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NICHELLE NICHOLS INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Nichelle Nichols

Actor

9/12/2011

Interviewed by Beth Osisek

Total Running Time: 38 minutes and 2 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Nichelle Nichols

Actor

Nichelle Nichols

Actor

00:00:08:00

BETH OSISEK:

Can you tell me about your family, what was your dad like, what was your mum like?

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

Oh boy. Well, Dad had three daughters and Mom had one son when they met, and both had said they'd never marry again. Of course, they fell in love, and one day, had been together for almost forty years when my father died. And Mother was quite brilliant. She had planned to be a lawyer.

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And all my father's best friends, many of them were lawyers, and they used to test her. They'd say, "You got quite a brilliant lady here. She should be a lawyer." They wanted to send her back to school, but together, they brought six children in the world. And so, we all came in, kind of, sets of threes. And so it was never like, a house with ten kids.

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My dad was a physicist at the Howard University and became very interested in metaphysics as well. And they were very highly regarded in our neighborhood, and helped a lot of people, and raised their children with music and love, and I think they were pretty special.

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BETH OSISEK:

What were your parents' expectation of you, and was it a given that you would work?

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

To be the best that I could be of whatever I was going to be. To know when I'm wanted, go after it, and be the best. The best that I could be. My dad said, "No one can be better than you if you are at your best. And you're no better than anyone else, but no one else is better than you." And I always remembered that. It kept me humble, and it kept me... believing in myself, and believing there's a world out there I could conquer in my own little way without interfering with anyone else's way unless they got in my way-

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No. I say that facetiously, but I really mean it. And I mean in ways that society plans your life, to tell you who you are and what you can and cannot do and what you can and cannot achieve, and I don't believe it for one minute. Never did, never will, and resent what's going on now. I think we're all here for one another.

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BETH OSISEK:

Tell me the moment you realized you were good at performing.

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

When I was about five. Because as I said, I would perform for my parents. And when they would settle down for the evening- And I'd learn something. Of course, when I was five, so was Shirley Temple, so I'd do all the things. And

Mom used to do my hair with Shirley Temple curls, it was so fun. And I loved it.

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And later, I began to write music, and... I got into a performance. And then when I was fourteen, I was coming home from school, and Mother's out saying, "Come. Come. Quick. Quick. Quick." So I ran home and said, "What Mom?" And she said, "Your dance teacher called and they want you down at the audition. She's going to be in a big show and wants you to be in it too. It's called the College Inn story at the Sherman Hotel in Chicago." And I'm from Chicago.

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And so, she said, "But Ms. Nichols, would you do something about her hair? To make her look a little older." And I had long black hair. So Mother took my hair and pulled it up on top, and made all kind of—I don't know what she did to it—and put something beautiful, pearls or something, around it. And put some of her beautiful earrings—very small but very pretty—and then she put the suit on me.

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And she looked at me, and my big sister had given me a pair of shoes that Mother and Daddy wouldn't let me wear. They were first platforms that you've ever seen and had an ankle strap on them, and I had long pretty legs. So Mother let me wear them for the first time but I had to walk around the house in them and I'd been practicing when nobody was looking anyway.

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And first time that I went on the elevator—elevated—by myself, downtown to the Sherman place, and I walked in, tall, and nobody recognized me in the company. And I walked over to the stage and Ernie Byfield was sitting there. They were all just having conversation, waiting for me. He says, "She should be here any minute." And my teacher didn't recognize me. I looked so adult.

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BETH OSISEK:

So at fourteen, you're already working a professional job and going to school...

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

Yes. I had to maintain the average that I had at that time, which was a B+, and so... And so, school came rather easy for me. Anything I was interested in was easy so... I was interested in everything. I was the only one that got good marks in science 'cause girls weren't supposed to like science. I thought science was fun.

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I was fourteen, we went in there thinking October 1st, I think, and then December 28th, just a few days before the end of the year, I turned fifteen. We went in for six weeks, and we were there a year. And at that time, everybody who was anybody who came to town stayed there, because the big supper

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club at where we were, The College Inn, was famous from the 20s, and Ernie Byfield was doing The College Inn Story.

