

# The Last Othello

*A Play in One Act*  
*by Robert Joseph Ahola*

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# *THE LAST OTHELLO*

## *Synopsis*

Paul Robeson and Uta Hagen who once headlined the longest running Shakespeare ever on Broadway, and who spent a large portion of their careers on "The HUAC Blacklist," meet 20 years later, just before Robeson's last performance of Othello at Stratford-on-Avon. A poignant portrait of the most powerful influence for political change in the history of Black America, *The Last Othello* gives a shattering insight into Paul Robeson in his later years - a Promethean actor, singer and activist who ultimately became a casualty to his own courage and unwillingness to bend.

# THE LAST OTHELLO

## *Synopsis of Scenes* **And Production Considerations**

This play has two scenes in one setting, (Scene 2 is an Epilogue): Paul Robeson's Dressing Room at Stratford on Avon. It is replete with a large lighted set of mirrors and comfortable, if inexpensive, theatre furniture, including a chaise longue.

Properly set at angles toward the audience the mirrors can and should play an extraordinary fourth character in the play, and should be able to reflect the characters' every aspect whenever they speak. This is a creative conundrum of course to lighting and set. But, as any good production should challenge both the design and the director, it will enhance the dramatic power of the presentation five fold.

**1 M 2 F. Running time: 40 minutes**

***Note:* The part of Paul Robeson must be played by a person of color.**

## Cast of Characters

**PAUL ROBESON:** [A person of color about sixty.] An historical figure of remarkable stature, Paul Robeson, as he is played here, should be about six foot three inches tall, athletic, compellingly magnetic, and yet with a carriage that is starting to show some signs of both wear and frailty. For decades he has led the fight not only for people of color but also for downtrodden workers, and though he is still both a driving force and a lightning rod for activism wherever he goes, his demeanor—by custom of clever manipulation of the moment—is always one that forces others to respect his position as being on the side of Right.

**UTA HAGEN:** [late forties] By now, this great lady of the stage is in her mid forties and is starting to gray. There is a presence about her that is perceptibly melodramatic to the point of carrying traces of arrogance. And yet there is also a timeworn grace that only women of a certain age—those who have done much— seem to have about them.

**MARY URE:** [an actress in her twenties] A famous but all-too-brief a flame. Young wife of playwright John Osborn and the new Desdemona, she is pretty and deferential, but clearly outmatched by her co-star and her predecessor. She is also under the drag of her own demons (alcoholism) which may or may not show through in this piece.

**Note:** All of these characters were already well aware of their fame and would be certain to behave accordingly.

# The Last Othello

**Scene 1.** *It is a dressing room at Stratford on Avon – ample for a star of Paul Robeson’s stature. There is comfortable but inexpensive theatre furniture, including two dressing chairs, a chaise longue, and a large sectioned mirror jotted by lights and set at angles that play with reflections into the audience. Robeson – a very tall dignified black man with a magnificent carriage – enters. There is an unmistakable presence about him, and yet haunted as well for the first time by specters of his own mortality. Touching up, he takes his seat and dabs some greasepaint onto his face, laughing at the irony of it.*

## **ROBESON**

Makeup on a black man...now there’s an art form.

*Gazing in the mirror, he dabs again and spreads on some base when, from the doorway, a pretty young actress, Mary Ure, enters the room on her line*

## **MARY URE**

“Will you come to bed, my lord?”

## **ROBESON**

“Have you prayed tonight, Desdemona?”

## **MARY URE**

“Aye my lord.”

*Recognizing Robeson smiles and gets up.*

## **ROBESON**

Mary, Mary...always there—so steadfast and serene. Feeling that young and faithful energy always makes me smile.

*He goes to take her hands and kisses her on the cheek.*

## **MARY URE**

I thought we could run through some lines together, Mr. Robeson.

**ROBESON**

*(chides her pleasantly)*

“Paul.” Please dear lady, you promised. Calling me “Mr. Robeson” makes me feel older than I do already.

**MARY URE**

“Age cannot wither, nor custom stale...”

**ROBESON**

Praise reserved for Cleopatra, I think.”

**MARY URE**

But fitting. It’s just that, playing against a living legend like Paul Robeson gives me butterflies every time. I mean the reviews...

**ROBESON**

*(interrupts softly)*

...Have been extraordinarily kind.

**MARY URE**

For you...and deservedly so! The production’s another matter. My husband thinks that Tony’s staging is gimmicky and contrived...

**ROBESON**

John Osborne is a very gifted playwright.

**MARY URE**

...And that the only thing that brings any of it up to its true meaning is you.

**ROBESON**

“Played like a classic Roman sculpture...and with all the animation of one.” I believe that’s what The Guardian said.

