

Written Interview with Director Kurt Tetzlaff on *Paul Robeson: "I'm a Negro. I'm an American."*

By Gisela Harkenthal, film journalist

DEFA Film Library: The short introduction and interview with director Kurt Tetzlaff about his documentary Paul Robeson: "I'm a Negro. I'm an American." were published in Kino DDR 2/1990, a monthly publication that highlighted upcoming theatrical releases in East Germany (GDR). It was created by GDR's only existing film distribution company, PROGRESS Filmverleih, and included film credits, annotated summaries of the films, interviews with directors and marketing information. It was distributed among journalists and cinema administrations and programmers.

Director Kurt Tetzlaff presents a full-length documentary about the world-famous African American performer Paul Robeson after years of working on the film. He centers the story on the time in Robeson's life when the US government denied him a passport after he spoke out while abroad against warmongering and racial discrimination. He was trapped within his own country for nearly ten years. But he did not give up. His voice, his songs, his political convictions rang out over tapes and phone lines to cross borders and continental divides to pierce the hearts of people.

Kurt Tetzlaff allows his admiration for Paul Robeson as an artist and as a human being to shine through in every aspect of the film. He interviews famous contemporaries and friends of Robeson such as Harry Belafonte and Earl Robinson, the composer of *Ballad for Americans*. Pete Seeger speaks about the Peekskill riots of 1949, where Robeson had offered him the chance to perform some of his own songs at a planned concert. Fanatical white supremacists wanted to stop the concert, and the Ku Klux Klan showed up to throw stones.

Tetzlaff also interviewed Paul Robeson Jr., who commented: “In spring 1949, when my father came back from his European tour from having said at the Paris World Peace Conference that it was unthinkable that Black Americans should go to war against the Soviet Union, a nation that treated Black and non-white people with dignity, the reaction of the ruling class here was one of at least by implication that they wouldn’t mind if somebody killed him.”

Robeson was a friend of the Soviet Union. He spent more than a year there and sent his son Paul to school in Moscow. The film features many documentary recordings, some rare, of Robeson among the Soviet people with whom he felt such a strong kinship.

Tetzlaff also discovered footage of Robeson as an actor; he had played supporting roles in many American films. He became world famous as a stage actor for playing the starring role in *Othello*—at that time it was a sensation for a Black man to perform on Broadway.

Tetzlaff’s film is vibrant and thrilling from beginning to end, with dynamic sequences as well as more restrained moments that allow room for reflection. He does not tell Robeson’s story chronologically but orders it according to life situations and attitudes: Robeson as a student and famous football player, Robeson at the beginning and at the peak of his career, Robeson’s years of suffering and resilience in the face of adversity, Robeson in the Spanish Civil War, Robeson in the Soviet Union, Robeson on the stages of the concert halls and theaters of the world. Less is shown of his visit to the GDR, seemingly because of a lack of film footage, a shortcoming on the part of chroniclers of that time. On the occasion of a symposium in the GDR marking Robeson’s 73rd birthday, Professor Albert Norden¹ wrote of him: “The son of a slave, an antifascist who rose against the Nazis in Berlin and fought against European fascism in the trenches of Spain,² world-famous singer for peace who grappled with the racist devils in the USA and spoke so powerfully and convincingly on behalf of the persecuted Communist Party that the judge refused to keep his statement on the record. Well, Paul Robeson’s statement could be struck from the court’s record, but not from the historical record.”

Gisela Harkenthal: This is the first full-length documentary about Paul Robeson. What fascinated you about this world-famous Black singer?

Kurt Tetzlaff: Paul Robeson is a man who was celebrated in the concert halls of the world as well as a great actor, the first Black actor to play *Othello* on Broadway. After a concert in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1949, he announced that he would withdraw from commercial concert performances in order to join in on the battles of his time. He did just that. The result: ten years of discrimination in his own country and isolation from audiences in the rest of the world. His own sense of social responsibility had driven him to make this

¹ DEFA Film Library: Albert Norden was a member of the East German SED Party Politbureau and in charge of propaganda. He also headed a commission that coordinated all measures and processes to come to terms with war and Nazi crimes. From 1953-55, he was a professor at the Humboldt University in East Berlin from which Robeson received an honorary doctorate in 1960. Norden was a supporter of the idea of founding a Paul Robeson Archive that was set up at the East German Academy of Arts in 1965.

² DEFA Film Library: This statement is incorrect. Paul Robeson had a short layover in Berlin on his way to Moscow in 1934. “The Nazis were now in full charge, and he felt the change immediately.” There is no mention of any active encounter with Nazis. Robeson also had never “fought in the trenches of Spain” but he visited the Spanish Civil War front line in 1938. He gave concerts and met members of the Lincoln Brigade. (See: Duberman, Martin. *Paul Robeson: A Biography*. New York: The New Press, 1989. 184 and 215-220.)

decision. This is material for a documentary film that tells the story of more than what is on the surface. It was quickly apparent through intensive engagement with the material that the fate of this man has relevance today. I am glad to have had the chance to make a full-length documentary about Paul Robeson.

