

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Walter Mason, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Mason, Walter, 1926-2017
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason, Jr.,
Dates:	October 31, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:48:21).
Abstract:	Stage actor, production manager, stage director, and stage production manager Walter Mason, Jr. (1926 - 2017) was the entertainment director at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel and the founder and artistic director of the Aldridge Theater Company, Inc. Mason was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 31, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_314
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Production manager, stage actor, stage director, and stage production manager Walter Mason, Jr. was born on January 26, 1926, in Detroit, Michigan. His mother, Joanna Columbus Mason, a school teacher, and his father, Walter Mason, Sr., a skilled laborer, reared Mason in a church and community-oriented environment. After graduating from Detroit's Northwestern High School, Mason attended Wayne State University, where he earned his B.A degree in theater and business administration. Years later, Mason attended the Detroit College of Law while he continued to pursue a career in theater.

In a 1952 adaptation of Richard Wright's book *Native Son*, he portrayed its chief character "Booker Thomas" at the World Stage in Detroit, Michigan. His theatrical performances include his role as "Othello" in seven separate productions of *Othello* and "Caliban" in two productions of *The Tempest*. Mason has also been an instrumental figure in notable Broadway productions such as *Purlie Victorious* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Beyond acting, Mason served as a producer, director and artist for *The Good Book Sings* on WJR Radio and appeared on WXYZ TV's, *Showtime at the Apollo* as the master of ceremonies. He collaborated with choreographer, Alvin Ailey, in 1961 as the musical and production manager of *African Holiday*. Six years later, Mason became the production manager for *The Emperor Jones*, which starred actor James Earl Jones. Throughout his career, Mason has worked closely with many celebrities, including Sammy Davis, Jr., Duke Ellington, Frank Sinatra, Liza Minnelli, Jimmy Durante, Diana Ross, Dionne Warwick, Ella Fitzgerald, Lola Falana, Jackie Gleason and Gladys Knight and the Pips. As a private speech and drama coach, Mason has worked with many public figures and film and television performers.

Mason served as an associate to the dean of Yale University School of Drama at both Yale and on Broadway. In 1983, Mason produced and directed a theatrical presentation at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. featuring aspiring young actors from black colleges and universities for The National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education. The following year, Mason directed the production of the Pulitzer Prize winning play, *A Soldier's Story*, at Detroit's Fisher Theater.

Mason is the entertainment director at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel and the founder and artistic director of the Aldridge Theater Company, Inc.

Mason passed away on February 28, 2017 at age 91.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Walter Mason, Jr. was conducted by Jacques Lesure on October 31, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Stage actor, production manager, stage director, and stage production manager Walter Mason, Jr. (1926 - 2017) was the entertainment director at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel and the founder and artistic director of the Aldridge Theater Company, Inc.

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:

Mason, Walter, 1926-2017

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Mason, Walter, 1926-2017--Interviews

African American actors--Interviews

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Stage Actor

Stage Director

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers|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 Walter Mason, Jr., October 31, 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 Walter Mason, Jr., Section A2007_314_001_001, TRT: 0:29:09 2007/10/31

Walter Mason, Jr. was born on January 26, 1926 in Detroit, Michigan to Joanna Columbus Mason and Walter Mason, Sr. Both his parents were born in Mississippi, although his mother grew up in Mangham, Louisiana; while his father was raised in Dermott, Arkansas. His mother became a teacher, and his father was a skilled laborer. They moved to Detroit in 1924, and Mason never met either his maternal or paternal grandparents. In Detroit, his family lived in an integrated, close-knit neighborhood on Vancourt Street. Mason was initially interested in the career of their neighbor, aeronautical engineer Linwood C. Wright, Sr.; but also recited poetry at the Hartford Avenue Baptist Church. He began his education at William T. Sampson Elementary School, and then attended Munger Junior High School. He was briefly a student at the majority white Chadsey High School, and then transferred to Northwestern High School. Mason also recalls the housing discrimination case of *McGhee v. Sipes*, which was decided in Detroit in 1947.

African American families--Michigan--Detroit.
African American children--Michigan--Detroit.
African American neighborhoods--Michigan, Detroit.
African American Baptists--Michigan--Detroit.
African American business enterprises--Michigan--Detroit.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason, Jr., Section
A2007_314_001_002, TRT: 0:28:31 2007/10/31

Walter Mason, Jr. grew up in Detroit, Michigan. There, he attended the Hartford Avenue Baptist Church, where the pastor was Reverend Charles A. Hill; and experienced racial discrimination from an early age at the Granada Theater, where he and his family were required to sit in the balcony. As a child, Mason built model airplanes, and aspired to join the Tuskegee Airmen. He enlisted in the U.S. Air Force upon graduating from Northwestern High School in 1943, and served for twenty-six months in a segregated unit at air fields in Dyersburg, Tennessee; Biloxi, Mississippi; and Coffeyville, Kansas. During this time, he wrote about his observations of racial injustice in the Air Force in a U.S. military newspaper. Then, Mason matriculated at Detroit's Wayne University, where he participated in productions of 'Othello' and 'The Emperor Jones.' He was mentored by director Lloyd Richards; and, under the tutelage of drama coach Bertha Bright Knapp, developed the program 'Literature That Lives.'

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--Michigan--Detroit.

