

The artist must elect to fight for Freedom or Slavery

Short Hollywood career

Robeson was active in the film industry from 1932 to 1939, appearing in "Body and Soul," "Borderline," "The Emperor Jones," "Sanders of the River," "Show Boat," "Song of Freedom," "King Solomon's Mines," "Jericho," "Big Fella," "Proud Valley," and "Tales of Manhattan."

He saw the film as a tool for removing stereotypes. He was the first black actor to demand the right to final approval of his films; he was the first to refuse to work under segregated conditions. Although some of his roles portrayed black courage and integrity, he was not able to control the racism inherent in the industry. His "song of Freedom" was considered a breakthrough, but it was buried and hardly seen. "Big Fella" was based on a story by Claude McKay. In 1937 he left the industry: "I thought I could do something for the Negro race in the films: show the truth about them—and about other people too. I used to do my part and go away feeling satisfied. Thought everything was O.K. Well, it wasn't. Things were twisted and changed—distorted. They didn't mean the same. . . . So no more films for me."

He did make two more films, "Proud Valley," made in Wales about the tribulations of the miners. It projected a black working man as a hero with humor and cultural values. "Tales of Manhattan," 1942, so disappointed him that he tried to buy up all the prints.

Visit to the U.S.S.R.

On his way to the Soviet Union in 1924, Robeson had his first taste of fascism while passing through Germany. The storm troopers reminded him of a lynch mob in America; then and there he vowed to fight fascism the rest of his life.

Robeson's welcome to the Soviet Union was a stark contrast. Everywhere he went he was welcomed and honored. "I hesitated to come; I listened to what everybody had to say but I didn't think there would be any difference from any other place," he said. "But—maybe you'll understand—I feel like a human being for the first time since I grew up. Here I am not a Negro but a human being. . . . Here, for the first time in my life, I walk in full human dignity."

Having fully mastered the Russian language, he talked with many people and was impressed with the lack of racism and the social gains the nation had made in only 20 years. He returned to London with a great love for the Soviet people which he retained all of his life.

When he returned to the concert tour in England, the most prominent concert artist in the world, there was a marked difference. He sang in the small halls, sometimes giving several performances a day, reaching the common working people.

"In Soviet Russia I breathed freely for the first time in my life," he said in 1935. "It is clear, whether a Negro is politically a Communist or not, that of all the nations of the world, the modern Russians are our very best friends."

He visited the Soviet Union a number of times and sent his son to Soviet schools for two years.

Spanish Civil War

In 1933 Hitler rose to power in Germany; in 1935 Mussolini's fascists marched against Ethiopia and the League of Nations was deaf to Haile Selassie's pleas for help. The next year the fascist Franco attacked the Spanish Republic, backed by Germany and Italy. It was a dress rehearsal for World War II but the nations of Europe looked the other way.



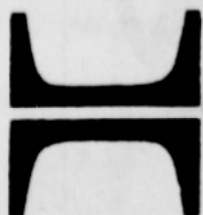
Othello



New York City, 1939

Harriet Tubman

Though unable to read or write, Harriet Tubman was described as "strong as a man, brave as a lion, cunning as a fox". The "Black Moses", she was the leading conductor on the Underground Railroad that guided slaves north to freedom. She made 19 trips to the South and freed some 300 slaves.



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