

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Barbara Ann Teer

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## 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>	Teer, Barbara Ann
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Ann Teer,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 6, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:47:43).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Arts administrator Barbara Ann Teer (1937 - 2008 ) was the founder and chief director of the National Black Theater, whose mission was to maintain and develop African American cultural traditions. Teer was recognized as a global business leader, receiving more than sixty awards and citations. Teer was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 6, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_126
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Founder and CEO of the National Black Theatre, Inc., Barbara Ann Teer was born in East St. Louis, Illinois on June 18, 1937, to a family of educators and leaders in the field of community development. After graduating magna cum laude with her degree in dance education from the University of Illinois, Teer moved to New York City to begin her career as an actress, dancer, and director.

In the 1960s, Teer left show business to begin teaching at Harlem's Wadleigh

Junior High School; her methods helped to develop the Group Theatre Workshop, which became the foundation for the world renowned Negro Ensemble Company. In 1968, Teer founded the National Black Theatre with the aim of maintaining and developing African American cultural traditions. In 1983, Teer expanded the purpose and vision of the National Black Theatre by purchasing a 64,000 square foot city block of property on 125th Street and Fifth Avenue, creating the first revenue generating black art complex in the country by housing several entrepreneurial businesses.

In May 1994, Teer was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Rochester, New York; in 1995, she received an honorary doctorate degree of humane letters from the University of Southern Illinois. Teer is included in Who's Who Worldwide, which recognizes her as a global business leader and has received more than sixty awards and citations. Teer passed away on July 21, 2008 at the age of 71. She leaves behind two children: her son, Michael F. Lythcott, is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University's Business School and her daughter, Barbara A. Lythcott, is a graduate of New York University.

Dr. Barbara Ann Teer passed away on July 21, 2008, at the age of seventy-one.

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## **Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Barbara Ann Teer was conducted by Shawn Wilson on June 6, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Arts administrator Barbara Ann Teer (1937 - 2008 ) was the founder and chief director of the National Black Theater, whose mission was to maintain and develop African American cultural traditions. Teer was recognized as a global business leader, receiving more than sixty awards and citations.

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## **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®.

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## **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.

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## **Controlled Access Terms**

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### **Persons:**

Teer, Barbara Ann

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghilea, Neculai (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Teer, Barbara Ann--Interviews

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African American dramatists--Interviews

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Women dramatists, American--Interviews

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Acting teachers--Interviews

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African American women educators--Interviews

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African Americans in the performing arts--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Arts Administrator

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

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## **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 Barbara Ann Teer, June 6, 2005. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Ann Teer, Section  
A2005\_126\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:27 2005/06/06

Barbara Ann Teer was born on June 18, 1937 in East St. Louis, Illinois. Her paternal grandparents were born in Shuqualak, Mississippi. Her paternal grandmother was a teacher and her grandfather was a Mason who had been active in the 1917 race riots in Illinois. Her maternal grandparents moved from Mississippi to Chicago, Illinois, where her grandmother worked for a wealthy family. Teer's father was born in 1912, and was an educator, politician, newspaper publisher and owner of a printing press. Her parents met at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Her sister, Frederica Lila Teer, was a founder of CORE. After graduating from Lincoln High School, Teer attended Bennett College for a year, where she became interested in dance. She transferred to UIUC, and after graduation, traveled to Berlin, Germany to study under modern dance pioneer Mary Wigman. Teer describes her dance and theatrical career, growing up in East St. Louis, her early encounters with racism, and leaving her hometown at fifteen.

African American dramatists--Interviews.

Women dramatists, American--Interviews.

Acting teachers--Interviews.

African American women educators--Interviews.

African Americans in the performing arts--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Ann Teer, Section  
A2005\_126\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:45 2005/06/06

Barbara Ann Teer grew up in East St. Louis, Illinois, home to other notable African Americans like Miles Davis, Donald McHenry, Amos Leon Thomas, Jr., Tina Turner, Ike Turner and Josephine Baker. Teer attended Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary School, Hughes-Quinn Junior High School, and East St. Louis Lincoln High School. Her family worshipped at Wesley Bethel Church. After graduating from the University of Illinois, Teer went to Berlin to learn from modern dance pioneer Mary Wigman. Returning to New York, she studied dance with Alwin Nikolais at Henry Street Settlement for over three years, before transitioning to theatre. She studied acting under the guidance of HistoryMaker Lloyd Richards, Sanford Meisner, Philip Burton and Paul Mann. Teer recalls performing on Broadway; being appointed dance captain in the Agnes de Mille-choreographed, Tony-Award winning play 'Kwamina;' and publishing her writings in The New York Times and The New York Amsterdam News. She also contrasts modern dance with black dance.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Ann Teer, Section  
A2005\_126\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:22 2005/06/06

Barbara Ann Teer left show business in the 1960s to begin teaching at Wadleigh Junior High School in Harlem. She helped develop the Group Theatre Workshop with HistoryMaker Robert Hooks, which became the foundation for the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC). Due to ideological differences, Teer separated from the NEC in 1968 and founded the National Black Theatre in Harlem to maintain and develop African American cultural traditions. She created the first revenue generating black art complex in the country by housing several entrepreneurial businesses in the theater's space. Teer also helped co-found the Black Arts Movement in Harlem. She traveled to Africa on a Ford Foundation fellowship and

forged ties with local theaters in Nigeria. Teer describes Harlem in the 1960s; her relationship with The Nation of Islam, The Last Poets and Amiri Baraka; and her thoughts about playwrights such as HistoryMaker Paul Carter Harrison and Joseph Walker. She also reflects upon black theater and the spirituality of her art form.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Ann Teer, Section  
A2005\_126\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:12 2005/06/06

Barbara Ann Teer and her company, the National Black Theatre, attended the Second World Festival of Black Arts and Culture, or FESTAC, in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977, where their performance of 'A Revival: Change, Love Together, Organize!' was widely acclaimed. She describes the festival's highlights, her travels in Nigeria and performing there again in 1984. Teer visited Africa over thirty times, and called Nigeria her second home. Teer shares her vision for a series about five women icons, including Billie Holiday, Dorothy Dandridge, Marian Anderson, to showcase their achievements rather than depict their lives as tragic. In reflecting upon her life and career, Teer notes her unique mark in the black arts and theatre community. She also describes how she would like to be remembered, the importance of preserving history, and the transformation and gentrification of her community in Harlem, New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Ann Teer, Section  
A2005\_126\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:24 2005/06/06

Barbara Ann Teer established the National Black Theatre in 1968 in Harlem, New York to maintain and develop African American cultural traditions. Teer met HistoryMakers Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee when her ex-husband, Godfrey Cambridge, performed the lead in the Broadway show 'Purlie.' Through them, she met Malcolm X, and later paid tribute to his life with her piece 'Rise: A Love Poem for A Love People.' In 1977, Teer and her students performed at FESTAC in Nigeria, a country that became her second home. Teer describes FESTAC's purpose of bringing together artists of African descent from across the globe and promoting unity. She reflects upon the gentrification of Harlem since she moved into the community, the need to re-interpret black history, the

empowering learning environment of the National Black Theatre, the power of theatre, the sustainability of her theatre and her legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Ann Teer, Section A2005\_126\_001\_006, TRT: 0:20:33 2005/06/06

Barbara Ann Teer narrates her photographs.