

CALL MR. ROBESON: A life, with songs.

Written and Performed by Tayo Aluko,

With Mark Henley (19 Feb) and Renee Vanasse (20 and 21 Feb), Piano

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Greetings and Welcome. A few days ago at the Pan African Film Festival, as I was watching a documentary on the Freedom Riders, marveling at the bravery of those young people's willingness to be injured, or even killed for the cause of freedom and equality, I couldn't help thinking of two things: first, the fact that I had myself joined thousands by riding at the front of a greyhound bus to witness the inauguration of Barack Obama, without a need to worry about my personal safety. It is interesting that as one of the Freedom Riders reminded us, Mr. Obama was born while they were in jail in Alabama for daring to challenge the system. The second thought was a reminder of the violent riots that Paul Robeson's stand provoked a generation earlier in Peekskill, in 1949, and the bravery of trade unionists and other people who put their lives at risk to protect him, or just to be a part of the audience wishing to hear and support a performer who chose to use his art as a weapon in the fight for peace and justice for all people. It is wrong that the vast majority of those Freedom Riders (now in their sixties and seventies) are, like Paul Robeson, largely unknown today, and it is right and necessary that their stories be told through such documentaries and other means today. It seems to me that such brave action as shown by the Freedom Riders is required by all people today, because despite Obama, we seem not to have moved that much further forward in the fight against poverty and injustice worldwide. My hope is that Mr. Robeson's story helps to inspire more people – you and old – to rejoin that fight.

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