

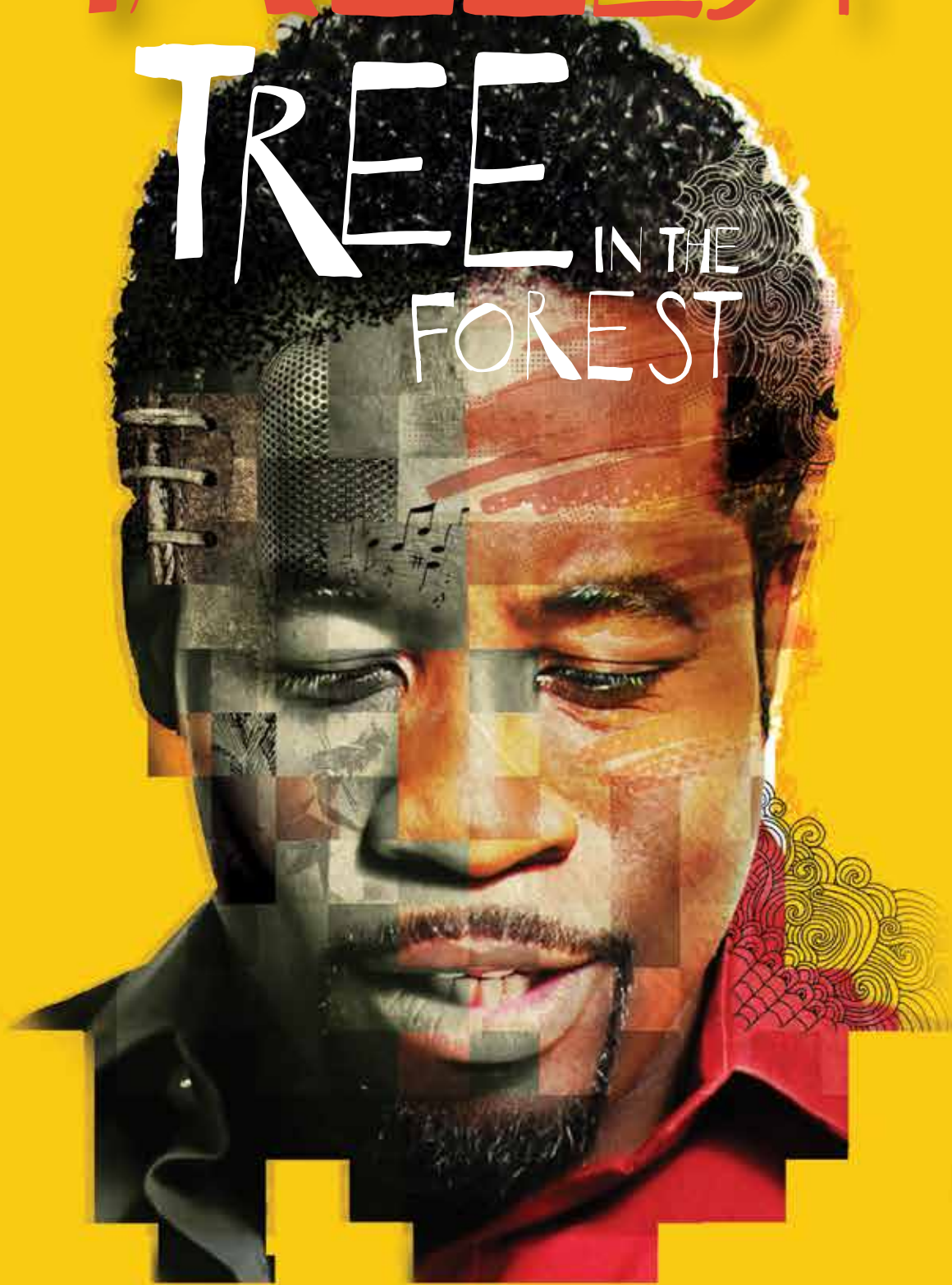


L.A.'s Theatre Company
A non-profit arts organization

Discovery Guide

PAUL ROBESON'S
LARGER-THAN-LIFE STORY

THE
TALLEST
TREE
IN THE
FOREST



Written and Performed by **DANIEL BEATY**
Directed by **MOISÉS KAUFMAN**
WORLD PREMIERE PRODUCTION

The Kansas City Repertory Theatre/La Jolla Playhouse Production in association with Tectonic Theatre Project

April 15 – May 25, 2014
Mark Taper Forum



Welcome to
Center Theatre Group
and *The Tallest Tree in
the Forest.*

Welcome to Center Theatre Group and *The Tallest Tree in the Forest* by Daniel Beaty. This theatrical biography tells the story of an incredible man — Paul Robeson, who was born in 1898 and died in 1976. He was an actor, singer, scholar, athlete and activist. He fought for equality for African-Americans and for people all over the world. He risked everything to stand up for what was right.

