

CALL MR ROBESON
A life, with songs.



A Monodrama

By

TAYO ALUKO

© COPYRIGHT

Draft: July 2018

Tel: 44 (0) 151 707 8187

email: info@tayoalukoandfriends.com

(LXQ 0.5) *Preset: LARRY BROWN at piano, USR, playing a medley of spirituals and other Robeson songs, as audience files in. The set consists of file cases littered around the stage, amid paraphernalia relating to Robeson's life: photographs, papers, film, play and concert tour posters etc (Note: where appropriate, permission to be obtained for what is displayed on stage) and lots of books. Once clearance is given, (LXQ1). Once blackout reached piano stops.*

(5 seconds after piano stops, SQ1). *PAUL starts to sing off stage, a cappella,*

Nobody knows de trouble I seen **(LXQ1.5)**

(Enters USL carrying a chair)

Nobody knows my sorrow **(LXQ2)**

Nobody knows de trouble I seen

Glory Hallelujah

*He places the chair SC as he finishes, **VISUAL: puts reading glasses on***

(LXQ3), (SQ2) *LARRY starts to play the introduction to **01: OL' MAN***

RIVER. *PAUL begins to sing, in rehearsal.*

(Sings) Niggers all work on de Mississippi

Niggers all work while de white folk play

Pulling dem boats from de dawn till sunset

Gettin' no rest till ...**(LXQ4)**

(He starts to address the audience as LARRY stops.)

There I was, rehearsing with Larry, and my wife Essie barges in, just like that, and asks me, ‘Pual! Paul, Paul Robeson, don’t you think it’s about time you stopped singing that darn song?’ And I say, ‘Darn? Dar- Essie, that song was written for me!’ *(To audience)* You know, for the role of *Joe* in *Showboat*. And she says, ‘Yes, by a white massa for his favourite nigger. Niggers this, Niggers that. How can you carry on singing those words and expect to be taken seriously?’ Well, “my dearly beloved” had her faults, but a lack of expressive clarity wasn’t one of them! And I say, ‘Listen, Eslanda, “*that darn song*” is the reason I am famous today and why many white folks now show me – and therefore you – respect. Honey, don’t you see that I can use music to show that we are equal to them?’ Then she says quietly, ‘Not by letting them carry on calling us niggers, you won’t’, and then she changes the subject, and starts to talk about arrangements and fees for my next concert. You see, she was my manager too, and a darn good one at that. Well, I refuse to stop singing “*that darn song*”, but I do change the lyrics: *(Sings)*

“Coloured folks work on de Mississippi, Coloured folks work while de white folks play”...

She’s still not that happy about it, and I decide I’ll probably stop singing it after a few years *(LXQ5)*. But then, about a year or so after that, Essie announces out of the blue, that she has agreed a fee of forty thousand dollars for me to play the role in the movie. In Hollywood! Forty Thousand dollars! Just for a few scenes, and that’s in 1935! The rest, as they say, is history. *(Beat. Chuckles)* To think that I was

ready to stop singing “*that darn song*”.

There had been somebody else before I met Essie. Gerry Neale, her name was. My first true love. *Finds photo USR and walks DSR with it*) We met while I was at Rutgers College in New Jersey, and she was in teacher training at Trenton ... I asked her to marry me several times. She thought about it for a long time, but eventually she said, 'Look, I ain't strong enough to marry you, Paul Robeson. Something about you tells me that I'd be marrying nothing but trouble.'. *(Chuckles. Beat)* I guess she was right. *(Beat. Returns photo USR and moves DSC)*

Anyway, when I went to Columbia University to study law, I carried on with my football. As a matter of fact, I had been in the All-American team in 1917 and 1918. Even as a teenager, I was already famous! All over the country, people knew me as “Robey of Rutgers”. One reporter even described me as “Six foot four and two hundred graceful pounds of dark devastation”. Well, at Columbia, I got this serious injury on my thigh, and needed to spend some weeks at the New York Presbyterian Hospital. That’s where I met Eslanda Cardoso Goode. Essie *(picks up photo)*. Fine, small woman. Spirited. Vivacious. And, the only coloured woman on the senior staff. Well, being so fair, she could often pass for white. By the time they found out, it was clearly too late!

When we decided to get married, we discovered that her family weren’t best pleased. Turns out I was too... dark, see? My brother Ben wasn’t so sure about her either. He thought her too ambitious, too abrasive. Still, we were in love, and that

was that: we married anyway. (*Replaces photo*) I was 23, she was 26. August 1921.
 (*Sits. Beat*)

Six years later, we had a boy. Paul Jnr. Pauli. Great kid. Smart. I'm afraid I wasn't around much for him, especially when he was small. Always on the road, see? And even when I wasn't touring, well, truth is, Essie and me, we didn't always get along too well together, and I'd often pitch up in hotels, or with friends, and I felt comfortable doing that. With her, it was always - passports, concerts, "sing this, don't sing that. I've booked you on this, your fee is this, my cut is that. Read this script, but don't take that part". (*Beat*) Don't get me wrong: she was a lovely, beautiful, thoughtful woman - a great mother to Pauli. But you see, for me, home is where one goes to be at peace, where you can just Be... Just think... Rest, you know? Talk about - anything, or nothing. (*Beat*) Still, we did have lots of good times together. We'd walk in the garden, read, talk, go out to the theatre, I'd play football with Pauli. You know, family stuff. And Essie's mom - Ma Goode - she was around much of the time to help look after Pauli, because I wasn't there Or was I not there because she was?

