

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Roscoe Lee Browne

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Browne, Roscoe Lee
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne,
Dates:	March 30, 2006 and October 5, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005 and 2006
Physical Description:	13 Betacame SP videocassettes (6:03:39).
Abstract:	Stage actor, film actor, and television actor Roscoe Lee Browne (1922 - 2007) won Tony and Emmy awards for his work. His film and television credits included, 'The Cosby Show,' 'Uptown Saturday Night,' 'Babe,' 'All In The Family,' and 'Law and Order.' Browne was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 30, 2006 and October 5, 2005, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_234
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Tony and Emmy award winning theatre, film and television actor Roscoe Lee Browne was born on May 2, 1922 in Woodbury, New Jersey. He attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania until 1942, when he enlisted in the U.S. Army during World War II. After the war, he graduated from Lincoln in 1946. During this time, he studied French through Middlebury College's summer language program. He received his master's degree from Columbia University, then taught briefly at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Browne also found success as an athlete, winning two American indoor championships and setting records in the 800 meters, and winning the 1951 world championship. After a knee injury hampered his athletic career, Browne worked as the national sales representative for Schenley Import Corporation.

He began his acting career with a small role in a 1956 New York Shakespeare Festival production of 'Julius Caesar.' Soon thereafter, Browne became an understudy for Ossie Davis' performance in 'Purlie Victorious.' Although Browne played the character of Archibald in 'The Blacks,' a play that launched numerous other African American stars, Browne's career did not take off until his 1963 performance in the off-Broadway play 'Benito Cereno.' He would reprise this role again in both 1965 and 1976. In 1966, Browne performed his own poetry while directing 'An Evening of Negro Poetry and Folk Music.' Browne continued to work actively in theater throughout much of his career, performing August Wilson's 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone' in 1989 and giving a Tony Award-winning performance in the August Wilson play 'Two Trains Running' in 1992.

Browne also worked in a variety of films, whether as a character actor (in 'Superfly' and 'Uptown Saturday Night') or as a voiceover performer (as the narrator of 'Babe' and 'Garfield: A Tale of Two Kitties'). His television career was prolific and diverse. He received an Emmy award for his recurring role as Dr. Foster on 'The Cosby Show,' a nomination for 'Barney Miller,' and achieved critical acclaim for his work on 'All in the Family' and 'Soap.' His list of television credits included performances in 'Law and Order,' 'E.R.,' 'Will and Grace' and 'New York

Undercover.' He also did voiceover work for numerous cartoons, including animated versions of 'Batman' and 'Spiderman.' In addition to his work as a performer, Roscoe Lee Browne wrote short stories, plays, worked as a musical director and was a gifted poet.

Browne passed away on April 11, 2007 at age 81.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Roscoe Lee Browne was conducted by Paul Brock on March 30, 2006 and October 5, 2005, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 13 Betacame SP videocassettes. Stage actor, film actor, and television actor Roscoe Lee Browne (1922 - 2007) won Tony and Emmy awards for his work. His film and television credits included, 'The Cosby Show,' 'Uptown Saturday Night,' 'Babe,' 'All In The Family,' and 'Law and Order.'

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:

Browne, Roscoe Lee

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Browne, Roscoe Lee--Interviews

African American actors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Stage Actor

Film Actor

Television Actor

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers|EntertainmentMakers

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 Roscoe Lee Browne, March 30, 2006 and October 5, 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 Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_001_001, TRT: 0:29:28 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne was born on May 2, 1922 to Lovie Usher Browne and Sylvanus Browne in Woodbury, New Jersey. His mother was born in 1884 in San Antonio, Texas. Her Irish ancestor developed a relationship with one of his slaves in Texas. She also had Native American ancestry, was well-liked and rode horses. To distinguish his family from other Browns in the area, Browne's father suggested that he and his siblings add an E to their last name. However, his siblings misunderstood and retained the original spelling. Prior to World War I, Browne's mother and her sister were introduced to Browne's father, a Buffalo Soldier in the U.S. Army cavalry, by a fellow officer when they were stationed near San Antonio. From that meeting, Browne's mother referred to Browne's father as Joe. Browne recalls reading the letters that his father wrote to his mother while stationed in France during World War I. Browne also lists his father's and his mother's siblings.