Paul Robeson was an extraordinary American citizen, so why is it that so many of us have never heard of him? Artist Daniel Beaty wondered this as well and decided to share Paul Robeson's story through theatre and music, saying "I hope *The Tallest Tree in the Forest* honors the spirit and truth of Paul Robeson's life and character."

Paul Robeson urged people to join him in working to make a better world, proclaiming "The dream our fathers dreamed—of a land that's free, of a people growing in friendship, in love, in cooperation and peace. This is history's challenge to you. I know you will not fail."

Take a moment and think about that challenge. What will it take to make freedom and peace possible for everyone? How can each of us contribute, as Paul Robeson did, to making this a better and more just world?

Theatre raises questions and challenges audience members to discover their own answers and perhaps, additional questions. See what questions this information raises for you and what discoveries the performance provides.

Thank you so much for joining us for *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*. We look forward to seeing you at the theatre!

**"They did silence me,
but my voice...it will live
on... oh, it will live on...
every time an Artist,
anyone, decides to speak
for his fellow human
being."** *—The Tallest Tree in the Forest*

Daniel Beaty. ORIGINAL PHOTO BY NATHAN YUNGERBERG.

THE TALLEST TREE IN THE FOREST

Paul Robeson was born in 1898, the son of a runaway slave. At the height of his fame he was “the most well known black man in the world,” but his story was almost erased from history.

Obie Award-winning writer and performer Daniel Beaty shares the triumphs and tragedies of Paul Robeson’s life in a one-man theatrical performance. This play with music explores Robeson’s journey as an artist, his commitment to justice and equality and the heavy personal cost of his speaking out.



PHOTO BY GORDON PAINES, SHUTTERSTOCK.COMMENTS

ACADEMIC. ATHLETE. ARTIST. ACTIVIST.

Can you think of a POPULAR MUSICIAN, one whose music you can hear on the radio right now? Of course you can: Drake. Usher. Robin Thicke.

Can you think of a POPULAR MUSICIAN WHO IS ALSO A MOVIE STAR? Easy: Justin Timberlake. Jennifer Lopez. Christina Aguilera.

Now, can you name a POPULAR MUSICIAN WHO STARS IN MOVIES AND IS A SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR? A bit harder, but the Internet probably has the answer.

Can you name a POPULAR MUSICIAN WHO STARS IN MOVIES, IS A SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR AND AN ALL-AMERICAN FOOTBALL PLAYER? HOW ABOUT A MUSICIAN, MOVIE STAR, SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR, ALL-AMERICAN WHO SPEAKS 20 LANGUAGES?

How about a POPULAR MUSICIAN, MOVIE STAR, SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR, ALL-AMERICAN ATHLETE, WHO SPEAKS 20 LANGUAGES, HAS A LAW DEGREE AND IS A PHI BETA KAPPA SCHOLAR? It seems ridiculous — no one could accomplish so much in one lifetime. But wait; there’s more.

Name a POPULAR MUSICIAN, MOVIE STAR, SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR, ALL-AMERICAN ATHLETE, WHO SPEAKS 20 LANGUAGES, HAS A LAW DEGREE, IS A PHI BETA KAPPA SCHOLAR AND WHO IS A POLITICAL ACTIVIST WHO FIGHTS FOR THE RIGHTS OF OPPRESSED PEOPLE ALL OVER THE WORLD. Have you thought of anyone?

There is only person who accomplished everything on this list:

PAUL ROBESON.

Born in 1898, Paul Robeson grew up in Princeton, New Jersey. His father had escaped slavery, making his journey to freedom along the Underground Railroad. At 17, Paul attended Rutgers University on an academic scholarship. He was only the third African-American to enroll at the school. At Rutgers he earned fifteen varsity letters in baseball, football, basketball, and track and field. He was a two-time all-American in football. He graduated class valedictorian. He went to Columbia Law School, paying his way in part by playing professional football. He was a world-famous singer and sold thousands of records. He was an actor on stage and in film.