No, I admit I probably wasn't the best of fathers. Not like my Pop. The Reverend William Drew Robeson. Now, there was a man! (*Rises and goes searching for photo*) He raised all five of us almost single-handedly, after my ... after my mother died.... In a fire. I was.. I was there - (*Beat*) I was ... just six years old. (*Beat. Continues searching*) Pop was a preacher, with this big, booming voice. He always, always had this dignity about him that even white folks just had to admire and respect (*finds photo*). It was he who encouraged me

to stay on in the Rutgers football team when I was ready to quit, because I was made to know I was not welcome. I'll never forget when I first showed up for the team trial. The very first scrimmage, both sides just went for me, because I was colored! Both sides! I got a sprained shoulder, cuts and bruises all over, a spike in my hand, my fingernails ripped off... Ten days I was laid up in bed after that, ten days! Of course, I wanted to quit. But Pop impressed on me that as the only coloured kid at Rutgers, I was the representative of a whole lot of Negro boys who wanted to go to college, who wanted to play football, and I had to show that I was ready to take whatever was handed out. And with his coaching, I became a Phi Beta Kappa scholar, and a prize winning orator. *(Beat)*

Three days before my last oratorical contest, ... Pop died. *(Piano starts to play introduction to 02; STEAL AWAY)* But I still entered it, and I won! He would have been so proud... ***(LXQ6)***

(Sings)

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus
Steal away, steal away home
I ain't got long to stay here.

My Lord calls me, he calls me by the thunder
The trumpet sounds within a my soul
I ain't got long to stay here.

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus
Steal away, steal away home
I ain't got long to stay here.

(Piano continues to play to the end of this next section. What a beautiful, dignified song! (Rises) (LXQ7) You know, it was originally sung as a secret code for slaves getting ready to escape, so for me it encapsulates Pop's life, because he was actually born in slavery in Martin County, North Carolina, but at the age of fifteen he escaped North, to a better place. *(Music out) (Beat)*

Many times, I also escaped to what I thought was a better place: Russia. *(Piano starts to play 03: SONG OF THE VOLGA BOATMEN)*. From the time I first visited there in 1934, I found that their folk songs bore a close relationship to those of the Negro people, and that a tremendous bond of sympathy and mutual understanding united us. In Russia, I was treated like a full human being for the first time in my life. There was no racial prejudice! So I - we - sent Pauli to school there, when he was nine. We felt it would be better for him to grow up in a non-racial, socialist country, rather than in America, where he would always be a second class citizen. *(Piano out)*

Now, I first got interested in Socialism in Britain in the 1920s. One night, during the run of Showboat at the *(LXQ8)* Theatre Royal, Drury Lane *(SQ3)* in London I was coming out of this exclusive restaurant, and was drawn by the sound of a group of men singing on the street. It turns out they were coal miners, from a place called, er, Wales. These fellows had marched hundreds of miles to London – in winter - to highlight their plight: they'd been working in very dangerous, unhealthy conditions, for immensely rich bosses, on wages that could barely feed them, let alone their families. You know, I actually bought them their first hot meal in days! It actually shocked me to discover that in a white country there could be

such a wide divide between the ruling elite and the working class. **(SQ4)**

I soon came to realise that the same capitalist system that uprooted Africans from their home, kept them at the bottom of the pile in America operated in Europe too! ... and that the fascists would do anything in their power to crush any resistance.

Take Spain in the 1930s. I participated in a concert in support **(SQ5)** of the Republican refugees at the Royal Albert Hall, London, June 1937: **(Sound of RAH Audience) Steps on "podium". (LXQ9)**

(As he begins to speak, SQ6: Track 3 out, 3s) "I am deeply happy to be joining with you in this appeal for the greatest cause which faces the world today. Like every true artist, I have longed to see my talent contributing in an unmistakably clear manner to the cause of humanity. The challenge must be taken up. Fascism is no respecter of persons. It makes no distinction between combatants and non-combatants. The blood-soaked streets of Guernica are proof of that, as are the concentration camps full of artists and scientists. The liberation of Spain from the oppression of fascist reactionaries is not a private matter of the Spaniards, but the common cause of all advanced and progressive humanity. The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative."

(Steps down) (LXQ10)

Yes, I had choices to make, alright. You see, in London in 1929, I'd met this very beautiful woman. Yolande Jackson. She was white. From a wealthy, aristocratic

family. We fell deeply, deeply in love, and decided to get married, even though I knew that if I divorced Essie for a white woman, folks back home would never forgive me. Not the Negroes, and definitely not the whites. But love is an irresistible force, and so I asked Essie to initiate divorce proceedings and name Yolande as correspondent. In the end however, Yolande's father absolutely forbade her from marrying a Negro, and she relented. I was devastated at first, but eventually I came to terms with it, and Essie and I resolved to stay together, which we did. *(Sits)*

I had choices to make about my movie career too. You see, in England, I could get to play starring roles in a way that was totally impossible for a Negro actor in America back then. But it came at a price, because after filming, and thus unbeknownst to me, many of the movies would be edited in a way that would make my character look like he was venerating the white man. Worst of all was *Chief Bosambo* in *Sanders of the River*. *Ah ee yo ko! Ah ee yo ko! The least said about him, the better!* On the other hand I did get to play some pretty good roles, like *The Emperor Jones*, and *David Goliath*, in *The Proud Valley*. That was filmed in Wales, with real Welsh miners. *(Sings) Lord God of Abraham!* And during filming I actually stayed in their homes, with their families. I'd never felt so happy, so comfortable. So - loved. *Goliath* was just a regular working class fellow, but a real hero. Yes - definitely my best movie, but waiting for roles like that to come along was like waiting for the freedom train itself.

