

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Okoro Harold Johnson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Johnson, Okoro Harold, 1925-2012
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Okoro Harold Johnson,
Dates:	May 31, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:20:04).
Abstract:	Playwright, stage actor, and theater director Okoro Harold Johnson (1925 - 2012) was known for his down-to-earth approach with both acting and directing. He produced a legendary black soap opera, written by Richard Durham for public television called <i>Bird Of An Iron Feather</i> . Johnson served as artistic director at ETA Creative Arts Foundation for seventeen years and was director of South Shore Cultural Center. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 31, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_041
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Okoro Harold Johnson, actor, director, and playwright was born May 25, 1925 in Chicago, Illinois. He attended Forestville Elementary and DuSable High School, but graduated from Eureka High School in Meridian, Mississippi. He briefly attended Tougaloo College, but ended up working as a waiter on the Grand Trunk Railroad. Later at Roosevelt University, Johnson became involved at the ground floor of the Chicago Black Arts Movement. Johnson earned a B. A. in Theater from Roosevelt University and an M.A. in Theater from Governor's State University.

Johnson is known for his down to earth approach with both acting and directing. He has exposed people from all walks of life to the magic of the theatre through his productions. Some of his plays include: *S. C. L. C: Second Coming*, *Last Chance*, *The Regal Theater*, *Kintu and the Law of Love*, and *Strange Fruit*. Johnson directed among other plays: *A Candle in the Wind* (featuring William Marshall), *A Change is Gon' Come* by Joe Turner, *Purlie Victorious* by Ossie Davis, *Fats Waller: His Life and Times* by Runako Jahi and *Jazz Set* by Ron Milner. Johnson produced a now legendary black soap opera, written by Richard Durham for public television called *Bird Of An Iron Feather* for Chicago's WTTW. His acting skills were featured on Broadway in Ron Milner's *Checkmates*, in a role that he created. Film credits include: *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, *The Wedding* and *A Raisin In The Sun*.

Johnson served as Artistic Director at ETA Creative Arts Foundation for 17 years and was director of South Shore Cultural Center. Johnson has taught theatre at the college and community level. He is the recipient of the Paul Robeson Award from the African American Arts Alliance of Chicago.

Okoro Harold Johnson passed away on April 3, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Okoro Harold Johnson was conducted by Chuck Smith on May 31, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Playwright, stage actor, and theater director Okoro Harold Johnson (1925 - 2012) was known for his down-to-earth approach with both acting and directing. He produced a legendary black soap opera, written by Richard Durham for public television called Bird Of An Iron Feather. Johnson served as artistic director at ETA Creative Arts Foundation for seventeen years and was director of South Shore Cultural Center.

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:

Johnson, Okoro Harold, 1925-2012

Smith, Chuck (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Johnson, Okoro Harold, 1925-2012--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Playwright

Stage Actor

Theater 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 Okoro Harold Johnson, May 31, 2002. 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 Okoro Harold Johnson, Section A2002_041_001_001, TRT: 0:30:06 ?

Okoro Harold Johnson was born on May 25, 1925 in Chicago, Illinois to Nellie and Earl Johnson. His parents, who were from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, moved to Chicago where Johnson's father worked as a mechanic. During the Great Depression, Johnson and his six siblings were sent to live with different relatives. He spent five years with his grandmother in Hattiesburg before returning to Chicago where he was a student at DuSable High School until he dropped out. In high school, Johnson discovered an affinity for music and played in a band. Although Johnson dropped out of DuSable, he finished his high school education in Mississippi at the age of twenty-two. From there, he enrolled at Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Mississippi, before transferring to Roosevelt College. While at Roosevelt, Johnson worked as a waiter on the railroad. He was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1950. After he was discharged in 1952, Johnson continued his studies at Roosevelt, obtaining a B.A. degree in political science in 1955 whereupon he entered law school at DePaul University.

Video Oral History Interview with Okoro Harold Johnson, Section A2002_041_001_002, TRT: 0:29:14 ?

Okoro Harold Johnson studied acting in Drama Incorporated, a community theater company founded by Lillian Tompkins. In 1971, Johnson co-founded ETA, (Ebony Talent Associates) with HistoryMaker Abena Joan Brown, a fellow student at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois. Johnson was also concurrently working for the Chicago Park District, directing and acting in plays at Stateway Gardens. Johnson's excellence as a director allowed him to overcome racial discrimination and become the first black director at Theater on the Lake, the park district's most prestigious venue. Johnson describes ETA's early years and his role in reviving Chicago's Regal Theater through his eponymous play "The Regal Theatre". Johnson also talks about other theater groups in Chicago and a course he took at WGBH Boston for aspiring black directors.

Video Oral History Interview with Okoro Harold Johnson, Section A2002_041_001_003, TRT: 0:27:37 ?

Okoro Harold Johnson was a director on the set of "Bird of the Iron Feather", the first black television soap opera in Chicago, Illinois in 1967. Alongside the Coalition for United Community Action, Johnson and his colleagues fought to make WTTW Chicago hire black personnel to work on Bird of the Iron Feather. On the set of the successful soap opera, Johnson faced racial discrimination. After production closed, Johnson sought to integrate the television and radio stations in Chicago. In 1971, the Interstate Commerce Commission determined that all television and radio stations in Chicago had to hire black personnel. Johnson returned to theater, directing "A Candle in the Wind", and writing the play "Kintu and the Law of Love". He also acted on Broadway, working with HistoryMaker Woodie King, Denzel Washington, Paul Winfield, and HistoryMaker Ruby Dee in "Checkmates". In 1980, Johnson received a master's degree in theatre from Governors State University. He talks about his work at Chicago State University.

Video Oral History Interview with Okoro Harold Johnson, Section A2002_041_001_004, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Okoro Harold Johnson describes his work at ETA, highlighting the productions of "Jazz-Set" and "A Change is Gon' Come". After Johnson turned Joe Turner's "A Change is Gon' Come" into a musical incorporating the songs of Sam Cooke, the production became a hit. However, Johnson had to change all the songs after Bobby Womack asserted his copyright over Cooke's works. Johnson talks about "S.C.L.C.: Second Coming Last Chance", a play he wrote about Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. He recites an excerpt from the play as well as two of his poetic works “The First Blues” and “Chicago”. During his career, Johnson cast non-actors like Moms Mabley, LaDonna Tittle, Sherry Scott, and Light Henry Huff in his production because he felt they communicated an organic spirituality to audiences. Johnson also talks about how he would like to be remembered, a musical revue he directed for Major Harold Washington’s 1983 campaign, the Chicago’s black arts scene, and The HistoryMakers.

Video Oral History Interview with Okoro Harold Johnson, Section A2002_041_001_005, TRT: 0:23:07 ?

Okoro Johnson narrates his photographs.