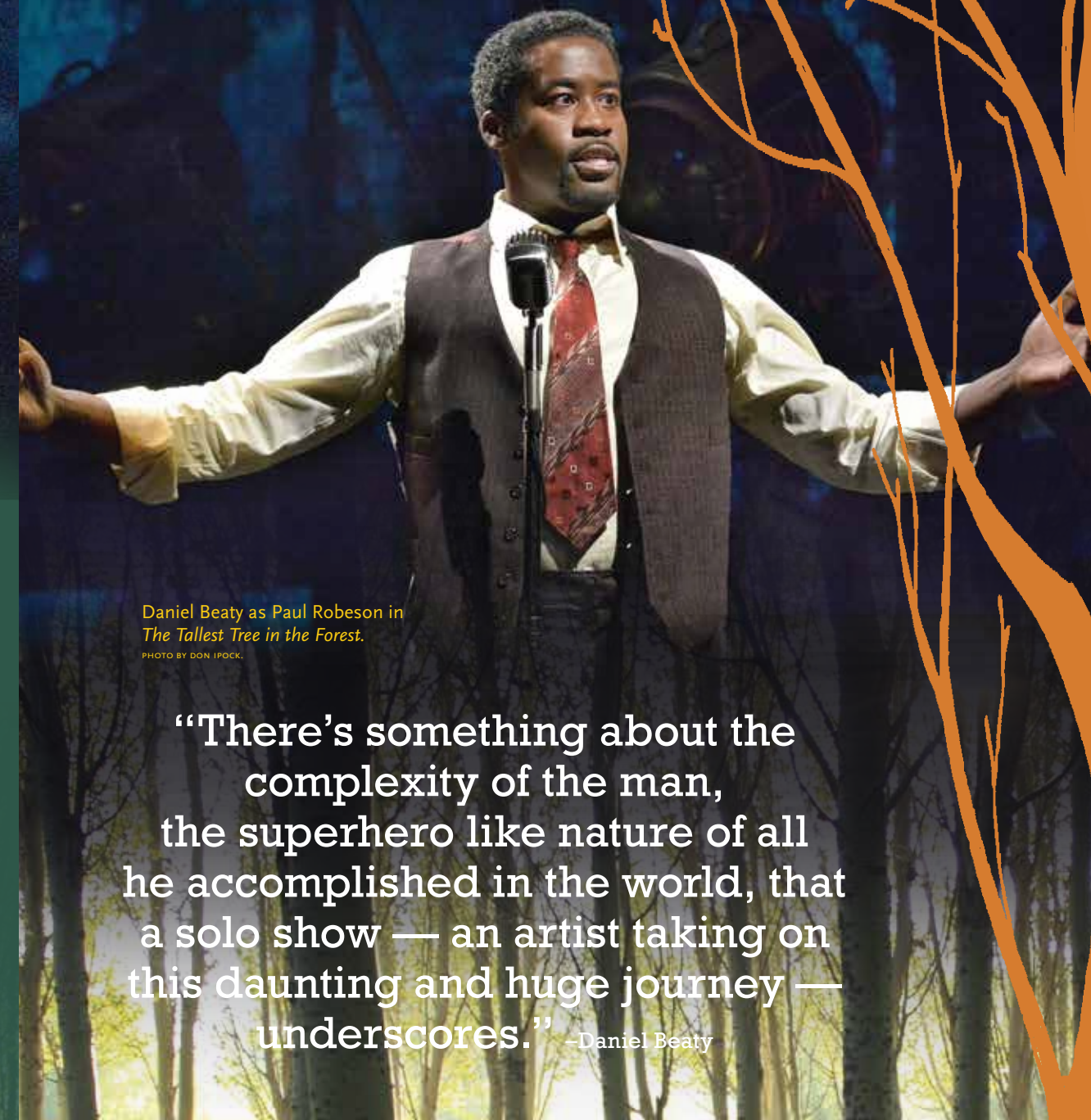
It is almost unimaginable what Paul Robeson accomplished in his life. So, why have so many of us never heard of him?

Paul Robeson believed that an artist must take sides in the fight for freedom and justice

throughout the world. He used his fame and his art to fight against poverty and racism. He spoke out for civil rights and for workers’ rights. Robeson became a national symbol and a leader in the war against racism in America and fascism (a governmental system led by a dictator having complete power) abroad. Civil Rights Leader Mary McLeod Bethune said of Paul Robeson, “If he was a tree, he would be the tallest in the forest.”