And then I had to decide whether to continue supporting International Peace and

Socialist causes, or just entertain. My London agent warned me that my political activities might adversely affect my career. And you know what? That year I polled first place - get that – first place - among BBC listeners, as “The most popular singer on radio”. And I sold out the Royal Albert Hall and countless venues all around Britain too, so he was clearly plain wrong.

(Rises) And then, back home in America a few years later, I recorded a very patriotic song called *The Ballad for Americans*, *(Piano starts to play 04:*

BALLAD FOR AMERICANS) and boy, did that make me big!

(Sings) Ol’ Abe Lincoln was thin and long
 His heart was high and his faith was strong
 But he hated oppression, he hated wrong
 And he went down to his grave to free the slave...

(Piano continues) It was played on every radio station the length and breadth of the country! I toured all over, singing it with orchestras and choirs. That was definitely the peak of my popularity, and of my career, commercially. *(Piano stops)* Everywhere I went, my concerts were packed. *(Piano starts playing introduction to 05: THE OLD FOLKS AT HOME)* I remember singing one night in Kansas City sometime in 1942, the Municipal Auditorium:

(Steps onto “stage” DSC) (LXQ11)

Way down upon de Swanee Ribber
 Far, far away
 Dere’s where my heart is turning ever
 Dat’s where the old folks stay

(He starts to peer into the audience as he continues)

All around am sad an' dreary
Everywhere I roam

Oh, fellas, how my heart grows weary...

(He stops singing, and piano stops soon after)

Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, but I – can I have the house lights on please?

(LXQ12) (SQ7) *He looks round the audience, and then up into where the circle would be. As he starts to speak, (SQ8)* have been going round the country for several years now, and everywhere I've been, I have campaigned tirelessly for equal rights for my people, for our integration at all levels of society. I have also insisted that I will not sing to segregated audiences. I thought that that had been understood by the management of this auditorium when this concert was arranged, but I see that their pledge has not been honoured, because we have white people down here, and Negro people up there. For this reason, I'm afraid I have to say that this concert is now over.

(Walks purposefully USR. pauses, then turns to address audience)

You see, only the previous week, I had sung *The Ballad for Americans* at the Hollywood Bowl, with the biggest damn orchestra and chorus you can imagine:

(Sings)

Man in white skin can never be free while his black brother is in slavery.

30,000 people cheering me to kingdom come. And you know what? That night at my hotel, they told me I could not eat in the restaurant, that the guests would not approve! I had to eat upstairs in my room with Freda – er, that’s Freda Diamond – a, er, close friend. So when I encountered this segregated audience in Kansas City, I figured, enough’s enough, and I walked right off that stage into the dressing room, and as far as I was concerned, that was that. Then the manager walks in, all arrogant, talking about suing me and all, and I told him I’d see him in court. I had to take a stand, see? He had the good sense to get the hell out of there. Then the compère comes in with these two other fellows, but he’s begging me, explaining that the manager was new. He goes out on stage (I can hear him from the dressing room):

(At CS, adopting the Compère’s voice) “Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen - and this includes our – friends – upstairs. We apologise for this unfortunate misunderstanding. The management is in talks with Mr Robeson right now, and we are hoping that he might be persuaded to rejoin us just as soon as possible.”

Eventually, I calm down, **(SQ9)** and I decide to go back out there. But I lay it down straight. *(Steps back up to stage.(LXQ13) Raises hand to ask for silence*

(SQ10)

“I see that Jim Crow is alive and well in Kansas City tonight, and you know my views. However, I feel that my people upstairs, who have paid good hard-earned money to hear me sing tonight must not be disappointed, so I will continue with this concert, but for their sake only. Let there be no doubt that I am continuing only

under protest. I will therefore sing, for my people upstairs, songs of our people's struggle, for we have resisted hundreds of years of slavery, but continue to fight injustice, continue to have to battle to preserve our dignity. (*Beat. Points towards exit*) Yes, Sir, Madam, you may leave if you wish, and be sure to ask for a refund on your way out. Larry, *Battle of Jericho*, please. (*LARRY plays* **06: BATTLE OF JERICHO**)

Joshua fit de battle ob Jericho,
 Jericho, Jericho
 Joshua fit de battle ob Jericho
 An' de walls come a tumbling down

You may talk about your King ob Gideon
 You may talk about your man ob Saul
 Dere's none like Good ol' Joshua
 At de battle ob Jericho

Up to de walls ob Jericho
 He marched wid sword in han'
 Go blow dem ram horns Joshua cried
 Cause de battle am in my hand

Den de lam' ram sheep horns begin to blow
 An de trumpets begin to soun'
 Joshua commanded de chillun to shout
 An de walls come a tumbling down
 Dat mornin'

Joshua fit de battle ob Jericho

Jericho, Jericho
 Joshua fit de battle ob Jericho
 An' de walls come a tumbling down

(*Leaves "stage"*) (**LXQ14**) Always makes me think of Frederick

Douglass, that song. A great leader in the freedom struggles of my people. A nineteenth century Joshua. Like Pop, he also escaped slavery by the Underground Railroad. He visited Europe in 1849, and in a farewell speech to the British people, he said this:

"I go back to the United States not as I landed here – I came a slave – and I go back a free man. I came here maligned, I go back with reputation and celebrity. Still, I go back to toil. I do not go back to America to sit still, remain quiet and enjoy ease and comfort. I prefer living a life of activity *in the service of my brethren.*"

Amen to that! (*Beat*) He wrote a wonderful autobiography, you know: "*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*", and I own a copy autographed by him almost a century and a half ago! That's one of *the* prize items in my book collection. Oh, I love books, I love reading. That's why travelling so much has never been a problem for me. You see, I say: "thousands of miles only means dozens of books". I've got hundreds, on all sorts of subjects, from African History to world religions; music and musicology to linguistics and languages. You know, I can now converse quite fluently in maybe, twenty five languages: including Russian, Yiddish, Mandarin Chinese, and some African ones, like Efik and Swahili. I've just

got this hunger, this thirst, a yearning for learning, for knowledge, see?