African American actors--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_001_002, TRT: 0:31:09 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne's paternal great uncle, a blacksmith, was enslaved in Henderson, Kentucky before purchasing his own freedom. After serving as a Buffalo Soldier, Browne's father entered the ministry. He pastored churches in the Philadelphia area, including the Baptist Temple Church in Camden, New Jersey, and was a leader in the Baptist Pastors and Ministers Conference of Philadelphia and Greater Philadelphia. He also delivered parcels to help finance his children's education. Growing up, Browne recited poetry at his father's services, and his performances were attended by Mahalia Jackson and Marian Anderson, both of whom remembered Browne later in life. He and his siblings read to one another, and he and his brothers sang to their sister. While attending Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, Browne obtained employment cleaning the Vail Memorial Library to fund his studies. Browne describes his siblings' education and professions, as well as those of his father's siblings.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_001_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne attended Woodbury Junior-Senior High School in Woodbury, New Jersey. In addition to excelling academically, Browne successfully tried out for the school's mile relay team that raced in the Penn Relays. Although he was initially employed as a janitor at Lincoln University's Vail Memorial Library, when it became evident that he understood the Dewey Decimal System, he was reassigned to organizational tasks. At Lincoln, Browne also participated in the choir and glee club. His classmate encouraged him to try out for Lincoln's relay team, which also competed in the Penn Relays. His participation further supplemented his scholarship. In 1940, he and his classmate, Reginald E. Benn, experienced racial discrimination on a bus ride from Lincoln to Williamsburg, Virginia, where they intended to attend the a

conference on democracy. Browne also describes traditions among Lincoln University students, such as the designation of nicknames.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_001_004, TRT: 0:29:04 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne attended a leadership conference at Lincoln University that featured presentations by Roy Wilkins, Eleanor Roosevelt, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and W.E.B. Du Bois. In 1942, before completing his bachelor's degree, Browne enlisted in the U.S. Army, where he was a member of the 370th Regimental Combat Team during World War II. Mozel Ellerbe, a sprinter, designated Browne to select a team of runners to race the European Theater of Operations. He recruited Harrison Dillard, whom Browne did not realize was a talented athlete. Browne was also a part of the Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon, in which he translated German intelligence information into English. He describes his commanders and fellow soldiers, including those who were killed in combat. After the war ended, he returned to Lincoln University to complete his degree. During this time, Browne taught and, in the summer, studied French at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont. He graduated from Lincoln University in 1946.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_001_005, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, where he met Kwame Nkrumah. Browne graduated 1946, after serving in the U.S. Army in World War II. During this time, he also participated in the Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association, winning races in the half-mile and quarter-mile events. Selected by Daniel J. Ferris as a member of the American running team, Browne also met Joseph J. Yancey, Jr., founder of the New York Pioneer Club. Browne was accepted into graduate programs at Harvard University and at Columbia University, where he attended. In New York City, Browne lived at the International House and ran for the Pioneer Club. Through Yancey and Yancey's wife, Josephine Greaux Yancey, Browne met Charles "Honi" Coles who subsequently introduced him to Dinah Washington, who taught him to shoot craps at Harlem's Apollo Theater. In 1948, Browne went to the Olympic tryouts where he was unfairly challenged by Avery Brundage. He also talks about his friendship with Roscoe C. Brown.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_001_006, TRT: 0:29:45 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne participated in the 1948 Olympic tryouts but was unfairly disqualified by Avery Brundage. In 1951, Browne set the 800 meter record at the Stade Jean-Bouin in Paris, France, as well as in Belfast, Northern Ireland and Dublin, Ireland. During this time, he and Malvin "Mal" Whitfield engaged in a friendly, record-setting competition. When Browne injured his knee, he underwent meniscus surgery conducted by Hans Kraus in New York City, ending his running career. Browne taught from 1950 to 1952, then became the national sales representative for Schenley Import Corporation. He describes his work for the company, including a company trip to Chicago where he unknowingly met Jake "Greasy Thumb" Guzik, whom Browne later witnessed on television during the Kefauver Committee hearings. Browne accompanied Guzik to a boxing match between Sugar Ray Robinson and Randy Turpin. He also remembers his brother, Arthur "Ted" Browne's meniscus surgery, which preceded their father's funeral.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_001_007, TRT: 0:30:06 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne acted in several plays while he was attending Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, as well as at New York City's International House. When he left his lucrative position at Schenley Import Corporation, Browne decided to become an actor, surprising his close friends, including Leontyne Price, Josephine Premice and Susan Fonda, who were concerned that he would be unsuccessful. While auditioning for the New York Shakespeare Festival, Browne met Joseph Papp, who was impressed by Browne's expressiveness. Browne acted at the Joseph Papp Public Theater for seven seasons, performing roles such as the Fool in 'King Lear' and Autolycus in 'A Winter's Tale.' During this time, he was a part of the original company of 'The Blacks: A Clown Show' at St. Mark's Playhouse, and he performed in 'Dream on Monkey Mountain' with the Negro Ensemble Company. Browne also describes controversy surrounding 'The Blacks,' as some cast members questioned the way the play addressed racial identity.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_002_008, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne left Schenley Import Corporation despite being offered a more lucrative position. Instead, he decided to pursue an acting career. His close friends, Leontyne Price, Josephine Premice and Susan Fonda, initially expressed concern that he would not be as financially successful as he had been at Schenley. He also recalls the reaction of his Schenley employers when he revealed his acting ambition. Upon seeing an advertisement in Show Business, Browne auditioned for the New York Shakespeare Festival's 1956 inaugural production of 'Julius Caesar,' directed by Stuart Vaughan. For his audition, he read the part of Cassius, for which a white actor had already been chosen. Browne recounts how he was ultimately cast as the Soothsayer and Pindarus, initiating his acting career. He met Joseph Papp and Colleen Dewhurst, whom he also acted alongside in 'Titus Andronicus.' Browne portrayed Babo in a production of 'Benito Cereno' with Woody King.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_002_009, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne began his acting career in 1956 at the New York Shakespeare Festival, performing in productions of 'Julius Caesar,' 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Taming of the Shrew' at Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in New York City's Lower East Side. He was then cast by Joseph Papp as Aaron the Moor in 'Titus Andronicus,' acting alongside Colleen Dewhurst. Browne was the understudy for William Marshall in 'Othello' in addition to performing in off-Broadway productions. His early theater reviews were positive, buoyed by his fame as a runner. In 1958, Browne began his formal acting training in Greenwich Village. His early acting coaches included Al Morgenstern, Curt Conway and Stella Adler. He expanded his professional network, meeting other actors, directors and playwrights at The Actors Studio, directed by Lee Strasberg. There, Mark Rydell cast Browne for his one-act play, 'Bohikee Creek,' along with Bill Gunn. For the play, Rydell incorporated blues music, including Lead Belly's song, 'Po' Howard.'

