

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Micki Grant

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Grant, Micki
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Micki Grant,
Dates:	June 21, 2006 and September 1, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:30:41).
Abstract:	Actress, lyricist, and songwriter Micki Grant (1929 - 2021) was a Grammy-winning composer, writer & performer who also earned five Tony Awards. Her Broadway credits included, "Your Arms Too Short to Box With God," and, "Working." Grant received a Helen Hayes Award for her performance as Sadie Delaney in a two-year tour of, "Having Our Say," in 1996. Grant was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 21, 2006 and September 1, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_095
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lyricist, composer, writer and performer Micki Grant was born to Gussie and Oscar Perkins on June 30, 1929 in Chicago, Illinois. Her mother worked for Stanley Products and her father was a master barber and self-taught pianist. Encouraged by her parents to pursue music, writing and acting, Grant began taking piano lessons at eight years old, and at age nine, she took drama classes from Susan Porché. After high school, she pursued her acting career in earnest. Moving to Los Angeles, under the tutelage of her cousin, Jeni LeGon, a Hollywood tap dancer and performer, Grant was cast in James V. Hatch and C. Bernard Jackson's *Fly Blackbird*. She moved with the show to New York City, where she also earned her B.A. degree in English and theatre at CUNY's Lehman College, graduating summa cum laude.

It was in New York that the writer, musician and performer consolidated her talents. While cast in Jean Genet's long-running play *The Blacks*, Grant began studying acting with Herbert Berhof and Lloyd Richards. As a result of her stage work, she won a major role in the daytime series *Edge of Night*. She also began to write a musical score with Vinnette Carroll, with whom she was to enjoy a successful collaboration that included, *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope*, *The Ups and Downs of Theophilis Maitland*, *Step Lively*, *Boy* and *Croesus and the Witch*. Grant's other Broadway credits include *Your Arms Too Short to Box With God* in 1976 and *Working* in 1978. As a lyricist, Grant worked on *Eubie* in 1978 and *It's So Nice to Be Civilized* in 1980. Her other credits in music and lyrics includes J. E. Franklin's *The Prodigal Sister* in 1974 and music and lyrics for *Phyllis* in 1986. She also wrote the English lyrics for *Jacques Brel Blues*.

Grant received a Helen Hayes Award for her performance as Sadie Delaney in a two-year tour of *Having Our Say* in 1996, which also ran for six weeks in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1998. She was the recipient of the National Black Theatre Festival's Living Legend Award in 1999 and the AUDELCO's Outstanding Pioneer Award in 2000.

In February 2005, she was honored at the New Federal Theatre's 35th Anniversary Gala.

Grant also garnered a Grammy for Best Score from an original cast album; an OBIE Award for music and lyrics; a Drama Desk Award for lyrics and performance; an Outer Critics Circle Award for music, lyrics and performance and five Tony nominations. She was also the recipient of an NAACP Image Award.

Micki Grant was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 21, 2006 and September 1, 2006.

Grant passed away on August 22, 2021 at the age of 92.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Micki Grant was conducted by Shawn Wilson on June 21, 2006 and September 1, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Actress, lyricist, and songwriter Micki Grant (1929 - 2021) was a Grammy-winning composer, writer & performer who also earned five Tony Awards. Her Broadway credits included, "Your Arms Too Short to Box With God," and, "Working." Grant received a Helen Hayes Award for her performance as Sadie Delaney in a two-year tour of, "Having Our Say," in 1996.

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:

Grant, Micki

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Grant, Micki--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Actress

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 Micki Grant, June 21, 2006 and September 1, 2006.
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 Micki Grant, Section A2006_095_001_001, TRT: 0:30:27 ?