(He discovers a newspaper cutting in the book he's holding. He picks it up, remembers it)

Listen to this: "Paul Robeson says..." No. Wait a minute. *(Puts book and clipping down)* I'll let you hear what I actually said, and then I'll read the clipping to you. I'm in Europe in 1949, and like Frederick Douglass, I speak out on behalf of my people. And I always **(LXQ15)** like to say things that relate American Negroes to Europeans, like in Liverpool, I said to a small gathering there once:

I need to draw attention of people here in Europe to what's happening in my country. I stand here ashamed to be an American. Ashamed that 87 full years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, it is still necessary to speak of the wave of lynch terror and mob assault against Negro Americans. Lynching is not the special or exclusive concern of Negro Americans. The good Aryan who stood idly by while the German Jew was being persecuted lived to learn that that was the beginning of the end of his own freedom. Let us not some day live to learn that the persecution of the Negro was the beginning of the end of all American **(LXQ16)** freedom.

(To audience) And then at the World Peace Congress in Paris, France that April, I made the speech that changed everything.

(Steps back onto podium) **(LXQ17)**

"The wealth of America was built on the backs of white workers from Europe

and the backs of millions of blacks, and we are resolved to share it equally among our children. And we shall not put up with any hysterical raving that urges us to make war on anyone. We shall not make war on the Soviet Union. It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against a country which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind.”

(Pause. Steps off podium). **(LXQ18)**

You know how they reported that speech back in the United States? *(Reads the clipping)* “Paul Robeson says that no intelligent Negro would fight for the United States as it presently exists”... “He describes the policies of the United States government as being no different to those of Hitler and Goebbels”.

Well! *That* was the beginning of the end of my own freedom. **(SQ11)** I get back to America and all hell **(LXQ19)** breaks loose. Right from the time I get off the plane, the press is there waiting for me.

REPORTER: Mr Robeson, you are reported as denouncing your government in Paris. What do you have to say for yourself?

PAUL: I prefer to give what I have to say to papers like The Daily Worker.

REPORTER: Did you not say that you loved Russia more than any other country?

PAUL: I said that I love the America of the working class. And I love the working class of England and France and many other countries. And I very deeply love the people's republics in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, for their fight for freedom for my people and for the white working people of the world."

REPORTER: What do you think of President Truman's fight for civil rights?

PAUL: President Truman is merely promising, but not giving, the Negro people privileges, not rights. The privilege of not being lynched."

REPORTER: Mr Walter White of the NAACP denounced your Paris speech as unpatriotic.

What do you say to that, Mr Robeson? **(LXQ20)**

(Track 6 still running, but quiet at this point)

(To audience)

Now, I wasn't expecting that one and I really have to think quick. It's like I'm back on the football field. You see, despite my size, I was very quick, and I could do these amazing sidesteps. Some fellows would be coming for me, and next moment *(does a sidestep)*, I'd be someplace else. So I say, **(LXQ21)** 'If Mr White had read the truth about what I actually said in Paris, and not the distorted lies you printed, he would have understood that I am as patriotic as he or any other American, Negro or white. Now if you will excuse me I would like to get back home to my people in Harlem.' **(LXQ21.5) (SQ11A)**

(To audience) I thought I handled that quite well, but I was worried. You see, it's one thing to take abuse from the white press or from whites in general, but the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People? I'd been a supporter all my life! And then I find out that they'd been saying even worse things about me, which made me mad. Real mad! So I say to their committee, "How dare you, you errand boys, you Uncle Toms, challenge my Americanism? Most black Americans are not afraid of their radicals who point out the awful, indefensible truth of our degradation and exploitation, unlike you - you craven, fawning, despicable so called leadership!" *(Beat. To audience)* I don't think they liked that very much.

I speak here, there and everywhere: I'm really worried for my country, see? My people are still getting lynched, the workers exploited, trade unionists persecuted, the war mongers are spreading fear all over the place while they're quietly and secretly raping my brothers and sisters in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Meanwhile the House Un-American Activities Committee are looking for "reds" under every bed: putting people on trial and in jail. Making them name names: real communists, people they think may be communists - mostly just regular honest liberals, progressives. *((Looks behind him as though hearing a voice))* What? *(Continues)* So I have to keep going, keep fighting for the working people. Keep battling, but there's so much happening: Pauli's getting married, people are holding welcome rallies for me, some say I should run for Vice President, and Essie and Pauli, and - *(Looks round again, disconcerted)* and everybody's really worried about me, but I just have to keep going. *(Beat)*

And then I've got this outdoor concert to do in a park in Peekskill, upstate New York. It's in aid of the Harlem Chapter of the Civil Rights Congress. I arrive there by train, and Helen is there to – er, that's er, Helen Rosen – another er, close friend – she's there to meet me, with her husband Sam, and we travel in **(SQ12)** their car. We get near the park, and there's trouble. **(LXQ22)** Seems some marauding white youths have blocked the road, are shouting at people and threatening them. Some are throwing rocks and stones at people's cars! The police are just standing there, watching, doing nothing! I'm so angry, I want to get out of the car and show them hell. But then Helen spots an effigy of me hanging from a tree, and yells – 'Paul! Stay in the car! Sam let's go! Let's get the hell out of here!' So Sam reverses the car all the way down the line, *(Moves SR)* we drive away, and the concert doesn't happen. **(LXQ23) (SQ13)**. *(Beat)*

