



## TRANSCRIPT

### *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*

#### **Roger Guenveur Smith Makes the Sublime and the Profane Artful**

The writer, actor and director creates characters that resonate in the moment and speak compellingly to the day's dilemmas. From his collaboration with Spike Lee, to his portrayal of Frederick Douglas, Otto Frank and Rodney King, he unfolds fascinating stories that span his prolific career, like his unlikely decision to audition for the Yale School of Drama.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at [hkelly@pbk.org](mailto:hkelly@pbk.org). Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On our podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country for us visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the full Visiting Scholars schedule, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Today, I'm delighted to introduce actor, writer, and director, Roger Guenveur Smith. Mr. Smith performs history throughout a rigorously imagined body of work, which references the past while inviting us to interrogate our present moment. Let me give just a few examples. He adapted his Obie Award-winning performance of *A Huey P. Newton Story*, based on the life of Black Panther Party cofounder, into a Peabody Award-winning telefilm. His Bessie Smith Award-winning *Rodney King* is currently streaming on Netflix. His latest solo is *Otto Frank*, inspired by the father of diarist Anne Frank.

Mr. Smith has created and performed studies of Frederick Douglass, Christopher Columbus, and Bob Marley, and has an eclectic range of screen credits with major studio productions, as well as independent films. He studied at Yale University and Occidental

College, and has taught at both institutions, as well as CalArts, where he directs his Performing History Workshop.

Welcome, Professor Smith.

Roger Guenveur Smith:

Oh, thank you for having me, Mr. Lawrence. Isn't that a movie? Oh, no. That's Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence. Great to be in conversation with you.

Lawrence: So, tell us about your journey and how you came to the point where you decided, "I want to be an actor."

Smith: Well, I'm not really qualified to do anything else. If I had apprenticed with my grandfather in Charleston, South Carolina, who was a master plumber, I would be able to fix a toilet, but I didn't, and I am unable to do that. I've paid a lot of other people a lot of money to do that, but I do try to fix human emotions, and that's the thing I think for which I am trying to become qualified to do.

Lawrence: And you grew up in the Los Angeles area, is that right?

Smith: I grew up in L.A., I was born in Berkeley. I was a Dodger fan as a child and my nickname was Roger Dodger.

Lawrence: Aha, and your father was a judge and your mother a dentist, right?

Smith: That's right. They were the original Huxtables.

Lawrence: So, did their career paths and their professional attainments influence you in some way, do you think, as you look back on it?

Smith: Oh, absolutely. My parents in a very odd moment were having a great big argument, and I walked into the middle of it, and it was disturbing to me not only that my parents were arguing, but also that my father's best friend was there, as well. And my father's best friend was Milton Wood, who worked with the American Negro Theatre in Harlem, and he was disturbed that I was disturbed and explained to me, "Roger, listen. They're simply rehearsing what's called a play." I said, "A play?" He said, "Yes, it's a play. It's called Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

Lawrence: Oh, my goodness.

Smith: And for the first time, I realized what a play was, and for the first time, I realized that a play could have some sort of emotional affect on even a very small child.

Lawrence: How old were you at the time of this story?

Smith: I was probably about six years old.

Lawrence: If I had taken the little six-year-old Roger aside at that moment and said, "I think this is what you're gonna do, young man." Would you have said, "I don't know what you're talking about," or would you have said maybe?

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Smith: Well, there were other things that I was certainly interested in, baseball being one of them. Roger Dodger was my nickname when I was a kid. Always interested in history, Fred. The Encyclopedia Britannica was something that I did for fun. My mom had a two-volume set in her home library called The World's Great Men of Color and there were these biographical sketches, and these wonderful illustrations of all these men throughout history, and I was kind of fascinated with that, as well.

But somewhere, lurking, there was this kind of performative passion and energy, and I embraced it while studying history, while playing sports, and eventually when I went to Yale to study history, I heard about this thing called the Yale School of Drama, and I thought, "Well, maybe I'll just on a lark kind of audition for this thing." And I was accepted into an outstanding class, which included Angela Bassett, and Charles Dutton, and John Turturro.

Lawrence: Wow.

Smith: Three people with whom I worked with subsequently in cinema. And I've been combining my interests ever since. I teach a course entitled Performing History, in which my students are encouraged to go into the historical archives to create new work for the stage.