**MARY URE**

The Manchester Guardian doesn’t like anything... or anyone —except you, of course. Good heavens, what respect they all have for you.

**ROBESON**

Respect is what you get when the world gets tired of throwing punches.

**MARY URE**

It’s thrown them all. And you’re still here.

**ROBESON**

...A testament to brute stubbornness and numb persistence.

**MARY URE**

Are you sure you wouldn't like to go through a few sides? It's a selfish request, I know. A cry for help, I suppose.

**ROBESON**

A cry from anyone else but you. Why, Mary, you're the most polished of us all. I'm the one who keeps stumbling across a line or two.

**MARY URE**

Hardly...

**ROBESON**

Besides, too many people leave their best performances in the dressing room.

*He notes her concern.*

Not to worry, we'll pass some lively exchanges before the curtain goes up. Othello's vicious challenge to Desdemona's virtue — that should knock the edge off!

**MARY URE**

Lovely... *(She turns to leave but stops.)* Oh, and not to put the edge back on. But I understand Uta Hagen is coming tonight.

*Robeson turns toward the mirror and toys with the makeup box.*

**ROBESON**

That rumor's been flying around for weeks.

**MARY URE**

Not this time. They have her reservations at box office — "comped" of course.

**ROBESON**

Alone?

**MARY URE**

Her secretary's with her, I believe. I mean, good God! Uta Hagen! Your original Desdemona and one of the greatest actresses ever to set foot on the stage! She redefined the role of Blanche DuBois in "Streetcar!" Changed it forever!

**ROBESON**

I know. I know her quite well...

**MARY URE**

So you do... Well, there you have it. Daunting to say the least. You can imagine how I'm feeling right now.



**ROBESON**

Just be true to yourself.

**MARY URE**

And I understand she isn't one to fake the niceties...

**ROBESON** *(reflects upon it with a smile)*

So, play it so that she doesn't have to...Just remember to keep that fragile integrity that makes Desdemona what she is.

**MARY URE** *(thinks about it)*

Fragile integrity...

*Robeson turns and blows her a kiss.*

**ROBESON**

You'll be fine.

*Mary Ure exits. Robeson thinks about it.*

She'll be slaughtered.

*He turns back toward the mirror with a sense of irony.*

Hell, I'll be slaughtered. Oh, well...kill me if you will. Eat me if you dare. But you'll never, never spit me out!

*He starts stabbing at the makeup and checking himself out.*

Mine enemy grows older...and I don't mean J. Edgar Hoover.

*He starts reciting lines from Othello on his own.*

"...As Hell's from Heaven! If it were now to die,

'T'were now to be most happy; for I fear

My soul hath her content so absolute,

That not another comfort like to this

Succeeds in unknown fate."

*Entering as he is finishing, Uta Hagen comes into the doorway behind him, and eloquently blends in her own remembered verse. Without turning, he reacts if it were a recitation of his favorite song.*

**UTA HAGEN**

"...The heavens forbid

But that our loves and comforts should increase,

Even as our days do grow!"

**ROBESON**

Now, there's a Desdemona to die for!

*(He turns to see her hesitating in the doorway.)*

Is that what you came for—all this way just to stand in my doorway?

*(She runs into his arms. He towers over her as they hold one another for a very long time. He kisses the top of her head, as she pulls away for the moment.)*

**UTA HAGEN**

Like a little girl lost in adoration.

**ROBESON**

To witness the last gasps of a long since daunted Moor well past his prime. Breaking with tradition and stopping in before a performance...

**UTA HAGEN**

For man who transformed Othello!? You bet I am.

**ROBESON**

We transformed it. We did it together. "The greatest Shakespearean cast ever assembled in America..."

*(He Pauses to measure the subtext.)*

And I'm glad you came now. I don't think I could have dragged through my performance, knowing you were out there tonight. Wondering...

**UTA HAGEN**

And now you have a new Desdemona. Young, lovely...

**ROBESON** *(anticipates)*

...married to a playwright who's best friends with the director, Tony Richardson. It's a family affair.

**UTA HAGEN**

Never stopped you before.

**ROBESON**

I'm not the same man I was before. Besides, she's not Uta Hagen!

**UTA HAGEN**

Thank God! Anyway, "Comparisons are odious." And she plays her role like a scullery maid.

**ROBESON**

Which, I have a feeling, you'll point out to her at the earliest opportunity.

**UTA HAGEN**

Somebody needs to.

**ROBESON**

Never one to spare the candor for a good purpose...Just remember to be kind.

**UTA HAGEN**

I'm always kind, after a fashion. Besides, you either have it, or you don't. And I'm not sure this one has it .

**ROBESON**

Did you see her with this young Burton fellow in *Look Back in Anger*? She was good. Very good.

**UTA HAGEN**

Oh, I suppose...But she's playing this the same way. Over a kitchen sink, for God's sake!

