

# Educator Resources



THE  
**TALLEST**  
TREE  
IN THE  
FOREST

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Mark Taper Forum

 **UCLA** 

# Welcome

Educator Resources  
*The Tallest Tree in The Forest*

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Center Theatre Group is excited to have you and your students join us for *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*. A great play raises questions about the human condition and a great educational experience gives students an opportunity to reflect upon those questions and begin to discover their own answers. To that end, the materials in Center Theatre Group's Discovery Guide and Educator Resources raise questions: questions about the role and responsibility of an artist, questions about oppression, questions about the power of music and art. Our goal is to provide you with a variety of entry points into *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*, so that you can choose what best suits you and your students.

The Educator Resources and Discovery Guide are companion pieces, designed to help you prepare your students to see the play and to follow-up after the performance with options for discussion, reflection and creativity.

We have organized the Educator Resources into the following sections:

## Discovery Guide

The Discovery Guide provides students with background information about the play and the subject matter, as well as questions for individual reflection. Written to be student-driven, the Discovery Guide helps prepare your students for the performance.

## About This Play

This section includes a scene-by-scene synopsis of the play to provide you with detailed information about the content and form of the play.

## Comprehension

This section includes background information about the setting and subject matter of the play. We have selected the information that most directly connects to or informs what happens in the play.

This section furthers and deepens the background information provided in the Discovery Guide. It can be shared before the play and/or discussed after the performance. It can also be used to provide research topics for your classroom.

## Connections and Creativity

This section provides ways to explore connections between the ideas presented in the play, the students' lives, and the world we live in. In addition, it provides opportunities for your students to use theatre to explore and express. Theatre activities are included that examine specific artistic aspects of the production, as well as delve deeper into the ideas and questions raised by the production. The questions, activities and information in this section can be used both before and after the performance.

We know the hard work and dedication that it takes to bring students to see theatre. These materials are designed to support you in making the most of that experience. We applaud your passion for sharing theatre with your students and thank you for sharing your students with all of us at Center Theatre Group. We look forward to seeing you at *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*.



601 West Temple Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

# About the play

## *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*

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This section includes a scene-by-scene synopsis of the play to provide you with detailed information about the content and form of the play.

### Scene-by-Scene

#### Act I

Paul Robeson, at the height of his fame and the pinnacle of his vocal prowess sings “Ole Man River,” the song that would become his signature. The audience’s applause dies as a projection appears: December 28, 1975.

A now 70-year-old Robeson recalls the fame that “Ole Man River” brought him — and its cost. Flash back to 1949, the Paris Peace Conference. Robeson, now 49, gives a speech in which he declares that an artist must take sides in the fight for peace and praises the Soviet Union for that country’s work in the struggle against oppression. He is labeled a traitor by the American press.

Flash forward to the older Robeson as he recalls how he was once “the tallest tree in the forest” and how, because of his politics, he has been cut out of American history. But, he assures us, his roots are deep in the soil of the nation.

Flash back to 1902 when a young Paul learns lifelong lessons about American racism from his brother Reeves and his father (“Pop”). While playing football with Reeves they notice a white couple. Paul admires the woman. The white man takes offense and he and Reeves get into a fight with him. Reeves punches the man in the face with a fist full of rocks and is arrested. Later that night after Pop has bailed him out of jail, he admonishes Reeves for not using his words to fight. Pop was born a slave and knows the brutalities of white racism intimately. Reeves counters that words are not enough, that you have to fight — “take nothing from nobody.” This is too much for Pop. Reeves’ attitude is too dangerous to allow around Paul; it could get him killed. Pop kicks Reeves out of the house. Young Paul is deeply grieved. Pop explains to him that to climb up, to stay alive, he must show white people he is grateful and, above all, never make them angry. Young Paul is a gifted student. As he sits with Pop studying *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in Latin and Greek, the lessons seep into his young mind, along with a facility for languages and a lifelong love for learning.

#### RUTGERS UNIVERSITY, 1915-1917

Paul is now 17 and wins a scholarship to Rutgers University. He is the only African-American to attend the university during his tenure there. He joins the football team but is treated with hostility by the white players. He channels his anger at this treatment and becomes an aggressive player. Coach Stanford tells him that the best players are the smart players and that he should learn to control his temper. Paul does just that and goes on to lead the team to the 1917 championship and becomes a two-time All American. But accolades on the field are not enough for Pop. He reminds Paul that he is at the university for an education. He encourages Paul to think about a sensible career after graduation. Paul takes his father’s advice and studies hard. But Pop does not live to see Paul’s hard work come to fruition. He passes away in 1917 during Paul’s final year of college. Paul is named valedictorian of his class and is accepted into Columbia Law School.

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### NEW YORK, 1920s

Paul begins law school in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance. There he meets black and white artists and intellectuals. He pays his way through law school by singing at parties. During this time he meets Eslanda (Essie) Goode, a young chemist from a prominent family. She has seen him around the social scene. Essie immediately takes an interest in Paul's development. She gets him better clothes and encourages him to pursue a singing career. Even though Paul is seeing someone else and has no desire to sing professionally, Essie is convinced that Paul will be a great performer and that they are destined to have a life together.

