

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Arthur Wellesley French

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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>	French, Arthur
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Wellesley French,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 7, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:23:05).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Stage actor, film actor, and stage director Arthur Wellesley French (1949 - ) has appeared regularly on and off Broadway and in movies and television. Along with Audience Development Committee nominations and much critical acclaim, French won an Obie Award for Sustained Excellence of Performance in 1997. French also has taught acting at Herbert Berghof (HB) Studio in New York. French was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 7, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_127
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

A director and actor who has appeared regularly on and off Broadway and in movies and television for more than forty years, Arthur Wellesley French, Jr. was born in New York City to Arthur Wellesley French and Ursilla Itonia Ollivierre. Educated at Brooklyn College, French worked for the New York City Department of Social Services before he began studying the Strasberg technique with Peggy

Feury and acting in community theatre. He also studied with Maxwell Glanville, the founder of the Dramatic Workshop, as well as performing street plays in Harlem for Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theater. A role in an off-Broadway satirical play, *Raisin' Hell in the Son* at the Provincetown Playhouse, launched his career as a professional actor.

In 1965, French appeared in Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, out of which the Negro Ensemble Company evolved in 1967, producing professional theatre using Black artists, performers, writers, directors, actors, and craftspeople. During his career, French has performed in plays by Lonne Elder III, Ron Milner and August Wilson; a list which, including Ward, encompasses many contemporary African American playwrights. While French's broad body of work in theatre includes acting in everything from *Death of a Salesman* with George C. Scott and Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Melvin van Peebles' *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*, he has also appeared in films including *Malcolm X*, *Crooklyn*, *Car Wash*, *Round Midnight*, *Kinsey*, and on television programs such as *Law and Order*, as well as in commercials. He has directed, among others, the South African playwright Lungelo Mvusi's *Just Won't*; Marjorie Elliott's *Branches from the Same Tree*; Clifford Mason's *Two Bourgeois Blacks*; George Bernard Shaw's *The Village Wooing*; Steve Carter's *One Last Look*; Rudy Gray's *Chameleon*; Estelle Ritchie's *Love You to Pieces* and Wole Soyinka's *Strong Breed* for which he garnered two Audience Development Committee (AUDELCO) nominations.

Along with the Audience Development Committee nominations and much critical acclaim, French won the Obie for Sustained Excellence of Performance in 1997. French currently teaches acting at Herbert Berghof (HB) Studio in New York as he continues to direct and to act on stage and in film.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Arthur Wellesley French was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 7, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Stage actor, film actor, and stage director Arthur Wellesley French (1949 - ) has appeared regularly on and off Broadway and in movies and television. Along with Audience Development Committee nominations and much critical acclaim, French won an Obie Award for Sustained Excellence of Performance in 1997. French also has taught acting at Herbert Berghof (HB) Studio in New York.

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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:

French, Arthur

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Stage Actor

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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 Arthur Wellesley French, June 7, 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

## 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 Arthur Wellesley French, Section A2005\_127\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:17 2005/06/07

Arthur Wellesley French was born on November 6, 1949 in New York City. His mother, Ursilla Ollivierre French, was born in St. Vincent and the Grenadines in 1901. Her father was an assimilado, or African subject in the Portuguese colonies, and her mother was from Barbados. French's mother immigrated first to Miami, Florida, but after being threatened by the Ku Klux Klan, fled to New York City where she was an organizer for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. His father, Arthur French, Sr. was born in 1889, also in St. Vincent, and raised in Barbados. After working on the Panama Canal and traveling the world as a seaman, he settled in New York and met French's mother. Unable to join the segregated printers unions despite his training, he worked odd jobs. French grew up an only child though both parents had children from previous relationships. In Harlem, he first aspired to be a preacher, attended P.S. 90 and J.H.S. 40, and saw Duke Ellington and Pigmeat Markham at the Apollo Theater.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Wellesley French, Section A2005\_127\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:16 2005/06/07

Arthur Wellesley French's strict parents did not allow him to roam the neighborhood unsupervised. While growing up Harlem, New York City, he saw HistoryMaker The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan speak at Lewis

Michaux's African National Memorial Bookstore. At St. Philip's Episcopal Church, he performed with the H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players Theater Group. Having few friends, French spent his time reading, studying dance, singing, and acting, and honing his talent for accents and funny voices. Although asthma limited his physical activity initially, in high school he played basketball and was coached by Floyd Layne, who was later involved in the City Colleges of New York point shaving scandal. French attended The Bronx High School of Science and Morris High School. After his father's death, he helped his mother earn extra money by embroidering material she brought home from her job at a garment factory. After graduating from high school, he worked as a clerk for the New York City Department of Social Services.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Wellesley French, Section A2005\_127\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:12 2005/06/07