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And so someone played Fred and Adele Astaire, all the way to Katherine Dunham and her barefoot dancers. They said, "She can't come in with her barefoot dancers." He said, "Yes, she is." So she did one there and did an Apache number with heels on. It was very, very famous. He broke the color barrier, and the top entertainers could come and perform like Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, all of the top people. Lena Horne.

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They played the Chicago Theater, and they had to go on the other side of town because they couldn't- or played the- Ernie Byfield's the first one who played Black performers in his supper club. You played the theaters, but you didn't play the supper clubs. And not only that he was the first, that if you played at his establishment, you had a suite in the hotel, and that was the first time it ever happened. And so I had a suite.

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However, my parents had to be there with me. A year later, when I was almost sixteen or was sixteen, the woman who had done the publicity for the Sherman House for The College Inn Story, had gotten a call from Duke Ellington, and he had come to see the show while he was in town, and he asked to meet me. And I was so excited, and Mother said, well-

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The guy came up to our room to say and give a note that Mr. Ellington wants to meet Ms. Nichols. And mother said to tell him he would meet Ms. Nichols with her mother and the troupe, and he sent back up and said he'd be honored. And he told me, "You're going to be a singer because-" And I said, "How do you know?" 'Cause I wanted that and everything else. And he said, "Because I could-"

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We sang in the beginning and the opening and the finale, with the entire cast, but I didn't sing in the section that we did of Katherine Dunham, of course. And I said, "How do you know?" And he said, "Because I could hear that voice of yours over everybody else's." And I did indeed wind up, six months later, traveling with him as a dancer for one of his suites.

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I choreographed it and played it, called *Monologue Duet and Threesome*. And I used to come to- I followed the singer, and I used to come to the edge of the stage 'cause we're going to go right after her, and I watched her, and she was tall and willowy and she hung on to her microphone like this. And so, one day, we were almost at the end of the tour, and Mr. Ellington called me into his dressing room.

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These were theaters, so a picture would go on, and then a stage show. And he called me on, he says, "Sing something for me." And I looked around, I said, "You can sing, can't you?" And I said, "Of course I can sing. We all got rhythm

don't we?" And he thought that was funny, and he said, "Well, sing something for me." And I said, "Well, I don't see a piano."

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And the picture was on so we couldn't do it, and I said, "There's no piano." And he said, "You don't need a piano. We can all sing. We all got rhythm, don't we?" And so, that was a challenge. When I finished, he said, "Do you still have that little gold dress you wore before we left the party- we gave before we left?" And I said, "Oh yes, I even have the shoes." The gold shoes. I was so dumb.

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And he chuckled... and he said, "Oh good." He said, "This number. This number, and that one. You go on tonight." I said, "What?" He said, "You're going to have to go on tonight." And I said, "But- But-" He said, "Band singer fell deathly ill. Very, very ill, and she had to go home. So there's only a few days left." He says, "You can take over."

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And then I thought, "This is my big chance," after I got through with the chills and the nervousness. And so, I went on. The great Duke Ellington is playing for me. It's like being on a cloud, floating on a cloud. You can do no wrong. And I found myself just loving it. And I looked up and I turned to Mr. Ellington, and he's trying to keep a chuckle from his face.

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And he finally came to me afterwards. He said, "You were wonderful, but please let that microphone go and be yourself." He says, "She holds onto the

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microphone because she's so nervous, she can't... she'd fall down if she couldn't... That's why she holds on to the mic. Be yourself." And that's the best advice I ever got. From then on, I said anything I did, I knew that I had to be myself. He said, "When you are yourself, nobody can touch you."

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BETH OSISEK:

You must have run into a lot of things you were unprepared for.

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

Yes, yes. Yes.

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BETH OSISEK:

Can you tell me about some of that, going out so young at such a young age and becoming a performer?

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

I remained a performer from then on. I finished the tour with Duke Ellington. I was then—it seemed just sought after—but then I got married and had a kid, and I thought, "Oh, my career's over." Everybody said that. "Oh, your

career is over." And I said, "No, it isn't." But I was determined to stay with my son until... Not to leave him until he was at least understood. Not a baby.

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BETH OSISEK:

What were some of the obstacles you faced trying to get back in your entertainment career?

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

Where are you going to work? And I wanted to do theater, I wanted to do plays. But there was hardly anything in Chicago. And if you're going to get anything, it would be New York. And my parents weren't about to let me go at fifteen, sixteen. It's just- Even though I'm married, divorced, and got a kid.