Because of Robeson’s political activism, he was investigated by the FBI and accused of being a communist and a traitor. He was considered a threat to American democracy. People turned against him. His concerts were cancelled. In 1950, his passport was revoked. He could no longer travel abroad to perform and was cut off from his supporters around the world. Newspaper headlines declared that “the Tallest Tree in the Forest has been cut down.”

GIVING VOICE



Daniel Beaty as Paul Robeson in *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*. PHOTO BY DON IPOCK.

“There’s something about the complexity of the man, the superhero like nature of all he accomplished in the world, that a solo show — an artist taking on this daunting and huge journey — underscores.” —Daniel Beaty

In *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*, Daniel Beaty gives voice to the amazing Paul Robeson. Like Robeson, Beaty is fiercely accomplished. He is a graduate of Yale University and the American Conservatory Theatre, a spoken-word performer, opera singer, playwright and personal empowerment book author. In 2013, Daniel launched a nationwide initiative that uses the tools of storytelling to help individuals and communities in trauma.

He performed his autobiographical spoken-word poem “Knock Knock,” about his father’s incarceration on Def Poetry Jam (the video can be viewed on YouTube). He has also turned the poem into a children’s book. He is passionate about using the pain of his own experience to help young people whose lives or families have been impacted by incarceration, know that they are not alone.

The Tallest Tree in the Forest, was inspired by Paul Robeson’s life and the fact that Beaty, like so many of us, had never heard of him.

Beaty was a student at Yale University studying classical voice. While researching spirituals, he learned about Paul Robeson and became determined to share his story saying: “When I found out the breadth of all he has done I was both astonished and very upset that I had not learned about this giant figure...I wanted to find the right space and vehicle to bring him back to the social discourse.”

He decided to tell this story as a solo (one-man) show. Beaty uses his voice, body and imagination to portray Paul Robeson from seven years old to 75. He also plays over 40 other characters — some are well-known figures from history and others are friends and family — ranging from his wife Eslanda Robeson to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. Although it is a one-man show, Beaty is not alone onstage: he is accompanied by an ensemble of musicians who use music to convey the different time periods and support Beaty as he sings many of the songs that made Robeson famous.

THE ARTIST MUST TAKE SIDES

“The Artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I made my choice.” —Paul Robeson

Paul Robeson’s talent as a singer and actor made him world famous. He used his art and celebrity to fight for freedom and equality. Daniel Beaty was inspired by Paul Robeson’s life sharing: “I feel like he epitomizes the artist activist.” Like Robeson, Beaty uses art to fight for a more just world.

Beaty and Robeson share the belief that art can be a powerful force in making the world a better place and that an artist has a responsibility to participate.

- Do you think that art has the power to change things in society?
- Do artists have a responsibility to use their art to make the world a better place? What artists do you know who are doing this today?
- What would you fight for or take a stand for? Would you use art, or something else, to take that stand?

MOMENT WORK

Moment Work is Tectonic Theater Project’s method for creating theater. Moment Work encourages participants to actively engage with the elements of the stage (lights, sound, costumes, movement, architecture, props, etc.), allowing anyone —whether they are a writer, actor, designer, director, or brand new to theatre —to build an exciting theatrical story. Through Moment Work, you first identify the physical world of the play and then write or find the text that the different Moments inspire.

Think back on a memorable theatre or film experience. What is a Moment from that show you still remember? What about that Moment was important to you? Do you remember specific words or is the Moment more visual, like a picture in your mind?

The Tallest Tree in the Forest was created, in part, through Moment Work. Director Moisés Kaufman and the play’s writer and performer Daniel Beaty used Moment Work to help differentiate the 40 plus characters that Daniel plays during the show.

While you watch *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*, notice what Moments stand out for you. What elements of the stage attracted your attention - lights, costumes, sound, music, etc. How did they help tell the story?

If you were going to tell the story of your life as a play, what moments would be the most important to share? How would you use theatre elements to help tell your story?

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Mark Taper Forum
Kirk Douglas Theatre

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Citizen of the World

Paul Robeson was a citizen of the world. He performed, lived in and visited many countries. He knew people from different cultures and backgrounds. He dined with royalty and sang with striking miners. He spoke over 20 different languages. As he traveled the world he realized that African-Americans were not the only people fighting for equality. Welsh miners, Jewish activists, Russian peasants, Africans living under Apartheid, people suffering from political persecution, and many others struggled for freedom and a better life. Robeson spoke out against oppression and demanded racial, religious and employment equality world wide.

