

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Harry J. Lennix

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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>	Lennix, Harry J.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 1, 2006 and May 3, 2018
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006 and 2018
<b>Physical Description:</b>	12 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:50:26).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Stage actor and film actor Harry J. Lennix (1964 - ) received both a Tree of Life Award from the NAACP and a Golden Satellite Award from the International Press Academy for his performance as Aaron in the film, 'Titus'. He founded Legacy Productions with Goodman Theatre director Chuck Smith, and serves on the advisory board of the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. Lennix was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 1, 2006 and May 3, 2018, in Chicago, Illinois and Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_057
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actor Harry J. Lennix was born the last of three children in Chicago, Illinois, on November 16, 1964, to Harry and Lillian Lennix. He grew up in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood, the youngest of three siblings, and was raised by a single mother. His father died when Lennix was only two years old. Lennix attended Quigley Preparatory Seminary where he studied to become a Dominican priest. He did well in school, and upon graduation attended Northwestern University.

At Northwestern University, Lennix became interested in theater. He majored in acting and directing and was a member of For Members Only, an African American student organization at Northwestern. He was also awarded the School of Communications' Sandra Singer Scholarship for talented theater students. After graduation, Lennix spent eight years teaching in Chicago Public Schools, although he began to perform in prominent Chicago theaters, including the Goodman and Steppenwolf Theatres.

Lennix's acting career began to take off in the late 1980s. His first film role was in 1989's *The Package*, filmed on location in Chicago. Lennix continued working in theater, and the following year, he won an Obie award for his portrayal of Malcolm X in *The Meeting*. After relocating to New York City, Lennix performed in the play *Titus Andronicus*. He would reprise this role when the play became a film (*Titus*) in 1999. Lennix received both a Tree of Life Award from the NAACP and a Golden Satellite Award from the International Press Academy for his performance in that film. Lennix's film and television credits are numerous. He has had significant roles in movies such as *Ray*, *Love and Basketball*, *Get on the Bus*, *Barbershop 2: Back in Business* and *The Matrix: Revolutions*, among others. His television credits included a major role on NBC's acclaimed series *Commander in Chief* as well as parts in *E.R.*, *Diagnosis Murder* and *House, M.D.*.

Lennix is known for playing stern and stoic characters. He joined forces with Goodman Theatre director Chuck Smith to form Legacy Productions. The company has performed plays throughout the country. Although he resides in Los Angeles, Lennix is on the board of advisors at Chicago's Goodman Theater, and continues to work as a stage actor, including a role in 2005 in the play *Permanent Collection*.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Harry J. Lennix was conducted by Larry Crowe and Paul Brock on April 1, 2006 and May 3, 2018, in Chicago, Illinois and Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 12 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Stage actor and film actor Harry J. Lennix (1964 - ) received both a Tree of Life Award from the NAACP and a Golden Satellite Award from the International Press Academy for his performance as Aaron in the film, 'Titus'. He founded Legacy Productions with Goodman Theatre director Chuck Smith, and serves on the advisory board of the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois.

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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:

Lennix, Harry J.

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Lennix, Harry J.--Interviews

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African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews

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African American motion picture actors and actresses--Interviews

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African American actors--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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Goodman Theatre (Chicago, Ill.)

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## Occupations:

Stage Actor

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Film Actor

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers|EntertainmentMakers

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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 Harry J. Lennix, April 1, 2006 and May 3, 2018. 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).

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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 Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

Harry J. Lennix was born November 16, 1964 in Chicago, Illinois to Lillian Vines Lennix and Harry Lennix II. His maternal great-great-grandfather was a slave from Africa and his maternal great-grandfather owned a grocery store. His maternal grandparents, Addie Owens Vines and James Vines, were farmers in North Carolina with thirteen children of which his mother was second oldest. Lennix's paternal family is Leni Lenape Native American, Creole, and African. His paternal great-grandfather, Isaac Lennix, was a teacher and his paternal grandfather, Harry Lennix I, was a cooper and jazz trombonist in St. John the Baptist Parish, Louisiana. That parish was the sight of the German Coast Uprising, which was the largest slave rebellion in U.S. history. Lennix reflects upon the rebellion and others like it around the world. Lennix's father was born in 1925 in Louisiana. Both of his parents worked on plantations as children. His mother grew up in Newport News, Virginia during the Great Depression.

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews.

African American motion picture actors and actresses--Interviews.

