Wilson, Nancy, 1937-.

Lewis, Ramsey.

Davis, Ossie.

Rolle, Esther.

Davis, Sammy, 1925-1990.

Republican National Convention (1972: Miami Beach, Fla.).

Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994.

Rat Pack (Entertainers).

Sinatra, Frank, 1915-1998.

Black Theater.

Jones, James Earl.

African Americans--Travel--Europe.

African Americans in the performing arts--Race discrimination--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason, Section A2007_314_001_005, TRT: 0:28:33
2007/10/31

Walter Mason discusses the discriminatory practices in the theater industry and the social and political climate of the 1960s. He elaborates on how James Earl Jones and the cast of "The Amen Corner" were reprimanded and fined by the theater union in the United States for touring the production in Europe. Mason then talks about the assassinations of Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy—noting the somber and angry mood that culminated from these events. He, along with many of his colleagues, took a leave of absence from work in order to attend King’s funeral. Mason goes on to discuss his work as an acting coach and the opening of his restaurant LeCave, which he hoped would bring more African Americans to downtown Detroit to enjoy its ambience and nightlife.

African Americans in the performing arts--Race relations--United States.

United States--Social conditions--1961-1969.

United States--Political aspects--1961-1969.

Kennedy, John F.(John Fitzgerald),1917-1963--Assassination.

King, Martin Luther, Jr.,1929-1968--Assassination.

Kennedy, Robert F.,1925-1968--Assassination.

X, Malcolm, 1925-1965--Assassination.

African American business enterprises--Michigan--Detroit.

African Americans--Social life and customs--Michigan--Detroit.

African American theatrical producers and directors.

Acting--Study and teaching.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason, Section A2007_314_001_006, TRT: 0:23:36
2007/10/31

Walter Mason shares his philosophical thoughts on the theater industry and young African American performers. He believes that entertainers need to be more intentional about developing their skills in the craft of performance arts. Mason contends that contemporary performers should study the roots of the entertainment industry and use it as a guideline. Mason advises young people to bask in their youth and as they become adults, remember to give back to the next generation. He then narrates photographs.

African Americans in the performing arts.

African American youth.