Lawrence: You went off to Yale with the intention of getting a PhD in history, right?

Smith: Right, but I wound up playing a history professor on a sitcom called "A Different World."

Lawrence: So, Yale Drama School is one of the great drama educational institutions not just in the country, but in the world. What did they make of this history PhD candidate wandering in essentially as what in sports we'd call a walk-on?

Smith: Yeah. A walk-on. Well, it was interesting, and it was challenging, because I was in a class with people... For example, like John Turturro, who wanted to be an actor I think all his life, and he and his brother, Nick, would go to the cinema and then go home and act out what they had seen on stage, on screen. But I was in a class of people I think who wanted to be an actor possibly all their lives, and you know, acting was something that I was interested in, but I was always interested in other things. I was interested in literature, and I was interested in history, and in biography, and in baseball, and football, and rugby, and basketball, and those are all sports that I played.

So, I've been very fortunate in that I've been able to reconcile the wide variety of my interests in what I do.

Lawrence: You were certainly fortunate in landing a couple of breakthrough roles with the great Spike Lee in School Days and in Do the Right Thing. What was it like working with Spike Lee?

Smith: Well, Spike Lee kind of liberated me from repertory theater. I was at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. It was my first gig. I was doing Ionesco, and Pinter, and Dickens, and Shakespeare, but I slipped into a little indie cinema called The Uptown Cinema, and saw a little indie film called She's Gotta Have It.

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Lawrence: Oh, yes.

Smith: And I was fascinated, and I sat through it twice, and I said, "I gotta find out what this guy from Brooklyn, Spike Lee, is doing next." And so, I was able to finagle a cattle call audition for his next film, which was his first studio thing, called School Days. And I was asked to do a little snippet of the script, I was asked to tell a joke, and I was asked to sing a little song. And I did those three things and I guess Spike thought that I was a prime candidate to play a demented fraternity pledge, and so I was chosen to do it, and we've been working together ever since. That was 30-some-odd years ago.

Lawrence: You know, there's a story told from that movie that I've always wondered if it's apocryphal, and so I'm about to find out, and that is a story told of the late Danny Aiello, another recently-lost lead in Do the Right Thing, where he is, at least as I've heard the story, is working himself into the part of someone who is going to express some deeply-held racist feelings and is going to use the N word with pretty reckless abandon, and it started coming out a little too easily, and Aiello himself had to sort of deal with where did that come from and what am I learning about myself? So, is that apocryphal or is that true?

Smith: I think that all of us had to dig very deeply into a dark part of ourselves, a tragic part of ourselves. For my own part, I played Smiley, who was a young man who had a stutter, and I didn't realize, Fred, until months after I had created this character for Do the Right Thing that it was based on real people in my very young life. One was a guy who sold the Los Angeles Sentinel, the Black newspaper of Los Angeles, every Thursday night on a street corner. And my father would patronize him, give him his 15 cents, and I looked up to him and obviously that hit me in a very deep place, and it didn't emerge until I had to create this character, improvise this character.

Lawrence: So, Smiley was not written with a stutter. You gave Smiley his stutter.

Smith: Smiley was not written. Do the Right Thing was an Oscar-nominated screenplay, but if you look in it, you will not see Smiley. Smiley was completely improvised.

Lawrence: And how much of that was Spike Lee giving you direction of what he wanted to see you do, and how much of it was Spike Lee saying, "You're there because you're the guy I want to do this, go do your thing?"

Smith: Well, it was a collaborative exercise in improvisation. The way that I walked, the way that I talked was certainly something that came from me, but Spike, as the film developed, saw certain opportunities for Smiley to participate and Smiley in fact becomes the person who lights the match to burn the pizza parlor down. So, he did play a tremendous role strategically in the final narrative.

Lawrence: For those who have not seen Do the Right Thing, I regret that you and I have probably done a few spoilers here, but I have to say that it strikes home in a way that is rare for a film that is now, what, 30 years old or so? It's so current that it's painful.

Smith: Yes.

Lawrence: Do the Right Thing, of course, is set in a very hot summer in New York, and the oppressive heat is sort of an extra character in the play, and the racial tension is so thick that you can touch it, you can smell it, you can cut it with a knife.

