

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Val Gray Ward

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Ward, Val Gray
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Val Gray Ward,
Dates:	June 2, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:13:58).
Abstract:	Artistic director, stage actress, stage director, and stage producer Val Gray Ward (1932 -) is the founder of the nonprofit Kuumba Theatre, and was dedicated to the revitalization of the black community through the arts. Over the years, Ward has provided opportunities in the arts for hundreds of inner-city youth and adults. Ward was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 2, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_077
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Val Gray Ward, actress, producer, cultural activist and internationally known theatre personality, was born Q. Valeria Ward on August 21, 1932 in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, America's oldest all black town. As the daughter of a successful minister, Ward showed an interest early on in performance. She eagerly read poems and did readings for her father's congregation and eventually won various oratorical competitions in school. Above all, she was keenly interested in African American literature.

After graduating from Mound Bayou High School in 1950, Ward dreamed of going to college. Instead, she moved to Chicago in 1951, got married and became Val Gray and a mother to five children. When the marriage failed, Ward went back to school and became active in Chicago's African American cultural activities. She was a regular at the South Side Community Arts Center and the DuSable Museum of African American History as she developed friendships with Dr. Margaret Burroughs, Gwendolyn Brooks, Don L. Lee, Haki R. Madhubuti and Abena Joan Brown.

In 1965 Val Gray met and married journalist, Francis Ward as she continued to make a name for herself as an actress, television host and cultural consultant. Now known as Val Gray Ward, Ward was recognized as part of Chicago's activist Black Arts Movement. In this context Ward founded the nonprofit Kuumba Theatre in 1968. Kuumba is Kiswahili for clean up, create, and build and was dedicated to the revitalization of the black community through the arts.

With Kuumba, Ward has produced and directed such plays as *The Amen Corner* by James Baldwin, *Welcome To Black River* by Samm Art Williams, and *Five On The Black Hand Side* by Charles Fuller. Touring has also been important. Ward took the cast and crew of Useni Eugene Perkins' play, *The Image Makers* to Lagos Nigeria as part of the FESTAC '77, an international African arts festival. Ward brought Kuumba's musical production, *The Little*

Dreamer: The Life of Bessie Smith to Japan in 1981 and produced Buddy Butler's *In The House of The Blues* in Montreal, Canada. Ward and the company received Emmy Awards for the PBS television production of *Precious Memories: Strolling 47th Street* in 1988.

When she is not producing, Val Ward performs one woman shows in the United States and abroad. Performances include *Harriet Tubman* by Francis Ward, *Sister Sonji* by Sonia Sanchez and *I Am A Black Woman* which includes the poetry of Mari Evans.

Over the years, Ward has provided opportunities in the arts for hundreds of inner city youth and adults. All five of her children were or still are active in theatre. Ward currently lives in Syracuse, New York.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Val Gray Ward was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on June 2, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Artistic director, stage actress, stage director, and stage producer Val Gray Ward (1932 -) is the founder of the nonprofit Kuumba Theatre, and was dedicated to the revitalization of the black community through the arts. Over the years, Ward has provided opportunities in the arts for hundreds of inner-city youth and adults.

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:

Ward, Val Gray

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Ward, Val Gray--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Kuumba Theatre Company

Occupations:

Artistic Director

Stage Actress

Stage Director

Stage Producer

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 Val Gray Ward, June 2, 2002. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 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 Val Gray Ward, Section A2002_077_001_001, TRT: 0:30:21 ?

Val Gray Ward was born August 21, 1932 in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, the oldest all-black town in America, to Henry Yarborough “H.Y.” Ward, from Port Gibson, Mississippi, and Iola Williams, from Shubuta, Mississippi, the second oldest of eight siblings. Ward’s father was a Baptist minister who worked and raised his family in Mound Bayou, where his mother’s family, the Millers, were early settlers. Her father used to be a dancer and a baseball player, and kept his children well informed of social issues, bringing home numerous African American papers and encouraging Ward’s oration talents. Ward’s mother’s family, the Pruitts, can trace their ancestry to African origins. Ward shares memories growing up in the tight knit, all-black community of Mound Bayou, where she felt protected from the prejudices African Americans faced in most of the South in the 1930s and 1940s. She describes her maternal grandmother, Anna Mae Moten, who was a successful business woman in the Mississippi Delta, and the large Fourth of July picnics she would host for the community. Some of Ward’s earliest memories include fishing with her father and playing with friends in Mound Bayou, Mississippi.

Video Oral History Interview with Val Gray Ward, Section A2002_077_001_002, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Val Gray Ward grew up in Mound, Bayou, Mississippi, which is the oldest all-black town in America. Mound Bayou was founded in the 1820s as Davis Bend, by the former slaves of Joseph Davis who was the brother of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Mound Bayou’s residents have included the Civil Rights leader and surgeon, Dr. T.R.M. Howard, and Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers. Ward grew up feeling supported and protected in this tight knit community, and she was encouraged to compete in oratory contests in school. As a youth, Ward was strong-willed and outspoken at her father’s, Reverend H.Y. Ward, Baptist church. She attended private schools in Mound Bayou, including Alice Morris Preschool and B.O. Felder Elementary school, where she was mentored by Alice Morris. She then attended the public Mound Bayou High School, graduating from there in 1950. She was awarded two scholarships for leadership and oration to attend Tougaloo College in Mississippi but subsequently did not attend.

