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**CALL MR.
ROBESON**
A LIFE. WITH SONGS



EDUCATION PACK

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CALL MR. ROBESON

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Written and Performed by Tayo Aluko, With Live Piano Accompaniment

Directed by Olusola Oyeleye, Designed by Phil Newman

SYNOPSIS

"They say I'm meddling in the foreign affairs of the United States Government. Now, that's too bad, 'cause I'm going to have to continue to meddle..."

Paul Robeson is a world-famous actor, singer and civil rights campaigner. When over the years he gets progressively too radical and outspoken for the establishment's liking, he is branded a traitor to his country, harassed, and denied opportunities to perform or travel. Just as physical, emotional and mental stress threaten to push him over the fine line between genius and madness, he is summoned to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), to give the most difficult and important performance of his career.

This roller-coaster journey through Robeson's remarkable and eventful life highlights how his pioneering and heroic (but largely forgotten) political activism led many to describe him as the forerunner of the civil rights movement. It features much fiery oratory and some of his famous songs, including a dramatic rendition of *Ol' Man River*.

Tayo Aluko revives one of the 20th Century's most impressive but overlooked figures in this powerful, compelling tour-de-force performance, which was seen at New York's Carnegie Hall in February 2012, and in London's West End in October 2013.

"First-rate ... an admirable introduction to a great pioneering performer" 4 Stars [The Guardian](#)

"A stunning piece of musical theatre.... high quality drama, first class singing"
[Fringe Review, Edinburgh Fringe, 2010](#)

"A brilliantly put together history lesson delivered as art." [Dirt & Candy](#)

"Never less than utterly believable" [British Theatre Guide](#)

"Simply told but immensely powerful" [The Scotsman](#)

"A must-see experience, a treasure of a show. TOP PICK!" [DC Theater Scene](#)

Age recommendation: 12+ No violence, bad language, nudity or sexual content.

Show length: 83 minutes (no interval)

Winner, Best Musical Performance, Atlantic Fringe, Halifax, Nova Scotia, September 2013

Winner, Best Solo Show, Stratford-upon-Avon Fringe, June 2013

Triple Winner (Impresario Award, Best Actor, Best Original Work)

London Fringe, Canada, June 2012

**Double Winner: Argus Angel Award for Artistic Excellence & Best Male Performer
Brighton Festival Fringe, May 2008**

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Paul Robeson

Paul Robeson was a renowned African American athlete, singer, actor and advocate for the civil rights of people around the world. He rose to prominence in a time when segregation was legal in America and black people were being lynched by white mobs, especially in the South.

Born on April 9, 1898 in Princeton, New Jersey, Paul Robeson was the youngest of five children. His father was a runaway slave who went on to graduate from Lincoln University, and his mother came from a family of Quakers who worked for the abolition of slavery.

In 1915, Paul won a four-year academic scholarship to Rutgers University. He earned 15 varsity letters in sports (baseball, basketball, track) and was twice named to the All American Football Team. He received the Phi Beta Kappa key in his junior year, belonged to the Cap & Skull Honor Society and was the Valedictorian of his graduating class in 1919.

After graduating from Columbia Law School in 1923, Paul took a job with a law firm, but left when a white secretary refused to take dictation from him. He decided to leave the practice of law and use his artistic talents in theatre and music to promote African American history and culture.

On stage in London in 1930, Robeson earned international critical acclaim for his lead role in *Othello*. He won the Donaldson Award for Best Acting Performance (1944) for playing the same role on Broadway. Robeson performed in **Eugene O'Neil's** *Emperor Jones*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and the musical *Show Boat*. His eleven films include *Body and Soul*



(1924), *Jericho* (1937) and *Proud Valley* (1939).



Paul Robeson sang for peace and justice in 25 languages throughout the United States, Europe, the Soviet Union and the Third World. Among his friends he counted future African leader **Jomo Kenyatta**, India's **Nehru**, historian **W.E.B. DuBois**, anarchist **Emma Goldman** and writers **James Joyce** and **Ernest Hemingway**. At a 1937 rally for anti-fascist forces fighting in the Spanish Civil War he declared, "The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative."

