Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator: Porter, Billy
Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Billy Porter,
Dates: October 7, 2016
Bulk Dates: 2016
Physical Description: 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:10:14).
Abstract: Actor Billy Porter (1969- ) won the 2013 Tony Award for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical for his role as Lola in Kinky Boots. He also wrote the solo piece Ghetto Superstar and the semi-autobiographical play While I Yet Live. Porter was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 7, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2016_052
Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actor Billy Porter was born on September 21, 1969 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and raised by his mother, Cloerinda Ford. Porter attended Taylor Allderdice High School in Pittsburgh, as well as the Pittsburgh School for the Creative and Performing Arts, where he studied acting, music, and dance. He later attended Carnegie Mellon University’s School of Drama in Pittsburgh, graduating in 1991.

In 1991, Porter was cast in the ensemble of Miss Saigon, which won three Tony Awards and became one of the longest-running shows in Broadway history.

In 2013, Porter returned to Broadway as Lola in the musical *Kinky Boots*, winning the 2013 Tony Award for Best Actor in a Musical, the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Actor in a Musical, and the 2014 Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album for his performance. In the years following, Porter wrote the semi-autobiographical play *While I Yet Live*, which premiered at Primary Stages in New York City in 2014, and played Aubrey Lyles in the 2016 Broadway musical *Shuffle Along, or the Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed*. In 2018, Porter became a series regular in the television show *Pose*, and appeared on multiple episodes of *American Horror Story: Apocalypse*. He was a supporter and fundraiser for the Ali Forney Center, a community center for homeless LGBT youth in New York City.

Billy Porter was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 7, 2016.

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**Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Billy Porter was conducted by Harriette Cole on October 7, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Actor Billy Porter (1969- ) won the 2013 Tony Award for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical for his role as Lola in *Kinky Boots*. He also wrote the solo piece *Ghetto Superstar* and the semi-autobiographical play *While I Yet Live*.

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**Restrictions**
Restrictions on Access

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

Restrictions on Use

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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:

Porter, Billy

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Porter, Billy--Interviews
Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Actor

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 Billy Porter, October 7, 2016. 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).
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 Billy Porter, Section A2016_052_001_001, TRT: 1:29:22 2016/10/07

Billy Porter was born on September 21, 1969 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Cloerinda Ford and William Porter I. His mother was born in Pittsburgh to Martha Richardson Johnson. Due to malpractice by her obstetrician, Porter’s mother was injured during her delivery, and had limited physical mobility. Porter’s father was born in Wellsville, Ohio to Lola Porter, and moved to Pittsburgh as a young man. He married Porter’s mother on a bet, and was physically and emotionally abusive to her and Porter. They divorced when Porter was one year old. At that time, he and his mother moved to the Lawrenceville section of Pittsburgh, where they lived with Porter’s maternal grandmother, Martha Richardson Johnson, and great aunt, Dorothy Richardson Majors. From a young age, Porter was uninterested in traditional masculinity. Based on the advice of a psychologist, his mother remarried so that he would have a male influence. Porter was then molested by his stepfather, Bernard Ford, from the age of seven to twelve years old.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Porter, Section A2016_052_001_002, TRT: 2:30:53 2016/10/07

Billy Porter grew up in the East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with his mother and stepfather, Cloerinda Ford and Bernard Ford. He attended the local all-black elementary school until 1975, when he was bused to Florence Reizenstein Middle School. There, he was the only African American student assigned to the accelerated classes. At both schools, Porter was bullied by
his peers because of his traditionally feminine mannerisms. He was introduced to musical theater during the sixth grade, when he saw Lillias White play the role of Dorothy in ‘The Wiz.’ Shortly afterwards, he joined the school theater program, where he was cast in ‘Babes in Arms.’ Then, in 1981, Porter saw the actors from ‘Dreamgirls’ on the Tony Awards show, and decided to pursue a career in theater. During this time, Porter was groomed by his stepfather, who sexually abused him until he was twelve years old. Four years later, Porter told his mother about the molestation out of fear for his younger sister.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Porter, Section A2016_052_001_003, TRT: 3:02:41 2016/10/07

Billy Porter was sexually abused by his stepfather, Bernard Ford, from the age of seven to twelve years old. Porter was groomed to accept the abuse, but forced his stepfather to stop around 1981, when he heard a news report about deaths of gay men from AIDS. Porter told his mother about the molestation four years later, but understood that she was unable to leave the marriage because of her physical disability. Porter confronted his stepfather around the time of his graduation from Taylor Allderdice High School. He went on to study theater at the nearby Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There, he was placed on academic probation, and was told by his instructors that he would never find work as an openly gay black man. During the summers, Porter went to New York City to audition for Broadway shows. He was cast in the ensemble of ‘Miss Saigon’ prior to the start of his senior year. At this point, Porter talks about how his experiences of sexual abuse affected his adult relationships.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Porter, Section A2016_052_001_004, TRT: 4:30:39 2016/10/07

Billy Porter performed in the original Broadway production of ‘Miss Saigon’ in 1991. That year, he moved to Hell’s Kitchen in New York City, and began singing at cabarets in his free time. In 1992, Porter won the televised vocal competition ‘Star Search,’ but received less than half of the prize money due to gift taxes. The next year, Porter
was cast as an understudy in the Broadway production of ‘Five Guys Named Moe.’ He played a lead role after the original actor was injured, but sustained similar injuries because of the show’s extreme choreography. Porter’s next role was the Teen Angel in the 1994 revival of ‘Grease.’ He was frustrated by the character’s lack of emotional depth, and the widespread misrepresentation of black gay men in theater. Around this time, he saw George C. Wolfe’s new play, ‘Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes,’ which included an openly gay black character. Porter then left ‘Grease,’ and began recording his first album, ‘Untitled,’ in Los Angeles, California.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Porter, Section A2016_052_001_005, TRT: 5:29:27 2016/10/07

Billy Porter moved to Los Angeles, California to record his debut album, ‘Untitled,’ in the mid-1990s. He continued to experience discrimination because of his race and sexual orientation, and was told to speak as little as possible during the promotions for the album. Deciding to move behind the scenes, he enrolled in a screenwriting program at the University of California, Los Angeles. While there, Porter successfully auditioned for ‘Smokey Joe’s Café,’ and returned to Broadway for the show’s run in 1995. He also played the role of John in the Broadway revival of ‘Miss Saigon’ in 1999. Ten years later, Porter returned to Broadway in the revival of George C. Wolfe’s ‘Angels in America’ as the character of Belize. Then, Porter auditioned for the musical production of ‘Kinky Boots,’ and was cast as the lead character, Lola, despite concerns about his hiatus from Broadway. At this point, Porter talks about his upcoming projects, including ‘The Untitled Sex Project,’ which he wrote in the 1990s.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Porter, Section A2016_052_001_006, TRT: 6:07:12 2016/10/07

Billy Porter talks about the impact of HIV/AIDS on the gay community, and describes his experiences as an advocate and role model for black men who were HIV positive. Porter concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life and legacy.