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The Tallest Tree in the Forest

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Throughout the performance, the four actors remained on a minimalist though visually stunning stage designed by Daniel Conway, which highlighted the institutional power in the military-interrogation scenes and created an unsettling and ominous atmosphere in the city of Kabul—at odds with the elegant though coldly artificial ambience of a Dubai hotel. Act 2 begins with Roya and her father’s travel to Dubai at the invitation of Desiree. The austere, industrial stage in act 1 was transformed into a luxurious Dubai hotel by using bright orange lights and gobos (designed by lighting designer Mark Lanks) that reflected on the texture of the Kogod Cradle’s back wall. Here, the audience witnessed the contrast between Roya’s integrity and Duke’s constant demonstrations of shallow and arrogant charm. While Duke expresses his desire to “save her” by offering her a job at the World Bank and a marriage certificate, Roya stands up to him, refusing to become secondary to his sense of entitlement and superiority.

Roya’s strength and courage are underscored by her female ally Desiree. During the conversation between Roya and Desiree, it is revealed that the latter transformed from a Jamaican immigrant to the wife of a prominent lawyer in Washington, D.C., and eventually became a senior vice president at the World Bank. Ursula’s performance highlighted Desiree’s strength and clear goals as a woman who had struggled, like Roya, in a world ruled by men. With hilarious directness, wit, intelligence, and spontaneity, Desiree points out Duke’s arrogance as a “First World” male celebrity who regards himself as a savior to this poor but beautiful Afghan.

From the confrontation scene between Roya and Duke, the play takes a quick turn to the last scene of separation. Upon her return to Afghanistan, Roya is arrested for an alleged connection with the Taliban and the bombing. She is eventually released when Duke, who flies to Kabul, testifies that he was with her on the night of the bombing. Randolph-Wrights concludes the play with an extremely moving scene in which Duke and Roya repeat the lines from their first encounter. This last “duet” highlights the two characters’ painful awareness of their fundamental differences in life philosophies and goals, further illuminating the strength and virtue of Roya’s choice to better Afghan women’s lives over her personal safety and comfort.

**THE TALLEST TREE IN THE FOREST.** By Daniel Beaty. Directed by Moisés Kaufman. La Jolla Playhouse, Potiker Theatre, La Jolla, California. 19 October 2013.

Paul Robeson (1898–1976) was an African American stage and screen actor, attorney, and activist dedicated to identifying and eliminating prejudice around the world. Best known for his leading roles in the films The Emperor Jones (1933) and Show Boat (1936), Robeson broke theatrical racial barriers as the first black man to perform Othello on Broadway (1943). His artistic fame and passion for social justice led to multiple tours to Europe and the USSR. Due to his outspoken criticism against stateside segregation and post–World War II racial violence, he was questioned in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee and suffered the revocation of his passport for eight years, curtailing his career both at home and abroad. Playwright and actor Daniel Beaty’s solo performance as Robeson in The Tallest Tree in the Forest, commissioned by Tectonic Theater Project and coproduced by La Jolla Playhouse and Kansas City Repertory Theatre, was a tour-de-force biographical tribute.

Tallest Tree dramatized Robeson’s career and advocacy and illuminated his artistic contributions to the theatre amid a cultural and political context that was often hostile. Multi-character scenes from his life performed by Beaty with accompaniment from three onstage musicians created an intimacy and immediacy that are not apparent in historical texts or the 1977 documentary film that shares this project’s name. The show’s program notes by Charlene Baldridge compare Robeson’s humble beginnings as the son of a runaway slave to that of Beaty, the son of a often-incarcerated heroin addict. By showcasing the heights to which each artist has soared, Tallest Tree aimed to capture Robeson’s genius while infusing the contemporary theatre with an awareness of its African American lineage and the message that individuals can overcome adversity to become the voice of change.

Tallest Tree mirrored the solo performance practices of other contemporary artists, such as John Leguizamo and Anna Deavere Smith, wherein one artist embodies multiple characters in a full-length production dealing with themes of intersectionality, identity, and ideology. Beaty’s performance combined music, words, and movement to swiftly shift seamlessly from one character to another to not only depict multiple individuals, but also to create scenes among characters of varying ages, races, genders, nationalities, and ethnicities. He incorporated extensive dialect work, designed and coached by Paul Meier, to distinguish characters aurally and

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Music and singing comprised a third of the show, adding additional layers of cultural reference to the play. Spirituals, show tunes, and wartime victory songs infused the performance with a sense of the social ideology and politics of race that underscored Robeson’s popularity as an artist and his precariously as a political activist. Robeson struggled to accept and harness a fame achieved by performing material he considered a mixture of familiar African American folk tunes and racial stereotypes. Beginning the play with the star’s signature “Ol’ Man River” from Showboat and retaining the uncensored lyrics “niggers all work on the Mississippi,” Beaty’s dramaturgy directly confronted the racism and prejudice that Robeson navigated throughout his career, thus requiring the audience to do the same. Tallest Tree proceeded to challenge the stereotypes that underpinned Robeson’s earlier work by reclaiming the empowering message of spirituals. Beaty poignantly sang “Battle of Jericho” and “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” at points in the performance where Robeson’s character and career were under attack, and ended with a defiant and defensive rendition of “Scandalize My Name.”

