

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles "Chuck" Smith

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Smith, Chuck, 1938-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles "Chuck" Smith,
Dates:	July 18, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:55:30).
Abstract:	Theater director Charles "Chuck" Smith (1938 -) co-founded the Chicago Theatre Company. His productions include <i>The Amen Corner</i> , <i>A Raisin In the Sun</i> , & <i>The Meeting</i> . Smith won a Chicago Emmy Award for NBC's <i>Crime of Innocence</i> and for his theatrical direction of <i>Fast Break to Glory</i> . Smith was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 18, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_167
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Theatrical director Chuck Smith was born Charles Norman Smith on March 7, 1938 in Chicago, Illinois to Charles P. and Amanda Smith. Smith attended Kozminski Elementary School and at age twelve, saw his aunt in a production of *The Monkey's Paw* staged by the black Skyloft Players. Smith graduated from Parker High School in 1956 and enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. After his service in the Marines, Smith took a job with the United States Post Office, and in 1963, he won a role in the Dramatic Arts Guild's production of *McAdam and Eve*. In 1970, he landed his first paying role in the Goodman Theatre's production of *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*. Smith studied theatre at Loop College, then Governor's State University, while working as a computer programmer for the Illinois Department of Public Aid. He earned his B.A. degree in theatre in 1984.

Influenced by veteran Chicago playwright Ted Ward, Smith became involved with the Experimental Black Actors Guild or X-BAG, Kuumba Theatre, eta Creative Arts Foundation and other independent black theatres in the 1960s. In 1982, he was awarded the Paul Robeson Award by the Black Theatre Alliance of Chicago. Smith began teaching at Columbia College in 1983, and in 1984, he co-founded the Chicago Theatre Company with Douglas Alan Mann as an Actors Equity company. In 1991, Smith received a grant from Arts Midwest to study larger venues and touring, and since 1992, he has been a Goodman Theatre Artistic Associate. Smith's directorial credits include *The Gift Horse*, *The Amen Corner*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *A Christmas Carol* for the Goodman Theatre. He has also directed *Master Harold and the Boys*, *Home*, and *Dame Lorraine* for Victory Gardens Theatre. Smith directed *Playboy of the West Indies* for Congo Square Theatre, *The Temple* for eta and *The Last Season* for Robey Theatre. After directing *The Meeting*, Smith with actors Harry Lennix and Gregory Alan-Williams formed the touring company, Legacy Productions.

Smith won a Chicago Emmy Award for NBC's *Crime of Innocence*. He also won an Emmy for his theatrical direction of *Fast Break to Glory*. In 1997, he received the Award of Merit from the Black Theatre Alliance. Smith,

a long time board member of the African American Arts Alliance, spends time offering career advice and workshops to aspiring actors and directors.

Smith lives on Chicago's South Side and has one daughter, Michele.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles "Chuck" Smith was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 18, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Theater director Charles "Chuck" Smith (1938 -) co-founded the Chicago Theatre Company. His productions include The Amen Corner, A Raisin In the Sun, & The Meeting. Smith won a Chicago Emmy Award for NBC's Crime of Innocence and for his theatrical direction of Fast Break to Glory.

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:

Smith, Chuck, 1938-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Smith, Chuck, 1938---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Theater Director