African American actors--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Harry J. Lennix's maternal grandfather was a farmer and custodian in Newport News, Virginia. Lennix recalls his mother's strong sense of smell, strength, singing and ironing ability. She studied at a community college for two years in Virginia, then moved to Chicago, Illinois to escape the restrictions of the South, and worked in the gift wrapping department at Spiegel, Inc. Lennix's parents met in 1950. He recalls that his father aspired to be a singer, but worked as a mechanic and taxi driver. His parents dated for almost eight years before they married and had children. Lennix was born prematurely and spent the beginning of his life in an incubator. He was not expected to survive, so his mother refused to see him, but his father visited every day. When Lennix was two years old, his father died from Hodgkin's lymphoma, so Lennix grew up in Chicago with his mother, siblings and uncle, Roland Lennix. He describes his siblings' personalities and professions and remembers visits to his maternal grandmother.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Harry J. Lennix grew up in Chicago, Illinois' Morgan Park and South Shore neighborhoods. He remembers his father's death, his neighborhood friends, block parties and watching television. Lennix visited his maternal grandmother in Virginia, where he spied on his uncle, was frightened by a mule and found his cousins lacking manners. He was quite sick as a child and his elementary school

teachers were concerned for his health. He attended Myra Bradwell Elementary School, St. Bride Elementary School and Quigley Preparatory Seminary South. The nuns at St. Bride were strict, and they forced Lennix's brother to write right-handed. In school, Lennix aspired to become a trombonist and the Pope. He performed in school plays, but had no real interest in acting until high school, when he was exposed to the famous actors of the time. Upon meeting Anita Blanchard, he abandoned his hope to become the Pope and attended Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois to be near her. The two never dated but became close friends.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_001\_004, TRT: 0:26:40 ?

Harry J. Lennix and his mother were avid readers, which gave Lennix an affinity for languages. He learned Latin, Thai, French and Spanish in seminary school and college. In high school, Lennix became interested in acting, studying the Stanislavski method of acting and the works of famous actors such as Marlon Brando, Richard Boleslawski and Michael Chekhov. His grandmother passed away while he was in high school. He attended Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. His first major was English literature, but he found that acting allowed him to express himself more. He changed his focus to the stage and directing. All three of his siblings had attended college before him, but none gave him advice when he enrolled at Northwestern University. He felt unprepared and intimidated during his freshman year, but quickly adapted and realized his capabilities, and his mother remained involved in his education. He recalls her romantic relationships, although she never remarried.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Harry J. Lennix worked in Northwestern University's library and cafeteria during the summers as part of his work-study program. During his sophomore year, he performed in Lorraine Hansberry's 'A Raisin in the Sun' and studied the performances of his classmates, who included such future notables as Vernon Jarrett and Daphne Maxwell Reid. Lennix performed in all three plays of Northwestern University's summer festival, SummerStage. He booked his first professional role that season, but was unable to accept due to his commitment to the festival. In his junior year, he performed in his first professional play at Goodman Theatre in Chicago. At Northwestern University, Lennix was chairman of For Members Only, an organization involved in the anti-apartheid movement and Chicago's black politics. They invited Harold Washington, Reverend Jesse L. Jackson and Dennis Brutus to campus, which Lennix recalls as racially divided. Lennix reflects upon his confidence as a young actor, and his family's thoughts on his career.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_002\_006, TRT: 6:30:09 ?

Harry J. Lennix grew up in Chicago, Illinois' South Shore neighborhood, then a hotspot for black arts and culture. There, he attended Quigley Preparatory Seminary South, where he saw his first professional play, 'Fiorello,' on a school trip. In 1982, he attended the Summer Academic Workshop at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, where he then enrolled in the following fall. He studied communications, and was mentored by historian Dr. Ulysses Jenkins. Upon graduating in 1986, he worked as a substitute teacher in Chicago Public Schools while acting in stage productions around the city, including 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,' 'The Meeting,' 'Highest Standard of Living,' and 'A Christmas Carol' at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. He also secured film roles in 'The Package' and 'A Mother's Courage: The Mary Thomas Story' in 1989. In 1990, he was cast in the film 'The Five Heartbeats,' for which he received national recognition. Lennix also talks about colorblind casting and the black

theaters of the 1980s.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_002\_007, TRT: 7:28:41 ?

Harry J. Lennix worked with choreographer Michael Peters and actors Michael Wright, Leon Robinson, Tico Wells and Robert Townsend while filming 'The Five Heartbeats' in Los Angeles, California. He continued to live in Chicago, Illinois, where he also worked as a substitute teacher in Chicago Public Schools; as such, he brought the film's lead actors to visit Perkins Bass Elementary School. During this period, Lennix began questioning his Catholic faith. He became a student of the Nation of Islam, and attended Mosque Maryam in Chicago, having initially been introduced to the faith by his childhood neighbors. At this point in the interview, Lennix talks about dance and vocal techniques for actors; and he remembers the distinctive voices of prominent black actors and singers like James Earl Jones and Shirley Verrett. He also describes the differences between stage and film acting, and how technological changes to media platforms have reduced the compensation actors and filmmakers receive for their work.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_002\_008, TRT: 8:28:42 ?