Well, we decide to reschedule it for the following week. September 4th. This time, the trade unions send men to guard me and the concert goes. I travel laid down on the floor of a car, in a convoy, all of them with blackened windows. I was told it was necessary. I get out, and these big – well, big - trade unionists escort my accompanist, Larry Brown, and me up on stage **(LXQ24)**, and form a circle **(SQ14)** around us. *(Gets onto podium)*. There must be twenty thousand people out there. I see a ring surrounding the crowd. I stare, and then I realise what it is I'm seeing! A human chain of trade unionists: black men, white men, Asians, Latinos, all standing together, to protect us from the rioters out there. It's so moving! **(SQ15)** The crowd are all up on their feet. They're cheering so loud

that Larry and I have to wait. Eventually we start, and we do a few songs. (*LARRY plays a bit of **07: DEEP RIVER** tentatively*) I can tell that poor Larry is terrified, from the way he's playing. Well, there had been talk of snipers out there in the hills somewhere. And there's a helicopter – a police helicopter - hovering in the distance, and I wonder if that's where the sniper might be? (*DEEP RIVER stops*) And as Larry starts to play the opening notes to our final number, (*Piano plays introduction to **08: OL' MAN RIVER***) the helicopter starts coming towards us.

(Sound of helicopter approaching, then circling during the song)

Dere's an ol' man called de Mississippi
 Dat's de ol' man I don't like to be
 What does he care if de world's got troubles
 What does he care if de land ain't free?

Ol' man river, dat ol' man river
 He must know somethin' but don't say nothing
 He just keeps rollin' he keeps on rollin' along.

He don't plant taters, he don't plant cotton
 An' dem that plants 'em is soon forgotten
 But ol' man river, he just keeps rollin' along.

You an' me, we sweat an' strain
 Body all achin' and racked wid pain.
 'Tote dat barge! Lift dat bale!
 You show a little grit an' you lands in jail

Ah keeps laughin' instead of cryin'
 Ah must keep fightin' until I'm dyin'

(SQ15A)

But ol' man river, he just keeps rollin, along!

(After 3 s, SQ16)

(Beat. Steps down.) (LXQ25)

There were worse riots after the concert. Again, the police did nothing. Dozens of cars were damaged, one hundred forty five people got injured, including one coloured man who lost an eye. All because of me. *(Sits SL)*

Then the papers say things like “ROBESON: THE EPITOMY OF THE COMMUNIST THREAT”; “CRAZY COMMIE CROWD WRECK PEACEFUL PEAKSKILL”

Things get even worse. Stores stop selling my records. The studios cancel my contracts. More and more people from all sides want less and less to do with me, and I start losing bookings and venues. Only a few churches – black churches - host my concerts, but soon, many of them start closing their doors on me too, afraid they'd lose their mortgages, or even get burned down. In the mid 1940s I could earn one hundred thousand dollars a year, easy. In 1955, I earned six thousand dollars. Six thousand! I'd do better abroad - in Europe. But then what does my government do? They place travel restrictions on me, and eventually in 1950, they cancel my passport altogether! They won't even let me go into Canada! Imagine!

But then, the trade unions hit on a great idea. (*Stands. Moves to CS*) We held a concert at the border, under the (**LXQ26**) Peace Arch. (**SQ17**) Twenty five to thirty thousand people show up – I’m on this side of the border in America, they on the other, starting just about where you are right now (*pointing to front row. Steps up to address crowd.*)

(**SQ18**) “Comrades. I can’t act or sing in any sort of decent place in my own country. And yet, the British actors have sent a request saying that they would welcome me in England to play *Othello*. And at the same time, I have received an invitation (*Piano starts to play 09: WE’LL KEEP A WELCOME*)- and no invitation could mean more - from the workers, the miners in Wales, where I first understood the struggle of Negro and White together - to appear at a festival over there in October, and I very much hope to be able to get there to do that.” (*Piano stops*)

“But our government is preventing artists, and scientists, like Dr Du Bois, proudly a son of the Negro people, who has contributed to the advancement of all mankind, they are preventing him from leaving this country to attend peace meetings or scientific gatherings – anywhere on earth. And the same goes for countless outstanding American scientists, intellectuals, workers and trade union leaders too.”

“And as for me - why do they take my passport away? They said that I have been struggling for the independence of the colonial peoples of Africa, and that that is meddling in the foreign affairs of the United States government. Now that’s just

too bad, 'cause I'm going to have to continue to meddle! And I want everybody in the range of my voice to hear – official or otherwise – that there is no force on earth that will make me go backward one-thousandth part of one little inch!“
(SQ19). *Exhaustion descends on him heavily, briefly, but he perks up again.*

VISUAL: Hands up to appeal for quiet, (SQ20)

And now, comrades, brothers and sisters, **(LXQ27)** Joe Hill. **(SQ21)**. *LARRY gives opening note 10: JOE HILL)*

(Sings)

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night
 Alive as you and me.
 Says I, but Joe, you're ten years dead,
 I never died, says he,
 I never died, says he.

The copper bosses killed you Joe,
 They shot you Joe, says I.
 Takes more than guns to kill a man.
 Says Joe, I didn't die.
 Says Joe, I didn't die.

Joe Hill ain't dead, he says to me,
 Joe Hill ain't never died.
 Where workers strike and organise,
 Joe Hill is at their side,
 I never died says he
 I never died says he

(Steps down) **(LXQ28)**

Nine years, that went on. Nine years under house arrest, unable to sing, act or travel, but I couldn't stop fighting. *(Sits in chair, CS)* I went to court several times, to protest the cancellation of my passport. Got nowhere. Oh, I knew that all they wanted was for me to say that I was a communist, and to give them some names. They would have thrown them in jail, and I would have been able to carry on singing, start earning again. But I couldn't do that. **(SQ22)**. *Looks round* What? *(To audience, whispering)* Oh, I forgot to warn you. They follow me around, you know – the FBI. Read my mail, keep files on me, they bug me – oh yes - they've probably been listening to this all night, but don't you worry, just don't say a word, but be careful who's sitting behind you. *(Behind)* What??