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But there were supper clubs in the downtown, and this guy saw my work and headlined me in a calypso show, which lasted for six weeks, lasted a year and a half, which pleased me no end because I could stay home with my son, do my work that I love to do, and he discovered I could sing.

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And he discovered that I- So when I was singing- And he advised me that the Alliance de française, the Chicago chapter was in the audience, so I sang *La Vie en Rose*. And afterwards, they all came up to me and chattering away in

French, and I don't understand a word they were saying. And when they found out that I didn't speak French, they said, "Oh, but no!"

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And I loved that. And that's, I think, when I really knew showbiz was for me. And I loved the theater. I loved the theater of it. I loved the live contact. And then I got into plays and so forth, and went from there.

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BETH OSISEK:

How did the job on Star Trek come about?

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

They hadn't sent the script, had no idea what it's about, and they said, "You read the role." It was three characters: somebody named Bones, somebody named Kirk, somebody named Spock, and they said, "Would you read the part of Spock?" And I looked at it. Woo! Really good scene. Three pages full of just those three characters. And so, I read it and I said, "Well, tell me something about this character. What is she like?"

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And they looked at me. And they said, "Don't you know anything about this show?" And I said, "No, I've been in Europe." And they said, "Well, Spock is not a she, it's- Well, let's put it this way... Leonard Nimoy wouldn't be very

happy about it." "Could she be a woman?" I said. And he said, "Yes, she could. But Leonard Nimoy wouldn't be very happy about it."

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And I said, "Oh, so, it's cast." And I said, "Then why am I reading it?" "Because it's the closest thing possibly to your character, the chief communications officer." And I said, "Okay. So what are the characteristics?" And they told me, and that's how I read for it. And I took those characteristics, of no nonsense, that clean, pulled all the things apart, except just what I do.

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And he said, "You probably won't read the whole script." He said, "We just want to get a feel." They got to the end of the first page, the end of the second page, end of the third page, and finishes marvelous scene. This person is really getting into it with me too, and then I sat there and they just looked at me. Bob Justman said, "Have Penny call down-" When I finished- "Have Penny call down to-" Penny was his secretary- "Have Penny call down and see if Leonard Nimoy has signed his contract yet."

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That was their pleasant way of telling me that I had the role, not his role, but the communication- But they said, "Would you wait?" And so I waited. I said, "They told me to wait." And she said, "Oh fine, Ms. Nichols, and that's a good sign. Because if they're going to see all the other people, and those who wait get to read again." So I thought that's... But nobody else comes in.

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And so, I read my big book and I curl up on the little sofa in the little handy room where she's put me, and nobody else is in there. And then Joe Sargent, who was the director on that first episode, peeked his head in and he's looking for somebody. He looks and he sees me. He says, "What are you doing still here?" I said, "You told me to wait." He said, "Oh come on, big talent. You had the role when you walked in."

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BETH OSISEK:

Now, did you take that role intentionally to be a trailblazer? I mean, you were about to be one of the few African American women with a weekly television show, a spot every single week. Was that your intention taking that role? Did you even think about it at that time?

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

It never occurred to me that it was anything except a series, and what I would be able to do with that. And I would be able to do plays, do theater, and not worry about food on the table. It didn't occur to me that there was more to it, only if it last long enough.

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And a lot of shows weren't. And I didn't know what it was about. Really science fiction wasn't a big thing then, and people would go, "Science fiction?" and look at you cross-eyed. And much less did I realize the impact it would

have on people's lives across the country, and across the world, and in the most unlikely places.

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BETH OSISEK:

Tell me who you played and describe her character for me.

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

Uhura was an interesting character to me and... I fell in love with her. And the character was so strong that there was some concern, and so each time I- And almost everyday, I'd get the script, the full script, we'd all get the full script on the last day of shooting for the next shooting.

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We would rehearse and it would be a beautiful scene, and then they'd bring down the rewrites and I had less to say. I didn't know where that was coming from, but somebody else was saying it, either Leonard or Bill, Spock or the Captain or somebody. And then it kept happening.

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So you'd get the pink pages and the blue pages and the yellow pages and the orchid pages, and what was started out to be a beautiful participation became, "Yes sir. No sir. I can't reach star fleet command, sir." That kind of thing. I spoke about it and I said it's not natural because this is the command crew.