Hill, Charles Andrew, 1893-1970.

African American civil rights workers.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Detroit Branch.

Du Bois, W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963--Political and social views.

Robeson, Paul, 1893-1976--Political and social views.

United States--Race relations--History.

United States. Army Air Forces--African American troops.

United States. Army Air Forces. Composite Group, 477th.
World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.
Wayne State University.

African Americans--Education (Higher)--Michigan--
Detroit.

Richards, Lloyd, 1919-2006.

Acting--Study and teaching.

Othello (Fictitious character)--Drama.

Bigger, Thomas (Fictitious character)--Drama.

African American actors.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason, Jr., Section
A2007_314_001_003, TRT: 0:28:54 2007/10/31

Walter Mason, Jr. played the lead roles in productions of 'Othello' and 'The Emperor Jones' while studying at Wayne University in Detroit, Michigan. During this time, he worked at the Ford Motor Company foundry. Then, Mason became the set designer and technical director for the Panorama of Progress, a talent showcase at the Michigan State Fair. He also produced and directed the program 'The Good Book Sings' for Detroit's WJR Radio. In 1956, Mason received financial assistance through the G.I. Bill to attend the Detroit College of Law. After one year, he left the school to pursue his theater career, and acted under Lloyd Richards' direction in 'A Streetcar Named Desire' at the Northland Playhouse in Southfield, Michigan. In 1957, Mason played Caliban alongside actor Arnold Moss in 'The Tempest' at the Library of Congress. In 1959, Mason produced the 'Jazz Train' program in Detroit, and then acted in a production of 'Othello' in New York City, where he met choreographer Alvin Ailey.

African American actors.

African American newspapers--Detroit.

Acting--Study and teaching.

African American college teachers--Michigan--Detroit.

University of Detroit Mercy. School of Law--Faculty.

Civil rights movements.

Ailey, Alvin.

Walter Mason, Jr. directed the 'Free Sounds of '63' jazz revue, which featured musicians Cannonball Adderley and Nancy Wilson, at the Apollo Theater in New York City. Around this time, Mason played Purlie Victorious Judson in Ossie Davis' 'Purlie Victorious,' alongside actors Esther Rolle and Al Fann. In 1964, Mason was cast as Pepper White in Sammy Davis, Jr.'s production of 'Golden Boy.' While his character was ultimately cut from the play, Mason returned to the set as Davis' production manager. Throughout the 1960s, Mason performed as Caliban in various productions of 'The Tempest.' In 1965, he was the stage manager for a production of James Baldwin's 'The Amen Corner' in the West End of London, England; and then, in 1967, served in the same role for productions of 'Black New World' and 'The Emperor Jones,' which starred James Earl Jones. Mason also remembers the development of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut during this time. African American actors.

Levy, John, 1912-.

Wilson, Nancy, 1937-.

Lewis, Ramsey.

Davis, Ossie.

Rolle, Esther.

Davis, Sammy, 1925-1990.

Republican National Convention (1972: Miami Beach, Fla.).

Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994.

Rat Pack (Entertainers).

Sinatra, Frank, 1915-1998.

Black theater.

Jones, James Earl.

African Americans--Travel--Europe.

African Americans in the performing arts--United States.

Walter Mason, Jr. experienced discrimination from the Actors' Equity Association, which reprimanded the African American cast of 'The Amen Corner' for travelling to Europe. In 1967, Mason was the managing director of the Offski Theatre in Stowe, Vermont. The following year, he served as the stage manager for Sammy Davis, Jr.'s production of 'Golden Boy' in Chicago, Illinois; and accompanied Davis to Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral in Atlanta, Georgia. He continued to work as Davis' production manager for the next decade. In 1971, Mason produced the Bicentennial Homecoming Festival in Detroit, Michigan, which featured jazz performances by Kenny Burrell, Roland Hanna and Pepper Adams at the Detroit Masonic Temple. He also served as the artistic director of the Creative Express Theater Company. Mason went on to open the LaCav restaurant in downtown Detroit, and developed a training program that used dramatic techniques for the Michigan Bell Telephone Company.

African Americans in the performing arts--United States.

United States--Social conditions.

United States--Political aspects.

Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963--Assassination.

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968--Assassination.

Kennedy, Robert F., 1925-1968--Assassination.

X, Malcolm, 1925-1965--Assassination.

African American business enterprises--Michigan--Detroit.

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

African American theatrical producers and directors.

Acting--Study and teaching.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Mason, Jr., Section
A2007_314_001_006, TRT: 0:23:36 2007/10/31

Walter Mason, Jr. moved to Las Vegas, Nevada in 1986. There, he joined the theater staff of the Las Vegas Hilton hotel, which was directed by Joe Guercio. Later, Mason

succeeded Guercio as director, and was instrumental in attracting more diverse talent and clientele. After retiring in 1999, Mason turned his attention to youth education at the West Las Vegas Arts Center. He also established the Ira Aldridge Theater in Washington, D.C., which produced renditions of 'A Raisin in the Sun,' 'The Amen Corner' and 'The Emperor Jones. At this point in the interview, Mason reflects upon his life and career. He describes his hopes for the African American community, his advice to aspiring artists and the opportunities available for their artistic growth. Mason concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.

African Americans in the performing arts.

African American youth.