- ARTIST
- Artiste - French
 - Artista - Spanish
 - Künstler - German
 - Artista - Italian
 - Kalakar - Hindi
 - Yishùjia - Mandarin
 - Khudozhnik - Russian
 - Kunstenaar - Dutch
 - Artistiaid - Welsh
 - Olorin - Yoruba
 - Taiteilija - Finnish

- What does it mean to be a citizen of the world?
- What links us to people around the world?
- What separates us?
- What is our responsibility to people around the world? Do you feel you have more responsibility to those in your own community?
- What struggles are the same for people all over the world?
- What struggles do you think are uniquely American?

UNITED STATES

- HELLO
- Bonjour - French
 - Hola - Spanish
 - Guten Tag - German
 - Ciao - Italian
 - Namaste - Hindi
 - Ni Hào - Mandarin
 - Privet! - Russian
 - Hallo - Dutch
 - Shwmae - Welsh
 - Kaabo - Yoruba
 - Hei - Finnish
 - Mokom - Efik
 - Hujambo - Swahili
 - Shalom - Hebrew

“I saw the connection between the problems of all oppressed people and the necessity of the artist to participate fully.” —Paul Robeson

ALL AMERICAN TO UN-AMERICAN

THE HOUSE UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES COMMITTEE

Established in 1938, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), was a committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, charged with investigating accusations of communism, disloyalty and subversive activities of private citizens, public employees, and organizations. Communism (an economic and social system where property and resources are collectively owned by a classless society) was seen as a great threat to capitalist democracy.

HUAC had the power to subpoena witnesses and hold people in contempt of Congress, and used that power to pressure witnesses to “name names” (identify those whom they knew or suspected to be communists) and to supply information that could lead to the arrest of communists or “communist sympathizers.”

HUAC hearings created a climate of fear and suspicion that reached its height between 1947-1954. Convinced that communists had managed to infiltrate the United States, the atmosphere became increasingly hysterical. It was feared that communists were everywhere: in schools and universities corrupting our young people, in factories subverting our workers, inside the government undermining our nation’s security.

“You are the nonpatriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.” —Paul Robeson

Paul Robeson’s public support for what were at the time considered “communist” causes—including the decolonization of Africa, civil rights, anti-lynching legislation, and peace with the Soviet Union—were considered dangerous and un-American. In addition, his praise of the Soviet Union as a model of equality and tolerance made the FBI suspicious of his loyalty to America.

In 1956 he was called before the House Un-American Activities committee after he refused to sign an affidavit stating that he was not a communist. Robeson felt that signing this statement and HUAC’s investigation threatened basic American rights and civil liberties.

The personal cost of speaking-out for his political beliefs was enormous. Robeson’s name was removed from his All-American teams. His Othello was removed from the record books as the longest running Shakespearean play on Broadway. His record contract was terminated and his concerts were canceled. Many fans, friends and colleagues, radio stations, and newspapers in the United States turned on Robeson. In 1950 his passport was revoked by the State Department, cutting off his livelihood and isolating him from his international supporters. For speaking out against injustice this remarkable man was silenced. His story almost erased from history.

EXCERPTS FROM PAUL ROBESON’S TESTIMONY TO HUAC. PAUL ROBESON’S TESTIMONY JUNE 12, 1956

Mr. ROBESON: When I am abroad I speak out against the injustices against the Negro people of this land....That is why I am here.... I am not being tried for whether I am a Communist.

I am being tried for fighting for the rights of my people, who are still second-class citizens in this United States of America...I stand here struggling for the rights of my people to be full citizens in this country. And they are not. They are not in Mississippi. And they are not in Montgomery, Alabama. And they are not in Washington. They are nowhere, and that is why I am here today.

Mr. ROBESON: In Russia I felt for the first time like a full human being.
Mr. SCHERER: Why do you not stay in Russia?
Mr. ROBESON: Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay here, and have a part of it just like you. And no Fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?

SILENCE

“The answer to injustice is not to silence the critic, but to end the injustice.” —Paul Robeson

Why do you think people want to “silence the critic?” In this age of social media is it still possible to silence protest?

Why is speaking out dangerous? Why is speaking up important? What would happen if no one spoke up about injustice?

Who is speaking out today? Who is giving voice to the voiceless?

Is there something happening in our world that you want to change? How will you speak out?

