

OPINION

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WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

Breaking barriers, in baseball and opera



The Jackie Robinson Foundation

Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers.



Metropolitan Opera

Marian Anderson as Ulrica in 'Ballo en Maschera' at the Met.

It is a reader's joy to discover a favorite author writing about a favorite person. That was my delight at finding Jimmy Breslin's short biography of Branch Rickey. It is part of the Penguin Lives series.

Breslin brings the streetwise sensibility of a New York newspaper columnist to the life of the man who changed Major League Baseball in 1945. That's when Rickey's team, the Brooklyn Dodgers, signed Jackie Robinson.

While not an extensive biography, Breslin gives us a full sense of what drove Rickey to make history. Breslin describes a January morning in 1943. "... here on this street corner stands Branch Rickey, a lone white man with a fierce belief that it is the deepest sin against God to hold color against a person. On this day, he means to change baseball and America, too."

At the same time, Breslin writes that, "Branch Rickey was neither a savior nor a Samaritan. He was a baseball man, and nowhere in his religious training did he take a vow of poverty."

Rickey developed an extensive strategy to surmount the conservative, racist politics of baseball. He knew that signing Robinson would be resisted by other major league team owners. He also had to deal with peripheral characters, such as the Dodgers' Southern-raised radio announcer Red Barber. How Rickey jumped those hurdles is a fascinating story. His sophisticated maneuvers were similar to what Robert Caro tells us about how President Lyndon Johnson cleared the way for congressional consideration of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

I finished Breslin's book prior to a trip my wife and I took to New York City and Washington, D.C., where we would encounter more racial history — at the Metropolitan Opera and at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

There was a time when the Metropolitan Opera did not contract with black singers. That ended 10 years after Rickey put a black player on a Major League Baseball field. The man who forced the Met to integrate was its Aus-

trian-born general manager, Rudolf Bing.

The Met has put this history on display as a companion to its star-studded production of the Gershwin opera, "Porgy and Bess." It is the most performed American opera, and the Gershwin estate requires that it be performed by a black cast. In Founders Hall, on the Met's ground floor, the story behind Marian Anderson's Met debut is detailed.

Rudolf Bing is seldom mentioned in the same context as Branch Rickey. But like Rickey, Bing had plotted a strategy for Anderson to become the first black artist to sing on the Met's stage. One of Bing's tactics was to keep the Met Board of Directors in the dark. Only after

Anderson had signed her Met contract was the board informed that the role of Ulrica in Verdi's "Ballo en Maschera" would be sung by a person of color.

As we walked through the Met's exhibit, I remembered seeing an exhibit outside Richard Wagner's opera house in Bayreuth, Germany. Titled "Silenced Voices," this exhibit depicted the many singers, conductors and directors who were not allowed to perform in that storied opera house because they were Jewish or gay.

When I told one of my opera-loving friends about "Silenced Voices," she diminished its significance, implying that the German management had to do it. In disagreement, I noted that there was no marker at the Metropolitan Opera saying that until 1955 it did not contract with African American singers.

Anderson's appearance opened the door for Leontyne Price, Martina Arroyo and many more magnificent black singers. Following Jackie Robinson's Brooklyn debut, Branch Rickey signed Don Newcombe, Roy Campanella and other black players.

To read more about how Rudolf Bing made history in 1955, "The Complicated History of Marian Anderson's Met Debut" is at bit.ly/andersonmetdebut

Steve Forrester, the former editor and publisher of The Daily Astorian, is the president and CEO of EO Media Group.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Wealth gap

I was happy to see the penetrating and thoughtful letter ("Don't give up," The Astorian, Oct. 5).

More than half of all U.S. income growth has gone to the top 1% since 1976. Because of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, the richest 1% of households (making \$1.8 million per year) receive on average about \$47,000 in annual tax cuts, while those with the lowest income (making \$13,000 annually) receive on average, \$90 (taxallianceforeconomicmobility.org).

Substantial research shows that income from the time-tested Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) benefit struggling working families and their children throughout their lives: improved infant and maternal health, better math and reading scores, increased school attendance, less alcohol and drug use, higher earnings in the next generation, etc.

The Working Families Tax Relief Act would help level the growing wealth gap by expanding the already successful EITC and CTC. Our legislators need to support this bill in any upcoming tax legislation.

DONNA SCHINDLER MUNRO
Bremerton, Washington

Hats off

Hats off to the Port of Astoria commissioners for taking significant steps toward climbing out of the deep, dark hole they inherited. This includes seriously delayed maintenance needs, compounded by funding challenges — all of which have been building over the last decade.

Congrats on completing and unanimously passing the updated strategic plan ("Port approves strategic business plan," The Astorian, Oct. 3). This plan reflects the serious commitment of the current commissioners to restore the Port's economic health, as well as the trust of local communities and those who control the purse strings in Salem.

The entire Port has undergone dramatic and positive changes in the last year since I began regularly attending the meetings. In June, the Port swore in one newly elected commissioner and one previously appointed commissioner. Consequently, the discussions at the Port meetings are respectful, while presenting and exploring

different points of view.

Under the leadership of Dirk Rohne, the new president of the Port Commission, the agendas are robust and the meetings include spirited discussion of how to move the Port forward.

Will Isom was thrust into the position of Port director following the much-needed departure of Jim Knight. Isom is providing professional management, and effectively communicating with the commissioners as they work together to tackle the challenges and make difficult decisions.

It feels as if the children have left the room, and the grown-ups are now able to get down to the serious work of rebuilding this important port at the mouth of the great Columbia River.