### NEW YORK, 1922-1927

Paul completes law school and joins the firm of Louis W. Stotbury. Paul is the first and only black employee of the firm. Unfortunately, the other staff members and clients are not as progressive as Mr. Stotbury. Because of its racist atmosphere, Paul resigns from the firm.

As Essie foretold, she and Paul marry, and Paul begins to pursue a performing career. He lands a role in Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chilluns Got Wings*. The show puts Paul in contact with many important theatre artists. With Essie as his manager, his concert bookings increase. Their son Paul Jr. is born in 1927.

### SHOW BOAT, 1928

In 1928 Paul plays the role of Joe in Oscar Hammerstein's *Show Boat* in London. The show is guaranteed to be a hit, but Paul worries about the stereotypical nature of his character. Essie convinces him that it will be good for his career and that once he succeeds in London, better roles will open up for him in the United States. *Show Boat* is wildly successful and Paul becomes the toast of London. He performs in the play and sings concerts for the elite of English society. He socializes with the notable artists and intellectuals of England and Europe.

In London Paul has his political awakening. One evening he and Essie are unable to get a table at the Savoy Grill because an American southerner guest does not want to eat with "Negros." This, combined with a negative critique from the New York Amsterdam News about his use of the word "nigger" in *Show Boat*, causes Paul to question his responsibility as an artist. By chance he encounters with a large group of striking Welsh miners. They are marching and singing to protest their working conditions. They inspire Paul with a realization that he could use his celebrity to raise awareness of oppression. Meanwhile, his acting career continues to grow. He is offered the role of an African chief in the British film *Saunders of the River*. He thinks that perhaps this role can change things and show the world the humanity of the African people. But, when the film appears, is a crude glorification of British imperialism with grotesque caricatures of African people. Members of the white British press praise the film, but the New York Amsterdam News castigates Paul for perpetuating racial stereotypes.

While the film is an artistic and political failure for Paul, through it he meets Jomo Kenyatta, the exiled Kenyan leader and future President of Kenya. Jomo convinces Paul that his prominence can be used to bring attention to British imperialism in Kenya and for the cause of justice globally. Paul is deeply moved, and he informs Essie of his new path to speak for the voiceless and the oppressed. Essie wonders why artistic success is not enough. Paul tells her that he has a voice while the oppressed do not. He is determined to find a way to use both his art and his conviction.

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He receives an invitation to visit the Soviet Union from filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Paul is excited. Twenty-five years ago the Soviet Union was a land of slaves (serfs), and now they are a free people. Perhaps this is the place for him?

### BERLIN AND MOSCOW, 1934

Paul and Essie take a train to the Soviet Union and pass through Germany, which is experiencing the first tide of fascism. They are menaced at a train station by storm troopers. Their reception in the Soviet Union is markedly different; they are greeted with banners and love. Paul tours the Soviet Union for three months. He sees workers of all races living together in harmony and meets black expatriates who extol the virtues of a society free from racial prejudice. Both Paul and Essie are enamored. They consider moving from London to Russia, but as the 1930s end, fascism is growing stronger throughout Europe, and they decide to return to the United States. Upon Paul's return, J. Edgar Hoover opens a file on Paul. He is branded a communist and threat.

### ACT 2

#### WORLD WAR II

Back in the United States, Paul uses his celebrity to promote patriotism and support for the war. He records "Ballad for Americans," a rousing song extolling the virtues of democracy and diversity. It becomes the most popular radio broadcast of its day. He speaks at war bond rallies. He is at the height of his fame.

#### OTHELLO, 1943

Toward the end of the war Paul finances a Broadway production of *Othello*. It is a hit, dispelling any doubts about his skills as an actor and the power of his celebrity. Mary McLeod Bethune of the National Council of Negro Women, says "All American Negroes should be proud of Paul... he is the tallest tree in the forest."

While his professional life is at its height, his home life is suffering. Paul is having an affair. Essie demands that it stop; Paul refuses. They come to a painful understanding: that they are great friends and business partners, but no longer true spouses. They agree to an open relationship. Essie moves with Paul Junior to an estate in Connecticut. Paul continues to live in New York City.

World War II ends and possibilities for peace and prosperity loom for all Americans. African-American soldiers returning home from Europe and the Pacific take part in the happiness of life after wartime. But racism dashes their dreams as 46 African-American soldiers are lynched in 1946.

Paul takes the tragedy personally. He had encouraged African American men to fight against fascism and now the returning soldiers faced violent racism at home. He joins 3000 others who march on Washington demanding an end to lynching. Paul meets with President Truman, who tells him now is not the time. When Paul says that this would not happen in the Soviet Union, Truman warns him against supporting the Soviet Union, saying that they had been our allies, but were now our enemies, spreading Communism across the globe. Paul counters that who he supports is his own business. The fact that Paul is a celebrity, Truman tells him, makes who he

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supports the public's business, and dealing with the Soviets is the government's business. As Paul begins to actively support leftist causes, Hoover continues to add to his Paul Robeson file. In 1947 at a concert in Salt Lake City he performs "Joe Hill," a ballad about the murdered union leader. He announces to the crowd that he is retiring from show business to pursue political causes that champion Negro and worker's rights.

