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

Can you think of a POPULAR MUSICIAN, one whose music you can hear on the radio right now?

Can you think of a POPULAR MUSICIAN WHO IS ALSO A MOVIE STAR?

Can you name a POPULAR MUSICIAN WHO STARS IN MOVIES AND IS A SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR?

Now, can you name a POPULAR MUSICIAN WHO STARS IN MOVIES AND IS A SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR AND AN ALL-AMERICAN FOOTBALL PLAYER?

How about a POPULAR MUSICIAN, MOVIE STAR, SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR, ALL-AMERICAN ATHLETE, WHO SPEAKS 20 LANGUAGES, HAS A LAW DEGREE AND IS A Phi KAPPA SCHOLAR?

A PUBLISHER MUSICAL, MOVIE STAR, SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR, ALL-AMERICAN ATHLETE, WHO SPEAKS 20 LANGUAGES, HAS A LAW DEGREE, IS A Phi KAPPA SCHOLAR. It seems ridiculous — no one could accomplish as 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 KAPPA SCHOLAR AND WHO IS A COMMISSIONER OF 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 19, Paul attended Rutgers University on an academic scholarship. He was only the third African-American to enroll at the school. All Rutgers he earned fifteen varsity letters in football, baseball, 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 Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy agreed.

McLeod Bethune said of Robeson, “If he was complete power) abroad. Civil Rights Leader Mary McLeod Bethune said of Paul Robeson, “If he was alive to 75. He also plays over 40 other characters — some are well-known and some are not. He learned about this giant figure...I wanted to find the right space and vehicle to bring him back to the societal 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 some 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 on stage. He is accompanied by an ensemble of musicians who use music to carry the different time periods and support Beaty as he sings many of the songs that made Robeson famous.

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

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.

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 a Tecton Theatre Project’s method for creating theater. Moment Work encourages participants to actively engage with their own lives, as well as the lives of others (friends, family, community), and to use the tools of storytelling to help individuals and communities in trauma.

Think back on a memorable television 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 scenes 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 Mosés 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?
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.

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 the Nobel prize he had received.

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 1956 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.

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?
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 into stardom. Yet he was conflicted about the song, both the stereotypical character and the offensive lyrics:

"Negroes 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 in London and New York and in concert halls around the world. In 1935 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 beared of dyin'"

Robeson's lyric changed 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 fueled the lyrics at the baton 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, sometimes 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." —Caster Castro

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 test 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 it comes to heightened text, when we are talking with the poetic texts of Shakespeare, it’s helping to bring action and the highly-dense poetic text 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 stages, 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 resort to the most dense and highly-written 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 time of course, yet we each developed our own personal style of speech. We call that an “idiolect,” which is a term that means something that you probably never hear, 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 and his father 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 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 what they want to work on and what they want to work towards — what are the characters? Did I talk 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 distinctively different characters. Clearly, it’s got lots of American characters and British characters. You’ve got to make each of those individuals, 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’re 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: Was it 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 American voice repertoire far better than I do, so he needed no help with Paul’s voice or Revere’s voice or Mt. 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 characters.

So I made recordings for him and he had a copy of my textbook, Ascents 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 [midd]le T. Instead of “sitting,” it’s “Sit-ten.” “What are you doing sit-ten there? I saw you 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.
Center Theatre Group Education and Community Partnerships

Leslie K. Johnson, Director of Education and Community Partnerships

Melissa Hernandez, Program Associate

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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, dialogues 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 inevitably to an engaged and enlightened society.

Center Theatre Group’s education and community partnerships 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;

Art Education Leadership: Contributing to the community-wide efforts to improve the quality and scope of arts education in Los Angeles.

SPECIAL THANKS

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References

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