During the 1940s, Robeson continued to perform and speak out against racism in the U.S. and for peace among nations. As a passionate believer in international cooperation, Robeson protested the growing Cold War hostilities and worked tirelessly for friendship and respect between the U.S. and the USSR. Because of his outspokenness, he was accused by the **House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)** of being a Communist. Robeson saw this claim as an outright attack on the democratic rights of the many people like himself who work for friendship with other nations, and equal rights for all people.



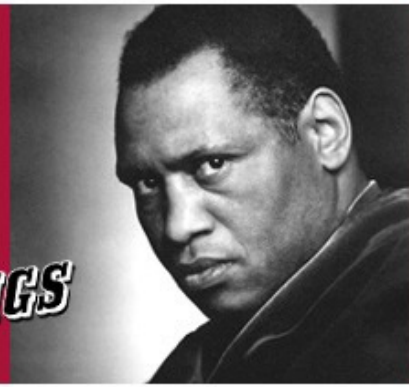
This accusation nearly ended his career. Eighty of his concerts were cancelled, and in 1949 two outdoor concerts in Peekskill, N.Y. were attacked by white mobs while state police stood by complacently.

In 1950, the U.S. government revoked Robeson's passport, and even prevented him from travelling to Canada. Starting in 1952, he held four annual concerts at the border at the Peace Arch in Blaine, Washington, with thousands in attendance. He fought a long battle to secure his passport and to travel again, which he was eventually able to do for the first time in mid-1958. In 1960, Robeson made his last overseas concert tour. Suffering from ill health, he retired from public life in 1963. He died on January 23, 1976 at age 77, in Philadelphia.

Information culled from the Bay Area Paul Robeson Centennial Committee's website, www.bayarearobeson.org

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Scene Breakdown

Setting: The play is performed in one act, set in a space filled with file cases spread untidily around the stage, amid paraphernalia relating to Paul Robeson's life: photographs, papers, film, play and concert tour posters etc., and lots of books. A piano is part of the set, and the pianist is in position at the beginning.

Paul Robeson enters slowly, singing the spiritual NOBODY KNOW DE TROUBLE AH SEEN. The chair on his shoulder looks like a much heavier load than it actually is. He puts it down, and starts to sing, in rehearsal, the song he is best known for, OL' MAN RIVER. The first word is N****ers"! He interrupts himself in the voice of his wife, Essie, who objects to him using that word. It is the beginning of his career; she is his manager, and clearly a forceful woman who eventually negotiates a huge fee for him to play the part of Joe in the film version of *Show Boat*. His grudging decision to change the lyric indicates from the start that this is a complex and important relationship. He talks about first meeting her, their son, their marriage (despite family objections based on their having different Black skin tones), his childhood – the death of his mother when he was six, his father raising all his children thereafter, and being a strong influence on him throughout his life, even though he died while Paul was still in college, where he excelled as a scholar, orator, footballer and athlete.

He sings STEAL AWAY, then talks about having visited Russia several times, starting in 1934, and immediately being struck by how he was accepted there as a human being for the first time in his life. Because he saw no racism there, he fully embraced the idea of socialism, which he says first interested him after meeting Welsh miners in Wales in the 1920s, and discovering that rich white people exploited poor white working people as well as Blacks! He then realised that this occurred all over Europe and indeed the world, and decided that as an artist he would lend his talents to supporting oppressed people wherever he could. He gives the example of a concert at the Royal Albert Hall in London in 1937, given on behalf the Spanish Republicans who were fighting against the fascist dictatorship of General Franco, in which he made a speech which he ended by stating, "The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative."



He talks about becoming very popular in the United States after recording a particularly patriotic song BALLAD FOR AMERICANS, selling out huge venues all over the country. He recounts one particular concert, in Kansas City in 1942 when at the huge Municipal Auditorium, while singing OLD FOLKS AT HOME, he realises that the audience is segregated. He stops singing, announcing that the concert is over and walks off stage. He is eventually persuaded to return to complete the concert, but only after expressing his disgust at the South's *Jim Crow* laws. He sings JOSHUA FIT DE BATTLE OB' JERICHO.

