

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles Randolph-Wright

---

## 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>	Randolph-Wright, Charles
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles Randolph-Wright,
<b>Dates:</b>	November 5, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:25:48).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Choreographer and film director Charles Randolph-Wright (1956 - ) was cast in the original theatrical production of 'Dreamgirls,' and produced and wrote for the Showtime cable television series, 'Linc's.' He was also the award-winning director of the musical, 'Senor Discretion Himself,' and the film, 'Preaching to the Choir.' Randolph-Wright was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 5, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_129
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Charles Randolph-Wright was born an only child in York, South Carolina, on August 26, 1956, to Ruth and Charles Randolph-Wright, Sr. He attended Jefferson elementary and junior high schools. Randolph-Wright graduated with honors from York High School in 1974, where he was the first African American A.B. Duke Scholarship recipient.

Randolph-Wright entered Duke University as a pre-med major. During his junior year at Duke University, Randolph-Wright decided to change his major to religion and theater. In 1976, he was afforded the opportunity to go to London. Subsequently, he studied acting with the Royal Shakespeare Company and danced with Alvin Ailey in New York. Randolph-Wright graduated with honors from Duke University in 1978 with his B.A. degree in theater and religion.

In 1979, Randolph-Wright relocated to New York City where he was cast in *Pippin* and in the original cast of *Dreamgirls*. Randolph-Wright has built a dynamic and diversified career in performing, producing, directing and writing for theater, television, and film. He was the producer and writer for the Showtime cable television series *Linc's*. Randolph-Wright's musical staging has been seen on a variety of programs, including *The Golden Girls*. Randolph-Wright's direction of *Senor Discretion Himself* won the Helen Hayes Award for the Best Musical. He made his film directorial debut in 2006 with *Preaching to the Choir*, which won feature prizes at the ninth annual American Black Film Festival.

Randolph-Wright serves on the board of directors of the Roundabout Theater and the artistic board at Duke University. He is also a founding member of the Wright Family Foundation of South Carolina. After learning that an ancestor was a free man during slavery, this foundation converted the family's former funeral home into a family history museum.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles Randolph-Wright was conducted by Denise Gines on November 5, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Choreographer and film director Charles Randolph-Wright (1956 - ) was cast in the original theatrical production of 'Dreamgirls,' and produced and wrote for the Showtime cable television series, 'Linc's.' He was also the award-winning director of the musical, 'Senor Discretion Himself,' and the film, 'Preaching to the Choir.'

---

## 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:

Randolph-Wright, Charles

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Randolph-Wright, Charles--Interviews

---

African American television producers and directors--Interviews

---

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews

---

African American actors--Interviews

---

Choreographers--Interviews

---

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews

---

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## **Occupations:**

Choreographer

---

Film Director

---

## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers|EntertainmentMakers

---

## **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 Charles Randolph-Wright, November 5, 2006. The HistoryMakers® African American Video

## 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).

---

## 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 Charles Randolph-Wright, Section A2006\_129\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:55 2006/11/05

Charles Randolph-Wright was born on August 26, 1956 in York, South Carolina to Ruth Lillian Lucas Wright Johnson and Charles R. Wright, Sr. When his paternal ancestors were freed after the Civil War, they assumed the maiden name of their former slaveholder's wife, who was kind and selfless. His father was born in the 1930s in York, where his family owned the Wright Funeral Home. Randolph-Wright's mother was born in 1930 in Bennettsville, South Carolina, where her parents were cotton sharecroppers. Due to her Native American ancestry, her mother struggled to make sense of her racial identity. Randolph-Wright's mother and her siblings all studied to become educators. Upon receiving her bachelor's degree in English from Colored Normal Industrial Agricultural and Mechanical College of South Carolina in Orangeburg, she became a high school teacher in York, where she and Randolph-Wright's father began their family. Randolph-Wright also describes his

upbringing and his mother's high standards.

African American television producers and directors--  
Interviews.

African American motion picture producers and directors--  
Interviews.

African American actors--Interviews.

Choreographers--Interviews.

