

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Denise Nicholas

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Nicholas, Denise, 1944-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas,
Dates:	May 19, 2007 and May 21, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:23:56).
Abstract:	Actress and fiction writer Denise Nicholas (1944 -) was one of the first members of the Negro Ensemble Company. Her film and television credits include Let's Do It Again, Room 222 and the television version of In The Heat of the Night. Nicholas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 19, 2007 and May 21, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_177
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actress and fiction writer Denise Nicholas was born Donna Denise Nicholas on July 12th in Detroit, Michigan to Louise and Otto Nicholas. She grew up in Milan, Michigan, just south of Ann Arbor. After she graduated from Milan High School, she attended the University of Michigan. In 1963, she met Gilbert Moses, then a stage actor. The two married, and in 1964, Nicholas and Moses moved to Jackson, Mississippi.

Nicholas joined Moses' Free Southern Theater and with a small troupe of actors

performed significant plays for rural African-American audiences many of whom had never seen live theater before. They toured Ossie Davis' *Purlie Victorious*, Samuel Beckett's, *Waiting for Godot* as well as an *Evening of Poetry and Song*. Their production of *In White America* toured not only in Mississippi and Louisiana, but also in New York City. In 1965, the theater company moved its base of operations to New Orleans, Louisiana. Nicholas separated from Moses and the two were divorced in 1966.

Nicholas then moved to New York City and, in 1967, was one of the first members of the famous Negro Ensemble Company. She studied with dance instructor Louis Johnson and voice instructor Kristin Linklater and performed in a production of German dramatist Peter Weiss' *Song for Lusitanian Bogey*. The following year, she acted in a number of plays with the company, including *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *Daddy Goodness*. That same year, Nicholas was cast in her first television role, as a character on the ABC-TV series *It Takes a Thief*, an action-adventure series that aired until 1970.

In 1969, she was cast as "Liz McIntyre" on the popular television series *Room 222*, about an American history class at Walt Whitman High School in Los Angeles, California. The following year, she was nominated for an Emmy Award and two Golden Globes for her work on *Room 222*. Nicholas also received four NAACP Image Awards during her career. In 1972, she was cast in *Blacula*, a blaxploitation horror movie based on *Dracula* with William Marshall playing the title character. Throughout the 1970s, she continued to take prominent roles in films, including a series of movies with Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby that included 1975's *Let's Do It Again* and 1977's *A Piece of the Action*.

In 1981, she married Jim Hill, a Los Angeles sportscaster with KCBS-TV. In the early 1980s, she continued working on the stage, and was featured in *Voices of Our People: In Celebration of Black Poetry* for PBS. In 1987, Nicholas earned her B.A. degree in drama from the University of Southern California, and began teaching at the college that same year. In 1988, she returned to television, starring in *In the Heat of the Night* as Harriet DeLong, and in 1991 began writing for the program as well. In 1990, Nicholas again starred alongside Bill Cosby in *Ghost Dad*.

In 2005, Nicholas' first novel, *Freshwater Road*, was published to widespread critical acclaim. *New York Newsday* called it, "perhaps the best work of fiction about the Civil Rights Movement." In 2006, the novel won the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Legacy Award for Debut Fiction. That same year, the book won the American Library Association's Black Caucus Award for Debut Fiction.

Denise Nicholas was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 19, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Denise Nicholas was conducted by Julianna L. Richardson on May 19, 2007 and May 21, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Actress and fiction writer Denise Nicholas (1944 -) was one of the first members of the Negro Ensemble Company. Her film and television credits include *Let's Do It Again*, *Room 222* and the television version of *In The Heat of the Night*.

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:

Nicholas, Denise, 1944-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Nicholas, Denise, 1944---Interviews

African American actresses--Interviews.

African American authors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Actress

Fiction Writer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Denise Nicholas, May 19, 2007 and May 21, 2007. 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).

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 Denise Nicholas, Section
A2007_177_001_001, TRT: 0:30:10 2007/05/19

Denise Nicholas was born on July 12, 1944 in Detroit, Michigan to Louise Jones Burgen and Otto Nicholas, Sr. Her maternal grandfather, John Jones, served in World War I, and died in the 1930s, leaving her maternal

grandmother, Ethel Jones Bradley, to raise two daughters on her own in Detroit. Nicholas' paternal grandparents, Waddy Nicholas and Samuel Nicholas, came to Detroit from Harrisburg, Kentucky just before her father was born, and found retail and domestic work. Their family came from a mixed heritage of African American, white and Native American roots. Nicholas grew up on the west side of Detroit with her mother and brother, Otto Nicholas, Jr., after her parents divorced. Although she lived with her mother, Nicholas spent much of her childhood with her paternal grandparents. From the porch of her grandparents' home, she could smell the nearby Wonder Bread factory and Gulf Oil gas station. She also frequently visited her father, who was a numbers runner in Detroit, and owned a bar in Flint, Michigan.

