

THE **A**merican MAGAZINE

DECEMBER • 1941

AMERICA'S

NO 1

NEGRO



*Paul Robeson broke the
back of prejudice to command
recognition as a football
star, lawyer, concert singer, and
actor. Today he has won
top triumphs by his magnificent
portrayal of Shakespeare's
Othello. And all to prove
to his people that they, too, can
rise to the heights*

*by
Jerome Beatty*

OldMagazineArticles.com

America's No. 1 Negro



PAUL ROBESON, playing *Othello* this season in New York, has not only broken all American box-office records for this Shakespearean tragedy; he has established himself firmly as America's most distinguished living Negro.

Having already crowded three remarkable careers into his 46 years—as football star, lawyer, and concert singer—this versatile six-foot-three giant now proves himself to be one of our great Shakespearean actors. In the present run of *Othello*, he has far outstripped the New York record of 57 consecutive performances set by Walter Hampden, as well as John Barrymore's epoch-making run of 101 performances of *Hamlet*. And his performance earned him the American Academy of Arts and Letters medal for good diction on the stage, an award that has been made only 9 times in 20 years.

Broadway showmen are flabbergasted. When Robeson played *Othello* at Princeton and Harvard two years ago they said, "It's okay for the high-brows and the radicals, but it won't last long on Broadway. *Othello's* one of Shakespeare's turkeys. Even if Robeson stopped in the middle of the murder scene and sang *Ol' Man River*, it'd never be a hit. And a real Negro playing the Moor! Choking a white girl to death! He'll do a nose-dive in this town."

But the time came when they read that *Othello* was "one of the season's wonder dramas," playing to capacity month after month, and they gasped, "Holy Mackerel! Robeson's made *Othello* as great a play as *Abie's Irish Rose*!"

And that, in a way, is true. Heretofore, *Othello* has been played by white actors in burnt cork, and even the talents of Walter Hampden, Philip Merivale, and Walter Houston have failed to make him real.

FOR this season's Theater Guild production in New York, Robeson studied, worked, and took direction from Margaret Webster, Shakespearean actress and expert. And because of his race, his physique, his voice, and his genius, aided by a superb cast, he brought to the theater the exact story, the story of a noble Negro persecuted by a white fiend, that Shakespeare had in mind.

For years, probably because white actors have been inadequate when they attempted to portray the enormous, horrifying tragedy of this mighty Negro warrior, critics have said, "Iago, not *Othello*, is the star of the play"—Iago, one of the theater's most evil men, who rouses *Othello* to a jealous fury, who cleverly goads him until he murders his innocent white wife, believing that she has betrayed him. But in this production, although Jose Ferrer's Iago has probably never been excelled, Robeson's magic undoubtedly makes *Othello* the star.

At last, 339 years after Shakespeare conceived him, *Othello* has come to life.

America's No. 1 Negro



Paul Robeson thinks of himself as conclusive proof that there is no such thing as a backward race. Given a few generations of equal opportunities, he believes, any people—Eskimos, Malaysians, Fijians, or the Untouchables of India—can produce as talented statesmen, scientists, educators, inventors, and artists as the whites.

Painters and sculptors seek Robeson as a model of "the pure African type," although his blood is not pure African. He's a mixture of Negro, American Indian, and white. His father was a slave in North Carolina, and in 1860, when he was 15, escaped to Philadelphia, where he worked his way through Lincoln University, became a Presbyterian minister, and married an educated Pennsylvania Negress. Paul was the last of eight children, born in Princeton, N. J., when his father was 53.

The family moved to Somerville, N. J., and Paul started as a pretty good student and athlete in high school. One day his father complained that Paul's grades weren't perfect.

"But nobody ever gets 100 per cent," Paul protested.

"Well," his father demanded, "what's 100 per cent for, then? I want you to be the best student and the best athlete in high school."

PAUL pulled himself together, did it, and won a scholarship in Rutgers University at New Brunswick, N. J. Here, again, his goal was to be the best student and the best athlete. Majoring in languages and pre-law studies, his grades were so good he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, the national honorary scholastic fraternity, and he was chosen as one of the four seniors who represented the best ideals and traditions of Rutgers.