THE SONGS OF OUR PEOPLE

Songs can give people a voice in times when speaking out is difficult or even dangerous. Spirituals sung by African-American slaves; protest songs sung by 1960s youth; union songs sung by labor organizers; songs and rhymes sung on playgrounds; and underground YouTube hits are all examples of ordinary people using song to share their thoughts and feelings about the world. To give voice to struggle and to victory.

During slavery, spirituals were often used to mask information and ideas that were forbidden. The spiritual "Follow the Drinking Gourd" was thought to have been used as a map for fleeing slaves to find their way north, the drinking gourd being a code for the big dipper. "If you follow the drinkin' gourd, / The river bank will make a very good road, / The dead trees show you the way."

Paul Robeson grew up in his father's church singing spirituals. He understood their power to translate the pain and suffering, hopes and dreams of a people. Robeson brought Negro spirituals to concert stages around the world and discovered that they resonated with audiences everywhere. Scholar W.E.B. DuBois said, "Robeson... more than any living man has spread the pure Negro folk song over the civilized world."

As he traveled, he heard folk songs of other cultures and became aware of the common humanity and shared struggle that lived in these songs.

Using his great gift for languages, Robeson began to include folk songs from other nations into his concerts. He created a deep connection to his audience by singing the songs of their nations in their own languages. He sang the Welsh "David and the White Rock"; the Scottish "Loch Lomond"; the Mexican "Encantadoro Maria"; the Finnish ballad "The Wander." He used these "songs of the people" to give voice to those who were being silenced or oppressed throughout the world, proclaiming "My song is my weapon."

Ole Man River

"I made that song famous and that song made me famous."

-*The Tallest Tree in the Forest*

"Ole Man River," from the musical *Show Boat* was specifically written for Paul Robeson's voice and launched him into stardom. Yet he was conflicted about the song, both the stereotypical character and the offensive lyrics:

"Niggers all work on de Mississippi.
Niggers all work while de white man play."

Even as he grew increasingly uncomfortable with the song, he kept singing it. He sang it onstage in London and New York and in concert halls around the world. In 1938 he visited the front lines of the Spanish Civil War. While singing "Ole Man River" for the troops he took back the song — he changed the words, from:

"I'm tired of livin' and feared of dyin'
to:
"I must keep fighting until I am dyin."

Robeson's lyric change transformed "Ole Man River" from a passive acceptance of one's fate to a unifying cry for action and perseverance. He sang it at rallies supporting union workers in Detroit, California, Australia. He hurled the lyrics at the mob that circled his concert in Peekskill, New York. The song that once shamed him became a symbol of defiance.

Do you believe that music can be used as a weapon?
What musicians are using music to protest injustice today?
What are the songs of your people?
What type of music do you connect with most? Is it music you grew up with? Is it music from another culture?

"There were messages in songs, sometime even revolutionary messages, and he believed that all of the people of the world, the folk music, had a kind of common undertone...and he delighted in...using the songs as a cultural way of reaching out and touching people in their lives where they lived." —Ossie Davis

A conversation with Dialect Coach Paul Meier and Center Theatre Group Teaching Artist Marcos Nájera



Marcos Nájera: Paul, we have been thinking about how Paul Robeson used his voice to speak up for his beliefs. And oftentimes, that voice got him into trouble. So we thought this was the perfect opportunity to talk with someone who teaches actors how to use their voices. How would you describe your job as a voice expert/dialect coach?

Paul Meier: I am a voice, speech, dialect and heightened text professor. I deal with all aspects of human voice in the speaking context—not a singing context. All aspects of accents and dialects. And then when it comes to heightened text, which is really what we are talking about with the poetic texts of Shakespeare, it's helping to bring archaic, highly-dense poetic texts to life and make them sound real and accessible, that's also part of my job.

MN: As an actor, I've heard the words "heightened text" my entire life. Can you help us understand what those words mean to you as a voice expert?

PM: Sure. People will be familiar with heightened stakes; when a human being is in an extreme situation, the stakes become very high, very real—heightened. You know, when Shakespeare's Hamlet discovers himself with his father's murder and his mother marrying his uncle, he resorts to the most dense and highly-wrought language: "To be, or not to be? That is the question." He's reaching for words that can adequately convey the depth of his feeling. Deep feelings, heightened text. That's the way I think of it.

MN: How do you describe what you mean by "dialect" when you begin working with a student?

