

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ossie Davis

PERSON

Davis, Ossie

**Alternative Names:** Ossie Davis;

**Life Dates:** December 18, 1917-February 4, 2005

**Place of Birth:** Cogdell, Georgia, USA

**Work:** New Rochelle, New York

**Occupations:** Film Director; Screenwriter; Stage Actor; Film Actor

## Biographical Note

Writer, director, actor, and producer Ossie Davis has established a phenomenal career, remaining throughout, a strong voice for artists' rights, human dignity, and social justice.

Ossie Davis was born on December 18, 1917, in Cogdell, Georgia, to loving parents and a supportive extended family. Graduating in the top five percent of his class with an already burgeoning interest in theater,

Davis had to earn enough money before venturing on to college. A year after graduation, with his savings in tow, Davis hitchhiked from Georgia to Washington, D.C., to live with his aunts. There, he received the National Youth Administration scholarship and enrolled at Howard University in the fall of 1935.

At Howard University, Davis would find a nurturing environment to cultivate both his ideas and his talents. Impatient to try his luck on the actual stage, Davis left Howard University for New York City. It was in Harlem in 1939 that he became involved with the Rose McClendon Players.

Davis made his Broadway debut in 1946 in *Jeb*, where he met his wife and fellow actress, Ruby Dee. Davis went on to perform in many Broadway productions, including *Anna Lucasta*, *The Wisteria Trees*, *Green Pastures*, *Jamaica*, *Ballad for Bimshire*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Zulu* and *the Zayda*, and the stage version of *I'm Not Rappaport*. In 1961, he wrote and starred in the critically acclaimed *Purlie Victorious*. Davis was inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame in 1994.

Davis has written and directed numerous films, including *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Countdown at Kusini* (co-produced with his wife), the first American feature film shot entirely in Africa by Black professionals. He most recently appeared in the films *Dr. Dolittle*, *Get on the Bus*, and *I'm Not Rappaport*.

Davis was a leading activist in the civil rights era of the 1960s. He joined Martin Luther King, Jr., in the crusade for jobs and freedom and to help raise money for the Freedom Riders. He eulogized both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X at their funerals. He remains an activist today.

Davis has received innumerable honors and citations, including the Hall of Fame Award for Outstanding Artistic Achievement in 1989; the U.S. National Medal for the Arts in 1995; the New York Urban League

Frederick Douglas Award; NAACP Image Award; and the Screen Actor's Guild Lifetime Achievement Award in 2001. He has enjoyed a long and luminous career in entertainment along with his wife and fellow performer, stage and screen collaborator, and political activist, Ruby Dee. They have recently published a joint autobiography, *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together*.

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