African American families--Michigan--Detroit.

African American families--Michigan--Milan.

Passing (Identity).

African American grandmothers.

Migration, Internal--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas, Section
A2007_177_001_002, TRT: 0:29:30 2007/05/19

Denise Nicholas grew up in Detroit, Michigan, where her father, Otto Nicholas, Sr., brought her to nightclubs to listen to groups like the Modern Jazz Quartet. After her parents' divorce, Nicholas and her brother, Otto Nicholas, Jr., were particularly close. They lived with their mother, Louise Jones Burgen, and often visited their paternal grandparents, Waddy Nicholas and Samuel Nicholas, especially during the holidays. Due to her mother's financial difficulties, Nicholas' family moved frequently in Detroit, and she attended several elementary schools. She responded to her parents' divorce by focusing on her studies, and excelling academically. When her mother remarried, Nicholas moved to Milan, Michigan to live with her stepfather, Robert Burgen, while her brother remained in Detroit. In Milan, a small, rural and mostly white city, Nicholas was one of the few black students at Milan High School. There, she once confronted a history teacher who failed to mention slavery.

African American families.

African American children--Education (Secondary)--Michigan--Detroit.

African American single mothers.

African Americans--Social life and customs--Michigan.

African American extended families--Michigan.

Children of divorced parents--United States.

Divorced parents--United States.

Single parents.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas, Section
A2007_177_001_003, TRT: 0:29:40 2007/05/19

Denise Nicholas' father, Otto Nicholas, Sr., and stepfather, Robert Burgen, fostered her political interests during her teenage years through books like 'Listen, Yankee' by C. Wright Mills. Her father also funded her summer courses at the National High School Institute in Evanston, Illinois. After graduating high school, Nicholas attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she studied the arts and political science. After two years of study, she decided to take a leave of absence, and moved to New York City. She was hired at an advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, but soon met director Gilbert Moses. They married at the American Place Theatre in New York City, and moved to Jackson, Mississippi, where Moses and John O'Neal created the Free Southern Theater during the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964. In partnership with SNCC, the Free Southern Theater worked to share the arts with African Americans in the South. Nicholas initially worked as an administrator, but soon began acting in plays.

African American fathers.

African Americans--Education (Higher)--Michigan--Ann Arbor.

Afrocentrism.

University of Michigan.

African American college students--Political activity--Michigan--Ann Arbor.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored

People--Michigan--Ann Arbor.

J. Walter Thompson Company.

African Americans--Marriage.

Moses, Gilbert.

American Theatre of Actors (New York, N.Y.).

African American actresses.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas, Section
A2007_177_001_004, TRT: 0:29:30 2007/05/19

Denise Nicholas performed with the Free Southern Theater during its first season in 1964. The company was based in Jackson, Mississippi, and led by Doris Derby, John O'Neal and Nicholas' husband, Gilbert Moses. Its first production, 'In White America' by Martin Duberman, was performed in towns where SNCC voter registration projects were held. Along with their theatrical productions, the company held discussions with the audience following some of their performances. While performing, the Free Southern Theater was often threatened by white supremacy groups, and required the protection of guards. During her time with the Free Southern Theater, Nicholas grew as an actress, and learned to work within an ensemble. As threats towards the company grew, the headquarters transferred to New Orleans, Louisiana, and Nicholas moved to the city's French Quarter. She and Moses soon separated, and Nicholas moved to New York City to act in a touring production of 'Three Boards and a Passion.'

Duberman, Martin B.

Black theater.

Free Southern Theater.

Civil rights movements--Mississippi.

Tougaloo College.

African American churches.

Ku Klux Klan (1915-).

African American actresses.

African American actors.

African American civil rights workers.

Hamer, Fannie Lou.

Council of Federated Organizations (U.S.).

African Americans--Rural communities--Mississippi.

African Americans--Louisiana--New Orleans.

Divorce--United States.

Mississippi--Race relations--History--20th century.

Mississippi Freedom Project.

O'Neal, John, 1940-.

Derby, Doris Adelaide.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas, Section
A2007_177_001_005, TRT: 0:31:12 2007/05/19

Denise Nicholas was asked to tour with George Tabori's 'Three Boards and a Passion' after his wife, Viveca Lindfors, saw Nicholas' performance in the CBS special 'Look Up and Live.' The show travelled the Midwest for two months. After that production, Nicholas began studying with vocal coach Kristin Linklater, and joined the Negro Ensemble Company during its premier season in 1967. The members of the company, including Hattie Winston, Robert Hooks and Douglas Turner Ward, trained together in dance, voice and scene work. That year, Nicholas performed in 'Song of the Lusitanian Bogey,' 'Kongi's Harvest' and 'Daddy Goodness' at the St. Mark's Playhouse in New York City. Then, Nicholas left the company to pursue a career in screen acting. She moved to Los Angeles, California, and began filming the 'Room 222' comedy series. She and her fellow cast member, Lloyd Haynes, were among the few African American actors on television at the time, and experienced discrimination from the show's writers and directors.