PM: I don't know if you have siblings.

MN: One sister.

PM: You and your sister probably don't speak exactly alike. I know that was the case with my brother and I; we were both brought up in the same family, the same place, the same historical era, of course, yet we each developed our own personal style of speech. We call that an "idiolect," which is a term that most people have probably never heard of. It means your personal dialect. You know, we talk about idiosyncrasies; that's the same root when we talk about an idiolect.

So, Paul Robeson for example, he was brought up with his brother and his father and his mother. But he doesn't have the same psyche as his father and his mother and his brother. They are different people, and although they share much of the same cultural influences, because they are individual human beings, they each have a different idiolect.

It's important that actors create a voice and a speech and an accent or dialect that's true to their character. And it's not just a generic character based on where they're from; but it's their individual psychology, their personality. So that's where we start.

We are each born into our tribe and we have those tribal ways of speaking, but yet even deeper than that we have our idiolect.

MN: When does that idiolect become useful to us and when does it become challenging for us in telling a story on stage?

PM: Many actors have fine careers without ever changing their style of speech. They have brought their own idiolect and made it famous. But more frequently of course, you are playing characters who are not like you—you've got to change the way you walk, you talk. You've got to change your value system, your outlook, your politics and ethics. You've got to change everything. The art of acting—of course, is transformation—you walk a mile in someone else's skin, and that's the delight of the job, and that's the challenge of the job.

And I have just one small aspect of helping actors in that transformational process.

MN: Where did you begin with *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*? What was the first step that you took as Daniel Beaty's dialect coach?

PM: My first step is always to talk to my client and find out how they like to work and what they want to work on. My first conversation with Daniel was, "Daniel, what do you need from me? What do you think you've got a handle on yourself, and what do you need from me?" He plays 41 distinctly different characters. Clearly, he's got lots of American characters and British characters. You've got to make each of those individual, so maybe they share more or less the same accent, but Daniel's job is to make them distinctly different characters. And with some, he needed no help from me at all. And then sometimes, I would say—let's make this character speak a little deeper, a little faster. And this character can speak a little slower. And without changing accent at all, we've got two different characters side-by-side.

MN: Simply by the vocal choices you've made for those characters?

PM: Yes, that's right. You know, where does their voice sit? How do they, with their voice, how do they think of themselves? What impressions do they want to create on the world? How do they want people to think of them? That's what shapes the way we speak—the image we have of ourselves and the image we have of the world in a given situation.

MN: What was Daniel's response when you asked him in that first session, "What do you need from me?"

PM: Well, he zeroed in right away. He had a shopping list for me. He really needed help with the British and European accents. He knows the African-American voice repertoire far better than I do, so he needed no help with Paul's voice or Reeve's voice or Mr. Robeson, Sr. He needed absolutely no help with those, just a little encouragement perhaps to make one character a little slower than the other. Just to keep them separated in the audience spectrum. In terms of coaching their dialect, no, he needed no help from me. He did need a lot of help with the British and European voices, and those were where I was perhaps most useful.

So I made recordings for him and he had a copy of my textbook, *Accents and Dialects for Stage and Screen*, which has 24 of the most commonly used accents and dialects for actors. I recorded the characters he needed, and he worked from my CD.

MN: If I were a student who was invited to pop into a session with you and Daniel as an observer, what would I see?

PM: You might see us sitting down at a table with scripts and I might do a phrase. Daniel might do a phrase. I'd say—take this phrase, Daniel, in Welsh, for example. Notice how the Welsh person holds on to the medial [middle] T. Instead of "sitting," it's "Sit-ten." "What are you doing sit-ten there? I saw him sit-ten..." There's a peculiar little thing that the Welsh people do, hanging on and making those medial consonants last a bit longer. And having brought that to Daniel's attention, he had a go at it. And I'd give him feedback. So I have to discover his weaknesses and his strengths and work toward his strengths.

Daniel was good at it all.

