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# The Tallest Tree in the Forest

Jocelyn Buckner
*Chapman University*, jbuckner@chapman.edu

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**Comments**

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**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 an 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

Daniel Beaty as Paul Robeson sings spirituals, show tunes, and wartime victory songs in *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*. (Photo: Don Ipock.)

to immediately locate the scenes geographically as they ranged from Alabama to Paris.

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 precariousness 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
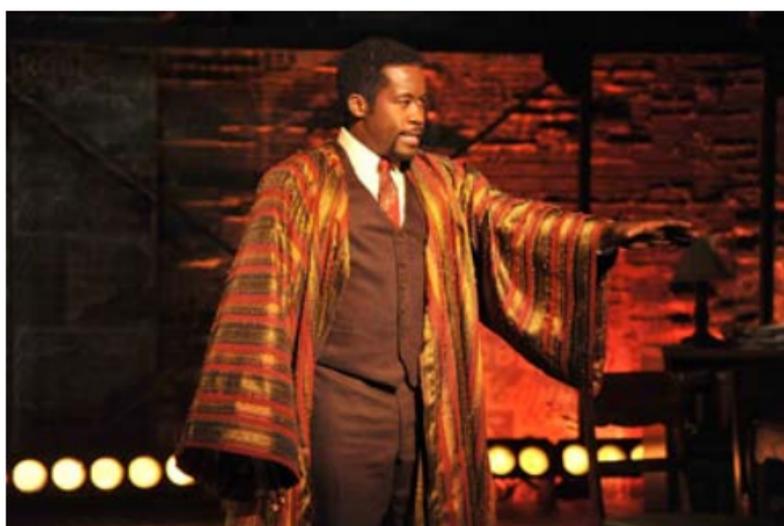
Daniel Beaty as Paul Robeson performs a
monologue from *Othello* in *The Tallest Tree in the
Forest.* (Photo: Don Ipock.)

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 fo-
cused 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 sig-
nature use of small, practical lamps throughout the
space created ambient light that further underscored
the intimacy of the performance and helped deline-
ate locales on the open stage.

At the height of Robeson's career, African Ameri-
can educator and civil rights leader Mary McLeod
Bethune heralded him as "the tallest tree in the
forest." For today's audiences, Robeson's iconic sta-
tus 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 free-
dom or slavery."

**JOCELYN L. BUCKNER**
*Chapman University*