Beleaguered by the political fights in the United States, Paul takes a trip to the Soviet Union to perform. On this trip he learns from his friend, poet Itzik Feffer, that the Soviet Union is persecuting its Jewish citizens. At his concert Paul makes a plea on behalf of the Soviet Jews, ending his concert by singing the Warsaw Ghetto resistance song "Zog Nit Keynmol."

When Paul returns to New York in June 1949, his bags are searched on the behest of the FBI. At the airport a reporter asks him his opinion on Stalin's purges and Jewish persecution. Paul will not comment. When questioned later by Essie, he tells her that he will comment about Soviet problems when in the Soviet Union; here in the United States if he is critical, it will weaken his argument that the Soviet Union is a model for race relations.

### 1949 PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

When Paul delivers his infamous speech praising the Soviet Union, he is labeled a traitor. Mary McLeod Bethune, who once called him "the tallest tree," demands that he be "cut down." His concerts begin to be canceled, and on September 4, 1949, concert-goers are attacked by an angry mob.

The following year, on May 5, 1950, his passport is revoked. If he signs an affidavit claiming he is not a Communist, his passport will be returned. Paul refuses to sign. He is called before the House Un-American Activities Committee to answer charges of communism. Paul holds his own against the committee.

We flash forward to 1975. 70-year-old Paul tells us that they kept his passport for eight years. During this time he could not work, and radio stations would not play his records. He was erased from history. But his voice will live on every time an artist, or anyone, speaks out for his fellow man.

A reporter announces that 5000 people have come out to mourn for Paul Robeson who died on January 25, 1977. He had been one of the most well-known black men in the world, perhaps best defined by his own words: "The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice."

# Comprehension

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## Political, Economic and Social Systems

### **Fascism**

A governmental system led by a dictator having complete power, forcibly suppressing opposition and criticism, regimenting all industry, commerce, etc., and emphasizing an aggressive nationalism and often racism. (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/fascism>)  
“Fascism” [after “fasces,” the symbol of bound sticks used as a totem of power in ancient Rome]. (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/mussolini-fascism.asp>)

### **Socialism**

An economic and political system where means of production (capital, land, and labor) is collectively owned by the workers who are individual private owners. In a socialist system goods and services are produced for the people’s use, not for profit.

### **Communism**

An economic and social system in which all (or nearly all) property and resources are collectively owned by a classless society and not by individual citizens. Based on the Communist Manifesto, published in 1848 by two German political philosophers, Karl Marx (1818-1883) and his close associate Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), it envisaged common ownership of all land and capital and the withering away of the coercive power of the state. In such a society, social relations were to be regulated on the fairest of all principles: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” Differences between manual and intellectual labor and between rural and urban life were to disappear, opening up the way for unlimited development of human potential. (<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/communism.html#ixzz2rptgOX2G>)

### **Capitalism**

An economic and social system based on private ownership of the means of production (capital, land, and labor) employed in generation of profits. In such a society emphasis is placed on individualism, competition and private enterprise.

### **Democracy**

A form of government in which power rests in citizens’ equal participation — either directly or through elected representatives — in the proposal, development and creation of laws.

## First Red Scare

The period in the United States immediately following World War I (1914-1918) that profoundly shifted the country’s social, cultural and political landscapes. During this time, an influx of new immigrants poured into American cities. Many came from Eastern Europe, fleeing the devastation of the war and the upheaval of the Russian Revolution, which introduced a new form of government in contrast to the capitalist democracies of the West. These new ideas about the relationship between workers and owners fueled waves of labor strikes as the economy suffered the collapse of wartime industries. All these changes created a climate of fear: fear of traditionally marginalized populations demanding a larger place in society; fear of new cultures; fear of new ideas — all of which challenged the established power structure.

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In 1917, two revolutions completely changed the fabric of Russia. First, the February Russian Revolution toppled the Russian monarchy and established a provisional government led by industrialists, merchants and bankers. Then in October, a second Russian Revolution placed the Bolsheviks — a party whose name means “majority” and which was composed of workers and peasants — as the leaders of Russia, resulting in the creation of the world’s first communist country. (<http://history1900s.about.com/od/Russian-Revolution/a/Russian-Revolution.htm>)

In the United States during World War I, approximately nine million people worked in war industries, while another four million were serving in the armed forces. Once the war was over, these people were left without jobs, and war industries were left without contracts. Economic difficulties and worker unrest increased. (<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/saccov/redscare.html>) New concepts and political structures like communism, socialism and anarchy were attracting many workers, intellectuals and labor leaders who were looking for ways to gain some power and control over their economic lives.