**ROBESON**

Few if any ever had your sense of grandeur.

**UTA HAGEN**

If you can't have grandeur, why do Shakespeare? And if you can't mimic the bard, at least have a sense of pace and timing!

*As Uta rails on, Mary Ure comes to the door.*

**MARY URE**

I hope I'm not interrupting...

**ROBESON**

*(amused)*

Speaking of timing...

**MARY URE**

I can come back.

**ROBESON**

No, of course not, Mary. Come in, luv.

*Robeson motions her forward.*

**MARY URE**

I couldn't let the occasion pass, Miss Hagen, without telling you that you are one of my true role models, and the woman I admire more than any other in this strange profession of ours.

**UTA HAGEN**

*(nonplussed by the charm)*

Oh dear, well thank you...

**MARY URE**

I mean, you two. Stars of the longest running Shakespeare in the history of the Broadway stage. What was it? Three years.

**UTA HAGEN**

Two, actually.

**MARY URE**

*(Continues rhapsodizing).*

Margaret Webster directing that all-star cast! I mean, you two—Jose Ferrer, your husband.

**UTA HAGEN**

*(cuts her off)*

Was...It's Mrs. Berghof now.

**MARY URE**

That remarkable man —and that fabulous dramatic school you have!

**UTA HAGEN**

Yes...

*Mary Ure is "laying on the jam" and Uta resents it. There is a pregnant pause as the air thickens.*

**MARY URE**

Well... I have to tell you that I'm both inspired and terrified to have you in the audience and see me play the part that you made famous. I'm shaking in my boots right now.

**UTA HAGEN**

Well, just go have a good stiff one right before you go on.

**MARY URE**

A stiff one...

**UTA HAGEN**

That should loosen you up... And play Desdemona like the grand and courageous lady that she is. That's her secret— flying in the face of public opinion — that and being willing to die for what she believes in.

**MARY URE**

You were made for it.

**UTA HAGEN**

And so can you be, my dear. We're actors after all.

**MARY URE**

*(Thinks about it)*

So, we are.

*Somehow the comment, fortifies her. She straightens up, shakes Uta's, hand, gives Robeson a kiss on the cheek and goes to leave.*

**UTA HAGEN**

*(Calls out)*

Merde!

**MARY URE**

Thank you...

*Mary Ure exits. Uta Hagen watches her leave.*

**UTA HAGEN**

Why is it that every time you say something perfectly shitty about someone they always pop in on you practically on cue?

**ROBESON**

Well, if you don't want people popping in at the wrong times, don't be saying the wrong things.

**UTA HAGEN**

Paul Robeson quoting Paul Robeson?

**ROBESON**

Credited...or blamed...for everything! Anyway, I meant to tell you that your recommendation...About the stiff one...

*He edits himself. She notices.*

**UTA HAGEN**

About the stiff one? Works as a last resort.

**ROBESON**

It's already a bit of an issue with her...And her marriage is...

**UTA HAGEN**

Oh, I didn't know...

*(thinks about it)*

Oh well... We've all had a few last resorts by now. Welcome to show business.

**ROBESON**

Amen to that.

*(He steps toward the door, as if he'd like to finish.)*

I wish it weren't that way with Mary. Somehow... I worry about her.

**UTA HAGEN**

Oh well, she's young. Time to mend her ways...Anyway, we all have our demons. And what are yours these days?

**ROBESON**

Too many to speak of...

*Thoughtfully, he goes to close the door and locks it.  
In mock horror, she catches him up for it.*

**UTA HAGEN**

Paul Robeson shame on you, after all these years!

**ROBESON**

You misunderstand me. It's a privacy issue.

**UTA HAGEN**

*(mocks the moment)*

Oh, how disappointing.

**ROBESON**

Now, madam! I'm entirely reformed. Besides, I know how happily married you are, now.

**UTA HAGEN**

I was happily married then. To Jose Ferrer. Remember! I think that's what attracted you about me—that and the rumors about Joe's philandering. Maybe that's what you got wind of.

**ROBESON**

How is Jose? Do you ever see him?

**UTA HAGEN**

Joe and I stay in touch...as much as any ex-husband and wife can do these days. He's busy winning Oscars and Tony's and making babies with Rosemary Clooney.

**ROBESON**

Well, I suppose he's happy. And he deserves it after what we put him through.

**UTA HAGEN**

Hardly! He knew. He always knew.

**ROBESON**

You've always said that. I don't know

**UTA HAGEN**

Besides, he was fooling around with that little actress in the crowd scenes at the time. And others...as we're you. And others...

**ROBESON**

*(as if reciting the lines)*

I am but a man and hopelessly flawed, brought down by my desires.

