

The Robeson controversy

The tour of Philip Hayes Dean's *Paul Robeson*, continues despite protests by Paul Robeson Jr., who has branded this portrayal of his father "an insult to his memory."

The play, which stars James Earl Jones, has been seen in St. Louis, Louisville, Philadelphia, Milwaukee and Cleveland, and will go to Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Boston before its scheduled February opening on Broadway.

A variant of the currently fashionable "one-man/woman show," this is closer to a "one-and-a-half man" drama. Jones speaks upwards of 80 percent of the lines, but shares the stage with Burt Wallace, who plays Robeson's long-time accompanist Lawrence Brown. Wallace provides the music and speaks lines for other important characters.

Many of the ingredients of good theater are present. Jones, who has recently given marvelous performances as a socialist baseball star in *Bingo Longo* and Malcolm X in *The Greatest*, exudes much of the presence—although little of the voice—that made Robeson a towering figure. What is lacking is a commitment to telling the truth about Robeson's life, which could have made the play as powerful as its subject.

The first of the two acts traces Robeson's incredible career as an All-American footballer and Phi Beta Kappa at Rutgers, a graduate of Columbia Law School, a world-renowned concert artist, and film and stage star.

The best of the vignettes, a conversation between young lawyer Robeson and a black woman janitress, captures some of Robeson's extraordinary ability to touch and be touched by the downtrodden.

But even in this section, the play suffers from attempts to "humanize" Robeson, which usually succeed only in casting a certain clownishness over his character. For example, there is a tortuously extended scene in which as a Rutgers freshman, he orders only "white" foods like rice and vanilla ice-cream to circumvent segregation at the college cafeteria.

The playwright ascribes Robeson's militancy to the example of his rebellious older brother, Reed, who carried a small bag of rocks to strike back at those who victimized him. Paul is portrayed as a jocular existential hero, an odd cross between characters out of Mark Twain and Sartre, wielding a larger and more artful bag of rocks. He is ever the lone battler, whether on stage or on the gridiron.

This is a distortion. Robeson's upbringing gave him a "Home in That Rock"—a secure place in the black community and a firm grounding in Afro-American culture. Beginning in the late '20s, Robeson broadened this sense of identity by a systematic investigation of African and Afro-American language and music. His close ties to British and Welsh workers during his London years further demonstrate that he lived out his conviction that "artists are not a race apart."

The second act is concerned with Robeson's activities in and after the 1950s. Jones' brief re-



James Earl Jones as Paul Robeson. Paul Robeson as himself.

citation from *Othello* is the high spot of the act, but the script fails to convey that Robeson's performance in the title role was among the great performances in the history of the American theater.

In the treatment of Robeson as a citizen—an antifascist, a civil rights activist, a supporter of the Soviet Union, a victim of McCarthyism—the script is equally deficient. There are moments of power (especially when Jones speaks Robeson's own words), but the meaning of Robeson's actions is obscured.

He is shown as a good, but utterly naive artist, caught in the whirlwinds of Nazism and McCarthyite hysteria, incapable of relating to such phenomena on any but an instinctual level. His antifascism, for example, seems to grow out of the cancellation of a Berlin concert date and the realization that the Nazis have produced a "city without music." Dean chooses to ignore Robeson's leadership of the Progressive party, the Council on African Affairs, the World Peace Council and the newspaper, *Freedom*.

Also distorted is Robeson's position on socialism. Paul Robeson Jr. has told interviewers that early drafts of the play contained outright falsifications, including the claim that his father became

an anti-communist before his death. In the scene in the present version where Robeson refuses to answer questions by HUAC concerning CP membership, he adds that he denied party membership as late as 1946. While this is narrowly accurate, it ignores the courage of a black leader who, at the height of repression, reaffirmed his "deep conviction that for all mankind a socialist society represents a higher stage of life."

There are numerous inaccuracies, some more, some less important. The overall impression is of hasty writing and small regard for historical fact. But the most serious shortcoming of this *Paul Robeson* is that it reduces the issues of the '50s to matters of personality. (It is as wide of the mark on Robeson's personality as it is on his politics.)

For over a quarter of a century the name of one of our most internationally prominent citizens was virtually expunged from the media and the public mind. This play will take the name of Paul Robeson across the country—the name, but not the story.

—David R. Roediger

David R. Roediger is a free-lance writer in Chicago and saw Paul Robeson in performance in St. Louis.

Statement by Robeson's son

"I HAVE SEEN PAUL ROBESON, A ONE-MAN play with James Earl Jones. The play is a fictionalized and distorted portrayal of Paul Robeson that misrepresents the most important aspects of his life. It trivializes the Paul Robeson story and makes his basic character unrecognizable.

This production whittles down the giant stature of Paul Robeson to such an extent that he is made to resemble the false image that has been created by the white establishment. His powerful message to all oppressed peoples and to black Americans in particular is diffused and lost in a mass of confusion.

Anyone who takes the time can easily see through this crude commercialization of Paul Robeson's name by reading his own book, *Here I Stand* (Beacon Press), by listening to recordings of his performances and viewing film of him.

My father's own words and deeds provide the best criticism of this play, which I consider to be an insult to his memory."

—Paul Robeson Jr.

Paul Robeson Jr. told IN THESE TIMES that readers interested in a correct and deepened understanding of his father ought to press local radio stations to play his records and local PBS and ABC TV outlets to make available to viewers two excellent documentaries: the one-hour WNET-Washington *A Profile of Paul Robeson* and the ABC hour-and-a-half documentary done by Gil Noble for his program, "Like It Is."