One of the first major incidents was in Seattle, when on January 21, 1919, 35,000 shipyard workers in Seattle went on strike. The police in Boston went on strike. A nationwide steel strike occurred: 275,000 steel workers walked off their jobs, and soon the strikers numbered 365,000. Three-quarters of Pittsburgh’s steel mills were shut down. Strikers were branded as “reds” and as being unpatriotic. Fear of strikes leading to a communist revolution spread throughout the country.

When a series of bombings took place in the summer of 1919 — bombs went off in eight cities, including Washington D.C., hitting the home of Attorney General Mitchell A. Palmer — hysteria took hold. “Red hunting” became the national obsession. Colleges were deemed to be hotbeds of Bolshevism, and professors were labeled as radicals. Just who set the bombs remained unclear; but popular opinion, inflamed by the press, blamed anarchists.

Although there were only about 70,000 self-professed communists in the United States in 1919, Palmer viewed them as responsible for a wide range of social ills, including the bombings. In his essay “The Case Against the Reds,” Palmer charged that “tongues of revolutionary heat [were] licking the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, seeking to replace marriage vows with libertine laws, burning up the foundations of society.” (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/hist409/red.html>)

To combat the ‘reds,’ the Justice Department, under Attorney General Palmer, started the General Intelligence (or Anti-Radical) Division of the Bureau of Investigation on August 1, 1919 with J. Edgar Hoover as its head. Its mission was to uncover Bolshevik conspiracies and to find and incarcerate or deport conspirators. Eventually, the Anti-Radical division compiled over 200,000 files that detailed radical organizations, individuals, and case histories across the country. These efforts resulted a series of raids — the “Palmer Raids” — that lead to the imprisonment or deportation of thousands of supposed “reds.” (<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/saccov/redscare.html>)

The Palmer Raids struck without warning and without warrants. Palmer’s men smashed union offices and the headquarters of communist and socialist organizations. Even the most innocent statement against capitalism, the government, or the country could lead to arrest and incarceration. The raids concentrated on alien residents rather than citizens, because aliens had fewer rights. In December of 1919, Palmer’s agents seized 249 resident aliens. Those seized

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were placed onboard a ship, the Buford, bound for the Soviet Union. Deportees included writer, feminist and anarchist Emma Goldman.

By the late 1920s the Red Scare died down, as America entered the Great Depression and turned its attention to saving a failing economy and putting a nation back to work.

### Second Red Scare

Another period of upheaval and another war marked the beginning of the Second Red Scare in the United States. In the period during the World War II in Europe (1941-1945) the Soviet Union was an ally of the United States in the battle against fascism. When the Soviets tested their first atomic bomb (1949), this event, along with the communist revolutions in China (1949) and Cuba (1959) and the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, signaled that the U.S. was no longer the sole super power in the world. Many in the West felt that communism was a real threat to capitalist democracy.

In March 1947, President Harry Truman issued an executive order creating a Federal Loyalty-Security Program. A greatly enlarged version of a program originally instituted in 1939, the program gave loyalty review boards the power to fire federal employees when “reasonable grounds” existed for belief that they were disloyal. Evidence of disloyalty included not only treasonous activities, but “sympathetic association” with a long list of organizations deemed by the Attorney General to be “Communist, fascist, or totalitarian.” These organizations ranged from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade — whose members fought in the Spanish Civil War — to the National Negro Congress. In practice, people could lose their jobs for being on the wrong mailing list, owning suspect books or phonograph records, or associating with relatives or friends who were politically suspect. Those accused almost never learned the source of the allegations against them. The criteria for dismissal were expanded in 1951 and again in 1953. (<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/fifties/essays/anti-communism-1950s>)

By the 1950s the fear was that communists were everywhere: in our schools and universities, indoctrinating children, in our factories corrupting our workers, in Hollywood creating pro-red propaganda. The suspicion was that they were even in the government subverting from the halls of power.

Established in 1938, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, investigated allegations of communist activity in the U.S. Through its power to subpoena witnesses and hold people in contempt of Congress, HUAC often pressured witnesses to surrender names and other information that could lead to the apprehension of communists and communist sympathizers. Committee members often branded witnesses as “red” if they refused to comply or hesitated in answering committee questions. In one of its most famous investigations, HUAC member Richard Nixon, after weeks of dramatic hearings, was at the final hour able to reveal that Alger Hiss, a former State Department official, had lied to them about having “ever been a Communist.” This intimidating atmosphere often produced dramatic but questionable revelations about Communists infiltrating American institutions and subversive actions by well-known citizens.