He was a star on the debating team. He won 12 letters in athletics—4 in football, 3 in baseball, 3 in basketball, and 2, for weight throwing, in track. Walter Camp, in Robeson's senior year, chose him as right end on his All-American football team for 1918, declaring, "There never was a more serviceable end, both in attack and defense, than Robeson, the 200-pound giant of Rutgers."

Perhaps that record for brain and brawn has been tied. I doubt if it has ever been beaten.

He made the football team, as a freshman, the hard way. When Robeson, today, tells of his first appearance on the field, he chuckles about it. "Those boys were tough," he says. "They didn't gang up on me because I was a Negro; they only wanted to see if I had the

America's No. 1 Negro

stuff. They're all my good friends now and I wouldn't want anybody to think they were mean and vicious."

Well, maybe so. But after the first few scrimmages all the other boys were in good health, but Robeson was out, with a dislocated shoulder, a broken nose, a body covered with cuts and bruises, and he spent ten days in bed. At first, as he lay there, he wanted to give it all up, to leave school and go to work as a waiter, a Pullman porter, or a stevedore. This was more than any boy of 17 could stand. But he remembered that his father had often told him, "Paul, you're representing your race. You've got to show 'em what a Negro boy can do. Don't ever quit."

Robeson told me, "I said to myself, 'I made 'em like me in high school. I'll make 'em like me in college.'"

The next time he went out for practice, things, for the first few plays, weren't quite so tough. But—he laughs, kind of, about it now—after a hard tackle he lay out of breath on his back on the ground, and a player trotted past him and purposely stepped on Robeson's outstretched right hand, and the cleats on the football shoe tore his fingers.

Robeson is a smoldering volcano and now he erupted. Suffering excruciating pain, like a mad gorilla he seized the first player who came his way. "It was Kelly," he smiled; "Kelly, a great back, who wouldn't hurt a fly. He was one of my best friends. I wanted to kill somebody, and as I raised him over my head to smash him to the ground, I heard George Foster Sanford, the coach, yell, 'Stop, Robey; stop! You're on the varsity!'"

That stopped him. He had been accepted. He had made the grade. He was one of them. Now Kelly was a fellow teammate, and Robeson lowered him gently to the ground and the trainer came and bandaged the hand. Robeson was never hazed at Rutgers again.

Graduating from Rutgers, Robeson moved to Harlem, entered Columbia University Law School, and got his LL.B. degree in 1923. He progressed more slowly at Columbia, for he took time out to play professional football with Akron, Ohio, in 1921, and Milwaukee in 1922. Robeson was a big name in football and he received as much as \$1,000 a game.

One afternoon, Milwaukee was playing Jim Thorpe's Indians, whose motto appeared to be, "Kill Robeson." But Robeson wouldn't be killed. He slammed Indians around as though he were the ghost of General Custer out for revenge, and when the game ended, two men from Chicago came to the dressing-room with a proposition.

"You'd make a great prize fighter," they said. "Let us train and manage you, and build you up and match you with Jack Dempsey. It'll draw a million-dollar gate, and, win or lose, you'll make enough so you'll never have to work again."

"I want to be a lawyer," said Robeson.

"So what? You can be a lawyer, after you make all this dough."

It sounded interesting and Robeson said he'd think it over. The promoters announced that this great football player would try for Dempsey's title, and it was the big sports story of the moment.

Some sports writers thought it would be a good show, but one, Lawrence Perry, a New York writer, a friend of Robeson's, opposed the idea fiercely. Other friends, Rutgers graduates, joined the "Don't do it, Paul," movement. If Robeson turned prize fighter, they protested, he would disgrace Rutgers and Phi Beta Kappa and hobble his ambition to become an intellectual leader of his race.

America's No. 1 Negro

That argument hit home. "Thanks, no," he finally said to the promoters. And out the window went an opportunity to collect several hundred thousand dollars of very easy money.