Arthur Wellesley French worked as a clerk for the New York City Department of Social Services. He also was a stagehand for doo-wop groups The Crickets and Lillian Leach and the Mellows in the late 1950s. After an article piqued his interest, French attended Dramatic Workshop in New York City where he studied under acting coach Peggy Feury, teacher of Lily Tomlin, Angelica Huston, and HistoryMaker Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr. After joining Maxwell Granville's American Negro Theater, he met HistoryMakers playwright Gertrude Hadley Jeannette and actor Roscoe Lee Browne. Working behind the scenes of Jean Genet's 'The Blacks: A Clown Show' enabled him to see the inspiring performances of HistoryMakers Maya Angelou and James Earl Jones. His first acting role was in the off-Broadway production of 'Raisin' Hell in the Son,' a parody of 'A Raisin in the Sun,' starring HistoryMaker Janet Angel McLachlan. He married former Fisk Jubilee Singer Antoinette Williams in 1961 in her hometown, Tyler, Texas.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Wellesley French, Section A2005\_127\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:27 2005/06/07

Arthur Wellesley French acted in three summer stock plays, including HistoryMaker Ossie Davis' 'Purlie Victorious,' at Hedgerow Theater Company in Rose

Valley, Pennsylvania. He appeared in HistoryMaker Douglas Turner Ward's 'Day of Absence,' which garnered significant attention for its sharp political commentary, and was seen by many notable entertainers and politicians. French's performances in 'Day of Absence' and 'Happy Ending' led to working with the Negro Ensemble Company during its first three years of producing groundbreaking shows featuring black life. French kept his day job at the New York City Department of Social Services until leaving in 1971 to focus solely on acting. Shortly after arriving in Hollywood to pursue work in film and television, French landed a role in the musical 'Daddy Goodness' in New York City, so he spent his remaining time in California vacationing with his children. French also describes the play 'Perry's Mission' and his approach to reading reviews of his performances.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Wellesley French, Section A2005\_127\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:54 2005/06/07

Arthur Wellesley French was one of only two students in his junior high school class to pass the admissions test for the Bronx High School of Science, despite his teacher's prediction that he would fail. French made his Broadway debut in HistoryMaker Melvin Van Peebles' musical 'Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death,' directed by Gilbert Moses. The play ran at the Ambassador Theatre after having to leave its opening location, the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Although there was initial concern about filling seats, 'Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death' was a success. It was performed at the Tony Awards, and Shirley Chisholm first announced her presidential candidacy at one of the shows. French quit the New York City Department of Social Services in 1971 to act full time. He describes his roles in various productions, including the 'The Iceman Cometh' at The Circle in Square Theatre in New York City, his film debut in the 1973 movie 'Car Wash,' and HistoryMaker Michael A. Schultz's production of 'Mule Bone.'

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Wellesley French, Section A2005\_127\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:15 2005/06/07

Arthur Wellesley French appeared in the Negro Ensemble Company's 'Song of the Lusitanian Bogey' at the Royal

Strand Theatre in London, England. When protesters disrupted the performance, the cast chose to continue the show despite fearing for their lives. French performed in several plays, including 'The River Niger' and 'Death of a Salesman.' His awards include Best Actor from the Audience Development Committee, Inc. for his role in 'Ceremonies in Dark Old Men' and its revival, and Best Supporting Actor for 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone.' Working with Rosetta LeNoire during a production of 'You Can't Take it With You,' the two became friends, and French admired her greatly. French also appeared in movies including 'Crooklyn' and 'Malcolm X' and minor roles on the 'Law & Order' franchise. At the time of the interview, he had recently produced a feature film called 'Bellclair Times' and was teaching a class at HB Studio in New York City. French also remembers playwrights August Wilson and Lonne Elders III.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Wellesley French, Section A2005\_127\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:44 2005/06/07

Arthur Wellesley French talks about the theme of passing in a film he produced, 'Bellclair Times.' French talks about his training in method acting and its history. In remembering his mother's support, he recalls how she encouraged him to pursue his dream of acting out of her own regret at being discouraged from a career in dance. While describing the continuing misrepresentation of African Americans in film and television, he notes the lack of roles for black people, even in adaptations where the characters were originally black. He shares his thoughts and advice for tackling discrimination and historical misrepresentation. French reflects upon his hopes and concerns for the African American community, his life, his legacy, and how he would like to be remembered.