Micki Grant was born on June 30, 1929 to Gussie Cobbins Perkins and Oscar Perkins in Chicago, Illinois. Her maternal great-great grandfather, a slave, ran away with his twin during the Civil War. He was caught, but his twin never returned. Her mother was born in the early 1900s in Oglethorpe County, Georgia, where her ancestors owned a saw mill and a quarry. The oldest of nine children, her mother took on domestic responsibilities for her family. They moved to Birmingham, Alabama, where Grant's maternal grandfather found work in the steel mills. In the 1920s, her mother relocated to Chicago, where she worked as a domestic and met Grant's father. He was born in the early 1900s in Memphis, Tennessee, where his mother was a nurse. As a child, Grant travelled on segregated trains between Chicago and the South. She learned to garden from her grandmother in Birmingham, and once sat in the white section of the bus. She also describes the crystal tableware that she inherited from her maternal family.

Video Oral History Interview with Micki Grant, Section A2006_095_001_002, TRT: 0:29:28 ?

Micki Grant's father, Oscar Perkins, became a father as a teenager in Memphis, Tennessee, although Grant did not meet her half-brother, an interior decorator, until adulthood. She grew up on Chicago's South Side, where her father owned a barbershop, and her mother was a successful Stanley Home Products saleswoman. Grant attended Woodlawn Union Baptist Church, where she was baptized, and her mother served as usher board president. She recalls her community's African American leaders, including Reverend Archibald Carey, Jr. of the Woodlawn A.M.E. Church. As a child, Grant was introduced to music by her father, who played the piano. At McCosh Elementary School, she took violin lessons from Lucille Davis. When Ms. Davis formed a string ensemble, Grant volunteered to learn to play the double bass. While attending Englewood High School, she studied with Chicago Symphony Orchestra double bassist Nathan Zimmeroff, and joined the Chicago School of Music concert orchestra. She also talks about being a homebody.

Video Oral History Interview with Micki Grant, Section A2006_095_001_003, TRT: 0:29:18 ?

Micki Grant honed her writing skill as a child, authoring a book of poetry, 'A String of Pearls,' which was published by Alvin E. Williams, her minister at Woodlawn Union Baptist Church. She played double bass in the Chicago School of Music's concert orchestra, where she was the only black student. Grant recalls how her younger cousin found her playing inspiring. She attended Englewood High School, an integrated school. She was prevented her from applying for college scholarships, but her family saved enough money for her to attend the University of Illinois at Chicago. She talks about African American personalities, like Buckwheat from 'Our Gang,' and her early musical inspirations, including Della Reese, Eartha Kitt and her cousin, Jeni LeGon. A well-known tap dancer, LeGon helped Grant when she moved to California. Grant recalls how her parents boasted about her talent to their customers after she became a successful actress. Grant also describes misconceptions about African American speech.

Video Oral History Interview with Micki Grant, Section A2006_095_001_004, TRT: 0:29:34 ?

Micki Grant took care of her family's collection of reading materials, and created a library card system to loan books to her friends. Her father was artistic,

and interested in film. Grant often saw movies at theaters like the Tivoli Theater and the Langley Theater on Chicago's South Side. At the Regal Theater, she recalls seeing African American acts like Moms Mabley and Sammy Davis, Jr. Upon graduating from Englewood High School, Grant joined Chicago's Center Aisle Players and the Skyloft Players, where she performed in 'The Heiress' and 'Hay Fever,' and acted opposite Lester Chung. Grant moved to Los Angeles, California, where she met Nick Stewart, and was cast in the musical, 'Fly Blackbird.' Her cousin, Jeni LeGon, performed alongside Lena Horne and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in 'Stormy Weather.' Grant talks about her family's political activities, including her mother's voter activism. She also narrates her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Micki Grant, Section A2006_095_002_005, TRT: 0:29:33 ?

Micki Grant transitioned from Chicago's community theatre community to Los Angeles, where she joined the Actors' Equity Association, and performed at Nick Stewart's Ebony Showcase Theater. To supplement the income she earned as an actress, she worked briefly at Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company. Grant's New York City theater career began when she was cast in James V. Hatch and C. Bernard Jackson's 'Fly Blackbird.' Grant then performed alongside Roscoe Lee Browne in 'Brecht on Brecht' in Washington, D.C. In 1970, she was cast in Langston Hughes' 'Tambourines to Glory,' her first Broadway show, with Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr., Hilda Simms and Robert Guillaume. When the show closed, she returned to the touring company of 'Brecht on Brecht,' and began her crossover to composing. She wrote 'Step Lively, Boy,' the title song for Glory Van Scott and Vinnette Carroll's anti-war musical. The three collaborated on the musical 'Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope,' initiating Grant and Carroll's working relationship.

