

# **CALL MR. ROBESON: A life, with songs.**

**Written and Performed by Tayo Aluko, with Rowland Cotterill, Piano**

**The Hafren, Newtown. Friday, March 21, 2014**

**Greetings, Welcome.** “Hello, this is Tony Benn”, the voice at the other end of the phone said. I almost fell out of my chair, having expected that such a famous person would leave his secretary to deal with me - a complete unknown - back in early 1998. He was delighted to talk to me, he said, because he was a great admirer of Paul Robeson. He then recounted the pride, joy and privilege he felt when he and his father hosted Robeson to tea at the House of Commons in 1958, shortly after Robeson had won his long battle with the US Government over his right to travel. Since Mr. Benn’s death last week, people from the entire political spectrum have lined up to pay tribute to him, many (including the leader of the Labour Party) being at pains to stress that they didn’t always share his views. It is a measure of the man that back in the 1950s when Robeson’s reputation was as bad as it was possible for anyone’s to be, Mr. Benn had been an open supporter of Robeson’s struggle for his right to travel and more importantly, to express political views that were far from being mainstream. Robeson had been painted as a dangerous communist who sided with those who planned the violent overthrow of the American Government. His stance on behalf workers of all races, of former colonies of the imperialist powers, and against war didn’t help his cause either, yet Mr. Benn was proud to have known him, and that was one of the reasons he took my phone call. He readily agreed to talk to the gathered audience at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall on the occasion of the centenary of Robeson’s birth - by telephone - recreating the occasions when that was all Robeson could do from America to London and Porthcawl, because his government prevented him from accepting invitations to perform abroad. Mr. Benn’s contribution down the telephone line to the audience at the Phil was the highlight of our occasion, and I was privileged to meet him thrice thereafter, the last time being when he was keynote speaker at Liverpool Stop the War Coalition meeting. We ended the evening singing “Ain’t Gonna Study War No More”. Tony was due to give an address at my *Paul Robeson Art Is A Weapon Festival* in London last October, but his deteriorating health prevented that from happening. He, like Robeson, was tireless in his desire to talk with, walk with and support ordinary working people in their campaigns for fairness, justice, equality, and above all, peace, and his death in the same week as we lost Bob Crow, the leader of the RMT came as a devastating blow to thousands here and abroad. Looking up his choice of Desert Island Discs on the BBC website, I was not surprised to see Paul Robeson and the song *Joe Hill* featured on the list. The last words that Joe Hill said before he was executed by order of the copper bosses ring true now as they did then, and if you listen carefully, you will hear Tony Benn’s voice as if speaking down the telephone to us tonight: “Don’t mourn for me, Organise!” I hope you enjoy the show.

**Tayo Aluko. Writer, Performer, Producer.** Tayo was born in Nigeria, and now lives in Liverpool. He worked previously as an architect and property developer, with a special but as yet frustrated interest in eco-friendly construction. He has fronted orchestras as baritone soloist in British concert halls, and has also performed lead roles in such operas and musicals as *Nabucco*, *Kiss Me Kate* and *Anything Goes*. **CALL MR ROBESON** won the Best Musical Show award at the Atlantic Fringe in Halifax, Nova Scotia and the Best Solo Show at the Stratford Fringe in 2013, three awards at the London Ontario Fringe in June 2012, and the Argus Angel Award for Artistic Excellence and Best Male Performer Award at the 2008 Brighton Festival Fringe. He has performed the play around the UK, the United States of America, Canada, Jamaica and Nigeria, and at New York’s Carnegie Hall in February 2012 on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. His other piece titled **FROM BLACK AFRICA TO THE WHITE HOUSE** - a talk about Black Political Resistance, illustrated with spirituals has also been performed in three continents. He researched, wrote and narrated to camera a piece on West African History before the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which forms part of the permanent exhibit at Liverpool’s International Slavery Museum. His 15-minute play, **HALF MOON**, which also deals with ancient Africa has been performed several times in the UK. He has recently been appointed president of the Birmingham Clarion Singers. He is currently working with The Maltings Theatre, Berwick on a new piece, titled *What Happens?* featuring the writings of Langston Hughes, to be performed with live jazz accompaniment. He is a current writer on attachment with the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse theatres.

## **Rowland Cotterill, Piano and original incidental music.**

ROWLAND COTTERILL studied Classics and Organ at Cambridge, and lectured in English and the History of Music at the University of Warwick. He founded and conducted the University of Warwick Consort. He has given many piano and organ recitals in the Midlands, and performs frequently as a professional accompanist. He has also directed a number of plays with professional and student actors. He lives in Birmingham.

