Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Ken Page

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ken Page,

Dates: April 4, 2008

Bulk Dates: 2008

Physical Description: 5 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:19:31).

Abstract: Actor Ken Page (1954 - ) is mainly known for his theatrical work. Page played the "Lion" in The Wiz, was featured as an original cast member in the Fats Waller musical revue "Ain’t Misbehavin’" and was awarded the Drama Desk Award for his performance. Page made his Broadway debut in 1976 when he starred in an all black revival of Guys and Dolls. Page was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 4, 2008, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2008_074

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actor Ken Page was born on January 20, 1954 in St. Louis, Missouri. He was raised by his mother and stepfather, Gloria and Garvin Gilstrap. As a youth, he attended St. Louis’ St. Bridget of Erin and St. Nicholas Elementary Schools. While attending St. Nicholas, Page was inspired by the founder of the school’s speech club, Sister Ruth Cecilia, and his older cousin to pursue a career in theater. In 1973, he graduated from Bishop Dubourg High School where he received special training in theatrical arts.

In 1973, Ken Page received a full scholarship to attend Fontbonne College located in Clayton, Missouri where he majored in theater. While attending Fontbonne College, he was cast in his first paid role as “Stewpot” in a theatrical production of "South Pacific," a musical that featured Frank Sutton, Mary Travers, and Theresa Merrit. A year later, Page moved to New York, where he began working with the Fanfare Children’s Ensemble. While performing with the Fanfare Children's Ensemble, he made appearances as Jim in a production of "Huck Finn." He also worked with the Amas Repertory Theatre and the Henry Street Settlement, starring in the musicals "Ragtime Blues" and "Louis."

Ken Page made his Broadway debut in 1976 starring in an all black revival of "Guys and Dolls." Then in 1977, he played the role of the Lion in the hit musical "The Wiz." In 1978, Page would later go on to be featured as an original cast member in the Fats Waller musical revue "Ain’t Misbehavin’" and was subsequently awarded the Drama Desk Award for his performance. He would later duplicate this performance in an NBC television special and in Paris, France. In 1982, Page originated the role of Old Deuteronomy in the Broadway production of "Cats" and repeated his performance in a PBS version of the play. During the 1980s, Page made appearances in several
films and television sitcoms including "Gimme A Break" (1984); "Sable" (1987); "Torch Song Trilogy" (1988) and "Polly" (1989). He continued his work in the entertainment industry during the 1990s and was hired to appear in such television shows as "Family Matters" (1990); "South Central" (1994) and "Touched By An Angel" (1995). In 2000, Page starred in the Broadway show "Ain’t Nothin’ But The Blues," and in 2006, he was hired as cast member in the musical film "DreamGirls."

Ken Page was interviewed by "The HistoryMakers" on April 4, 2008.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ken Page was conducted by Jacques Lesure on April 4, 2008, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 5 Betacam SP videocassettes. Actor Ken Page (1954 - ) is mainly known for his theatrical work. Page played the "Lion" in The Wiz, was featured as an original cast member in the Fats Waller musical revue "Ain’t Misbehavin’" and was awarded the Drama Desk Award for his performance. Page made his Broadway debut in 1976 when he starred in an all black revival of Guys and Dolls.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of 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.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Page, Ken
Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)
Burghielea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:
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 8/11/2011 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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
Ken Page reminisces about being a child and playing in different neighborhoods around St. Louis, Missouri. Page recalls his first performance as the voice of a hand puppet in a kindergarten play at Franklin Public School. Page then summarizes his primary education career; first he went to St. Bridget of Erin and then, when his family moved to the Car Square Village housing project in St. Louis, he attended St. Nicholas Elementary School. The topic of St. Nicholas, a parochial school, launches Ken into a discussion about the differences in education between public schools and private parochial schools. Page recalls his formal performance training beginning in the sixth grade. Page traces the beginning of his dramatic training to the seventh grade at St. Nicholas when he was enrolled in the Bellarmine Speech League.

Ken Page goes into greater detail about the Bellarmine Speech League, and how he and a small group of other students desegregated this institution. Page describes the large African American Catholic community in St. Louis, as well as his mentors. Page recalls being cast as Horace Vaderguilty in “Hello Dolly,” playing opposite a female Caucasian lead. By the time Ken was a senior at Bishop Dubourg High School, he was cast as Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof.” He remembers this role causing racial upheaval because it was a Catholic high school running a play about Russian Jews, with an African America in the lead role. Ken then discusses his experience at Fontbonne University, in St. Louis, Missouri, as inspirational because African Americans held important administrative positions.

Ken Page recalls his two mentors from Fontbonne University that pushed him to pursue theater professionally, Sister Mary Charity and Don Donner. During Ken’s freshman year, he joined The Municipal Opera Association of St. Louis, locally known as The Muny. This is where Page met Teresa Merritt; his first encounter with an African American that was working full time as an actress. At the end of his sophomore year, Page dropped out of school and moved to New York City. The first role Page was cast in New York City was with the Fanfare Children’s Ensemble, playing Jim in the “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.” Page left the Fanfare Children’s Ensemble after one year, but was quickly cast in the Broadway production of “Purlie”; the production was so popular that it went on a tour across The United States.
Merritt, Theresa
Manhattan (New York, N.Y.).
African American theater--New York (State)--New York.
Children's theater--New York (N.Y.)
Davis, Ossie. Purlie victorious

Video Oral History Interview with Ken Page, Section A2008_074_001_004, TRT: 0:28:29
2008/04/04

Ken Page discusses auditioning for the all black production of “Guys and Dolls;” there was controversy surrounding this production because it is one of the most cherished musicals of white musical theater. Despite the controversy, Page recalls getting the part as Nicely Nicely Johnson, a role that won him a Theatre World Award. Page goes on to discuss how accepting the mid-1970’s were for African Americans on Broadway. There were many African American shows running on Broadway at the time like “The Wiz,” “Bubbling Brown Sugar,” “Porgy and Bess,” and “Guys and Dolls.” In 1978, Page recalls being cast in the lead role as Fats Waller in the music revue “Ain’t Misbehavin. “

Ain't Misbehavin'.
Musical theater--New York (State)--New York.
African Americans in the performing arts.

Video Oral History Interview with Ken Page, Section A2008_074_001_005, TRT: 0:21:44
2008/04/04

Ken Page recalls receiving the role of Old Dueteronomy in the Broadway musical “Cats.” Page discusses how “Cats” is one of his best known performances. Page then recalls an interaction that he had with Andrew Lloyd Weber, the composer of “Cats.” After leaving “Cats” Page decided to leave Broadway entirely. He believed that the extreme success of “Cats” as a Broadway play could not be topped. So, Page decided to take this opportunity to move to California and begin working in TV and film. After moving to Los Angeles, California in 1984 Page recalls how the local entertainment industry differed from that in New York City. In closing, Page discusses the current lack of African American plays, as well as a lack of African Americans in theater.

Cats (Musical)
Weber, Andrew Lloyd
Broadway (New York, N.Y.)--1980-1990
Television Industry--United States--California--Los Angeles