They visit me, tell me they've got tapes: Tapes of me in bed - with Helen, Freda, Clara, Uta, Peggy, whoever, but I keep going, because too many people are giving in, see? But Lord knows, I'm getting tired. Tired of fighting. Tired of swimming against the tide. Of climbing up a mountain and rocks keep falling on me. Tired of shouting into the wilderness and nobody's hearing, or even listening, but I keep going! **(SQ23)** *(Beat)*

Did I ever tell you about the pentatonic scale? I've been studying the subject for a while now. It's fascinating. Basically, people's music - folk music - from any part of the world is instinctively based on just five notes, and **(LXQ28.5)** they just happen to be the five black keys of the piano. Listen to this. *(He goes over to the piano. LARRY freezes as PAUL stands next to him, plays the pentatonic scale)*

The five black keys of the piano. The pentatonic scale.

(Sings and plays few bars of Iwe Kiko)

Iwe kiko
 lai si oko
 Ati ada
 Ko I pe o
 Ko I pe o

That's *Iwe Kiko*, a Yoruba folk song taught to me by a Nigerian fellow student while we were studying in at London University in the 1930s. Every one of those notes you just heard is one of the five black keys of the piano. The pentatonic scale! Listen to this one:

(Sings and plays).

Swing low, sweet chariot

(LARRY takes up the accompaniment as PAUL moves away from piano).

Coming for to carry me home
 Swing low, sweet chariot
 Coming for to carry me home

(LARRY continues SWING LOW) A Negro spiritual, the folk music of my own people. Again, the pentatonic scale! *(LARRY plays the introduction to **II: ERISKAY LOVE LILT**)* The five black keys of the piano! Here's another one.

(Sings)

Ver mee o O rovan O
 Ver mee o O rovan Ee
 Ver mee o ru oho
 Sad am I without thee...

(LARRY continues) That's called "An Eriskay Love Lilt", and that too is based on the pentatonic scale! And you know where it's from? The Hebridean Islands off the Coast of Scotland! *(Piano stops. PAUL getting more and more excited, and beginning to imagine more voices)* Go to Australasia, China, the Middle East, anywhere, it's the same thing. Music is a universal language based on the pentatonic scale. It's just that we hear it, we make it in **(LXQ29)** different ways, like we speak different languages, and in different accents, see? Now I, Paul Robeson, scholar/athlete, Paul Robeson, internationalist and musicologist, Paul Robeson, Negro - am going to write about it, talk about it, and sing it! To get the message across to the people of the world, that we are all brothers. ...The Mandarin Chinese say, "woaman dao shoar shung de". Yes sir! You bet I'm going to get the message across... about ...la fraternité du monde ... Mi vsyor braati! and What? *(Behind him)* Who's there? Those darn voices! It's getting too much. I can't take it any more. I CAN'T TAKE IT **(SQ24)** ANY MORE! *(Sits in chair USC) (LXQ30) (Pianist starts to play discordant chaotic music)*

(Beat. Looks up, wondering where he is). I'm at a party. So many people. Too many voices! Got to get out. *(Tries to get up, falls back)* They've drugged me! Got to get back home to Essie. But there's no escape. *(Rises) (LXQ31)* I rush upstairs to the bathroom. My head feels like it's blowing up like a balloon! The voices are screaming at me now: "End it Paul, end it!. Find peace. Find peace!" I try to open a window to jump out, to end it all, but my head's too big! I scramble in the cabinet - there must be some pills, a razor someplace? "End it Paul, end it. Find

Peace, find ... “ Yes! A razor! There’s no time to think. Just ... (*Slits wrist*) *Find peace, (Slits other wrist) find peace!*” (*Sings*) I gets weary an sick of tryin’ (*Stands, speaks*) Oh, that darn song! (*Sits, sings*) ... I’m tired of livin’an scared of dyin... (*Pause*)

Ah, at last (**LXQ32**)...(Piano music resolves to tuneful rendition of **12: STEAL AWAY Reprise**)... That feels better. I begin to float.. Higher and higher... I see Essie and Pauli waving goodbye.... Gerry Neale tells me that she loves me and wants to marry me after all. Yolande Jackson too. Oh, feels so good... I’m not sick any more... Not scared. Just - tired. So, so tired... I’ll just go to sleep, and when I wake up ... I’ll be home... In the promised land, with Pop,... with Mom...(*Slips out of consciousness. Piano plays last line of STEAL AWAY and stops*) (**5s after piano stops, SQ25**) (*Pause*)

VISUAL CUE: Wakes up with a start (LXQ33)

I woke up, - in the hospital, and as you can see, I lived to tell the tale. But I was sick for months. But Essie - and Helen, they looked after me. Pauli took me up to my sister Marian in Philadelphia. There was so much medication to take. I couldn’t even read. Couldn’t concentrate. The voices, see? I’d stay in my room, with the curtains drawn, day and night. Couldn’t let them in, see? Didn’t want anybody to see me that way. I just needed to rest, get my strength back. Then in the middle of all this, (**SQ26**) just when –

VOICE 1 CALL MR ROBESON! (**LXQ34**)

PAUL What?

VOICE 1 CALL MR ROBESON!!

The committee will be in order.

VOICE 2 This afternoon the committee resumes its series of hearings on the vital issue of the use of American passports as travel documents in furtherance of the objectives of the communist conspiracy. Defendant, **(LXQ35)** please identify yourself by name, residence and occupation.