African American actresses.

Open Theater.

Black theater.

Negro Ensemble Company.

Ford Foundation.

St. Marks Playhouse (Organization: New York, N.Y.).

African Americans--Television actors and actresses.

Television broadcasting--auditions.

Room 222 (Television program).

Weiss, Peter, 1916-1982.

Linklater, Kristin.

Television broadcasting--United States--History.

Ward, Douglas Turner.

Television series.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas, Section
A2007_177_001_006, TRT: 0:30:40 2007/05/19

Denise Nicholas starred in the 'Room 222' comedy television series from 1969 to 1974, and received two Golden Globe Award nominations for her performance. She conducted press tours to promote the show, which was one of the few programs on air with African American cast members. Nicholas became interested in scriptwriting, but was discouraged by the lack of African American writers on the series. She encouraged its producer, Gene Reynolds, to hire writers from the Negro Ensemble Company, without success. In the end, 'Room 222' was cancelled due to disagreements between the creator, James L. Brooks, and the ABC network regarding the show's style and plot. While filming 'Room 222,' Nicholas also starred in her first feature film, 'Blacula,' which became a cult classic. In 1975, she auditioned for Sidney Poitier's comedy 'Let's Do it Again,' but was initially rejected by Poitier, who did not find Nicholas comedic. She changed his mind, and starred in that film as well as Poitier's 'A Piece of the Action.'

African Americans--Television actors and actresses.

Room 222 (Television program).

Emmy Awards.

Golden Globe Awards.

Television broadcasting--Race relations.

Advertising--Television programs.

Mod Squad (Television program).

Uptown Saturday night (Motion picture).

African American actresses.

Television series.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas, Section
A2007_177_002_007, TRT: 0:31:14 2007/05/21

Denise Nicholas performed with the Negro Ensemble Company in New York City during its first season. In one production, Nicholas was cast as the understudy for an actress who was ill during a performance. In the first act, Nicholas forgot most of her lines; but, after her recovery in the second act, was approached by International Famous Agency and offered a contract. At the time, the Negro Ensemble Company was directed by Michael A. Schultz, although artistic director Douglas Turner Ward made most of the creative decisions. After leaving the Negro Ensemble Company, Nicholas transitioned from the stage to film, which required a busier schedule and a new style of acting. In 1989, she successfully auditioned for the role of Harriet DeLong in Carroll O'Connor's 'In the Heat of the Night,' and went on to write several episodes of the series. While acting, Nicholas returned to school to earn a B.A. degree in drama from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

Television broadcasting--Race relations.

African Americans--Television actors and actresses.

Negro Ensemble Company.

Black theater.

African Americans--Television writers.

Women television writers.

African American actors.

African American actresses.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas, Section
A2007_177_002_008, TRT: 0:28:50 2007/05/21

Denise Nicholas was married to director Gilbert Moses; singer Bill Withers; and sportscaster Jim Hill. Just before her final marriage to Hill, Nicholas' half-sister, Michele Burgen, was murdered in New York City. During this time, Nicholas starred in Carroll O'Connor's 'In the Heat of the Night,' and befriended him and his wife, Nancy Fields O'Connor. Nicholas' and O'Connor's characters eventually married on the show; and, as an interracial

couple, received backlash from both African American and white audiences. While acting on the show, Nicholas pitched plot lines to O'Connor, and eventually wrote full episodes, including one about the voter registration movement in Mississippi. Through this work, Nicholas realized that she preferred long form fiction to screenwriting. She enrolled in writing workshops in California with authors Janet Fitch and Natalie Goldberg. With their help, Nicholas' first novel, 'Freshwater Road,' took shape, and the book was published by Simon and Schuster, Inc. in 2005.

O'Connor, Carroll.

African Americans--Marriage.

African Americans--Divorce.

Moses, Gilbert.

Withers, Bill, vocalist.

African American authors.

Cold cases (Criminal investigation).

Bereavement--Personal narrative.

Brothers and sisters--Death--Psychological aspects.

African Americans--Death.

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas, Section
A2007_177_002_009, TRT: 0:23:10 2007/05/21

Denise Nicholas wrote the novel 'Freshwater Road' about the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964. The book's older male lead, Shuck, was based on her father, Otto Nicholas, Sr. His character represented the generation prior to the Civil Rights Movement, while the younger male character, Ed Jolivette, embodied the generation born out of the movement. Nicholas also describes her plans for her next book, her advice for young people aspiring to a career in the theater and her hopes and concerns for the African American community. She reflects upon her legacy, and concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

African American authors.

African Americans--Crimes against.

Fiction--Technique.