GH: Your film never suppresses the fact that Paul Robeson was very politically active.

KT: There was hardly anyone who didn't know him and his song *O! Man River* in the 1950s and 60s. But who among today's 18-year-olds knows anything beginning with the name Robeson? We wanted to show not only the fate of an artist, but also the political situation in the USA during those years; in other words, it is a political film. At the center are the years 1949-1959, the period when Robeson was locked within his own country. He had been denied a passport. Because he held fast to his friendship with the Soviet Union, the allied partner of the USA, and because he spoke out against the oppression of his Black countrymen. Robeson would have been given a passport if he had agreed not to speak politically while abroad. We filmed interviews with friends and comrades such as Pete Seeger and Earl Robinson, the composer of such songs as *Black and White* and *Joe Hill*. His son, Paul Robeson Jr., told us: "At a time when my father was denounced as subversive and a traitor to his country, there was an editorial in the *New York Times* that was very friendly. They wrote: 'He is a great artist. We need him; we want him to sing and act. If only he weren't so political. If he would just stop with all this political talk, then everything would be fine.' But my father believed being an artist does not mean giving up the right to express oneself politically." Of course, we also tell Robeson's success in the 20s and 30s to show the weight of his decision, as well as the international solidarity he received. The concerts that his friends in Great Britain organized over the phone, the concert on the border of Canada, a border he could not cross.

GH: You use a wealth of documentary footage that in many cases has never been seen. How did you get a hold of this material?

KT: There were some difficulties. Film material about Robeson is very expensive. It looks like you can still make money off a man who has been vilified in your own country!. Some material was only available in exchange, which took time. But Irmgard and Bengt von zur Mühlen from Chronos-Film,³ Stanley Forman⁴ from London and above all the Paul Robeson Archive of the Academy of Arts in the GDR helped us. Working with the documentary material was an emotional experience for me: I already knew about Robeson's struggles in the USA due to his friendships with people who lived in the socialist parts of the world. But I hadn't fully understood how high a price Robeson paid for his uncompromising stance. Only now I do and I am aware of the true significance! He gave up a career as an artist of the world for the freedom to express his thoughts and choose his friends. That requires more than courage; it requires strength. Such decisions come with great sacrifices. He was barred from the concert halls of the world, shunned by record labels and rejected by colleagues and friends who didn't want to be jeopardized by association.

³ DEFA Film Library: CHRONOS Film (now: CHRONOS MEDIA in Potsdam) was based in West Berlin during the production of the documentary. It is one of the largest independent distributors of historic film footage and also a film production company.

⁴ DEFA Film Library: Stanley Forman (1921-2013) was a communist, filmmaker, producer and collector of documentary footage from Eastern Europe. Forman was also a distributor of Eastern European films in the UK.

GH: Robeson stood unswervingly against racial discrimination around the world. You make that very clear in your film.

KT: As the son of a freed slave, he felt racial hatred firsthand. Robeson studied law. In a photo of 120 graduates, he is the only Black person. His first experience practicing law: a white secretary refused to record a dictation for him because he was Black. On his college football team, where he was the only Black man, his teammates broke his nose and dislocated his shoulder.

GH: There is a legend about how he came to be a singer.

KT: Robeson tried to become an actor and came to singing by chance: “At the end of the first act I was falling asleep, and a sort of dream came over me. I whistle, and it puts me in good spirits. I do my very best to whistle when I fall asleep. I still can’t quite whistle. So I started to intone a spiritual song that I remembered from childhood. Somehow, I hummed it. Then I heard a voice from backstage: Sing louder, sing it, sing it louder, as if it’s part of the play. And I discovered that I was really a singer.” He became world famous—overnight—with his song *Ol’ Man River* from the musical *Show Boat*. He had been in a dozen films, and there is so much beautiful audio recorded from his concerts that I had trouble choosing what to put in the film.

GH: His time during the Spanish Civil War is an important accent in your film.

KT: Robeson said himself: “I was full of admiration and love for these white Americans and was so proud of my own people when I saw that there were also Black people in the Lincoln Brigade.” He sang in solidarity events for the Popular Front and called for solidarity with the Spanish people at the Spain and Culture event at Royal Albert Hall in London with Heinrich Mann and Pablo Picasso. It is said that the war ceased for a few hours in the trenches of Teruel because the two opposing armies were listening to the songs of Robeson. A legend, according to our interview partner Bill Alexander, who fought as a commanding officer in the Lincoln Brigade: “At the time of the battle, I assure you, people did not stop fighting, because Robeson was there. We were being shelled. I, myself, and I’m sorry to destroy a good story, but I would express the point of view that did not happen. We were fighting against heavy odds. The enemy seemed to have more planes. They seemed to have more artillery. They had all the material support. And the fact that a man with international reputation as a singer, as an artist, came to Spain, gave all of us, whether we heard him or whether we didn’t, we all felt stronger and so we all fought better as a result.”

Translated by Savannah Champion

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