**UTA HAGEN**

And brought down...and brought down. You men. One thought. One mind. One sex drive.

*(She taunts. He shifts back to his point.)*

**ROBESON**

And of course you still think that's where I am...Ah yes! Frozen in time!

**UTA HAGEN**

And you're not? Well, redemption becomes us all.

**ROBESON**

Father to daughter, if anything at all. Anyway, I compliment you. You handled young Mary Ure very well. You left her feeling empowered and collegial. You slapped her wrist and made it feel like a kiss — being the great teacher that you've become.

**UTA HAGEN**

Yes, isn't that quite the paradox? Two things the Hollywood Blacklist did for me. Barred me from Hollywood, and therefore free from the contamination of celluloid poisoning... and allowed me to find my *métier* — a teacher of acting.

**ROBESON** *(Animates, strolling away)*

“The Blacklist!” Now, there's a term. You'd think they'd call it the Red List...or at least the Pink List.. But no! It's a blacklist! And I'm a black man and I'm on it — a kind of blind embossed outlaw.

**UTA HAGEN**

Whatever “the Blacklist” was, we were charter members. Emblazoned for history!

**ROBESON**

Guilt by association! You see, that's what you get for keeping company with the likes of me.

**UTA HAGEN**

And Dalton Trumbo...and John Garfield and Alfred Drake and Howard K. Smith and Burgess Meredith ...and Jose Ferrer! Joe was on it too...anybody who gave a damn at all about having a social conscience was on it...John Henry Falk sued them, you know. And it looks like he's going to win.

**ROBESON**

A courageous man...but I always thought you had the most courage of us all. You had so much to lose.

**UTA HAGEN**

Oh, don't be silly. In our profession, protest is always fashionable. Besides, I'm white. When you're white and you protest, they give you a spanking, send you to detention for a little while and then bring you back into the loving arms of the establishment. But you, Paul! You scared the living Be-Jesus out of them! You still do! The ground still shakes when you come into a place.

**ROBESON**

Nothing shakes any more, except my hands once in a while.

**UTA HAGEN**

Not you. You're the rock.

**ROBESON**

No more. No more. The water has washed me small.

**UTA HAGEN**

No, no. Gibraltar is small. Not my Paul!

**ROBESON** (*pleased*)

A rhymed couplet. I like that! Even if you do overrate me.

**UTA HAGEN**

I speak the truth, at the expense of all else. You taught me that.

**ROBESON**

One good habit, anyway.

**UTA HAGEN**

...I heard about your illness.

**ROBESON** (*lifts his voice in protest*)

Now, that was overrated!

**UTA HAGEN**

I heard it wasn't. I heard it nearly killed you.

**ROBESON**

A blood pressure spike, an overzealous intern, and suddenly they're clamoring around me at Bellevue like bees in a hive. They seem to practice melodramatics in those places anyway. Too much television, I think.



**UTA HAGEN**

We were all worried sick! Anyway, you look...well.

**ROBESON**

*(Gets ethnic)*

Now girl! You just had to go and ruin it. All this truth telling! And now you come “laying on the jam” like that. Shame on you now!

*(He straightens out and goes back to the mirror.*

*Doesn't like what he sees.)*

I look old and tired. I look like what I am.

**UTA HAGEN**

With the weight of the world still on your shoulders.

**ROBESON**

*(Thinks about it. Changes the subject)*

I thought you said you'd never come back to England.

**UTA HAGEN**

Not to live! Not to live! They won't even let my dog in! I can't come to any country where they won't let my dog in...and they call themselves civilized.

**ROBESON**

We both know better than that.

**UTA HAGEN**

The two most imperialist nations in world history – Great Britain and the United States. The greatest enslavers of all time. You still believe that?

**ROBESON**

You expect me to change?

**UTA HAGEN**

Well, of course not. More mellow, perhaps.

**ROBESON** *(ironic)*

No! I was mellow. Back then I had to be mellow...and constrained and...turn the other cheek. Not any more. There's a whole new rising tide of anger! I can feel it —the rage of righteousness! And it will be glorious! “No more water, but the fire next time!”

*Mocks himself.*

Sounds radical. Huh?

**UTA HAGEN**

You've always been radical! And prophetic.

**ROBESON**

Prophesy is just seeing a few steps further down the road. And it's there, believe me. The fire is there! Waiting...simmering....

**UTA HAGEN**

And they all love your fire over here.

**ROBESON**

Not *The Times*.

**UTA HAGEN**

The Times doesn't love anything.

**ROBESON**

The Welsh miners, at least. They love me.

**UTA HAGEN**

And the Scottish miners, and the Irish factory workers. I heard you sang for them. Paraded for the Welsh. Spoke at their rally. Sang.