SINCE then he has seldom thought twice when called upon to decide between money and principle. Early in his career, when things were going badly and he was pretty hard up, an agent offered him a guarantee of a minimum of \$30,000 for three years if Robeson would agree to take any jobs the agent got for him—night clubs, vaudeville, or circus, and any parts offered in movies and the theater, whether or not they agreed with Robeson's ideas as to proper portrayal of Negroes. He promptly turned that down. Last summer he had before him two documents—an offer of \$10,000 for four concerts in four New England cities, and a *(Continued on page 142)* request that he go to San Francisco and Los Angeles to sing for nothing at a meeting of the Council of African Affairs, a Negro organization working for Negro advancement, of which Robeson is chairman. The dates were conflicting and he didn't hesitate a moment. He went to California.

While he was a student in Columbia University he married a Spanish-Negress, Eslanda Cardoza Goode, who was about to receive a degree of Bachelor of Science and Chemistry from Columbia, and who later worked in the laboratory of the Presbyterian Hospital in New York as a pathologist.

Mrs. Robeson is a woman of great ambition and vitality. Paul is a 12-cylinder engine when he gets going, but he needs a spark to start him, and Mrs. Robeson furnished it. He likes to loaf around and read, or discuss world problems when he ought to be making decisions and getting into action, and Mrs. Robeson has been ready with the hot foot whenever she thought that her hero ought to get going.

WHEN Robeson was graduated from Columbia Law School he went to work in a New York law office. He was the only Negro in the office, the color line was drawn definitely, and he hated the place.

He and Mrs. Robeson agreed that he should try the theater, in which he had become casually interested at Columbia.

"In the law," he told his friends who had urged him to carry on, perhaps to go into politics, "I could never reach the peak; I never could become a Supreme Court Justice. On the stage there is only the sky to hold me back."

He joined New York's Provincetown Players. The Greenwich Village crowd welcomed him, and his friends included Eugene O'Neill, Emma Goldman, Heywood Broun, and Alexander Woollcott. He appeared in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and a revival of *Emperor Jones*, and was a hit. One of his chief boosters was George Jean Nathan, the critic, who wrote, "Robeson, with relatively little experience and with no training to speak of, is one of the most thoroughly eloquent, impressive, and convincing actors I have looked at and listened to in almost twenty years of theater-going."

BUT Robeson wasn't getting a high salary, there were few parts for Negro actors, and there were long periods of idleness between engagements. At times Mrs. Robeson's earnings as a pathologist supported them.

In 1925, when he was 27 years old, he discovered that he had a Voice. He had known all along that he had a voice, but he didn't realize it was of capital-letter quality. Once he had

America's No. 1 Negro



sung for a few weeks in a quartet in the Negro musical show, *Shuffle Along*, at \$75 a week, and once, when Mrs. Robeson was ill and he needed money to pay the doctor, he had sung with Florence Mills in a night club. At Rutgers University he hadn't had time to do much singing.

It had never occurred to him that he might become a concert singer. In the first place, he was a basso, and nobody wants to pay money to hear bassos, because they sing *Asleep in the Deep* and growl. In the second place, he couldn't read music, and he didn't know any songs of concert quality. Of course, he knew the Negro spirituals and he had sung in his father's church, but who'd pay \$3.30 a seat to hear *Swing Low*, *Sweet Chariot* and *Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho*? Those were the songs he sang for fun among friends. Then, one day he went to call on a white friend in a swanky hospital and she asked him to sing for her. He closed the door of her room tight and sang *Water Boy*, and when he finished, a nurse came in and said she had heard him, and Robeson said, "I'm sorry. I won't do it any more." But the nurse said, "Please don't stop. Mayn't we open the door and let all the patients hear?" And they opened all the doors on the floor, and Robeson sang for an hour. When he was through, all the sick people felt much better.

Somebody suggested that he give a concert of Negro spirituals, and timidly he joined up with his friend, Lawrence Brown, who has been his accompanist ever since, rented the Greenwich Village Theater for a Sunday evening, and announced that he would sing the first concert of all-Negro music ever given in America.

