

CALL MR. ROBESON: A life, with songs.

Written and Performed by Tayo Aluko, with Michael Conliffe, Piano

Warner Bentley Theater at The Hop, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, USA

Tuesday, Wednesday 17, 18 January 2012

Greetings and Welcome. We stayed with an elderly lady in Boston for a day before coming to Hanover from England. This lady had never met us, but had decided weeks ago that “anybody who loves Paul Robeson is welcome in my house”. We were however a little surprised to find out after a few minutes in her company that she had been arrested by the Boston Police a few months ago! Had we been lured unsuspectingly into the home of a crazed geriatric felon? No - it turns out that our hostess, a member of the Boston cell of a very dangerous under-the-radar organisation called RAGING GRANNIES had decided to identify herself as one of the 99% in the country who demand a fairer deal, had joined Occupy Boston, and sat down with others in the lobby of a bank, getting arrested in the process. That was not the first time that sitting down got people into trouble in America. The famous sit-down protests of the 1960s civil rights movement resulted in many arrests, many beatings. When Rosa Parks sat down in a Montgomery Alabama bus in the decade before that and refused to get up, little did she know that she would launch the spectacular career of the young, then unknown preacher whose life and achievements we are celebrating with this season of events. By the time of Mrs. Parks’s quiet, gentle, dignified individual action, the world had begun to forget someone else whose activism was characterised not by sitting down, but by standing up and speaking, singing, marching, writing - on behalf of Blacks in America and in far-away Africa; on behalf of white working people in America, Europe and elsewhere; on behalf of ordinary people in other parts of the world, whom his leaders said must be hated and mistrusted; on behalf of those who argued that the world’s resources should be shared fairly among people and nations. As recent history has shown us, real, positive change can come about when large numbers of people are mobilised against injustice and tyranny; when, as Paul Robeson once said, they wake up and realise the power they possess together. We cannot all be a Dr. King, a Mr. Robeson or a Mr. Mandela, but we can - each and every one of us - be like Mrs. Parks or that “raging Granny” in Boston, even in the act of sitting down. There are many ways to stand up and fight for justice and peace. I hope that Robeson’s story inspires us to choose at least one. I hope you enjoy the show.