**ROBESON** (*Sings*)

“Oh-h-h-h what will you give me?  
Sing the sad bells of Rhymney.  
Is their hope for the future?  
Cry the soft bells of Ruther.  
And who made the mine owner?  
Shout the black bells of Rhonda!  
And who robbed the miner?  
Say the grim bells of Blynah!”...Now, there's music from the heart.

**UTA HAGEN**

Songs of protest!

**ROBESON**

Same song the whole world over. Same soul. Injustice knows no color, knows no boundary. We're all slaves to the same oppression.

**UTA HAGEN**

I miss that passion!

**ROBESON** (*notes the irony*)

I miss it sometimes, myself.

**UTA HAGEN**

And yet, you go out on Monday!

**ROBESON**

...To protest in Trafalgar Square against Apartheid in South Africa. Now there's a cause worth fighting for! And the whole world gets it, this time!

**UTA HAGEN**

If I'm here I'll be there with you.

**ROBESON**

The team again!

**UTA HAGEN**

Or part of it.

**ROBESON**

Who knows. Maybe we'll get blacklisted all over again!

**UTA HAGEN**

"If you're not on the edge of condemnation, you're not really trying."

**ROBESON**

Now, what wise man said that?

**UTA HAGEN**

You did. In your own writings...in your praise of Albert Einstein and his fight for human rights. You know that. You never forget anything.

**ROBESON**

I'll never forget Dr. Einstein and how passionate he was about our cause and how much he understood about our world.

**UTA HAGEN**

It's the Negro-Jewish connection in America I suppose.

**ROBESON**

Not necessarily. That's an illusion I lost a long time ago.

**UTA HAGEN**

Are there any left?

**ROBESON**

Anyway, there are blacks who hate Jews, and certainly Jews who hate blacks. Another ingredient in that strange soup of intolerance. I hated a Jew once. God forgive me.

**UTA HAGEN**

I'm sure he does.

**ROBESON**

When I grew up in Princeton, my first principal in school, Dr. Ackerman hated me so that he even threatened to resign when I was made the soloist for my glee-club. And the school board told him to go ahead and quit, because it turned out that they hated Jews so much, they wanted that nasty old man off the faculty in any way they could.

**UTA HAGEN**

Ah! The irony of poetic justice!

**ROBESON**

No. The real irony came when I would go home in the afternoon and see my father with his good friend Mr. Woldin — Mr. Woldin, an old immigrant Russian Jew, who was the only white man in our neighborhood who would even give us the time a day! I would come up the walk, and see the love in that old man's eyes — that twinkle that only blue-eyes can give. And I beheld the face of hope.

**UTA HAGEN**

You saw that twinkle in my eyes too, the first time I met you.

**ROBESON** (*smiles to remember*)

I saw more than that. I saw the flashing eyes of a flirt and the most confident young woman I'd ever met. Powerful, sure of herself, and arrogant beyond belief. What a package you were.

**UTA HAGEN**

Oh, and I suppose you weren't a bit arrogant yourself?! The toast of five continents and everyone's cause célèbre! My God! You were the only man I ever met who could strut while sitting in a chair!

**ROBESON**

Was I that bad? I suppose we all were. What a gathering of Titanic egos Margaret Webster had to deal with.

**UTA HAGEN**

But you were the worst. You were such a presence you had us all intimidated with the flick of a finger, without even trying. You were outrageous!!

**ROBESON**

Oh my goodness, I was wasn't I. Invulnerable! Celebrated! I had already stood in the fire! And I was the Emperor Jones back then! "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue."

**UTA HAGEN**

*(laughs to catch him)*

You're playing the Emperor Jones, and you're quoting The Great God Brown! You outrageous scoundrel!

**ROBESON**

Well, I never could put one over on you, could I?

**UTA HAGEN**

Who do you think you're messing with here?!

**ROBESON**

My acting mentor and maybe the best friend I ever had. I never could have gotten Othello right without you.

**UTA HAGEN**

You would have. You were brilliant! You were larger than life!

**ROBESON**

I was a stiff. An "oversized statue with an outsized voice box."

**UTA HAGEN**

You had him in you all along. You owned him in your soul.

**ROBESON**

But not in my heart. You taught me how to find that. You showed me how to go into those hidden places inside myself – the one's I'd blocked off for so long.

**UTA HAGEN** *(taunts him)*

I couldn't tell you anything! I just had to let it seep in like steeping tea.

**ROBESON**

But you drew it out of me. And I adored you for it.

**UTA HAGEN**

Oh, Paul. I loved you so much!

*(Moved to tears, she turns from him. He goes to hold her. She pulls away.)*

Before you, there had only been Joe. Only my husband. I was so young, so innocent.

**ROBESON** *(bounds away from her)*

Innocence! Now there's a commodity! Something I lost so long ago, I can't even remember what it was like. In my world, you wake up with fear in your gut, the moment you learn how to speak. And all the motherly love in the world can't hold off that beast at the door.