The music critics went overboard. The *New York Times*, for instance, said, "Mr. Robeson is a singer of genuine power. His Negro spirituals hold in them a world of religious experience, and voice the sorrows and hopes of a people."

On the advice of the box-office experts, Robeson had billed himself as a baritone, and the audience and critics didn't notice that he wasn't. So he continued to call himself a baritone. Robeson grins, "I'm a bass. I'm not even a baritone-bass. But the managers are afraid to admit it."

He started out on a concert tour, which ended in disaster when his voice gave out. He

America's No. 1 Negro

returned to New York and announced, "I'm through singing. There's nothing left for me but acting."

But some of his friends knew about voices and realized that his had broken only because he didn't know how to use it. For the first time he went to a teacher, and in a few months his voice was bigger and better than ever.

In the summer of 1925 he went to London to appear in *Emperor Jones*. London didn't like the show and it quickly closed, but Mr. and Mrs. Robeson did like London. Although the Hotel Savoy once barred him from its restaurant, generally there was none of the discrimination he had found in the United States. He was accepted by many theatrical and literary folk and found good companions among Negroes, mostly from the British colonies, who were attending universities.

FOR several years he shuttled between England and America, giving concerts in both countries, appearing in New York in *Porgy* and in *Black Boy*, by Frank Dazey and Jim Tully. In 1928 he opened in *Show Boat* in London, and after it had run nearly a year and he found himself at parties meeting important people, he said casually, "I'm not going back to America and be kicked around any more."

He did come back a few times in the next ten years, to give concerts, to appear in a revival of *Show Boat*, and to make *Show Boat* and *Emperor Jones* in Hollywood. But his home was in London, with his wife and Paul, Jr., who was born in 1927. He made many motion pictures in London, toured the British Isles and the Continent giving concerts, appeared in *Othello*, and made recordings of Negro spirituals and *St. Louis Blues* that were selling by the thousands all over the world.

"My whole social and political development was in England," Robeson told me, as if that should explain a number of things, "and I became as much a part of English life as I now am of American."

Many of his friends were Russians or Russian sympathizers, and the Communist ideas of racial equality agreed exactly with his. He became convinced that the Russian philosophy was the only one that would lift the Negro out of persecution and he has doggedly supported the Communist party line. He made several visits to Russia, was quoted as declaring, "It's good to breathe the free air here," and when Paul, Jr., was nine years old, sent him to school in Moscow for a year, then brought him back to enter a Russian school in London.

"I didn't want him to contend with racial prejudice until he was older," he says.

Robeson and his wife made one trip to Spain as guests of the Loyalists. A public-address system was set up outside of Madrid near the battle line, and Robeson sang defiant songs in Spanish that rolled out of loudspeakers over the Loyalists in the trenches and across into the ears of Franco's men.

When England went to war the Robesons returned to America. Robeson's decision was difficult to make. He was earning a lot of money in England, he suffered almost no racial discrimination, and the war wasn't likely to affect him very much.

"But I realized my life was tied up with this country. I wanted to help my own people," he said. "Whether I would be barred from certain hotels and restaurants was of minor importance. The important thing was that perhaps I could help members of my race get the kind of jobs they deserved."

He sang and spoke at meetings where racial problems were discussed, worked with com-

America's No. 1 Negro

mittees of Negroes and whites, and presented his case for equality to every influential white person he could reach.

"I know, Paul, it's okay about you," they'd usually say, "but what about the guy that shovels the coal in the furnace?"

"Educate him and his children. Give them the opportunities I had," he would say.

They'd smile kindly and shake their heads. It was discouraging, but he never let down.

His first appearance on the stage after his return was in *John Henry*, by Roark Bradford and Jacques Wolf. It ran for only five performances. Over the radio Robeson sang magnificently Earl Robinson's *Ballad for Americans*, his concert tours were great successes, he appeared in two pictures in Hollywood, and Hamilton College, at Clinton, N. Y., gave him the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters.

THE New York production of *Othello* was the most important thing Robeson had ever faced, and he realized it. If he succeeded in giving a truly great performance, portraying faithfully a tragic, heroic figure and inspiring true sympathy for this simple, black barbarian, Robeson would do more than raise his rating as an actor. He would tell the story of a persecuted Negro and also prove that once in the theater, at least, a Negro artist could be superior to any white.