It reminds him of Frederick Douglass, the former slave who became a great abolitionist and orator, a great inspiration to him. He searches for Douglass's autobiography among his many books "on all sorts of subjects," including African History, and Linguistics, and notes that he can speak twenty five languages! He finds the biography, and in it, a press clipping from 1949 misreporting a speech he made in Paris suggesting that African Americans wouldn't fight for the USA against the Soviet Union because they were second class citizens in their own country, while the Soviets afforded them full dignity. As a result of the inaccurate report, he is transformed almost overnight into Public Enemy No. 1, and vilified by everybody, it seems, including the leadership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He remains unapologetic, and is determined to carry on singing, speaking and fighting for equality, peace and justice. His career takes a nosedive, with recording companies dropping him, and most of his concerts cancelled. An outdoor concert he was due to give in Peekskill is prevented from taking place by a racist mob, but he and trade unions arrange to return the following



week – September 4, 1949, and under a huge guard of hundreds of trade unionists protecting both him and the crowd of thousands, the concert takes place, during which he sings OL' MAN RIVER (with more appropriate and defiant lyrics) battling against the sound of a police helicopter. After the concert, another attack ensues, which goes down in history as the infamous "Peekskill Riots."

The following year, his passport is cancelled too. A special case is made to prevent him from even travelling to Canada, even though Americans don't need passports to do so. He defies the ruling by holding a concert across the border, to which thousands of people show up! He makes a passionate speech saying he

will continue to sing and speak as he sees fit, and sings the trade union favourite, JOE HILL.

The strain on him begins to show though. Not only is he physically exhausted, he begins to show signs of mental instability. He is paranoid about being followed by the FBI and them saying they have evidence of him having several love affairs. His deteriorating mental health is epitomised by his obsession with the pentatonic scale – the five black keys of the piano, which he is convinced (and demonstrates on the piano) proves that music is a universal language that can unite people all over the world in brotherhood. He rapidly descends into a full mental breakdown after being drugged at a party and slits his wrists, slowly slipping out of consciousness.





He survives, and is forced to rest, but this is interrupted when he is called to appear before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC). They grill him on several points, including his membership of the Communist Party and his support for Joseph Stalin. After initially appearing dazed and unfocused, he rallies (with the help of a dream-like Mother Africa) and gives a spectacularly defiant defence of his actions and beliefs.

"The struggle continues," he says, and after fighting the government in the courts for eight years, he is finally able to announce, in a joyful service in his brother's church in Harlem, that he has finally had his passport restored. He then goes on a worldwide tour with Essie for five years, at the end of which they

return to New York in 1963, exhausted and sick. Essie dies (he wasn't aware of how sick she had been) and he tearfully sings JUST A WEARYIN' FOR YOU.

He gathers himself and talks about how he had been keen to return to the United States to join in his people's struggle once again. He however finds himself sidelined by the new generation of civil rights campaigners, and has in fact become completely unknown to many, as demonstrated by a young Black reporter who fails to recognise the name Paul Robeson, or that it ever meant anything. He laments the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Patrice Lumumba in The Congo, and the fact that Nelson Mandela and his colleagues are still languishing in jail in South Africa, and would likely die there.



Seemingly depressed, he briefly considers taking his life, but decides that he can't leave the world stage that way. His old friend Dr. W E B DuBois comes to mind. He had spent the last days of his life in Ghana, and suggested to Paul that he should do the same, maybe in



Nigeria, to where he had traced his ancestry. Much as he would have loved to do that, it was now too late, but he acknowledges that Africa, with its proud, hidden history had always been "home" to him, deep in his heart. He sings GOIN' HOME, pauses to recite a portion of Othello's last speech "*Soft you...*," then picks up his chair and sings a long, sustained note on the final word "home," as the tune of OL' MAN RIVER accompanies him off the stage.

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“Music is a universal language..”

Paul Robeson is perhaps best known for one song – *Ol’ Man River*, which was written for him to sing in the stage musical *Show Boat*, by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, in 1927. Thanks to Robeson’s rendition, it has become the most famous song from the musical, earning him repeated standing ovations and encore requests since he first sang it on stage in London (UK) in 1928. It serves as a commentary on society: Black people are exploited and abused by White people, but the world (de Mississippi) just looks on (keeps rollin’ along). Robeson sang the song throughout his career, but decided to alter or omit several of the lyrics to change the sentiment from one of resigned acceptance to determined defiance to fight the system.