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BETH OSISEK:

What was the thing that made you stay? What made you decide to stay on the show?

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

I went respectfully, wrote out my letter of resignation, and said at the end— 'cause they can't hold me—that I thanked him for everything that he had done, and that I'm now getting offers and my aim is Broadway. I want the theater and I miss it, and I wish to leave the show at the end of the season.

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And Gene... could not believe it. He just looked at me and he said, "You can't do this. Don't you know what I'm trying to achieve here? I know how you feel." And I didn't say anything, and I just was resolute, in my heart. And he said, "Okay." And I handed...

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And he said, "Why don't you do this? Take the weekend and think about it. Think about what we're achieving here. And if you still feel the same way on Monday, come back Monday and you can go with my blessings. I won't like it, but you'll have my blessings." And I said, "Okay Gene. Thank you." And I walked away with trepidation and a big sigh of relief.

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I realized how much I had been putting up with from the guard at the gate to some of the other people, guy that worked in the front office... who hated that I had the job. And so as- I've said this before.

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As fate would have it, I went to a- I had been invited as a celebrity guest to sit on the dias. It was a fundraiser, and I believe it was a NAACP fundraiser. And so I had just set down at the dias, when one of the organizers came over and said, "Ms. Nichols, there's someone who wants to meet you. He says he's your greatest fan."

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And I said, "Oh." And I'd seen the fan mail, some of the mail, and little kids or a grown kid, forty-year old kid, come up and say, "Oh, Star Trek is so wonderful. Oh, I love you on Star Trek. I love the stories. I love where it's taking us. The truth of it." And so I loved it too, because I saw what it was doing, but I hated what it was doing to me, and that I really couldn't enjoy being part of this... because I never knew what was coming at me.

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So I could never plan a scene, I could never- because it may not be my scene. I wouldn't be part of the scene, I was just an adjunct. I remember thinking, "I don't know who-" "There's someone who wants to meet you. He says he's your greatest fan." And I'm thinking it's a Trekker. So I said, "Oh, thank you." And I stood up and went to turn around- went to stand up and I turned around, and looked straight in the face of Dr. Martin Luther King who had this beautiful smile on his face walking toward me.

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And I thought, "I don't know who that little Trekker is that wanted to meet me but he's going to have to wait, because this is my leader coming to me and he's smiling." And he introduced Dr. King to me and I'm like, "Hello, Dr. King." And I shook his hand, and he said, "Ms. Nichols, I am the fan. I am your greatest admirer."

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He said, "The work you are doing, you may not know how important it is, but we, who are fighting the good fight, stop and watch you on Thursday night when you're on." And I was like, "What?" And he was so complimentary, and yet he was serious with me.

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He said, "The times are such that anything that encourages us to do that which we know is right. When we are out there, we know that Uhura is there. The twenty-third century tells us we are beginning and that is where we are going. Television is one of the greatest teachers.-

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-People look on television, they used to say, 'I know it's true 'cause I read it in the newspaper,' but now they look on TV, and they know it's true because it's there. This man, Gene Roddenberry, has created much more than probably... I wonder if he knows." I said, "I think he does." And I said, "Thank you so much, Dr. King. It means so much to me, and I am going to miss my co-stars because they're-"

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And he says, "What are you talking about?" And I said, "I'm leaving the show because I have an offer to-" And that's as far as I got. He said, "You can not do that. This man, Gene Roddenberry, has changed the face of television forever unless you leave." He said, "You are playing- You are the chief communications officer on a five-year mission. What does that tell us? If you leave, what? You were a flake?"

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He didn't actually use that word, but he meant that. He said, "Uhura is more than just a communications officer. You're a symbol. Young people look at you and they understand. You're a part of them. You have created this role in such a manner, with such dignity and such beauty. And even when you're off the ship, when you're off work, off the command group-"

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He says, "But you're on the command group. You're one of the commanders. Where are you going?" He said, "You can not do this. You have a greater good. This is a greater good." And then he lectured me some more, and then he said, "And besides, you're the only one- Star Trek is the only show that my wife Coretta and I allow our little children to stay up late and watch, and you are their hero."

