

Tony Howard (English and Comparative Literary Studies) has been researching the relationship between pioneering black actor, Paul Robeson, and the security forces in the UK and the USA. Chris Arnot talked to him.



Tony Howard, Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies

Tony Howard screws up his eyes and peers closely at one of many recently de-classified documents downloaded from the internet. Most come from files compiled by the FBI and MI5. All concern the black actor and singer Paul Robeson, son of an escaped slave, and a man whose political leanings were considered a threat to the security of the United States of America and the British Empire in the feverishly paranoid Cold War era of the 1940s and '50s.

This particular document was recorded by an officer from the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police who was in the audience at Robeson's concert in Coventry in 1949. 'The officialese of his report was tinged with sadness,' Howard notes. 'Even a hardened policeman could be affected by Robeson's description of growing up poor and black in America.'

CHARISMA

His resonant voice and theatrical charisma would make Robeson rich and influential – too influential for Senator Joseph McCarthy and his cronies on the Un-American Activities Committee. After a speech praising the Soviet Union as a liberator of 'colonised people', the star returned from the Paris peace conference of 1949 to find himself denounced as a traitor and deprived of his passport for the best part of a decade.

Only 10 years later was he able to fulfil his lifetime's ambition of playing Othello at Stratford. To mark the 50th anniversary of that achievement, Tony Howard is planning an exhibition next year at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. And as Fellow of Creativity at Warwick's CAPITAL Centre – a collaboration between the University and the nearby Royal Shakespeare Company – he is also encouraging his students to produce their own drama-documentary on Robeson's eventful life. 'As it is,' he muses, 'if you mention Paul Robeson's name to anyone under 40, they're likely to say "Paul Who?"'

BRAVERY

Howard himself is a youthful looking 60, although it's noticeable that he has to squint at documents to decipher their content. It transpires that he is facing up to an operation to remove cataracts shortly after our meeting in the foyer of the National Theatre. In the circumstances, it seems quite brave of him, I suggest, to have waded through over 3,000 downloaded pages in pursuit of new revelations about Robeson and the security forces. 'Brave or stupid,' he says, grimly.

The relationship between theatre and politics

has always been his speciality. When it comes to bravery, it's debatable which experience he found more nerve-jangling – being interrogated by the Polish police for trying to help dissident theatre groups in the state-controlled Poland of the 1980s or sharing a lift with Mrs Thatcher and her entourage at the Conservative Party Conference of 1979 while researching *A Short Sharp Shock*, the coruscating play about her government which he co-wrote with Howard Brenton.

But he would be the first to admit that Robeson's was courage of another order. When asked by one of McCarthy's Committee why he didn't go back to Moscow, he replied that his father was a slave who had helped to create this country and he wouldn't be told what to do. 'You are the un-Americans,' he proclaimed.

'As early as 1953,' Tony Howard reveals, 'he was warning against American involvement in Vietnam.' By 1959, only recently re-acquainted with his passport and about to fulfil his destiny in Stratford, he spoke at one of the first Trafalgar Square anti-nuclear rallies.

GIANT

Tony Howard has interviewed actors who played alongside him in Stratford and London. 'They talk about being in the presence of a 'giant' in every sense of the word.' He has also quizzed Tony Benn, who was in the audience at St Pancras Town Hall in 1957 to hear Robeson's voice transmitted by radio-phone. Benn was a member of the 'Let Robeson Sing' campaign. 'By a happy coincidence, their documents are kept at Warwick's Modern Records Centre,' says Tony Howard as the sun comes out beyond the windows of the National Theatre, illuminating the ghosts of Robeson's London years.

It was just beyond the far shore of the river that he first played Othello, opposite Peggy Ashcroft at the Savoy Theatre in 1930. The previous year, while starring in *Showboat*, he was kicked out of the restaurant at the Savoy Hotel. Robeson always blamed American guests for objecting to his presence, refusing to believe that racial prejudice existed in the UK.

Yet white actors were still 'blacking up' to play Othello years after his Stratford triumph. Here on the South Bank is a statue of Sir Lawrence Olivier who took the role at the Old Vic in the mid-1960s. Young Tony Howard, then an English student at Warwick, was in the audience. 'It was stunning and ludicrous at the same time,' he recalls.

Thanks to Howard's painstaking and sight-threatening research, Robeson's role as a pioneer for black actors will be properly marked next year.

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