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## Call Mr. Robeson: A Life with Songs

November 23, 2009 by [Debbie Minter Jackson](#)

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Tayo Aluko as Paul Robeson

Paul Robeson. The name conjures up scholar, athlete, the civil rights advocate who was blacklisted for supposed “Un-American activities,” and of course, the man with an amazing baritone voice like something the Lord made. Tayo Aluko provides a glimpse of the man behind the legend, and breathes life into the historical figure who is already receding from memory.

Using Robeson’s signature piece, ‘Old Man River’ from *Show Boat*, Aluko enters the intimate DC Arts Center stage singing in a rich and magnificent baritone, moving haltingly, as if struggling under the weight of massive cotton bales on his shoulders and years of oppression in his soul. The entrance represents a mix of drudgery, fortitude and strength – a perfect depiction of Robeson. Suddenly in mid-lyric, Aluko stops singing and starts to share some of the back story of how he got to that stage of his life. The ensuing scenes are effectively crafted and filled with details about his life, circumstances, and especially his choices.

From all accounts, Robeson was a larger than life Renaissance man, whose spectacular moves on the Rutgers football field and other sports in the early 1900’s earned him acclaim. His physical prowess complemented an intellectual inquiring mind which allowed him to master law, philosophy and umpteen languages. Aluko relays all this and more with an engaging narrative interspersed with touching musical interludes. Accompanied masterfully by pianist Maceo Kemp who matches Aluko’s every move, the two bring the mythic Robeson to life in the here and now.

While some of the content could have come from skimming basic biographical text, Aluko’s delivery and passion bring a tender honesty to the scenes. He also brings the sensibilities of a native Nigerian perspective to Robeson’s journey. Besides, what is routine knowledge about Robeson is still extraordinary material, so *Call Mr. Robeson* is an invigorating and rich story for novice and scholar alike.

Some moments sparkle and crackle with Robeson’s fire and brimstone attacks on social and racial injustice. His elegant text admonishing Kansas City theater owners for segregating their theaters and rebutting the accusations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities are just two outstanding moments. Talk about speaking truth to power – Aluko seems to almost channel Robeson’s fury as he takes the stand for justice and equity. But not without a price. Even when battle scarred and physically and mentally worn by the intense persecution and scorn he suffered in America, he maintained an unflinching demand for freedom.

Robeson’s international travels and connections with cultures all over the world reflect a brotherhood of justice, the likes of which are unparalleled. The script explains how he transcended racial and cultural divides, including his “Welsh coal mining brothers”, as well as his socialist leanings with amazing clarity. At the same time, the text doesn’t sugar coat his personal “leanings” towards women in a rainbow of colors in numerous dalliances over the years, all the while maintaining his love and appreciation for his anchor of a wife and life partner, “Essie.” It’s an amazing love story embedded in this larger than life icon, and Aluko’s sincere approach fused with humanity makes it all work. He has an easy-going appeal and charming delivery, criss-crossing the stage, selecting portraits, news articles, and playbills to share, as if chatting with a dear friend in a living room (set design by Phil Newman). Lighting by Gareth Starkey and sound design by duo David Darlington and Liam McDermott add a refreshing vitality to the production which even includes authentic voices from the 1956 Senate hearing.

And then there’s that soul-stirring voice that fills the air with deep somber tones and a supple resonance. Smaller in build than the tall, hulking 6 foot 4 inch Robeson, Aluko nevertheless has a barrel of a chest cavity to recreate the unmistakable vibrato and vocal range of this larger than life man. He’s really a must-see experience.

This is a treasure of a show, here on an exclusively short run. *Call Mr. Robeson* offers a rare glimpse of the man behind the legend, and Tayo Aluko has the heart and passion and voice to do him justice.

**Call Mr. Robeson: A Life with Songs – TOP PICK!**

Written and performed by Tayo Aluko  
 Directed by Olusola Oyeleye  
 Produced at D.C. Arts Center  
 Reviewed by Debbie Minter Jackson

[Click here for Details, Directions and Tickets.](#)

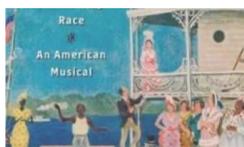
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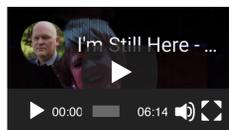
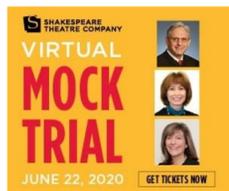
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**About Debbie Minter Jackson**

**Debbie Minter Jackson** is a writer and has performed in musical theater for decades. Originally from Chicago, she has hit stages throughout the Midwest and the Washington, D.C. area including the Kennedy Center in productions with the legendary Mike Malone. Her scripts have been commissioned and produced by the old Source Theater and festivals in New York. She is a member of the play reading and discussion group Footlights and the Black Women Playwrights’ Group. By day she happily works in a federal public health agency as a Senior Program Analyst and is in blissful partnership with her Bill.

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