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And I laughed. Dr. King, his children, and somebody else is a hero? He's my leader. And he said I could not go, and all I could think of over the next two days was what he had said. He says, "You've created this character with intelligence and beauty and compassion. You belong here. Besides, you're

fourth in command." Now that was the first time I heard I was fourth in command.

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So I go back to Gene Roddenberry Monday morning, and I said, "Gene..." And I tell him what transpired and I tell him what Dr. King had said. And I said, "If you still want me to stay, I will. It made such sense, and I know what you are trying to do." And Gene took a big sigh, and he said, "God bless Dr. Martin Luther King. You're right. Somebody knows what I'm trying to achieve here."

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And he reached in his drawer and pulled out the letter of resignation, and he handed it to me. It was in a thousand pieces. And I looked at him and there was a tear coming down that big, strong face of his. He said, "God bless Dr. Martin Luther King. Somebody knows what I'm doing."

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BETH OSISEK:

Can you talk a little bit about one of the quintessential scenes which was the kiss between Uhura and Captain Kirk?

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

Phew. There was a scene that was, I guess, changed the face of television forever. It was a scene in which for the first time I got- one of the first times I

got to get off the bridge, and it was what would become the first interracial kiss.

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We were being forced by these people, who had tremendous kinetic powers and could force people to do their bidding, and they decided to have us entertain them with a love scene. And the scene culminated in them forcing Captain Kirk and Lieutenant Uhura to kiss.

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Now if it had been any other actress than a Black actress, it would've been just a scene, but it stirred so much controversy in the studio, the director stopped us. The script plainly says he's in her arm and she's nervous, she's fighting it. They're trying to fight it and they come together and they kiss.

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So Bill Shatner was just delighted. He said "I knew I'd get you in my arms one day." We're laughing. I said, "Oh, shush. Shut up." So the director stopped and he says, "Bill, Bill, what are you doing?" He said, "What do you mean what am I doing? I'm kissing Lieutenant Uhura. They're forcing me too." And he says, "But Bill!" And he comes up to Bill and he's talking to Bill in his eyes like I'm not there. Bill was very angry about it.

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So they called Gene Roddenberry and two suits from NBC, and the suits are standing over there and Gene comes in, "What's the matter?" And he said, "Well, this is [inaudible] and then they actually kiss." And Gene said, "Yes. But

what's the matter?" And he said, "Gene! This is going into the South. You know we can't blah blah blah."

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And Gene said, "Oh, I see. But what's the matter?" And he said, "Well, what do you suggest?" He said, "Well, he can take her arm, and then they don't kiss." He says, "But... am I the only one who's not crazy?" And so Gene said, "Mm, I see your point. Shoot it both ways."

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And the guy said, "Phew, okay. Bill, where's Nichelle?" I'm standing right there and I walked over and got to my place. And he said, "Now we'll shoot it both ways." So Bill said, "Fine. Can I shoot the one with kiss first?" And so we did six takes, or eight takes. And he finally said, "Bill. We've got three more minutes left."

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Because Bill kept saying, "It doesn't feel right. I think like, maybe I'm holding her... Are you getting a good shot of this? And maybe I could just-" You know. And we did the kiss. He said, "Could I get the one..." He says, "Oh, of course. Why didn't you say something?" So now the guy crosses his eyes, he walks back over, and he says, "And action!" He's finally going to get the one without the kiss.

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He is so sure he's going to get the one he's not even looking in the camera, and Bill takes me, and instead of the kiss that we kissed like this, he takes me over like this, and looks up in the camera and crosses his eyes. He never saw

it until... And he says, "And cut!" And of course, they can't use the shot. That is how the first interracial kiss happened on TV.

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BETH OSISEK:

Well, that's one story, but in general, what was the value of Star Trek as a show? 'Cause it was so much bigger than just a television show in some ways.

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NICHELE NICHOLS:

I think the value of Star Trek was it was every man. When you come, you see yourself for who you are. You can measure yourself by looking at Star Trek and measure yourself, what are you doing with your life, with others? How are you relating? Where are your prejudices? Before you put a mirror up to someone else, put it up to yourself.

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Because we all have wondrous qualities and strengths, and we all have weaknesses and some of them are very ugly. And we let some of our worst traits, for one reason or other, dominate our lives.

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And we decide that one person is not worthy or... we can do without 'em. We can take away their security because mine is more important, and then you have to learn all over again.

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END TC: 00:38:02:00