**UTA HAGEN**

You had the world at your door before long — and at your feet.

**ROBESON**

Yes, but at what cost? And for what reason? To hear the well-spoken black man — the quantum leap Negro! The articulate freak! The Exception that proved the rule!

**UTA HAGEN**

Still the rage beneath the smile. I think that drew me more than anything. Pain and sadness in Prometheus — irresistible!

**ROBESON**

*(teases her)*

When a woman has lust for a man, she'll make up any excuse.

**UTA HAGEN**

Why, you arrogant son of a bitch!

*Half angry, half pleased, she turns at him as if she'd like to hit him.*

**ROBESON**

How about “arrogant black bastard” now that you've opened the door on it? Because it's not that I accomplished things. It's that I showed pride in it! And confidence! And superiority! That's what they hated about me!

**UTA HAGEN**

And what you loved about what they hated.

*(entirely to herself)*

You beautiful, tortured, complex man. How I loved you so...

**ROBESON**

*(Knowing she gets him yet again, he sags his shoulders as if to call a truce.)*

Besides, we had no illusions, you and I. We were both married. You knew I would never leave Essie. I never shared the same bed with her. But I would never leave her.

**UTA HAGEN**

Or any of your other girlfriends? Good God! How many were there Paul?!

**ROBESON**

I never lied to you.

**UTA HAGEN**

You never had to. I never knew! I was the only one in the world who didn't for God's sake!

**ROBESON**

When I was with you, I was with you!! No one else!

**UTA HAGEN**

But how many before!?! How many women did you have stashed around the world! Jesus God, Paul! Why?!

**ROBESON**

Why does a man do anything? Because if the white man would not accept me, it soothed my fragile self-image that white women did?! Because the variety left me emotionally safe?! That's why every man is promiscuous, I think. I couldn't have you own me; that would have been another kind of slavery.

**UTA HAGEN**

If that isn't the most outlandishly farcical excuse I ever heard! And I'll be damned if I don't believe you. Damn you, Paul! You're the most persuasive man I ever met.

**ROBESON**

I don't persuade anyone. Not any longer.

**UTA HAGEN**

You persuade everyone! That's your whole problem!

**ROBESON**

It was never a secret.

*He turns to the mirror. She steps toward him.*

**UTA HAGEN**

But it should have been. God knows, it should have been!! Didn't you know that's what they wanted?! Didn't you know that was exactly what they would use against you?! The big black, super stud making off with the white man's women! Boy, did you play right into their hands! J. Edgar Hoover had a file on you thicker than the Manhattan phone book!

**ROBESON** *(motions with his fingers)*

J. Edgar's had a file that thick on me since there was an FBI! And what do you think would have happened if I had done the honorable thing?!

*(Continuing, he turns back toward her as if to confront her with something she would never look at before now.)*

If I ever would have married you and taken you as my wife, what would have happened then?! On what cross on what hill do you think they would have crucified us both?! Is your memory so short that you've forgotten what happened on that hotel elevator in Boston?!

**UTA HAGEN**

*(remembers)*

How could I? You and I locked arm in arm. That very elegant, well dressed, seemingly upper-class woman gets on, sees us together and spits right in my face. I wanted so much to slug her. And all I could do was turn the other cheek.

**ROBESON**

Welcome to my world! Welcome to what I've had to deal with my whole life long!

**UTA HAGEN**

Essie would have hit her. Your wife would have hit her. But then, Essie's black. So it wouldn't have been an issue.

**ROBESON**

Oh, but you're wrong. It's always an issue. Just our being on that hotel elevator would have been an issue.

*(He actually circles her.)*

Do you know how many freight elevators we've had to ride in our lives because of the color of our skin?! Great God almighty! I've been honored by heads of state of half the countries in the world! And I have to ride a freight elevator in Indianapolis, Indiana because they're ashamed to let people know they have a black man staying in their hotel!

**UTA HAGEN**

I remember Indianapolis — that redneck town. And the eighteen faces of Paul Robeson. And seeing just how racist they were you pulled out number three.

**ROBESON**

*(Remembering with pleasure)*

The famous cakewalk scratch and shuffle...

*Mimics the servile parody of the black cliché.*

“Yawsa boss. I'm jus' good ol' Paul Robeson gonna sing for you white folks tonight. Jus' so happy to be here in dis' pretty blue room, dat I'm a gonna sing de 'Camptown Racetrack song.'”

*Uta is laughing, while Paul walks around the dressing room, like a minstrel show.*

Oh, De Camptown Ladies sing this song, Doo Dah, Doo Dah!

Oh De Camptown Racetrack's Five Miles Long....Oh, Doo Dah, Dey!!