**Olusola Oyeleye, Director and Dramaturge.** Olusola is an award winning writer, director and producer working in opera, music theatre, visual arts and dance. Theatre includes: *Tin* (The Lowry), *Ti-Jean and his Brothers* (Collective Artistes & Sustained Theatre, Cottesloe), Resident director on Trevor Nunn's West End production of *Porgy and Bess* (Savoy Theatre), staff producer at English National Opera, Spirit of Okin and Sankofa for Adzido Pan African Dance Ensemble, (National & International tours), *Coming Up For Air* (The Drum & UK tour), *The Resurrection of Roscoe Powell* (Soho Theatre), *The Shelter* (RSC Barbican Theatre), *Medea* (Ariya, Royal National Theatre Studio), *The Playground* (Polka Theatre, Time Out Critics' Choice Pick of the Year), *High Life*, (Hampstead Theatre), *Maybe Father*, (Talawa, Young Vic), *Twelfth Night* (British Council Tour, Zimbabwe) and *Ella*, a monodrama about Ella Fitzgerald (Rich Mix). Opera includes: Akin Euba's *Orunmila's Voices: Songs from the Beginning of Time* (Jefferson's Arts Centre, New Orleans) and *Chaka: An Opera in Two Chants* with the St. Louis African Chorus, *Dido and Aeneas* (Tricycle/BAC), *God's Trombones* (Fairfield Halls) and the second cast revival of Jonathan Miller's production of *The Mikado* (English National Opera). Olusola has also worked in Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Hungary and the Czech Republic. She has been a visiting lecturer and Artist at Universities in South Africa and London, and was Head of the Acting Studio at Morley College. Her poetry has been set to music by Akin Euba and performed at both Harvard and Cambridge Universities. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts.

**Phil Newman, Designer, Assistant Director.** Phil's Set & Costume Designs have featured in productions by companies as diverse as Ladder to the Moon, Trestle, Ariya, Full House Theatre, London Shakespeare Workout, Rouge28 Theatre and Impetuous Kinship. Recent design credits include: *Peter Pan* (Tickled Pink Productions), *Dance or Die* (contemporary dance performance choreographed by Avant Garde's Tony Adigun), *Cinderella* (Library Theatre, Luton), *Voices in the Alleyway* and *Yes, I Still Exist* for Spread Expression Dance, Faith Drama's *The Fiddler* (Unicorn Theatre) & *Next Door* (Cockpit Theatre), *The Famous Five* (Tabard Theatre), Chalkfoot's acclaimed *The Riddle of the Sands* and *Laurel & Hardy* (Jermyn St Theatre, London & UK tours) as well as tours of *Queen Elizabeth's Elephant* and *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, *Hansel & Gretel* (UK tour incl. Greenwich Theatre), *Stockholm* (BAC), and open-air tours of *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Railway Children* (Heartbreak Productions). Phil also designed the award-winning UK & international touring production of John Retallack's *Hannah & Hanna* (Time Out Critics' Choice). Other productions in collaboration with Olusola Oyeleye include *The Security Guard*, *Ella* (RichMix), *High Life* (Hampstead Theatre), *Coming Up For Air* (UK tour), *Ma Joyce's Tales from the Parlour* (Oval House Theatre) and *The Playground* (Time Out Critics' Choice, London).

**Sound Design:** David Darlington & Liam McDermott. **Sound Engineering:** Derek Murray. **Lighting Design:** Gareth Starkey. **Recorded Percussion:** Oludele Olaseinde **Voices:** Shamus Maxwell, Paul O'Neill, Felix Pring, Kat Bishop, Suzanne Goldberg, Harry Arkwright, and from the original HUAC hearing of June 12 1956, "Honorable" Senators Walter, Arens and Scherer. **Male Voice Choir:** Liverpool Male Voice Choir

**Forthcoming Performances Include:** April 12, Sheffield: **Paul Robeson - The Giant, in a Nutshell.** Millennium Hall; May 1, Preston: **Paul Robeson - The Giant, in a Nutshell.** The Continental; May 4, Lowestoft : Seagull Theatre; May 10, Goole: Junction; May 29, Derry: Playhouse; May 30, Lisburn: ISLAND Arts Centre; May 31, Donaghmore: Bardic Theatre; June 1, Downpatrick: Down Arts Centre; June 25: Ashbourne Festival

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