Roger, in your solo performances, you have taken on an astonishing range of historical figures. Fredrick Douglass, Huey P. Newton, Rodney King, Otto Frank. I want to talk a little bit about those important figures and what you do with them, but let me start by asking, how do you decide which historical figures you want to work on and bring to life?

Smith: I think curiosity and I also think ignorance. And in the case of Rodney King, it was his loss that really compelled me to wonder why he mattered to me. Why did I feel the way that I felt when I opened up my laptop and discovered that he had drowned in his backyard swimming pool? And that was in June. That was Father's Day of 2012, and by August of that summer I was on stage trying to answer that question for myself and for my audience, why did Rodney King matter?

Lawrence: You know, the Rodney King verdict, the first verdict, the acquittal in the state law trial led me to do something I've only done a couple of times in 30-plus years of teaching in various law schools, and that was I won't say to go off script, because one of the areas I've worked in a great deal in my career is racially-motivated violence and police misconduct, civil rights crimes, but we were gonna do that at the end of the semester, but I walked into class in a basic criminal law class the next morning and I said, "I know we're supposed to be covering whatever it was." Assault or burglary or something. And I said, "But I just don't see how on God's green Earth we can talk about that today and not what's going on in Los Angeles right now."

So, there was this kind of amazing impact of the event itself and then of course the acquittal, and the fact that the nation was focused on it, and part of it was the racial issue, part of it was the police issue, but part of it now, which we take for granted, is that it was videotaped, and that was quite unusual at the time, wasn't it?

Smith: Yes. As I say in the piece, "Rodney, you have gone viral before viral was viral. You're the first reality TV star." And yes, it was odd that the entire world should be able to focus in on that spontaneously captured videotape, and now we are in the moment where you can rewind and fast forward and freeze frame virtually thousands of similar acts of police violence.

Lawrence: So, let me ask you an audience question. When I heard you talk about how you came to Rodney King, it sounded as if the audience was you at first. You wanted to discover who Rodney King was and get to know him better. I think of the great line attributed to the literary critic Harold Bloom, who said, "We read imaginative fiction because we can't know enough other people." So, you get to create them. In a sense, you get to know them that way. On the other hand, what we've just been talking about makes the audience the outward-looking world to understand what happened and to broadening the public discussion. So, who's the audience when you do, let's say, a Rodney King recreation?

Smith: Well, I think that there is a Shakespearean quality to this story, and I wanted to in fact take Roger out of it, the personal pronoun I, I took out of the narrative. I didn't think that that would be useful. I wanted to take myself out of the equation. So, that was useful to me in improvising this piece, because this piece was largely improvised, as well. And then there are questions which are put out there. There are questions which are directed at Rodney King, which obviously he can't answer. So, there is a beautiful kind of silence, which is pervasive in a piece, which otherwise is full of a lot of sound and a lot of fury.

But at bottom, there is silence. The rest is silence.

Lawrence: The rest is silence as Shakespeare said. Yeah. It's life imitating fiction to the nth degree.

Smith: Yeah.

Lawrence: Let's go back about a century to another great speechmaker of an almost unimaginable ability. Tell us about Frederick Douglass and what does it feel like to inhabit the space, the mind, the if you will, body of the great Frederick Douglass?

Smith: Douglass I think is always challenging us. He is consistently challenging us to find the democratic, the republican, the humanistic way of surviving as a nation.

Lawrence: So, when you're creating a figure like a Frederick Douglass, who still speaks to us so compellingly today, 150 years later, how do you think of his understanding of himself? Do you have any sense of how it's going to play long after he's gone? Or do you put yourself in his place in his time and try to tune out what you know about what's going to happen in the next century and a half?

Smith: No. My Frederick Douglass is called Frederick Douglass Now. So, we look at Douglass through the lens of our present moment. I don't try to pretend that we're in 1856 or 1877, and all of my pieces, whether it's Douglass, or Huey Newton, or Rodney King, or Christopher Columbus, they all exist in the present moment. Because I don't want to perform simply an exercise in nostalgia, in the past. I want Douglass to resonate in our present moment and to speak to our present dilemma, which he does with great insight.

Lawrence: So, what drew you to Otto Frank?