*Uta joins him in the parody.*

**BOTH**

Gonna run all night! Gonna run all day.

I bet my money on the bobtail nag.

Somebody bet on the Bay!

*They both almost fall down laughing.*



**ROBESON**

*(catching his breath.)*

The sad thing about it is that they all bought it.

**UTA HAGEN**

All but that banker from Chicago —if you could have seen the look of horrified amusement on his face.

**ROBESON**

If one white man in fifty gets us right, it's a glorious day after all.

*He looks up and down again, reflecting the consequences. He all but breaks.*

Oh, God! Why does my own country hate me so?!

**UTA HAGEN**

People don't hate us. Governments hate us. They hate anyone who takes a stand against the established order of things.

**ROBESON**

Wrong! Government is a reflection of human consciousness— nothing more, nothing less. No, my dear lady! I have looked this devil in the face all my life and it is definitely personal!

*Haunted, he comes back to the mirror looks into it and remembers.*

When I went to play football at Rutgers my teammates hated me so much, they tried to cripple me every play, every day for the first month I was there.

**UTA HAGEN**

As usual, you won them all over. And you made All American...twice.

**ROBESON**

Stripped.

**UTA HAGEN**

I didn't know.

**ROBESON**

My All-American honors, all my acting awards, and all my singing awards... As if by taking my awards, they could strip away some part of my soul.

**UTA HAGEN**

I knew about those...

**ROBESON**

Trinkets!

**UTA HAGEN**

And they'll give them back some day, and then they'll be valuable if for no other reason than the fact that they were yours.

**ROBESON**

Why? Because I'm a freak of nature?! Because my works will be contraband, like conflict diamonds—something sold on the “Black” market?

**UTA HAGEN**

Because that is the way of the world! Corrupt, materialistic. It is the world we live in...

**ROBESON**

*(contemptuous)*

As if it mattered. I don't want them back. What I want is respect, not for me. I've had it in my time. For my people! They say I disgraced my country, when all I ever did was respect my country...and represent my people to my country as if it mattered.

**UTA HAGEN**

Oh, for God sake don't start in on that “poor black me” business! Not with me, Paul. I was there with you in some of those years. Or have you forgotten?

**ROBESON**

Yes you were there with me. But you were not me! You were not the son of a slave! Because when all was said and done, you all went back to your safe little penthouses in New York City and your estates in the Hamptons. And we went back to burnt homes, bombed out churches, and being whipped and kicked in public.

**UTA HAGEN**

How dare you say it didn't cost me! They took my career! They took my dreams!!

**ROBESON**

And they're taking my life! And my life has become nothing! I'm a mute in a maelstrom! They've silenced me!

**UTA HAGEN**

Stop talking like that! Stop trivializing what you've done! They'll never silence you. Not you!

**ROBESON**

They already have! And it started a long time ago!

*He paces like a cat and then returns to the mirror.*

You mentioned Albert Einstein, that good, fine man. I'll tell you the last time I saw him was when he went with Lena Horne and a group of us to go see President Truman. It was 1946, and we had to go see our own President to get a law put in place to stop lynching blacks in the south! We tried to pass a law to protect 20 million of our own people, and we got turned down flat!!

**ROBESON**

*(He turns to her.)*

And you know what our dear President Truman told us?! He said it wasn't "a propitious time for that kind of legislation" And then he lectured us, saying that we had to remember that The United States and England were "the last bastions of freedom in the world."

**UTA HAGEN**

And you said, "The British Empire is the greatest enslaver of human beings in history!" And it made all the papers. And two weeks later you were in fact-finding hearings for the House Un-American Activities Committee. And didn't it make all the papers?! And didn't your own wife warn you...

**ROBESON**

And warn me, and warn me...And you know what...after decades of turning the other cheek and saying the right thing, I finally started cutting loose and speaking my mind. God forbid, I should speak my mind!

**UTA HAGEN**

Oh, Mr. Robeson! Who are you kidding?! You've never done anything but speak your mind. Who else would you be if you didn't speak your mind. You certainly spoke your mind when you called the House Un-American Activities Committee "Un-American"!

**ROBESON**

They were! They were! God Damn them they were!! What did they do to our country?! What did they do to my people?! All in the climate and culture of fear that would have made the Nazis proud!

**UTA HAGEN**

And Stalin was any better?!

**ROBESON**

I know where you're going with this...not today. Not tonight!

**UTA HAGEN**

Then Sometime!

*(she gauges him)*

That's what did it. Wasn't it?

**ROBESON**

How can you be so naïve as to ever think that it would be any single thing?!

**UTA HAGEN**

The final insult. The final betrayal. But how could you tell, you had so many.