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_002_010, TRT: 0:28:00 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne acted alongside Bill Gunn in Robert Unger's 'Bohikee Creek,' a one-act play directed by Mark Rydell. During one rehearsal, Browne was inspired by Gunn to write 'Song,' a poem for Leontyne Price. During this time, Browne studied acting with Curt Conway, and later Stella Adler. He was also elected as a member of The Actors Studio, for which he did not audition.

There, Browne developed his professional network and was offered the role of Babu in Robert Lowell's adaption of 'Benito Cereno,' directed by Jonathan Miller. Although Adler discouraged Browne from accepting the role, Browne did not heed her advice, instead performing to rave reviews from domestic and international critics. Browne also remembers Flash Riley's advice to audition for 'The Blacks: A Clown Show.' Impressed by Browne's performance, Gene Frankel and Sidney Bernstein cast Browne as Archibald. However, as he had offers for roles in two other plays, Browne decided to contemplate his decision before formally accepting.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_002_011, TRT: 0:28:00 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne applied for his Actors' Equity Association membership card, heeding Joseph Papp's suggestion. However, since another actor, Roscoe Browne, was already a member, Browne was required to choose another name. After speaking with director Angus Duncan, he chose the name Roscoe Lee Browne to differentiate between himself and the other actor. In the early 1960s, Browne enlisted the support of his friends, Norma Millay Ellis and Charles Ellis, to determine which play, 'Gallows Humor,' 'The Apple,' or 'The Blacks: A Clown Show,' he should act in. Deciding that the plot of 'The Blacks' was the most compelling, he accepted the role of Archibald. In addition to performing at St. Mark's Playhouse in Harlem, he toured internationally with the cast of 'The Blacks,' including James Earl Jones, Maya Angelou and Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr. He also acted in 'Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright,' directed by Josh Logan. Browne remembers his friendship with Sarah Cunningham and John Randolph.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_002_012, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne portrayed Archibald in the original company of 'The Blacks: A Clown Show.' He then played the Corporal in Ira Levin's 'General Seeger,' directed by George C. Scott and starring William Bendix, Ann Harding and Dolores Sutton. Browne portrayed Royal Baron in 'The Cool World' along with Billy Dee Williams, and he played Preacher Haggler alongside Cicely Tyson and Clarence Williams III in a showcase of 'Dark of the Moon,' directed by Vinnette Carroll. During this time, Browne also acted at a festival in Spoleto, Italy in a piece written by Maria Irene Fornes, a Cuban American playwright whom he met at The Actors Studio. In 1963, Browne acted in Edward Albee's adaptation of 'The Ballad of the Sad Café.' During one performance, he learned of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's assassination. With support from Joseph Papp, Browne created 'A Hand Is on the Gate,' a celebration of African American poetry and music that took its name from a headline written by Jerry Tallmer of The New York Post.

Video Oral History Interview with Roscoe Lee Browne, Section A2005_234_002_013, TRT: 0:09:40 ?

Roscoe Lee Browne created 'A Hand Is on the Gate,' an evening celebration of African American poetry and folk music, in the early 1960s. In 1967, Vinnette Carroll invited Browne to join the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles, California. Although hesitant, Browne eventually agreed to play Zeus in Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Les Mouches' after he received an encouraging phone call from Gregory Peck. One of the first television productions Browne acted in was 'Mannix.' He describes his initial impressions of Hollywood and Los Angeles, including the city's public transit system.