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HUAC subpoenaed many Hollywood stars, gaining much publicity for the committee. The action was triggered when the editor and publisher of *The Hollywood Reporter* published a list of members of the movie industry who were communist “sympathizers.” (Possibly some of them were, as in 1930, during the Great Depression, there were two major strikes between movie producers and industry unions.) HUAC used the list to subpoena citizens in the film industry. Both Walt Disney and Ronald Reagan were called. They both insisted that communists were a serious problem in Hollywood. Reagan assured them that 99% of Hollywood was anti-Communist. In contrast, several stars formed a committee to protest the HUAC’s tactics, including John Huston, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Those in Hollywood that were subpoenaed were either known or suspected members of the communist party. Ten of them refused to give testimony, citing their First Amendment right of free speech and assembly. Known as the Hollywood Ten, they were all cited and convicted for contempt of Congress. This changed Hollywood dramatically. Artists were barred from work based on their alleged membership in progressive political causes that enforcers of the list associated with communism. The “blacklist” was rarely made explicit or verifiable, but it directly damaged the careers of scores of individuals working in the film industry.

The most famous “red hunter” of the Second Red Scare was Senator Joseph McCarthy (Republican-Wisconsin). He used the anti-communist hysteria for political gain, famously stating in a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, that “I have here in my hand a list of 205 [State Department employees] that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department.” (<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/mccarthy-says-communists-are-in-state-department>) The number of communists kept changing and he never produced the list. Although not affiliated with HUAC, he used similar tactics of subpoenaing citizens and forcing them to testify for his Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. McCarthy caused panic and witch hunts in government agencies.

1954 was the end of the McCarthy era and the fevered pitch of anti-communism. The turning point came when Senator McCarthy began to hunt for communists in the Army. A special Senate subcommittee was formed to investigate McCarthy’s tactics and the television network ABC broadcast the hearings live, the first time political hearings had been televised nationally. When McCarthy “red-baited” a young attorney, Army lead counsel Joseph Welch responded: “Until this moment, Senator, I think I had never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness... Have you no sense of decency sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?” The question resonated with Americans. A few months later the Senate voted overwhelmingly to censure McCarthy. The Red Scare was over.

## Paul Robeson's Remarks

to the House Un-American Committee for the House Committee on Un-American Activities  
June 12, 1956 (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440>)

Mr. ARENS: Are you now a member of the Communist Party?

Mr. ROBESON: Oh please, please, please.

Mr. SCHERER: Please answer, will you, Mr. Robeson?

Mr. ROBESON: What is the Communist Party? What do you mean by that?

Mr. SCHERER: I ask that you direct the witness to answer the question.

Mr. ROBESON: What do you mean by the Communist Party? As far as I know it is a legal party like the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Do you mean a party of people who have sacrificed for my people, and for all Americans and workers, that they can live in dignity? Do you mean that party?

Mr. ARENS: Are you now a member of the Communist Party?

Mr. ROBESON: Would you like to come to the ballot box when I vote and take out the ballot and see?

Mr. ARENS: Mr. Chairman, I respectfully suggest that the witness be ordered and directed to answer that question.

THE CHAIRMAN: You are directed to answer the question.  
(The witness consulted with his counsel.)

Mr. ROBESON: I stand upon the Fifth Amendment of the American Constitution.

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Mr. ROBESON: Gentlemen, in the first place, wherever I have been in the world, Scandinavia, England, and many places, the first to die in the struggle against Fascism were the Communists and I laid many wreaths upon graves of Communists. It is not criminal, and the Fifth Amendment has nothing to do with criminality. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Warren, has been very clear on that in many speeches, that the Fifth Amendment does not have anything to do with the inference of criminality. I invoke the Fifth Amendment.

Mr. ARENS: Have you ever been known under the name of "John Thomas"?

Mr. ROBESON: Oh, please, does somebody here want—are you suggesting—do you want me to be put up for perjury some place? "John Thomas"! My name is Paul Robeson, and anything I have

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to say, or stand for, I have said in public all over the world, and that is why I am here today.

Mr. SCHERER: I ask that you direct the witness to answer the question. He is making a speech.

Mr. ARENS: I put it to you as a fact, and ask you to affirm or deny the fact, that your Communist Party name was "John Thomas."

Mr. ROBESON: I invoke the Fifth Amendment. This is really ridiculous.

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Mr. ROBESON: Could I say that the reason that I am here today, you know, from the mouth of the State Department itself, is: I should not be allowed to travel because I have struggled for years for the independence of the colonial peoples of Africa. For many years I have so labored and I can say modestly that my name is very much honored all over Africa, in my struggles for their independence. That is the kind of independence like Sukarno got in Indonesia. Unless we are double-talking, then these efforts in the interest of Africa would be in the same context. The other reason that I am here today, again from the State Department and from the court record of the court of appeals, is that when I am abroad I speak out against the injustices against the Negro people of this land. I sent a message to the Bandung Conference and so forth. That is why I am here. This is the basis, and 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. My mother was born in your state, Mr. Walter, and my mother was a Quaker, and my ancestors in the time of Washington baked bread for George Washington's troops when they crossed the Delaware, and my own father was a slave. 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. You want to shut up every Negro who has the courage to stand up and fight for the rights of his people, for the rights of workers, and I have been on many a picket line for the steelworkers too. And that is why I am here today. . . .