Spirituals

African American Spirituals are sung and played in many parts of Call Mr. Robeson. They are a genre of music created by enslaved Africans in the United States. They use biblical stories (the Bible being



for a long time the only book they were permitted to read) to lament captivity and imagine freedom, and many argue, to plan escape. They achieved worldwide popularity thanks in part to the Fisk Jubilee Singers who toured the USA and Europe singing them in the late 19th Century (to raise money for the newly created Fisk University - set up to educate Blacks), and to Paul Robeson, who, with his accompanist Lawrence Brown was the first person to devote an entire solo concert to the singing of Spirituals. He would continue to sing them throughout his career.

The Pentatonic Scale

Robeson, though popular in large concert halls around the world, loved to sing the folk music of ordinary people from all over the world. It is said he could sing and speak in about twenty-five languages! He became literally obsessed with the concept that most folk songs were written using the pentatonic scale – a scale of five notes which also happen to be the five black keys of the piano. He believed that the fact people from Australasia, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, China, Africa – everywhere – all made songs using the same five notes meant that music could and should be used to unite all the world’s people in love and brotherhood.

Earl Robinson, composer.

Two songs in this play were composed by Earl Robinson, and they are both particularly significant to Robeson. *Ballad for Americans* was a cantata written in the 1930s, which when Robeson recorded it, became literally the most popular recording of its day. The words, by John La Touche are a very patriotic homage to America and its people in all their diversity. Curiously the song was so popular that in the 1940 presidential campaign, it was apparently sung at the conventions of both the Republican Party and the Communist Party! *Joe Hill* was Robeson's favourite (even more so than *Ol' Man River*) because it tells the story of a Swedish immigrant who used music to inspire working people to join trade unions and use collective action to defend their rights against greedy bosses. Robeson believed passionately in trade unionism, and was in fact instrumental in getting Black workers accepted into the ranks and the leadership of many unions around the country in the 1930s and 40s.



Just Awearyin' For You.

This was another popular song from Robeson's time, with words by Frank Lebby Stanton, set to music by the most successful American woman composer of her day, Carrie Jacobs Bond. Written in the dialect of Black southerners, the song is sometimes mistaken for a spiritual plantation song. Robeson's rendition was one of the most popular ones, and in this play, he sings it as a lament for the death of his wife, Eslanda.

Goin' Home.

The last song of the play was another very successful Robeson recording. The music was from the *New World Symphony* by the Czech composer Antonin Dvorak. Dvorak deliberately borrowed from African American music in this composition, feeling that American music needed to embrace that (and Native American) music in order to find its true voice.

Music as a weapon.

Robeson said of himself as a performer, "My art is a weapon in defence of my people and all oppressed people of the world." This is illustrated in the play for example when Robeson stops a Kansas City concert while singing a plantation song, *The Old Folks at Home* (by Stephen Foster), when he realises that the audience is segregated, and leaves the stage. After being persuaded to



continue, he returns, expresses his displeasure in no uncertain terms and then sings the spiritual *Joshua Fit de Battle ob' Jericho* - a song of defiance and one that shows the effectiveness of collective action: "Joshua commanded de chillun' to shout - an' de walls come a-tumblin' down!" Much later on in the play, the audience hears the tune to *We Shall Overcome* being played as Robeson talks about the modern civil rights movement, which he

preceded by decades.

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Some Books and Documentaries about Paul Robeson

For younger readers:

Paul Robeson: Hero Before His Time, by Rebecca Larsen, Franklin Watts, 1989.

Paul Robeson: The Life and Times of a Free Black Man, by Virginia Hamilton, Harper & Row, 1974.

Paul Robeson: Singer and Actor, by Scott Ehrlich, Chelsea House Publishers, 1988.

Paul Robeson, by Eloise Greenfield, 1975

Paul Robeson: Biography of a Proud Man, by Joseph Nazel, Hooloway House Publishing Co., 1980

Paul Robeson for Beginners, by Paul Von Blum, For Beginners LLC, 2013

For adults:

Paul Robeson, by Martin Bauml Duberman, New Press, 1995.

Here I Stand, by Paul Robeson, with preface by Lloyd L. Brown, introduction by Professor Sterling Stuckey, Beacon Press, 1998

Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen, Jeffrey C. Stewart, ed., Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974, Philip S. Foner, ed., Citadel Press, 1978.

