

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ruby Dee

PERSON

Dee, Ruby

Alternative Names: Ruby Dee;

Life Dates: October 27, 1924-June 11, 2014

Place of Birth: Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Residence: New Rochelle, NY

Work: NY

Occupations: Actress;

Biographical Note

Actress Ruby Dee was born Ruby Ann Wallace on October 27, 1924 in Cleveland, Ohio. Her family soon moved to New York, and Dee was raised during the golden age of Harlem. After high school, she attended New York City's Hunter College, graduating in 1945. Expressive and literate, Dee was drawn to the theatre while still a college student. Dee acted in small Shakespearian productions and landed a role in the play *South Pacific* in 1943. She also began to study with the American Negro Theatre, where she would meet her future husband, Ossie Davis. They would fall in love during a cross-country tour of *Anna Lucasta*.

Ruby Dee's career as an actress was nothing short of phenomenal. A petite, intelligent actress of nuance and sensitivity, she was talented enough and lucky enough to garner some of the best roles for black women in the 1950s and 1960s. On stage, she was the first black woman to play lead roles at the American Shakespeare Festival. She won an Obie Award for her portrayal of "Lena" in Athol Fugard's *Boseman and Lena*, a Drama Desk Award for her role in Alice Childress' *Wedding Band* and an Ace Award for her performance in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

Dee appeared in over fifty films. In 1950, she played Jackie Robinson's wife in *The Jackie Robinson Story* and forty years later she played his mother in the television production *The Court Martial of Jackie Robinson*. Her film credits include: *A Raisin In The Sun* (1961), *Uptight* (1968), *Buck And The Preacher* (1972), *Roots* (1978), *Do The Right Thing* (1989) and *The Delany Sisters: The First Hundred Years* (1999). Dee won an Emmy Award for her performance in the Hallmark Hall of Fame production *Decoration Day*. Throughout her film and television career, Dee was selective and

brought that selectivity and dignity to every role she played. She was particularly proud of her one-woman show, *Zora Is My Name*, about pioneering novelist, folklorist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston.

Dee and her husband were authors, storytellers and recording artists as well as actors. Her published works include the humorous *My One Good Nerve* and various recordings for young people. In 1998, Dee and Davis co-wrote the autobiographical book *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together*, in which they take turns telling their stories as actors, activists, a married couple and as parents.

Dee's life was not all acting, however. She was a survivor of breast cancer for more than thirty years and was long active in a variety of movements. She, along with Davis, traveled to Lagos, Nigeria, as goodwill ambassadors, and eulogized Malcolm X in 1965 and later his widow, Betty Shabazz in 1997.

Jointly presented with The Academy of Television Arts and Science's Silver Circle Award in 1994, Dee and Davis officially became "national treasures" when they received the National Medal of Arts in 1995. In 2000, they were presented the Screen Actors Guild's Life Achievement Award. They were inductees in the Theater Hall of Fame as well as the NAACP Hall of Fame. In 2008, Dee was awarded the Screen Actors Guild Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in the film, *American Gangster*. She also received an Academy Award nomination for this role.

Ruby Dee was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on March 7, 2001.

Dee passed away on June 11, 2014 at the age of 91.

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