"It was a responsibility my father gave me when I was a kid," Robeson told me. "For the sake of my race, I had to do a good job."

The play was tried out first at Princeton and Harvard and it didn't satisfy him.

"I took *Othello* apart bit by bit," he told me, "to find out what each word meant. I listened carefully to directors and Shakespearean authorities, but in some cases their *Othello* didn't think and act exactly as I believed a great Negro warrior would do, and in those cases I played it my way. I'm not a great actor like Jose Ferrer (Iago). All I do is feel the part. I make myself believe I am *Othello*, and I act as he would act."

Mrs. Robeson, two years ago, picked out their home, which is a southern colonial house in Enfield, Conn., on the main highway between Hartford, Conn., and Springfield, Mass. Sixteen-year-old Paul, Jr., is a senior in Springfield Technical High School and expects to enter Cornell next fall, to study aviation engineering, and Mrs. Robeson is studying anthropology in Hartford Seminary Foundation, working for a Ph.D. degree.

Except that Robeson sings now and then in the high school for the Scholarship Fund, they take little part in Enfield activities. Their social life there is with friends who come out from New York for the week end.

Most of their Negro friends are doctors, lawyers, and teachers. They don't move in Harlem's jive and tap-dancing set. Mrs. Robeson is more of a scholar than a housekeeper, and their living-room looks like the workshop of an absent-minded professor whose wife has gone to work in a war plant. Bookcases, packed tight, line the room, the top of the grand piano is littered with books and music, everywhere are tables covered with books and magazines. On the floor against the wall, probably waiting for the war to end so pedestals can be made, are bronze heads of Robeson and his son, done by Jacob Epstein.

DURING the run of *Othello*, Robeson has lived in an apartment in 38th Street, just off Park Avenue. Here were more books, all the new war books, dictionaries—English and foreign-language—the Bible, *Jane Eyre*, *The Plays of Anton Chekhov*, a file of

America's No. 1 Negro

The Monthly Labor Review, the works of Marcel Proust, books on science, Russia, the Negro, Africa, China, and music.

There was a huge radio-phonograph and a pile of records, including those that teach foreign languages. Robeson speaks fairly good Russian and a little of several other languages. He reads them better than he speaks them. "I think it's more important that I read the Greek classics in the original," he told me, "than that I learn how to ask a waiter in Athens for a bottle of wine." Now he is studying Chinese and it's tough going, but he hopes some day to read some of Confucius in the original.

Robeson wears a beard that he grew for *Othello*, weighs more than 250 pounds, dresses in dark suits that aren't always pressed, and moves quickly and gracefully like the athlete he is. The moment he sits down, lights a cigarette, and begins talking in his quiet, musical English you forget his color.

He's a man of great charm, he possesses some sort of hypnotic magic, as though he were a genie out of a bottle, and whether he is talking about the Negro, Russia, *Othello*, football, Chinese literature, Mrs. Roosevelt, his father, Eugene O'Neill, or Paul Robeson, Jr., you want him to keep on as fast as he can. Which he does.

"I work harder in one performance of *Othello* than I ever did in three concerts," he told me. "But I have only one ambition—to be a great scholar, a teacher, and I'll die with it. I want to teach Negroes, for I've always felt that education is the only solution for our problem. Some day I'll give up the theater and join the faculty of a college."

Robeson's rooms at both the Enfield and New York houses are hung with heavy curtains, always tightly closed. As we sat in his New York study one afternoon with the lights burning brightly, I looked up at the huge, curtained window and suggested, "It's a fine, sunshiny day outside. If the curtains were opened we would be able to see the beautiful silvery pinnacle of the Chrysler Building reaching toward the sky."

He shook his head. "It must be my mother's Indian blood," he said, in a steady tone. "I always want the curtains closed and the lights turned on, in any room. I don't like to look out at the world."

Then, quickly, as if he had said something he wished he hadn't, he began talking about something else.

THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE