

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Guillaume

PERSON

Guillaume, Robert

Alternative Names: Robert Guillaume; Robert P. Williams

Life Dates: November 30, 1927-October 24, 2017

Place of Birth: St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Residence: Woodland Hills, CA

Occupations: Actor

Biographical Note

Actor Robert Guillaume was born Robert P. Williams on November 30, 1927, in St. Louis, Missouri. Raised by his grandmother, Jeanette Williams, Guillaume attended St. Nicholas School where, as a promising singer, he idolized Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, and William Warfield. Expelled by St. Joseph's High School, Guillaume joined the United States Army in 1945, where he served until 1947. Guillaume eventually returned to St. Joseph's High School, from which he graduated; from there he went on to work as a postal clerk and a streetcar driver while attending St. Louis University and Washington University, where he majored in music. In 1957, Guillaume won a nine week classical music summer scholarship to Aspen, Colorado; there he met Russell and Rowena Jelliffe who invited him to join Karamu House Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio.

At Karamu Guillaume changed his name from Williams to Guillaume (French for Williams), received his first acting lessons, and befriended Ron O'Neal, who would later cast him in *Superfly* TNT in 1973. In 1959, Guillaume toured Europe with Quincy Jones, Clark Terry, and Harold Nicholas in the musical *Free and Easy*. Spending most of the 1960s and 1970s in musical theatre and drama, Guillaume appeared in *Kwamina* in 1961; *Fly Blackbird* in 1962; *Tambourines to Glory* in 1963; *Golden Boy* in 1965; *Porgy and Bess* from 1965 through 1972; *Purlie* in 1971; *Othello* in 1973; and *Guys and Dolls* in 1976. In 1968 Guillaume made his first television appearance on *Diahann Carroll's Julia*; many programs followed, but Guillaume achieved stardom when he won an Emmy Award playing the acerbic butler, Benson, on ABC's hit sitcom, *Soap* in 1979. Guillaume reprised the role of Benson DuBois in his own sitcom, *Benson*, which ran from 1979 through 1986. Nominated five times for best actor in a comedy series, Guillaume won another Emmy in 1985, and appeared in *The Robert Guillaume Show*, the first comedy about an interracial family, in 1989. In 1994, Guillaume became the voice of Rafiki, the mandrill sage in Walt Disney's *The Lion King*, and its sequels. That

same year, Guillaume played Gleason Golightly in Derrick Bell's Space Traders.

Producer and director of John Grin's Christmas in 1988, Guillaume also produced The Kid with the 2000 I.Q in 1983. After suffering a stroke in his dressing room while working on the sitcom Sports Night, Guillaume made history by returning to the show; he went on to appear in more films, including Big Fish in 2003, Tough Like Wearing Dreadlocks in 2005, and Jack Satin, also in 2005.

Guillaume passed away on October 24, 2017 at age 89.

Related Entries

St. Joseph's Elementary [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

St. Nicholas Grade School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Saint Louis University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Washington University in St Louis [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

U.S. Army [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1944 to 1946]

Mail Clerk

U.S. Postal Service [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1948 to 1953]

Mail Clerk

Witt/Thomas Productions [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1977 to 1986]

Actor in 'Benson' and 'Soap'

Karamu House [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Company Member

American Stroke Association [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Fundraiser

Artists for a New South Africa [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Fundraiser