Harry J. Lennix moved to New York City in 1991. In the next year, he appeared in the films 'Mo' Money' and 'Bob Roberts.' In 1994, Lennix played Aaron the Moor in a production of 'Titus Andronicus' at the Theatre for a New Audience, directed by Julie Taymor. He later played the role of Othello at Chicago's Court Theatre, receiving accolades from Shakespeare scholar David Bevington in spite of his discomfort with the role. During this time, Lennix and Gregory Alan Williams formed a company to tour Jeff Stetson's 'The Meeting,' with an extended run at Jomandi Productions in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1998, Lennix returned to the role of Aaron the Moor in the movie 'Titus,' working with actors Anthony Hopkins and Angus Macfadyen. At this point in the interview, Lennix reflects upon the impact of race on his career, which he dealt with by creating his own projects. Lennix also talks about his respect for the Nation of Islam; and Denzel Washington's portrayal of Malcolm X in the play 'When Chickens Come Home to Roost.'

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_002\_009, TRT: 9:30:04 ?

Harry J. Lennix worked with actors Mekhi Phifer, John Turturro and Harvey Keitel on Spike Lee's 1994 film 'Clockers.' He also appeared in the 1996 movie 'Get on the Bus,' which depicted the Million Man March. In 1996 and 1997, Lennix appeared in a recurring role on 'ER,' and returned to Chicago, Illinois, for a production of 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom' at the Goodman Theatre. He then worked with Dick Van Dyke and Victoria Rowell for six episodes of 'Diagnosis Murder.' In 2000, Lennix played Walter Lee Younger in the Goodman Theatre's production of 'A Raisin in the Sun,' with actors Irma P. Hall, T'Keyah Crystal Keymáh and Dwain A. Perry. He received the 2000 Satellite Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role in 'Titus,' and appeared in the film 'Love and Basketball.' In 2001, he acted in Bartlett Sher's production of 'Cymbeline,' which toured to Stratford-Upon-Avon, England at the invitation of the Royal Shakespeare Company. In 2002, he played Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. in the movie 'Keep the Faith, Baby.'

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_002\_010, TRT: 10:28:41 ?

Harry J. Lennix appeared as Assistant Attorney General Parker in a 2003 episode of 'The Practice.' He also worked with the Wachowskis, Cornel West and actor Laurence Fishburne in the 2003 films 'The Matrix Reloaded' and 'The Matrix Revolutions,' in which he played Commander Lock. Lennix went on to act alongside Anthony Hopkins and Anna Deavere Smith in 'The Human Stain,'

directed by Robert Benton. Then, he played Joe Adams in Taylor Hackford's 2004 biopic about Ray Charles titled 'Ray'; and Quentin Leroux in 'Barbershop 2: Back in Business,' which was filmed on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. In the 2005 film 'Chrystal,' Lennix played a blind musicologist, using methods he learned from observing actor Jamie Foxx's portrayal of Ray Charles. He appeared in 'Suspect Zero,' which was filmed in Albuquerque, New Mexico; and the play 'Permanent Collection' at Northlight Theatre in Skokie, Illinois. At this point in the interview, Lennix describes his process as an actor and his perspective on improvisation.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_002\_011, TRT: 11:30:19 ?

Harry J. Lennix was nominated for the 2006 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Supporting Actor for his role in the television show 'Commander in Chief.' In 2007, Lennix produced and played the title role in a black production of 'Macbeth' in Los Angeles, California, using a script edited to remove playwright Thomas Middleton's additions. Then, in the Broadway production of August Wilson's play 'Radio Golf,' he starred as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's fictional first black mayor, Harmond Wilks, a role which Wilson had written with Lennix in mind after seeing his portrayal of King Hedley II in the eponymous play. That same year, Lennix appeared as Walid Al-Rezani on the television show '24,' and as Bob Satterfield Jr. in Rod Lurie's 'Resurrecting the Champ.' Lennix talks about his campaigning efforts for Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2008; and shares his opinion of Barack Obama's leadership in Congress and the White House. He also reflects upon on his childhood in Chicago, Illinois' South Shore neighborhood.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry J. Lennix, Section A2006\_057\_002\_012, TRT: 12:30:30 ?

Harry J. Lennix appeared as the U.S. President on the television show 'Little Britain USA.' In 2008, he directed his first film, the short 'Fly Like Mercury,' written by Reginald Nelson and produced by David Schwimmer. In 2009 and 2010, he starred on Joss Whedon's 'Dollhouse,' played Draco in the short film 'The Interview' and produced his first film, 'Mr. Sophistication.' He went on to appear on 'Law and Order: LA' in 2011, and in the movie 'A Beautiful Soul' in 2012. In 2013, Lennix produced 'H4,' a modernized version of William Shakespeare's 'Henry IV' set in Los Angeles, California. During this time, he received a call to play Harold Cooper in 'The Blacklist,' a role which he ultimately accepted, despite his thoughts to retire from acting. Lennix also produced 'Revival!,' a rendition of the Gospel of John. He reflects upon his life, his favorite role and the film 'Black Panther.' He also describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community; and shares his advice to young black actors.