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
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Creator: Denise Nicholas

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas,

Dates: May 19, 2007 and May 21, 2007

Bulk Dates: 2007

Physical Description: 9 Betacam SP videocassettes (4:23:50).

Abstract: Actress and fiction writer Denise Nicholas was one of the first members of the Negro Ensemble Company. Some of 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 the 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 and May 21, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Denise Nicholas was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on May 19, 2007 and May 21, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 Betacam SP videocassettes. Actress and fiction writer Denise Nicholas 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

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews.
Nicholas, Denise---Interviews.

African American actresses--Interviews.

African American authors--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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


Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 8/10/2011 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).
Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage, May 19, 2007 and May 21, 2007

Video Oral History Interview with Denise Nicholas, Section A2007_177_001_001, TRT: 0:30:10 2007/05/19

Denise Nicholas slates the interview and discusses her family's background. Nicholas was born on July 12th in Detroit, Michigan. Her mother, Louise Carolyn Jones Nicholas, who was born in Dayton, Ohio, had a difficult childhood. After Louise’s father died in the 1930s, she and her family struggled a great deal. Nicholas also points to evidence of “passing” in her maternal family’s history. Nicholas’ father, Otto Nicholas, was born in Harrisburg, Kentucky in 1920 and later migrated with his family to Detroit, Michigan. Otto was a numbers runner and owned a bar in Flint, Michigan. In discussing her father, she mentions that one of the characters in her book "Fresh Water Road" (2005) was inspired by him. Nicholas also talks about her maternal and paternal grandparents. She recalls the weekends she spent with her paternal grandmother, Waddie Bridgette Nicholas, who Nicholas describes as a great cook and a woman with high standards of living.

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 continues to discuss her family life and shares stories about their various traditions. Nicholas had two separate Christmas celebrations, one with her paternal grandparents and another with her immediate family. She also mentions the weekly family ritual of going to the library on Saturday. Nicholas was an avid reader and enjoyed reading books such as Emily Bronte’s "Wuthering Heights" and the "Nancy Drew" series. She also enjoyed school, where she received free violin lessons and was double promoted in the 8th and 9th grades. Nicholas states that she was a fragile child, who worshipped her father and felt insecure when her parents divorced. She does not recall her parents arguing, however, she remembers her mother crying when her father did not provide support. She goes on to elaborate on the difficulties of growing up in a single parent home, especially since all of her playmates appeared to have a two-parent household. Nicholas’ mother eventually remarried Robert Burgen, a probation supervisor from a prominent Detroit family. At the beginning of her mother’s marriage to Burgen, Nicholas lived alternately with her Aunt Ruby and her grandmother. Later, she joined her mother and stepfather in Milan, Michigan, where they were the only black family, which was a very stressful experience.
Denise Nicholas discusses the influence her father’s Afrocentric perspective had on her social and political consciousness. He encouraged Nicholas to love and accept her African American identity and to be politically engaged. As a college student at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Nicholas channeled her father’s advice by participating in the campus chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). During her sophomore year of college, she dropped out of school and moved to New York, New York, where she worked at J. Walter Thompson, an advertising agency. While in New York, Nicholas met her first husband, Gilbert Moses, a poet, musician, and writer, who had studied at Oberlin College and the Sorbonne in Paris. In May 1964, Nicholas and Moses were wed at the American Theater in New York and then moved to Jackson, Mississippi. Nicholas goes on to talk about the theater courses she took in college and the nascent stages of her acting career.

Denise Nicholas discusses Martin Duberman’s "In White America," the first play in which she performed with the Free Southern Theater, a performance troupe co-founded in 1963 by her husband Gilbert with Doris Derby and John O'Neal at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi. The play was staged in June 1964, in conjunction with civil rights activities, specifically, Freedom Summer. The fledgling theater's performances were coordinated by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) and toured in southern towns that were involved in voter registration campaigns. Nicholas remembers the harassment and violent responses the troupe received in some of the rural communities they visited. The Ku Klux Klan often tried to intimidate the actors and to curtail their performances. On one occasion, the stage on which they performed was
bombed. Despite the dangers that came with these performances, Nicholas has fond memories of her time with the Free Southern Theater. She remembers a discussion led by civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer after the troupe’s performance in Ruleville, Mississippi, and the generous support of churches and the rural black communities they entertained. Nicholas states that she fell in love with Mississippi and felt a sense of kinship during her time there. In 1965, she left Mississippi for New Orleans, Louisiana, the Free Southern Theater’s new base of operation. By 1966, marital issues led to Nicholas’ divorce from Moses. In the same year, she moved back to New York to continue pursuing her acting career.