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Mr. ARENS:

If the American warmongers fancy that they could win America's millions of Negroes for a war against those countries (i.e., the Soviet Union and the peoples' democracies) then they ought to understand that this will never be the case. Why should the Negroes ever fight against the only nations of the world where racial discrimination is prohibited, and where the people can live freely? Never! I can assure you, they will never fight against either the Soviet Union or the peoples' democracies.

Did you make that statement?

Mr. ROBESON: I do not remember that. But what is perfectly clear today is that nine hundred million other colored people have told you that they will not. Four hundred million in India, and millions everywhere, have told you, precisely, that the colored people are not going to die for anybody: they are going to die for their independence. We are dealing not with fifteen million colored people, we are dealing with hundreds of millions.

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Mr. KEARNEY: The witness has answered the question and he does not have to make a speech...  
Mr. ROBESON: In Russia I felt for the first time like a full human being. No color prejudice like in Mississippi, no color prejudice like in Washington. It was the first time I felt like a human being. Where I did not feel the pressure of color as I feel [it] in this Committee today.

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? I am for peace with the Soviet Union, and I am for peace with China, and I am not for peace or friendship with the Fascist Franco, and I am not for peace with Fascist Nazi Germans. I am for peace with decent people.

Mr. SCHERER: You are here because you are promoting the Communist cause.

Mr. ROBESON: I am here because I am opposing the neo-Fascist cause which I see arising in these committees. You are like the Alien [and] Sedition Act, and Jefferson could be sitting here, and Frederick Douglass could be sitting here, and Eugene Debs could be here.

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THE CHAIRMAN: Now, what prejudice are you talking about? You were graduated from Rutgers and you were graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. I remember seeing you play football at Lehigh.

Mr. ROBESON: We beat Lehigh.

THE CHAIRMAN: And we had a lot of trouble with you.

Mr. ROBESON: That is right. DeWysocki was playing in my team.

THE CHAIRMAN: There was no prejudice against you. Why did you not send your son to Rutgers?

Mr. ROBESON: Just a moment. This is something that I challenge very deeply, and very sincerely: that the success of a few Negroes, including myself or Jackie Robinson can make up—and here is a study from Columbia University—for seven hundred dollars a year for thousands of Negro families in the South. My father was a slave, and I have cousins who are sharecroppers, and I do not see my success in terms of myself. That is the reason my own success has not meant what it should mean: I have sacrificed literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars for what I

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believe in.

Mr. ARENS: Have you recently changed your mind about Stalin?

Mr. ROBESON: Whatever has happened to Stalin, gentlemen, is a question for the Soviet Union, and I would not argue with a representative of the people who, in building America, wasted sixty to a hundred million lives of my people, black people drawn from Africa on the plantations. You are responsible, and your forebears, for sixty million to one hundred million black people dying in the slave ships and on the plantations, and don't ask me about anybody, please.

Mr. ARENS: I am glad you called our attention to that slave problem. While you were in Soviet Russia, did you ask them there to show you the slave labor camps?

THE CHAIRMAN: You have been so greatly interested in slaves, I should think that you would want to see that.

Mr. ROBESON: The slaves I see are still in a kind of semiserfdom. I am interested in the place I am, and in the country that can do something about it. As far as I know, about the slave camps, they were Fascist prisoners who had murdered millions of the Jewish people, and who would have wiped out millions of the Negro people, could they have gotten a hold of them. That is all I know about that.

Mr. ARENS: Tell us whether or not you have changed your opinion in the recent past about Stalin.

Mr. ROBESON: I have told you, mister, that I would not discuss anything with the people who have murdered sixty million of my people, and I will not discuss Stalin with you.

Mr. ARENS: You would not, of course, discuss with us the slave labor camps in Soviet Russia.

Mr. ROBESON: I will discuss Stalin when I may be among the Russian people some day, singing for them, I will discuss it there. It is their problem.

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Mr. ARENS: Now I would invite your attention, if you please, to the Daily Worker of June 29, 1949, with reference to a get-together with you and Ben Davis. Do you know Ben Davis?

Mr. ROBESON: One of my dearest friends, one of the finest Americans you can imagine, born of a fine family, who went to Amherst and was a great man.

THE CHAIRMAN: The answer is yes?

Mr. ROBESON: Nothing could make me prouder than to know him.

THE CHAIRMAN: That answers the question.

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Mr. ARENS: Did I understand you to laud his patriotism?

Mr. ROBESON: I say that he is as patriotic an American as there can be, and you gentlemen belong with the Alien and Sedition Acts, and you are the nonpatriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.

THE CHAIRMAN: Just a minute, the hearing is now adjourned.

Mr. ROBESON: I should think it would be.

THE CHAIRMAN: I have endured all of this that I can.

Mr. ROBESON: Can I read my statement?

THE CHAIRMAN: No, you cannot read it. The meeting is adjourned.

Mr. ROBESON: I think it should be, and you should adjourn this forever, that is what I would say.