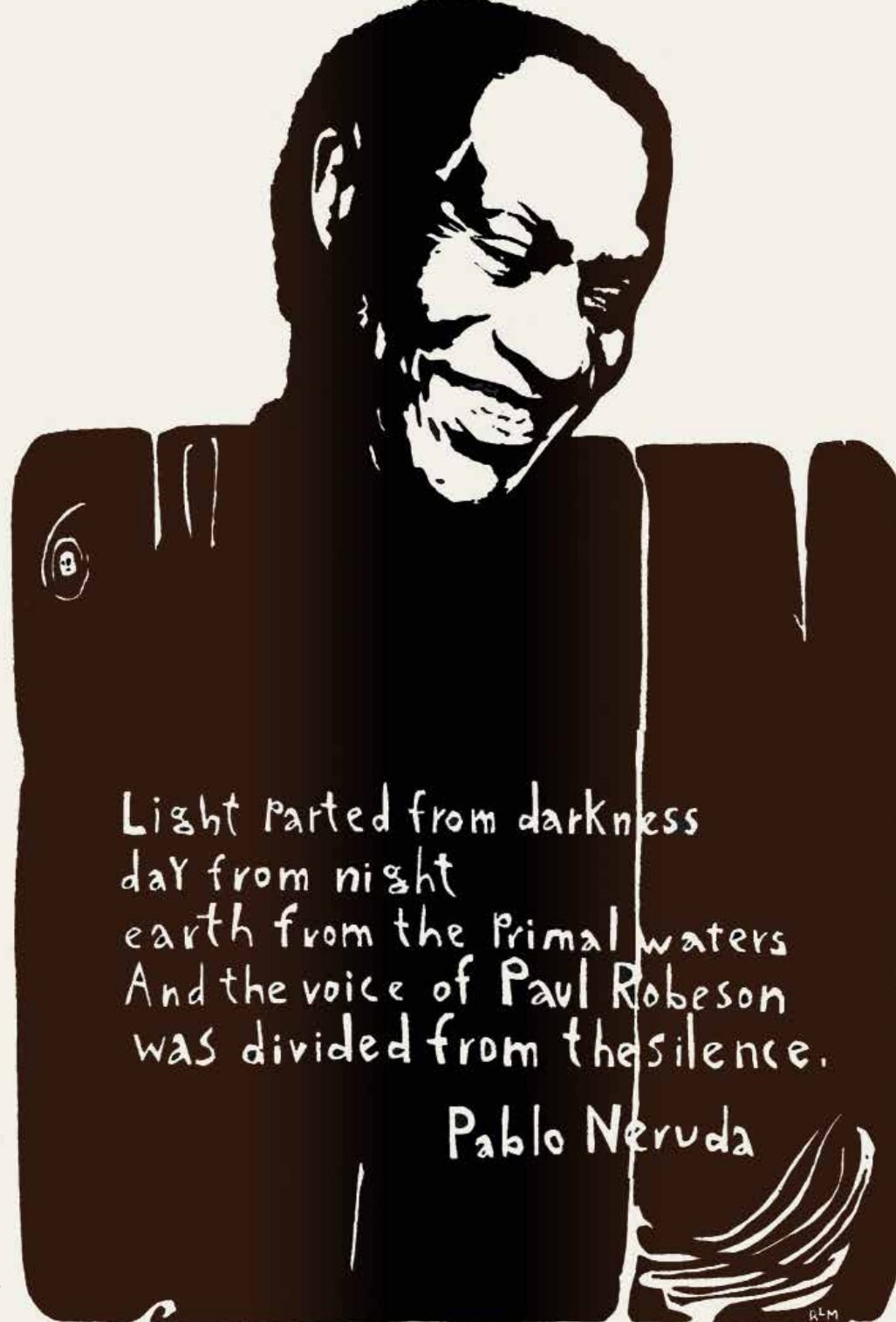


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Center Theatre Group's mission is to serve the diverse audiences of Los Angeles by producing and presenting theatre of the highest caliber, by nurturing new artists, by attracting new audiences, and by developing youth outreach and education programs. This mission is based on the belief that the art of theatre is a cultural force with the capacity to transform the lives of individuals and society at large.

Education and Community Partnerships

Theatre is an enduring and powerful tool for communicating ideas, stories, emotions and beliefs that fuel the intellect, imagination and creative spirit. Center Theatre Group believes that stimulating awareness, creativity, dialogue and an inquisitive mind is integral to the growth and well-being of the individual and the community; and that nurturing a life-long appreciation of the arts leads inextricably to an engaged and enlightened society.

Center Theatre Group's education and community partnership programs advance the organization's mission in three key ways:

- Audiences:** Inspiring current and future audiences to discover theatre and its connection to their lives;
- Artists:** Investing in the training, support and development of emerging young artists and young arts professionals who are the future of our field; and
- Arts Education Leadership:** Contributing to the community-wide efforts to improve the quality and scope of arts education in Los Angeles.



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