Duberman, Martin B.
Black Theater.
Free Southern Theater.
Civil rights movement--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: 0:31:10 2007/05/19

Denise Nicholas talks at length about her acting career upon returning to New York. Nicholas was recruited to perform in the play "Three Boards and a Passion," which toured for three months. Several people were instrumental in helping cultivate her career, including voice coach Kristin Linklater and Joe Chapin, who she worked with in open theater. Nicholas also discusses her participation in The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), a theater company founded by playwright Douglas Turner Ward, actor Robert Hook and theater manager Gerald S. Krone. According to Nicholas, the NEC received a major Ford Foundation grant to help build a fully professional African American theater company in New York. Nicholas performed in four plays for the NEC, the first of which was Peter Weiss' "Song of the Lusitania Bogey" at the St. Marks Playhouse. She goes on to discuss her audition for the popular television show "Room 222" in California and explains the financial, technical, and racial aspects of acting in the television industry.

African American actresses.
Open Theater.
Black Theater.
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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).
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 discusses the production and staff for the television program "Room 222." The cast did promotional tours during the spring months and filmed from June to September. For her performance as "Liz McIntyre" in "Room 222," Nicholas was nominated for two Emmy Awards and a Golden Globe. Though she enjoyed the casts and working with the film students, Nicholas was disappointed in the script’s content and by the dearth of African American writers employed to work on the show. She goes on to discuss the corpus of black television shows and the community of black actors and actresses that emerged in the 1970s—noting television series such as "Julia" and "Mod Squad." She also talks about her early career in films, including "Blackula," "Let’s Do it Again," "Uptown Saturday Night," "Mr. Ricco" and "A Piece of the Action." Nicholas also reflects on race relations within the television and film industries.

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: 0:31:10 2007/05/21

Nicholas continues to discuss the racial dynamics of the television industry. According to Nicholas, there were two different pay scales, one for white actors and one for their black counterparts. Nicholas then turns her attention back to The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) and the important role it played in the careers of African American thespians and writers. The NEC disbanded in the 1970s due to budget cuts. She also talks about her performance on the television program "In the Heat of the Night," which debuted in 1989. Nicholas was featured on "In the Heat of the Night" for seven years and wrote several of its episodes.

Television broadcasting--Race relations.
Denise Nicholas continues to discuss her role as "Harriet DeLong" in the television show "In the Heat of the Night." Nicholas talks about producer, director, and actor Carroll O'Connor, who played “Bill Gillespie” on the show. O'Connor was a very nurturing person whose personality veered far from his role as “Archie Bunker” in the television sitcom "All in the Family." Nicholas also elaborates about the audiences’ response to DeLong and Gillespie’s interracial marriage on "In the Heat of the Night." She goes on to talk about her personal life, particularly her marriages to Gilbert Moses and Bill Withers, both of whom she subsequently divorced. In 1981, Nicholas married Jim Hill, a Los Angeles sportscaster with KCBS-TV. Nicholas then discusses the unsolved murder of her sister, Michelle Burgen, who was a journalist and editor at "Ebony" Magazine. In 1980, Michelle was found dead in the parking lot of New York’s LaGuardia airport, with a bullet lodged in her head. After this incident, Nicholas began taking her writing seriously. Nicholas talks about her journey as a writer and the publication of her first novel "Fresh Water Road" (2005).

Denise Nicholas talks about the evolution of the characters in her book "Fresh Water Road." She also discusses her next book project and her passion for African Americans. Nicholas expresses her concerns about black-on-black violence and the denigration and lack of appreciation for black culture. This commentary is followed by Nicholas’ narration of photographs.