Video Oral History Interview with Micki Grant, Section A2006_095_002_006, TRT: 0:30:14 ?

Micki Grant was cast in 'The Edge of Night,' becoming the first African American with a soap opera contract. Her role as Peggy Harris Nolan on 'Another World' garnered her public attention. To improve her technique, she studied voice and acting. In New York City, she acted in regional, off-Broadway productions, like Lorraine Hansberry's 'To Be Young, Gifted and Black.' The first Broadway show she saw was Ossie Davis' 'Purlie.' She collaborated with Vinnette Carroll, composing the musical, 'Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope,' for which she received a Grammy Award and multiple Tony Award nominations. Grant describes her shows, 'Phillis' and 'Carver (Don't Underestimate a Nut),' which explored the lives and legacies of Phillis Wheatley and George Washington Carver. She also directed Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee in 'Two Hah Hahs and a Homeboy.' Grant names inspirational African Americans, including her cousin, Jeni LeGon, who enabled others to pursue theater careers. She also shares her opinion of blaxploitation films.

Video Oral History Interview with Micki Grant, Section A2006_095_002_007, TRT: 0:30:34 ?

Micki Grant collaborated frequently with Vinnette Carroll on musicals such as 'Alice,' based on Lewis Carroll's 'Alice In Wonderland,' and 'The Ups and Downs of Theophilus Maitland.' Grant reflects upon the uniqueness of her Broadway partnership with Carroll. She also shares two verses from her song 'It Takes a Whole Lot of Human Feeling,' which she sang for Carroll before they teamed up as a director and composing lyricist. Grant composed three numbers for Stephen Schwartz's musical 'Working,' based on Studs Terkel's book of the same name. Grant first worked with actress Jennifer Holliday during the tour of 'Your Arms Too Short to Box with God,' which led to Holliday's role on 'Dreamgirls.' In 1996, Grant was cast as Sadie in the touring company of

‘Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years,’ with which she traveled to South Africa. She performed at Johannesburg’s Market Theatre, and interacted frequently with black and white South Africans, who shared their support for Nelson Mandela.

Video Oral History Interview with Micki Grant, Section A2006_095_002_008, TRT: 0:30:21 ?

Micki Grant was cast as Ada Chandler on the soap opera, ‘The Edge of Night,’ when producers saw her perform off-Broadway. She then played Peggy Harris Nolan on ‘Another World.’ Grant was cast as Sadie in the stage version of ‘Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years’ after Emily Mann saw Grant read for John Henry Redwood’s ‘The Old Settler.’ However, she was not cast in the show’s film version. She recalls the critical reception to her Broadway show, ‘It’s So Nice To Be Civilized.’ Grant received the NAACP Image Award for her work as a playwright. At the National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, she met August Wilson, whose speech at the international colloquium inspired her own keynote the following year. She also describes how her cousin, Jeni LeGon, and mother supported her work. She reflects upon the importance of history, as well as her hopes for the African American community. Grant concludes this part of the interview by clarifying her maternal grandmother’s ancestry.

Video Oral History Interview with Micki Grant, Section A2006_095_002_009, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

Micki Grant experienced housing discrimination as a young actress in Washington, D.C. She identifies her favorite roles, including in Lanford Wilson’s ‘The Gingham Dog,’ one her first major performances. Grant remembers the opening nights of ‘Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope’ and ‘Your Arms Too Short to Box with God.’ In Mark Blitzstein’s ‘The Cradle Will Rock,’ her portrayal of Ella Hammer at New York City’s Lincoln Center earned her a standing ovation. Grant talks about how she was not always cast in roles meant exclusively for African Americans. She describes her goals, such as acting in a high-profile film, as well as her writing accomplishments, and reflects upon her legacy. Grant also talks about the significance of offbeat rhythms for the African American community. She sings a part of her song, ‘Fighting for Pharaoh,’ and concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.