

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Paul Carter Harrison

PERSON

Harrison, Paul Carter, 1936-

Alternative Names: Paul Carter Harrison;

Life Dates: March 1, 1936-December 28, 2021

Place of Birth: New York, New York, USA

Residence: Atlanta, GA

Occupations: Playwright;

Biographical Note

Playwright, professor, and African American theatre expert Paul Carter Harrison was born March 1, 1936, in New York, New York. His parents, Thelma Inez Harrison and Paul Randolph Harrison, were from North and South Carolina, respectively, with backgrounds rooted in the Garvey Movement, the A.M.E. Church, and Gullah culture. Harrison's brother, Kenneth, was the first black basketball player at Villanova University. Harrison attended P.S. 113 and graduated from Commerce High School in 1952. At New York University in Greenwich Village, sixteen-year-old Harrison met cutting edge artists, writers, and musicians including Billy Dee Williams, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Ted Joans, and Thelonius Monk. He transferred to Indiana University in 1953, where he met "Sweet" Charlie Brown, Freddie Hubbard, and David Baker. He was awarded a B.A. in psychology in 1957. Returning to New York, Harrison earned an M.A. in psychology and phenomenology from the New School for Social Research in 1962.

Shelving his plans for a Ph.D. in 1962, Harrison spent seven years in Spain and the Netherlands, honing his writing and experimenting in theatre. In Amsterdam he met students from Surinam with whom he dialogued about the drama of African ritual. Harrison wrote a film script, *Stranger On The Square*, and two plays: *The Experimental Leader* and *Dialogue from the Opposition*.

From 1968 to 1970, Harrison taught theater at Howard University, where his students included Phylicia Rashad, Debbie Allen, Linda Goss, Petronia Bailey, Clinton T. Davis, and Pearl Cleage. At the State University of California at Sacramento, 1970-72, he wrote and directed *Tabernacle* and directed Melvin Van Peebles' *Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death*. In 1973, his play *The Great McDaddy*, produced by the Negro Ensemble Company, won an Obie Award. From 1972 to 1976, Harrison taught at the

University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he later was professor emeritus. He wrote film scripts for *Lord Shango* (1975) and *Youngblood* (1978). In 1976, Harrison was hired as professor and writer-in-residence at the Theatre Center of Chicago's Columbia College, where he served until his retirement in 2002. While in Chicago, Harrison directed ETA's acclaimed production of Marsha Leslie's *The Trial of One Short Sighted Black Woman* (1996) and Columbia's *Doxology* (2002). Harrison's books include *The Drama of Nommo and Totem Voices: Plays From the Black World Repertory* (1972), *Kuntu Drama: Plays From the African Continuum* (1974), *In The Shadow of the Great White Way* (intro 1989), *Classic Plays from the Negro Ensemble Company* (1995), and *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* (2003). He last lived in New York City.

Harrison passed away on December 28, 2021.

Related Entries

Commerce High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

P.S. 113 Anthony J. Pranzo [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

New York University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Indiana University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

B.A.

Howard University [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1968 to 1970]

Professor of Theater

University of Massachusetts [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1972 to 1976]

Professor

Columbia College Chicago [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1976 to 2002]

Chairman of the Theater Department

eta Creative Arts Foundation [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Resident Artist