# Connections and Creativity

This section provides ways to explore connections between the ideas presented in the play, the students' lives, and the world we live in. In addition, it provides opportunities for your students to use theatre to explore and express. Theatre activities are included that examine specific artistic aspects of the production, as well as delve deeper into the ideas and questions raised by the production. The questions, activities and information in this section can be used both before and after the performance.

## Cultural Mapping

### Objectives

- Students will gain knowledge of similarities and differences in their classmates.
- Students will be introduced to *The Tallest Tree in the Forest* and begin to reflect on the play.

### Activity

Ask the students to move the desks to the side and stand in a circle. Describe the room as a map of the world. Identify Los Angeles in the space. Have students who were born in Los Angeles gather in that place. Have the other students group themselves according to their birthplace (north, east, south or west of Los Angeles). Have each group determine two additional things that they have in common. Report back to the whole class. (Example: The members of the “north” group all like pizza and are the oldest in their families.)

Repeat activity using other divisions: oldest, middle, youngest, only child; speak one language, two languages, etc.; most inspired by music, movement, image, language.

Quotes:

**“I take my stand with you for peace as a citizen of the World, as an American, and as a Negro.”**

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

**“The answer to injustice is not to silence the critic, but to end the injustice.”**

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

**“My song is my weapon.”**

**“Through my singing and acting and speaking, I want to make freedom ring. Maybe I can touch people’s hearts better than I can their minds.”**

Ask students to stand by the quotes that most intrigues them.

Discuss in the group why they chose those quotes.

What intrigues them about them?

## Tableau/Frozen Picture

### Objectives

- Students will practice using their bodies to communicate an idea or theme.
- Students will reflect on the varied interpretations of the theme.
- Students will reflect on *The Tallest Tree in the Forest* through a physical exploration of its themes.

### Activity

Divide students into pairs. Student A is the artist. Student B is the sculpture.

Have student A create a statue out of B on the theme of the “future.” (Examples: flying cars, world peace, destroying the environment, graduating from college). Statues can be realistic or symbolic, personal or global. Have students title their statues and present to the class. Repeat exercise with B as the artist and A as the sculpture.

Repeat with any of the following show-specific themes: Artist, Activist, Citizen of the World, Voice, Justice, Equality, American, Un-American. Have each student sculpt an image that represents one of these themes. Discuss what these ideas mean to your students and what these ideas mean in *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*. Are they similar or very different?

## Roles in Life

### Objectives

- Students will explore the many roles they play in their daily lives.
- Students will compare the roles they play with the many roles Paul Robeson took on during his life.

### Activity

Have each student draw a line down the center of a piece of paper. On the right hand side have students write down all the “roles” they play in their own lives. (Example: daughter, friend, sister, soccer player, singer, photographer, cousin, tutor). Do this as a timed one-minute free-write. Encourage students to think about everything they do in a day.

Next have them add an adjective to each of the roles they listed. Example: disobedient daughter, loyal friend, bossy big sister, competitive soccer player, aspiring singer, etc.

Ask students to pick roles they are proud of and write about the importance of that role in their lives. What makes them proud? What would they like to do differently in this part of their lives?

Next, have students go back to the list and think about the “roles” that are missing. What are roles they hope to play in the future? What type of that role would they aspire to be?

Discuss and compare the students’ roles with the many roles Paul Robeson took on throughout his life. Discuss and compare with the over 40 different roles/characters that Daniel Beaty brings to life in *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*.

## Character Biography

### Objectives

- Students will reflect on the life of Paul Robeson through discussion, research and theatre.
- Students will tell the story of Paul Robeson's life through original scenes.

### Activity

Divide the class into seven groups and give each group a decade in Paul Robeson's life from his birth in 1898 through his death in 1976. Have the group research their decade and decide on three important events from that time period. Have the group create a frozen picture of these moments.

Share the frozen pictures with the rest of the class in chronological order. Discuss the span of Paul Robeson's life as demonstrated in these 21 pictures. What was constant throughout his life? What was unique to each decade?

Back in their decade groups, have the students select one of their three frozen pictures. Have the group bring this picture to life adding dialogue, movement, costumes and props. Have the groups rehearse their "decade scene."

Ask each group to research and select a song from their decade to underscore or include in their scenes. Perhaps it is a song Paul Robeson sang or perhaps it is a song that was popular at the time.

Share the scenes in chronological order, telling the story of Paul Robeson's entire life through words, movement and music.

Compare the class's creation to the play *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*. What moments were included in each? What moments were unique to the students' creation?

## Character Echo

### Objectives

- Students will create the end to an improvisational situation. Students will practice using dialogue and characterization.
- Students will create original endings to scenes using dialogue from *The Tallest Tree in the Forest* and/or Paul Robeson's writings.

### Activity

Divide the room into two lines facing each other. Each student's partner is the student directly across from him or her. Designate one line Character A and the other line Character B.

Write the first four lines of an improvisational scene on the board. Example:

A: It's time to go

B: I'm not ready.

A: But we had a deal

B: I'm busy.

Say A's opening line. Have the students in line "A" echo/repeat that line. Say B's opening line and have the students in line "B" echo the line after you. Repeat with A and B's second lines.