PAUL *(Appearing dazed, slow and uncomfortable)* My name is Paul Robeson. I live at 16 Jumel Terrace, New York City, and I am an actor and singer by profession, and law on the side, now and then.

VOICE 3 Are you appearing today in response to a subpoena which was served upon you by the House Committee on Un-American Activities?

PAUL Yes sir, I am.

VOICE 4 Did you file a passport application on July 2, 1954?

PAUL Yes sir, I have filed several - about 25 in the last few months.

(Coughs repeatedly, gets up (LXQ36) and goes USR to the piano to take a

tablet with some water, then addresses the audience) I had insisted on testifying, see? I thought I still had some fight left in me, but now I knew I was wrong. I said to myself, "Well, this is it, Robey, this is where you get crucified, and boy, did you ask for it this time". And then, all of a sudden this (**SQ27**) Negro woman comes into my mind. (*PAUL moves slightly downstage in direction of vision*) She's got – her face is – it's my mother! No, no - this woman's even more beautiful. Ebony black. Her thick hair is sculpted in the shape of a Sankofa bird. Her eyes look straight into mine. Straight into my soul. Her face is wise. She knows everything. She's seen all there is to see, from the dawn of time. It's Mother Africa! Her spirit envelopes me, like I'm wrapped in a hibiscus-scented cloud, under the cool, cool shade of a celestial baobab tree, and I feel safe. Calm. She opens her mouth. Her voice is sweet. It flows out of her like from the bottom of a deep, deep river. She says to me, "Be strong, son. Be strong. I am with you. The ancestors are with you. Nwe Okukwe. Ujo Atunagi. (*moving slowly backwards, back to chair*) Be strong. Be strong. Be strong... and then she disappears" (*Sits*)

VOICE 4 Mr Robeson? (**LXQ36.5**) (*PAUL refocuses*) ... Mr Robeson! Are you now a member of the Communist Party?

PAUL As far as I know, it is a legal party like the Republican Party or the Democratic Party. It is a party of people who have sacrificed for my people and for all Americans and workers, that they may live in dignity.

VOICE 5 Have you ever been known under the name of John Thomas?

PAUL Oh please! My name is Paul Robeson, and anything I have to say I have said in public all over the world, and that is why I am here today.

VOICE 3 Who is Manning Johnson?

PAUL Manning Johnson... Oh, I read in the papers that he was dismissed from the FBI. He must be a pretty low character when he should be dismissed from that.

VOICE 4 Tell us whether or not you know Thomas W Young.

PAUL I invoke the fifth amendment.

VOICE 4 Thomas W Young is the Negro publisher of The Journal and Guide. He took an oath before this committee, and testified as follows:

‘Mr Robeson is now so far out of touch with Negro thinking, that he can no longer speak authoritatively about or for the race. In the eyes of the Negro people this false prophet is regarded as unfaithful to their country, and they should now repudiate him.’

Do you know the man who said that?

PAUL I invoke the fifth amendment.

VOICE 3 Did you go to Moscow in 1949?

PAUL Oh, yes. I would say that in Russia I felt like a full human being for the first time in my life, and no colored prejudice like in Mississippi and colored prejudice like I feel in the committee today.

VOICE 2 Why did you not stay in Russia?

PAUL 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?

VOICE 4 While you were in Moscow, Mr Robeson, did you make a speech lauding Stalin?

PAUL I will discuss Stalin when I may be among the Russian people some day, singing for them.

VOICE 4 Do you know Ben Davis?

PAUL One of my dearest friends, one of the finest Americans you can imagine, and nothing can make me prouder than to know him.

VOICE 3 Did I understand you to laud his patriotism?

PAUL 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 non-patriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you should be ashamed of yourselves. And you are not fit to sit there questioning-

VOICE 1 *(Interrupts)* Just a minute. I have endured as much of this as I can. The hearing is now adjourned.

PAUL I think it should be adjourned forever! *(Beat)* **(SQ27A)**

(Pause) The struggle continues. There are several more court hearings. Hopes raised, hopes dashed. It takes a lot out of me, but my friends and supporters, they all stand by me, they help me. And Pauli and Marilyn; My brother, Ben; My sister, Marian. And of course, Essie – she’s with me all the time, like she’d always been. My rock!

(Rises) Eventually, one day in my Brother Ben's church: The Mother Africa Methodist Episcopal Zion in Harlem. **(LXQ38)**

(LARRY plays along to the next sequence, improvising on 13: OH, FREEDOM! in black gospel style)

“Brothers and sisters, I have come to the end of a long, hard, road. Often times, when I could see no light, when I could see no end to my troubles, I would ask myself: What would my father say if he was alive? He would say: ‘Oh yes! It is hard, son, but don’t forget that I was born in slavery and that your people were not able to do anything as free people for a long, long while. But they fought, they made their songs, they struggled ahead, and they escaped by the Underground. So,

you stand your ground, son! You may have to stand there for a little while longer, you know. But just keep your courage and keep your heart. And that, brothers and sisters, is just what I did. And at long last, I am before you, and I testify that “Here I stand, and (**LXQ39**) I got my passport in my hand!”

(With a huge grin, he holds up the passport for all to see. LARRY continues from OH, FREEDOM! into 14: DIDN'T MY LORD DELIVER DANIEL, PAUL Sings)

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
 Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel
 Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
 And why not-a every man
 He delivered Daniel from the lions den
 Jonah from the belly of de whale
 An de Hebrew chillun from de fiery furnace
 An' why not-a every man

(Piano stops) I'm free to travel again, and I waste no time! I'm off to Europe with Essie. We do England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Russia. *(Piano: opening notes melody of 15: GIT ON BOARD)* Round and round!. I sing! I speak!. I play Othello! Everywhere, I feel nothing but - love!