Video Oral History Interview with Val Gray Ward, Section A2002_077_001_003, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Val Gray Ward grew up in a religious household in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Her mother, Iola Ward was very strict, while her father, H.Y. Ward, a former dancer himself, was more tolerant. Beginning in 1947, her mother took Ward on vacation to Chicago, Illinois. Ward was a good student growing up and talented at oratorical contests, and she was awarded a scholarship to attend Tougaloo College in Mississippi. However, following graduation from Mound Bayou High School in 1950, Ward became pregnant, and within a year married her first

husband, John Gray. She moved to Chicago, Illinois, where they had three children together, but the marriage was unhappy and they divorced in 1957. She then met her current husband, HistoryMaker and journalist Francis Ward. They both had strong interests in the Black Arts Movement. In the late 1950s and 1960s, she was active in the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago, and developed relationships with many influential black artists and activists, such as Gwendolyn Brooks and HistoryMaker Margaret Burroughs. She also began to perform throughout this time, and formed the writer's group 'To Make a Poet Black'.

Video Oral History Interview with Val Gray Ward, Section A2002_077_001_004, TRT: 0:31:28 ?

Val Gray Ward was active in the Black Arts Movement in Chicago, Illinois throughout the 1960s and 1970s. She developed relationships with many notable African American writers, artists, and activists, including HistoryMakers Margaret Burroughs, Philip Cohran, Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti. Ward first formed the theater and writing group, Artists for Freedom, and then founded Kuumba Theater in 1968 and performed with her company throughout the city. She worked especially closely with writers Gwendolyn Brooks and James Baldwin. Ward's work with Kuumba and her husband's, HistoryMaker Francis Ward, work at Ebony and Jet magazines, made them influential members of the Black Arts Movement. Kuumba's unique approach to performance involved going out into the community through improvisation. Ward developed and performed the Ritual form of theater at Kuumba, addressing issues in the black community through traditional, African-centered, and organic and free-flowing theater performances throughout different neighborhoods in Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Val Gray Ward, Section A2002_077_001_005, TRT: 0:30:09 ?

Val Gray Ward founded the Kuumba theater in Chicago, Illinois in 1968, where she addressed issues in the black community through the Ritual form of theater, an improvisational and organic theater form that combined various forms of prose, poetry, and music. She performed in nontraditional venues throughout the city and involved different members of the community in the process. Ward produced Useni Eugene Perkins' play 'The Image Makers' and 'The Little Dreamer: The Life of Bessie Smith' at Kuumba. Kuumba Theater and the performances Ward produced became influential and highly significant in the history of the Black Arts Movement. In 1977, she took Kuumba to FESTAC, the World Black Arts Festival in Nigeria, and then traveled to Antigua, Guyana, and the Virgin Islands. Kuumba continued to grow back in Chicago throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and Ward's work with influential business leaders, such as HistoryMakers John H. Johnson, Ed Gardner, and Earl Neal, helped establish Kuumba in Chicago's theater scene.

Video Oral History Interview with Val Gray Ward, Section A2002_077_001_006, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Val Gray Ward and her husband, HistoryMaker Francis Ward, developed close relationships with many African American business leaders in Chicago, Illinois, who have helped to support Kuumba Theater, such as HistoryMakers John H. Johnson and Earl Neal. In 1988, Kuumba Theater produced 'Precious Memories' for PBS Chicago affiliate WTTW, which won twenty-one Emmy Awards. In 1989, Kuumba produced James Baldwin's 'The Amen Corner.' Kuumba Theater continued to grow in recognition of this success. Ward has performed at Chicago's DuSable Museum of African American History and the Art Institute of Chicago. She also produced and performed in her husband, HistoryMaker Francis Ward's 'Harriet Tubman', HistoryMaker Sonia Sanchez' 'Sister Sonji', and Mari Evans' 'I am a Black Woman.'

Video Oral History Interview with Val Gray Ward, Section A2002_077_001_007, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Val Gray Ward talks about her close friendships with Hoyt Fuller, a leader in the Black Arts Movement and creator of the Organization of Black American Culture in Chicago, Illinois, and Gwendolyn Brooks, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet. When Fuller passed away in 2001, Ward and her husband, HistoryMaker Francis Ward struggled with this loss of their close friend. She describes how difficult it was to lose Brooks, as well, when she passed away in 2000. Over her career as a performer, an influential member of the Black Arts Movement, and the founder and director of Kuumba theater, Ward developed close relationships with writers, including HistoryMakers Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez. At Kuumba, she produced ‘Sister Sonji’, by Sanchez. Then, Ward reflects on the status of black theater in America, and the need for companies like Kuumba not only for the black community, but for theater and the arts, as well.

Video Oral History Interview with Val Gray Ward, Section A2002_077_001_008, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Val Gray Ward reflects upon her legacy and the legacy of Kuumba for black theater, theater in general, and the Black Arts Movement. She worked to fulfil the mission and motto of Kuumba, “clean up, create, and build,” throughout her career. Ward reflects upon growing up in the all-black town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi and then making Chicago, Illinois her home. She talks about the significance of her work with Kuumba for the black community. Then, she narrates her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Val Gray Ward, Section A2002_077_001_009, TRT: 0:10:20 ?

Val Gray Ward narrates her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Val Gray Ward, Section A2002_077_Ward_Val_06_MED_001, TRT: 1:13:02