Practice the first four lines as a group. Ask the students to deliver their lines to the partners across from them.

Next, each A/B pair will individually decide who their characters are, the relationship of the characters and the specific conflict between these two characters. Everyone will use the above four lines to begin their scenes and then each pair will add its own dialogue to create an ending.

Have them think about the physicality of their characters (old, young, shy, outgoing etc.) as they rehearse their scenes. Ask them to determine the setting—where their scenes take place.

Share the scenes.

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### Character Echo *(continued)*

Repeat the activity with a dialogue or a situation from *The Tallest Tree in the Forest* or other events in Paul Robeson's life.

1) Reeve: Be quiet, Paul.

Paul: But Reeve, he's coming this way.

Reeve: I'm gonna knock in him right in the forehead—

Paul: No, Reeve, don't please!

2) Essie: If you are going to have a career as a singer—

Paul: I'm in law school, Essie.

Essie: Why can't you sing some of those happy, popular songs?

Paul: Enough! I am sick of you trying to change me.

3) Chairman: Are you a member of the communist party?

Robeson: Oh, please.

Chairman: Mr Robeson will you answer the question?

Paul: What is the communist party?

4) Robeson: In Russia I felt for the first time like a full human being.

Scherer: Why do you not stay in Russia?

Robeson: Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country.

## Moment Work

Moment Work is Tectonic Theater Project's method for creating theatre. 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 writers, actors, designers, directors, 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. As you watch the play, watch how Daniel uses his body and his voice to bring to life a wide range of characters, including playing Paul Robeson at different stages throughout his life.

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 differentiate you at various ages? Are there certain props or costume pieces that you would use? What would those objects tell the audience?

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. — and how did they help tell the story?

## Pre-Show: Lyrical Language

Paul Robeson shot to international fame by singing the role of Joe in Oscar Hammerstein II's and Jerome Kern's 1927 musical, *Show Boat*. Joe's main song in the show is called "Ol' Man River," which is sung with the following lyrics by Daniel Beaty in *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*:

Niggers all work on de Mississippi  
Niggers all work while de white folks play  
Pullin' dose boats from de dawn to sunset  
Gittin' no rest till de judgment day

Ol' man river, dat ol' man river  
He mus' know sumpin', but don't say nuthin'  
He jes' keeps rollin'  
He keeps on rollin' along.

You an' me, we sweat an' strain  
Body all achin' an' wracked wid pain,  
Tote dat barge! Lif' dat bale!  
Get a little drunk an' you lands in jail

Ah gits weary an' sick of tryin'  
Ah'm tired of livin' an' skeered of dyin'  
But ol' man river  
He jes' goes rolling' along

Initial Questions for your students:

- 1) What lyrics or lyric phrases spark thought for you? Why?
- 2) Based on these lyrics, what inferences can you make about the character of Joe?

## Post Show: Artist vs. Activist

Although not directly addressed in *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*, later in Robeson's career during non-*Show Boat* performances of "Ol' Man River" (what would become Robeson's signature song), he notably changed the original lyrics of the song, written by Oscar Hammerstein II, to make it less about the character of Joe and more a rousing anthem for a person or people fighting against oppression.

Some of these lyric changes included:

- Phrases including "Nigger" were changed to "There's an ol' man called the Mississippi; that's the ol' man that I'd like to be"
- "I'm tired of livin' and scared of dyin'" to "I must keep fightin' until I'm dyin'"
- "You get a little drunk" to "You show a little grit"

As you saw in *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*, Robeson's dual identity as an artist and activist was often complicated sometimes leading to seeming contradictions as he attempted to keep to the ideals of both professions: as a performer, to honor the work of his director and writers, and as an activist, to speak truthfully and passionately about his social justice causes.

When Oscar Hammerstein II learned of Robeson's changes to his lyrics, he made the following comment to the New York Age newspaper in June 1949,

"As the author of these words, I have no intention of changing them or permitting anyone else to change them. I further suggest that Paul write his own songs and leave mine alone."

With your understanding of Paul Robeson's character from *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*, stage an improvised conversation between Paul Robeson and Oscar Hammerstein II.

The details:

It's July 1949, one month after Mr. Hammerstein II made the aforementioned quote. He decides to invite Paul Robeson to his home in Pennsylvania so they can discuss art, politics, and activism. What is at stake for each? What perspectives do they represent?

Before having different pairs come up to improvise conversations, as a class decide on some of the main questions that would most likely be asked and the stances and platforms for which each man will stand.

As your class will most likely know more about Paul Robeson (after seeing *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*) than they do about Oscar Hammerstein II, it is probably best for the quality of their debates if they do a brief investigation into the latter's life. However, it's recommended that for the purposes of this particular argument and exercise that they base their arguments on the stance expressed in Hammerstein's quote. While Oscar Hammerstein II was known as a liberal, a constant theme in his lyrics, here his stances on art and authenticity are the most important.

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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.

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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.

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**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

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

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