(Sings a cappella)

Git on board, little children
 Git on board, little children
 Git on board, little children

I can go anywhere I please! The Caribbean, East Germany, Australia, New

Zealand. I'm away for five whole years, then back home to the US of A!

(Sings, with piano accompaniment, 15: GIT ON BOARD)

Git on board, little children
 Git on board, little children
 Git on board, little children
 There's room for many a more

The gospel train's a coming
 I hear it just at hand
 I hear de car wheels rollin'
 An' rumblin' thru' de lan'

Git on board, little children (*LXQ39.5*)
 Git on board, little children
 Git on boa...

(Stops suddenly. Pause)

Essie died. *(Sits in chair, CS)* (*LXQ40*)

She'd had cancer, but never told me how bad it was. *(Pause. Piano starts playing introduction to 16: JUST A WEARYIN FOR YOU)*

Once, years ago, when I told her how much I loved her - over the phone. She says to me, "What the hell are you talking about, Paul Robeson? Are you feeling alright?" (*LXQ41*) *Chuckles and then almost breaks down. Sings, haltingly)*

Just A wearyin' for you
 All the time A feelin' blue
 Wishin' for you, wonderin' when
 You'll be comin' home again.
 Restless, don't know what to do
 Just A wearyin' for you.

(Piano continues under speech) Essie didn't really want to go back to America, you know. She preferred England, or Russia. But I was restless. **(LXQ42)** *(Rises)*. I felt I had been away too long, and needed to get back home, to take part in the continuing struggles of my people – now officially known as “The Civil Rights Movement”. *(Piano stops. PAUL finds photo)*

Yes, I'd been hearing a lot about those new young fellows, like him. Malcolm X. Now, he'd been causing quite a stir; getting a lot of bad press, and being portrayed as advocating violence against whites. He'd broken with the Nation of Islam, travelled in Africa, and that changed him. He began to wonder if a brand of socialism might have something to offer the Black Man. Word came that he wanted to meet with me. I was so excited! The meeting was all set up, and then ... they gunned him down. His own people, we'd be led to believe. But you know, I reckon the FBI were behind that. In the interests of National Security, of course.

(Beat. Piano starts to play 17: WE SHALL OVERCOME).

About a year after I got back to America, I was approached by this young Negro reporter in Harlem. He was canvassing the opinion of “the Negro on the street” about the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, and he asked me what I thought. Well, I said that I fully supported Martin Luther King and his people, and that their action was proof that the Negro will not rest until he attains full equality and dignity. I said

they were carrying on a great tradition of people who went before. Like Frederick Douglass, like Ida Wells, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and so many others. *(Beat)* Well *(incidental music stops abruptly)*...., King was shot dead too. Buried on my 70th birthday as it happens. And he was only 39. Then, the CIA. They helped kill Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, ... And you watch: Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, they'll probably die in jail too. *(Beat)* Now, that young reporter. He asked me who he could quote. *(Beat. Surprised)* Paul Robeson, I said. Paul ... Robeson? No, no. R - o - b - E - s - o - n. *(Beat)* He thanks me, shakes my hand, and then walks right on to the next person! *(Shakes his head, incredulous)* Seems I'd been assassinated too! Not sure when exactly. *(Beat)* So, with Essie gone, what's the point of carrying on? Why don't I just end it all? *(Sits SC)* I thought about it, but then I decided, "Well, there's still Pauli, there's his wife, Marilyn, there's the grandchildren, and then there's my public, both in America and all over the world. I can't go that way".

(Beat. Remembers something, then goes to pick up photo of W E B Du Bois)

My great friend and mentor, Dr W E B Du Bois: he chose to end his days in Africa **(SQ28)** - in Ghana. He'd always reminded us Negroes that Africa was our home, that we should hold our heads high, and not let slavery make us forget the proud histories and achievements of our ancestors. He suggested that maybe I should go to Nigeria, where I believe my people were stolen from. A little late for that now, I fear, but I have no regrets. Africa *is* home, alright. I've always known that, but I don't need to *be* there to feel it. It's always been *(taps his chest)* here. Always will be. **(SQ29)**. *(Beat)*

Well, **(LXQ43)** (*Piano starts to play 18: GOIN' HOME*) the freedom train
 has taken my people that much closer to our destination now, and I tried to do my
 share of the driving. When the time's right – but not before - I'll get off at my stop,
 and slip right on home. **(SQ30)** (*Sings*)

Goin' home, goin' home
 I'm a-goin' home
 Quiet like some still day
 I'm just goin' home...

It's not far, jes' close by
 Through an open door
 Work all done, care laid by
 Gwine to fear no more....

Mother's there 'spectin' me
 Father's waitin' too
 Lots o' folk gathered there...

All the friends I knew,
 All the friends I knew. **(LXQ44)**

(SQ31) (*Piano continues quietly underneath as he speaks.*)

“Soft you, a word or two before you go.
 I have done the state some service, and they know't.
 No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice.” **(LXQ45)**

(Sings) Home..... Home....
I'm goin' ..

*(Piano pauses as he picks up the chair. Rejoins him as he carries on singing and heads for exit
USL)*

Home! (**LXQ46**)

As he reaches exit: (LXQ47);

After exit: (SQ32)

END OF PLAY.

LXQ48: curtain call.

Q&A: LXQ49

CALL MR ROBESON

A life, with songs.



A Monodrama

By

TAYO ALUKO

© COPYRIGHT

Draft: July 2018

Tel: 44 (0) 151 707 8187
email: info@tayoalukoandfriends.com