Beaty and director Moisés Kaufman juxtaposed the performer’s constant stage presence with an understated, yet elaborate projection design by John Narun that announced shifts in locales, decades, and performance venues—from Harlem to Moscow, from the Jazz Age to the McCarthy era. The projections reflected the significant archival research involved in creating this tribute to Robeson, visually capturing the scope of his career and evoking a strong sense of time and place. For example, in 1946, Robeson lobbied President Truman to pass anti-lynching legislation after forty-six African Americans were lynched, many after returning home from military service during the war. As Beaty performed this debate between Robeson and Truman, dark silhouettes of lynching victims slowly appeared behind him, one by one, until the vertical stage space—from the grid to the stage floor—was filled with ropes and bodies slowly swaying in a breeze. The effect was a chilling and powerful visual representation of the toll of racial violence that Robeson worked to eradicate. Derek McLane’s set to immediately locate the scenes geographically as they ranged from Alabama to Paris.
design provided multifunctional playing spaces, with textured walls that evoked a backstage setting. With multiple levels, eleven distinct microphones, and a kitchen table cum library desk, the space focused the production on the communal struggles and individual isolation that Robeson faced as an African American performer without complicated set changes. Lighting designer David Lander’s signature use of small, practical lamps throughout the space created ambient light that further underscored the intimacy of the performance and helped delineate locales on the open stage.

At the height of Robeson’s career, African American educator and civil rights leader Mary McLeod Bethune heralded him as “the tallest tree in the forest.” For today’s audiences, Robeson’s iconic status in the arts often overshadows his legacy as an activist. However, Beaty’s tribute to a predecessor who was once, in the performer’s words, the “most recognizable black man in the world” recaptured the significance of Robeson’s achievements and acknowledged that the social justice for which he worked is an ongoing struggle in which “the artist must take sides” and “must elect to fight for freedom or slavery.”

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RI KÔRAN. By Asari Keita. Created and performed by Shiki Theatre Company. Shiki Theatre, Tokyo. 8–29 September 2013.

Ri Kôran, the major wartime (1931–45) play by Asari Keita, director and impresario of the Shiki Theatre Company, has enjoyed a continuous run in Shiki’s member theatres across Japan and overseas since its 1991 Tokyo premiere. An adaptation of the autobiography Ri Kôran: watashi no hansei (Ri Kôran: Half my life), this musical dramatizes the life of actress and singer Ri Kôran (also known as Yamaguchi Yoshiko [1920–]). Attending the work twenty years after its first performance, I wondered how collective memoirs depicting realism would be represented onstage.

Ri’s compelling story of changing identities under turbulent historical conditions has been adapted into television dramas and books. Born in Manchuria to Japanese parents, she adopted her Chinese stage name Ri Kôran (Li Xianglan in Mandarin) for her debut in the Manchuria Film Association’s 1938 film Honeymoon Express. From the late 1930s to the mid-‘40s, she attained the highest celebrity status, becoming a popular film and theatre icon in both Japan and China. Through her films based in Manchuria and Tokyo, Ri portrayed a “good Chinese” who advocated Japan leading Asia toward independence from Western imperialism. Although her career suffered a minor setback after her Japanese nationality came to light following World War II, she continued to make films and appeared on television shows throughout the 1950s and ‘60s, eventually transitioning to politics in the ‘70s.

As an original Japanese theatrical creation, Ri Kôran marks a major thematic departure from previous stagings of American scripts under Asari’s direction, including Disney stories, Hollywood films, and Broadway musicals. The performance opens with a military trial in Shanghai, where Ri (played by Nomura Ryôko) is accused of betraying the Chinese nation in collaboration with the Japanese empire. After the helpless Ri is subjected to considerable verbal abuse, the narrative flashes back to her childhood. Watching these scenes of Ri’s peaceful days with her Chinese and Japanese friends made me feel that I was witnessing the calm before the storm; indeed, the narrative drastically shifts in the second half of act 1, bringing us to the height of Sino-Japanese tensions, replete with massacres and guerrilla warfare. The end of act 2 takes us back to the trial, where the judge declares Ri not guilty of treason and collaboration with the Japanese. In the finale, performers at court sing together in chorus, symbolizing mutual forgiveness and reconciliation between the two nations.

Ri Kôran’s portrayal of a dark era was effectively supported by generally gloomy music, set decoration, and lighting, with the exception of a play-within-a-play scene that portrayed Ri’s performance at Japan’s Nichigeki Theatre, supported by several dancers in qipao (a traditional form-fitting Chinese dress). In addition, I am sure older audiences must