Smith: Well, Otto Frank was a father, and he was a father of two daughters, as am I. I think that's the fundamental interest. I think also that there's a certain ignorance about Otto Frank. Certainly, people think they know about Anne Frank, but here was the guy who was the only survivor of his immediate family and lived to a ripe old age.

Lawrence: Right.

Smith: And who was the man who got his daughter's work out there, who used the lessons imparted by his brilliant young daughter to focus on universal tolerance and understanding, and I don't think that we know as much about him as we should. And so, that is why I dove into this project. Now, I had been thinking about Otto Frank for some time and in fact, I was thinking about him when Rodney King passed, and that was really

the direction that I was traveling in until the Rodney King moment, which I thought was going to be just a moment. A moment of mourning and remembrance.

And oddly enough, Rodney King took me to Otto Frank, because I was invited to perform Rodney King at a theater festival in Amsterdam.

Lawrence: Oh, for goodness sake.

Smith: And it was there, of course, that I was able to visit the Anne Frank House, and I stood there, and I imagined Otto coming back from the war, from the camp, in an empty room, silent, that had once been full of light. The light of his family. And having that light extinguished.

Lawrence: Incredibly powerful. Let me ask you about one other... In this case, two characters you create and bring back to us, and that is Juan Marichal and Johnny Roseboro in the wonderful piece, Juan and John. For those who don't remember, you and I were both 10 years old that summer, and Juan Marichal, the star pitcher of the San Francisco Giants, Johnny Roseboro, the great catcher of your beloved L.A. Dodgers, and they got into a altercation that ends up with Marichal clubbing Johnny Roseboro with a bat. I remember where I was when it happened. Where were you?

Smith: Where do you think I was? I was watching the game on TV.

Lawrence: That's what I figured.

Smith: I was in L.A. The game was in San Francisco. Sandy Koufax was pitching for the Dodgers. Juan Marichal, number 27, pitching for the San Francisco Giants. It was the-

Lawrence: The famous high kick.

Smith: The high kick. It was neck and neck for the National League pennant. It was a heck of a summer. The Dominican Republic was invaded. We had 20,000 troops there. We had troops in Vietnam. My father said, "Let's go down to the business, the family business." My parents had a motel. We went to make sure that everybody knew that it was Black owned. People were yelling and screaming up and down the street. You know, "Burn, baby, burn. Burn, baby, burn." The liquor store went up in flames. The pawn shop went up in flames.

So, you fast forward to the next weekend, and I'm watching Marichal hit my hero, John Roseboro, upside the head with his baseball bat. John Roseboro was my hero not just because he was a good ballplayer, but because he had given me an autograph picture of himself at a community event. Well, when Marichal did that, I took Marichal's baseball card out of my personal collection and I burned it. And I chanted, "Burn, baby, burn."

Lawrence: Oh my God. And for anyone who does not have a baseball or did not have a baseball card collection, it's hard to describe the significance of that, and that was your private little Watts moment of protest, wasn't it?

Smith: That was... Yeah. That was it. And you know, Juan Marichal was one of the great villains of my childhood and you fast forward years and years, and I'm working on this play about that incident, and I met Juan Marichal, and I didn't know quite what I was going to say to him. But he was very open with me, talked to me about his struggle as a Black, Spanish-speaking man in the Major Leagues in the late '50s and early '60s. And I told him what I did, that I burned his baseball card, and he looked at me straight in the eye and said, "Roger, all I can say is that I'm sorry and I hope that you can forgive me."

Lawrence: So, when we think about a number of the characters you have brought to us and brought to life, I'm thinking of Frederick Douglass, I'm thinking of Rodney King, I'm thinking of Otto Frank, and I'm thinking of a ballplayer from the Dominican Republic and another ballplayer from the central part of the United States. It turns out that redemption is actually within our grasp, isn't it? It's not beyond us, but it's a piece of work that sometimes asks too much, but it's doable. It's doable. And I think you create that promise for people in your work.

I am delighted that you'll be a Visiting Scholar with Phi Beta Kappa this year. I'm so excited for campuses across the country to have the chance to learn from you, to experience your wisdom, your passion for the theater, and I'm so grateful that you joined me on Key Conversations today. Thanks for being with us.

Smith: Thanks for having me, Fred.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Michael Castaneda mixed this episode. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org). Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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