Peekskill: USA, by Howard Fast

Paul Robeson: the Artist as Revolutionary, by Gerald Horne, Pluto Press, 2016

Paul Robeson: A Watched Man, by Jordan Goodman, Verso, 2013

Paul Robeson: A Life of Activism and Art, by Lindsey R. Swindall, 2013, Rowman & Littlefield

Paul Robeson: Film Pioneer, by Scott Allen Nollen, McFarland & Co., 2010

The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898-1939, by Paul Robeson, Jr., Wiley & Sons, 2001

The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom, 1939-1976, by Paul Robeson, Jr., Wiley & Sons, 2010

Documentaries:

"**Paul Robeson: Here I Stand**," a 2-hour documentary, premiered on PBS on February 24, 1999.

"**Paul Robeson: Tribute to an Artist**," 29-minute documentary, narrated by Sidney Poitier, made in 1979, won Academy Award OSCAR for Best Documentary (Short Subjects).

"**The Tallest Tree in Our Forest**," 1977 documentary on Robeson's life, b&w and color, 86 min., written, produced and narrated by Gil Nobel.

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The Creative Team

Tayo Aluko. Writer, Performer. Tayo was born in Nigeria, and now lives in Liverpool, England. 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 concert halls, and has also performed lead roles in such operas and musicals as *Nabucco*, *Kiss Me Kate* and *Anything Goes*. *CALL MR ROBESON* has won numerous awards at festivals in the UK and Canada, as well as highly favourable reviews in the press – most notably in the Guardian and on BBC Radio 4. He has toured the play around the UK, the USA, Canada, Jamaica and Nigeria, and at New York's Carnegie Hall in February 2012 on his 50th birthday. He also delivers a lecture/concert called *PAUL ROBESON – THE GIANT, IN A NUTSHELL*, and another one, titled *FROM BLACK AFRICA TO THE WHITE HOUSE*: A talk about Black Political Resistance, illustrated with spirituals, which has been performed on 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 recently developed a piece titled *WHAT HAPPENS?* featuring the writings of African American Langston Hughes, for performance with live jazz accompaniment. He has been published in *The Guardian*, *The Morning Star*, *NERVE Magazine*, *Modern Ghana* and *Searchlight Magazine*. He is currently working on a new play.





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 Design credits include: *Saint/Jeanne* and *Spring Awakening - The Musical* (Chelsea Theatre), *Hairspray*, *Cabaret* & *Attempts on her Life* (Amersham & Wycombe College), *Lord of the Flies* & *Grimm Tales* (Colet Court School), *The Tempest* & *Pinocchio* (UK/UAE tours for Shakespeare4Kidz), *Beauty & the Beast*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *A Christmas Carol* & *Peter Pan* (Tickled Pink), an open-air *Romeo & Juliet* (Cornucopia Theatre), *The Liar* (South Hill Park), *Dance or Die* (Hoxton Hall), *Voices in the Alleyway* & *Yes, I Still Exist* (Spread Expression Dance), *The Fiddler* (Unicorn Theatre) and film short *The Judge* for Faith Drama, *The Riddle of the Sands* & *Laurel and Hardy* (Jermyn St Theatre), *The Famous Five* (Tabard Theatre), *Hansel & Gretel* (UK tour), *Stockholm* (BAC), open-air tours of *The Merchant of Venice* & *The Railway Children* (Heartbreak) and the award-winning UK/international touring production of *Hannah & Hanna*. His Set Design credits include *Our House* (Elgiva Theatre), *Cinderella* (Library Theatre, Luton), *Next Door* (Cockpit Theatre) and, most recently, Rouge28 Theatre's new tour of *Kwaidan*, a Japanese ghost story with puppets. Other collaborations with director Olusola Oyeleye include *High Life* (Hampstead Theatre), *A Wing, A Prey, A Song* (Guest Projects Africa), *The Security Guard* (Merton AbbeyFest 2012), *Ella* (RichMix), *Coming Up for Air* (UK tour), *The Playground* (Polka Theatre) and *Ma Joyce's Tales from the Parlour* (Oval House/Edinburgh). He has just started design work on musicals *Carousel* and *Fame* for Amersham & Wycombe College.