CHERYL JOHNSON
Astoria

Encouragement

Encouragement is important in these troubled times ("Encouraged," The Astorian, Oct. 1). Taking action also brings one out of worry and a feeling of powerlessness.

Fortunately, in our democracy, using our voices does make a difference. This is how citizens are convincing their members of Congress to increase funding for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, so it can continue saving millions of lives, preventing millions of infections and keeping us on the path to finally controlling these pandemics.

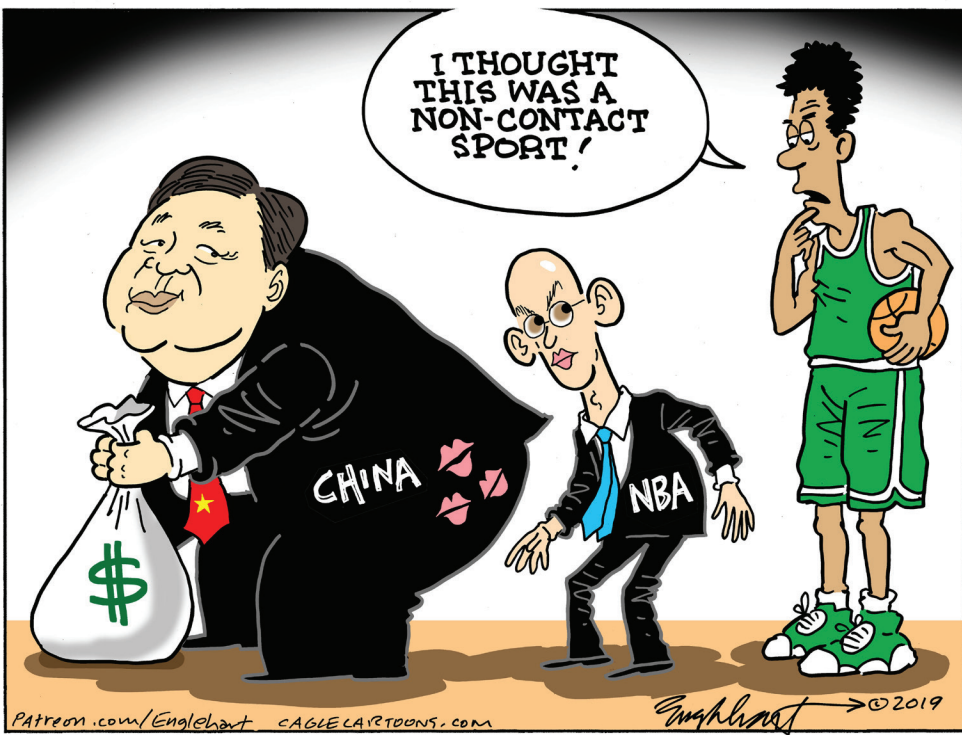
Recently, Oregon U.S. Reps. Earl Blumenauer, Suzanne Bonamici and Peter DeFazio joined 125 other members of the House from both parties co-sponsoring House Resolution 517 in support of the Global Fund. These representatives realize that these diseases must be treated globally to protect us locally.

So be encouraged by those who represent us taking action for the welfare of all. Citizens speaking up to those who represent them can help good things happen.

WILLIE DICKERSON
Snohomish, Washington

Mass devastation

If you believe the methanol refinery to be built in Kalama, Washington, is envi-



ronmentally friendly or safe, remember the mass devastation of the Loma Prieta fault in California in 1989.

County and state agencies were well ahead of safety standards at that time, and yet millions of dollars later (over a billion in today's dollars), liquefaction caused mass destruction to surrounding buildings, collapsing freeways, with many lives lost.

Can we, as knowledgeable individuals, truly create pillars that will withstand the forces of the earth? It's been shown recently how fragile man-made structures are.

The developer of the methanol refinery seeks roughly \$2 billion in loan guarantees from U.S. taxpayers. So, we guarantee a bailout of this risky business, and have the mess to clean up when there is a catastrophe in our beautiful little town. Stop the madness.

Washingtonians are counting on the Department of Ecology to reject the company's false claims, and protect our shoreline and climate from the massive fracked gas project in Kalama.

NANCY LYNCH
Kalama, Washington

Enjoying the view

Everyone who lives in Astoria and the surrounding area lives here for a reason. Not because of high-paying jobs, but because we love the small town feel and

our water views. We love to go to dinner, lunch or coffee and see the river views.

But the governing bodies of Astoria care more about money than the people who live here, and call Astoria home. In an article in The Astorian, there is undeveloped land beyond Bay Street that the Port of Astoria leases to developer Mark Hollander, who wants to build a Marriott hotel there, which could block river views ("Proposal to preserve Uniontown views could limit Port," Oct. 3).

According to the article, Mayor Bruce Jones and City Counselor Tom Brownson supported allowing developers to get City Council approval for exceptions to the view protection rules. So if you come to town with big pockets full of money, you can buy your way around the view protection corridor rules.

Port Commissioner Dirk Rohne's rationale is if we don't allow these big hotels on our waterfront it could be "a threat to the future prosperity of the Port." If we allow them it could be a threat to Astoria's identity, which is the views. We could become another place like Honolulu — gigantic hotels shoulder to shoulder, lining the waterfront.

Big developers only care about taking view property in Astoria, slap a big hotel on it and line their pockets with money. Who then enjoys the view? Not the citizens of Astoria.

SHARON DAVIS-ROBINSON
Gearhart