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 Charles "Chuck" Smith, July 18, 2005. 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 Charles "Chuck" Smith, Section A2005_167_001_001, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Charles “Chuck” Smith was born on March 7, 1938 in Chicago, Illinois. His mother, Amanda Booker Smith, born on September 9, 1917 in Birmingham, Alabama to Abraham Booker, Sr. and Otis Harper Booker, she was raised in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. Smith’s father, Charles Peterson Smith, was born in Wilmington, Delaware on September 3, circa 1910. Smith’s parents married and were some of the first residents of Ida B. Wells Homes in Chicago, Illinois. Smith attended Ida B. Wells Preparatory Elementary Academy until his parents separated when he was five years old. His father moved to Flint, Michigan and Smith moved to live with his maternal grandparents in Bronzeville. Smith also recalls watching westerns on his mother’s television set. In Bronzeville, Smith attended the Stephen A. Douglas School. After Smith’s grandparents moved to Hyde Park, Smith attended the predominately white Kozminski Community Academy.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles "Chuck" Smith, Section A2005_167_001_002, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Charles “Chuck” Smith attended Kozminski Community Academy in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. In 1952, Smith started at Hyde Park High School, but later transferred to Parker High School, where he graduated from in 1956. Smith then attended the University of Illinois at Navy Pier in Chicago before enlisting in the U.S. Marines in 1957. As a Marine, Smith was stationed in Subic Bay in the Philippines and Atsugi, Japan. In 1963, Smith left the Marines and returned to Chicago, Illinois, working at Spiegel’s, the steel mill, and later the post office. Smith, who had once seen his aunt in a production of “The Cat’s Paw” by the Skyloft Players, started acting with the Dramatic Art Guild. He later enrolled in Loop College in Chicago, Illinois to study theatre. While acting, Smith also worked as a computer programmer in the Illinois Department of Public Aid. In 1972, Smith began working with the Experimental Black Actors Guild (X-BAG; and, in 1974, he directed Theodore Ward’s play “The Daubers.”

Video Oral History Interview with Charles "Chuck" Smith, Section A2005_167_001_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Charles “Chuck” Smith recalls co-directing the play “Professor J.B.” with HistoryMaker Useni Eugene Perkins and directing Ted Ward’s “The Daubers.” Smith became the resident stage manager for X-BAG and began touring productions with performers Lynn Logan, Don X. Williams, and HistoryMaker Douglas Alan-Mann. Smith reflects on the Black Theater Alliance and Chicago’s African American theatre groups like Kuumba Theatre, eta Creative Arts Foundation, HistoryMaker Jackie Taylor’s Black Ensemble Theater, the Lamont Zeno Theater, Just Us Theater Company, and New Concept Theater. In 1976, Smith left X-BAG to enroll at Governors State University in University Park, Illinois, where he received a general studies degree in 1977. In 1978, Smith directed productions of “My Sweet Charlie” and “Eden.” The latter gained the attention of Dennis Zacek at Victory Gardens Theater, where Smith became the first African American to direct an Off-Loop play. Smith also recalls his first paid acting job at The Goodman Theatre in 1970.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles "Chuck" Smith, Section A2005_167_001_004, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Charles “Chuck” Smith recalls his first paid acting jobs at The Goodman Theatre and Kingston Mines Theater Company, where he performed in the show that followed the success of the musical “Grease.” Smith describes the success of his 1978 play “Eden” at Victory Gardens Theater, including its four Joseph Jefferson Award nominations. Smith then reflects on the relationship between

union and non-union productions in Chicago, Illinois and how they get critic reviewed. He also reflects on the black theater companies' full-length seasons and the opportunities available to actors at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theater Company, Court Theatre, and others. In 1981, Smith began teaching at Columbia College Chicago in Illinois; and, in 1984, he co-founded The Chicago Theatre Company. In 1988, Smith left the Illinois Department of Public Aid to focus on theater full-time. In 1989, Smith held a fellowship with Arts Midwest; and, in 1992, he joined The Goodman Theatre as an Artistic Associate.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles "Chuck" Smith, Section A2005_167_001_005, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Charles "Chuck" Smith describes the three theater companies in Chicago, Illinois which have won regional Tony Awards, The Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and Victory Gardens Theater. He reflects on how these theatres decide on their seasons and reflects on his own desire to stage all of August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle at The Goodman Theatre, and to hold an August Wilson Festival where all of Wilson's plays will be performed around Chicago. At Columbia College Chicago, Smith started the Theodore Ward Prize for African American Playwrights and publishes winners, starting with the book "Seven Black Plays." Smith reflects on the supportive Chicago theater community as well as his philosophy of directing. He shares his hopes and concerns for the African American community and his regrets that there is no commercial venue for black theater. He also reflects upon his family and his legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles "Chuck" Smith, Section A2005_167_001_006, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Charles "Chuck" Smith talks about the African American Arts Alliance in Chicago, Illinois, which includes Runako Jahi, Nora Brooks Blakely, and HistoryMakers Jackie Taylor and Joan Gray. He ends the interview by talking about his family and how he would like to be remembered, and by narrating his photographs.