African American theatrical producers and directors--  
Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Randolph-Wright, Section  
A2006\_129\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:23 2006/11/05

Charles Randolph-Wright's paternal ancestors founded the Wright Funeral Home in York, South Carolina, and his great uncle inherited the business. His paternal grandfather and father were brick masons, and constructed many of the buildings in York, a textile mill town. Randolph-Wright recalls how the railroad tracks segregated York's African American community. It was upon moving to York that Randolph-Wright's mother, an English teacher, met her husband, although they divorced when Randolph-Wright was young. In the mid-1950s, sociologist Hylan Lewis lived with Randolph-Wright's family while researching 'Blackways of Kent,' his study of York's black community. Years later, Randolph-Wright met his daughter, Carole Ione Lewis, the author of 'Pride of Family.' Randolph-Wright recalls the smells of southern cooking, and holiday celebrations with his extended family, who faced racial discrimination despite their relative affluence. He also reflects upon his family's values.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Randolph-Wright, Section  
A2006\_129\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:15 2006/11/05

Charles Randolph-Wright's paternal grandmother had Cherokee and Catawba Native American ancestry. His maternal family in Bennettsville, South Carolina was Baptist, while his immediate family was Methodist. Randolph-Wright attended the segregated Jefferson Elementary School in York, South Carolina. There, he participated in school traditions like May Day; studied

theater and African American history; and played trumpet in the school band at the all-state conference in Charleston, South Carolina. Randolph-Wright attended Jefferson Junior High School during the era of Freedom of Choice policies, when students could opt to attend a majority white school. Then, after desegregation was mandated, he became a student at York High School. Both the all-black Jefferson High School and the all-white Hickory Grove High School merged with the wealthier, white York High School, which resisted the other schools' traditions. The students of the merged schools worked together, and successfully advocated for their inclusion.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Randolph-Wright, Section A2006\_129\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:05 2006/11/05

Charles Randolph-Wright's family participated in the Civil Rights Movement in York, South Carolina and in Atlanta, Georgia, where his cousins lived, and his maternal grandmother voted in every election. At York High School, Randolph-Wright's mother worked as an English teacher, and Randolph-Wright developed his artistic ability under the tutelage of the band director, French teacher and guidance counselors. His senior year, he was elected vice president of South Carolina's state student government. He also received an award for earning the highest grade point average from the Sons of the American Revolution, which was presented by the local Ku Klux Klan (KKK) leader. Years later, the man left the KKK, and expressed his approval of Randolph-Wright's involvement in York's Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. parade. After retaking the SAT examination, Randolph-Wright became a National Merit Scholarship finalist. He enrolled at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, intending to complete his pre-medical studies.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Randolph-Wright, Section A2006\_129\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:02 2006/11/05

Charles Randolph-Wright matriculated as a pre-medical student at the majority white Duke University in Durham, North Carolina in 1974. Rejected by his fellow students, he befriended the campus staff instead. While drawn to art, Randolph-Wright was unsure of his abilities; until, in his second year, his English literature professor

encouraged his interest in performance. At first, he changed his major from psychology to religion; but then, upon seeing 'Pippin,' decided to pursue theater. Mary Semans, a friend from choir, told him about a voice program in London, England, where he met Royal Shakespeare Company actors, including Albert Finney and Tom Conti. Returning to Duke University, Randolph-Wright abandoned his plans to study medicine, and became one of the university's first three drama majors. He graduated in 1978, and moved to New York City, where he was cast in 'Pippin.' In 1979, he joined a disco group, and sang with Anita Ward. Randolph-Wright also describes his mother's opinion of his career.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Randolph-Wright, Section A2006\_129\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:27 2006/11/05

Charles Randolph-Wright choreographed disco acts on 'American Bandstand' in the late 1970s. He took a theater workshop in New York City, he returned to the stage as a chorus member in 'Dreamgirls,' alongside Phylicia Rashad. He moved to Hollywood to pursue acting, but found that he was often typecast. Instead, Randolph-Wright began writing screenplays and directing shows in the 1980s. In 2000, he directed the fiftieth anniversary touring production of 'Guys and Dolls,' starring Maurice Hines, Jr. as Nathan Detroit. At the request of Jo Sullivan Loesser, Randolph-Wright directed her late husband, composer Frank Loesser's musical, 'Senor Discretion Himself,' in collaboration with Budd Schulberg. Randolph-Wright created 'Cuttin' Up,' based on Craig Marberry's book about American barbershops. His play, 'Blue,' was inspired by members of his family. Randolph-Wright also talks about Hollywood's representations of African Americans, and reflects upon the importance of storytelling.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Randolph-Wright, Section A2006\_129\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:41 2006/11/05

Charles Randolph-Wright's play, 'Blue,' starred Phylicia Rashad and singer Nona Hendryx. He went on to direct the twentieth anniversary production of the musical 'Hair,' featuring performances by Donna Summer and Nell Carter, and the film 'Preaching to the Choir.' In 1999,



Randolph-Wright spent New Year's Eve on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where he participated in the Brazilian tradition of making an offering to the sea goddess, Yemoja. From the start of his professional career, he regularly returned to York, South Carolina, his hometown, to provide community support, including through the Wright Family Foundation. Randolph-Wright reflects upon comparisons between himself and playwrights Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson, and the impact of the Harlem Renaissance. He also shares a message of hope for African American youth. Randolph-Wright concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life, and how he would like to be remembered.