*He breaks away from her toward another mirror,  
and then another, looking into them as if still trying  
to make this all fit into some bank of logic.*

**ROBESON**

*(tastes the irony of it)*

When I first went to the Soviet Union, it was in the '30s. They were our allies, and I could feel the friendship and admiration. No one ever called us "nigger" or hated us because of our color. Then World War II came and went and things went upside down. Suddenly our allies are enemies. And so I'm expected to abandon the people with whom I share the most in common?! You can't do that! I had to stand up!

**UTA HAGEN**

But what did you stand up for? What?! You heard what's happened. Have you read the translations of this writer, Solzhenitsyn?! Have you read the blocked manuscripts? !They're pirated everywhere these days!

**ROBESON**

I refused! I still refuse! It's Western propaganda! Nothing more!

**UTA HAGEN** *(goes after him.)*

It's not! Read them for God's sake! It's worse than Hitler!

**ROBESON**

Nothing could be worse than Hitler!!

**UTA HAGEN**

It is worse!! It is worse! And it was under your dear friend Josef Stalin! Millions! Maybe ten million! They don't even know for sure!

**ROBESON**

I couldn't be! The Russians wouldn't do that! I've met with Premier Khrushchev, and he assured me that it was blown way out of proportion —that whatever problem they had they've cleaned up!

**UTA HAGEN**

Of course, he would. Because the truth leaked out—because it's tearing at the seams, and soon the whole world will know.

**ROBESON**

It's not true! It's not true! The truth will come out, and then you'll see!

**UTA HAGEN**

Oh, for God's sake, Paul, wake up! They used you. They used us! They used us all! They're all the same! Sometimes the Beast wears a different mask that's all! They're kissing your ass while they're persecuting Jews! They kiss my ass while they commit pogrom against the blacks in Africa. Celebrities and stars and scientists and idealists are fodder for their mill.

**ROBESON** *(breaks away from her)*

Then let us be used! And how could we not be?! How could anyone with eyes to see not take a stand?!

**UTA HAGEN**

It's the same corrupt establishment — the same ugly face! The only the difference is that in a so-called free society the atrocities are out in the open! They've used us, and they're using you right now... from both sides.

**ROBESON**

They don't use me! I use them! I use them!! Whatever alliance I have to make, whatever hand I have to shake, I will take the cause forward. Whatever ass I have to kiss or tyrant I have to outrage, I will take the cause forward!

**UTA HAGEN**

Then be more selective in how you do it! And start now!

**ROBESON**

You sound like my wife!!

**UTA HAGEN**

Well!!!?

*She comes and looks at his reflection with hers.*

We have a great deal in common, Essie and I.

**ROBESON**

Essie is my Lion! She was my voice in all those years when they shut me down cold!!

*Robeson strides away. Uta marks his pacing.*

When they took my passport and banned me from the radio — when no public place would give me speech or let me sing, Essie carried our message! **She** was listened to! She was the only voice we had.

*He turns back to remember.*

Then in 1955, when they took that young boy in Mississippi.

**UTA HAGEN**

Emmett Till.

**ROBESON**

Emmett Till!! The name still haunts me! And I'll make sure it haunts us all until the end of time! He whistled at a white woman. Whistled! he same thing young men do every morning in the world in a thousand countries a million times a day — a normal thing, a flirtatious thing. But he was colored and it was the South. He was only fourteen, but that didn't matter. He whistled at a white woman!

*Still disbelieving, he paces around the room like a cat, still trying to rationalize the kind of animal behavior that takes pride in such things.*

They took him to a tree and they cut off his balls, stuffed them in his mouth, put out his eyes, hanged him and then set him on fire!

**UTA HAGEN**

It was horrible. We all remember.

**ROBESON**

Even now, Congress has never summoned up the guts to pass an anti-lynching law. But somehow shortly after Emmett Till, things loosened up for all of us. The Eisenhower administration gave me my passport back, and I could move about the world again. Uncanny timing wouldn't you say? (*thinks about it*). Even though I couldn't save Emmitt Till. In some strange way, he saved me.

*Finally breaking he falls to one knee, Uta rushes over and slides him into a nearby chair.*

Oh, God forgive me I've failed! I have failed everyone!!

**UTA HAGEN**

Stop it! Stop it now! You are the rock! No man could have done...

**ROBESON**

*(interrupts violently)*

Nothing! I have done nothing! Except let...myself...be broken! Brought down! Brought down so low!!

**UTA HAGEN**

*(Almost panicked to console him, she runs to hold him, reciting the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm)*

"For dogs have compassed me. The assembly of the wicked have enclosed me; they pierce my hands and my feet..."

*Rejecting her, he gets to his feet and struggles around the room as if fighting for his life.*

**ROBESON**

No! No! I am no martyr! I am a warrior! I'm a warrior!! Whenever there are people being trampled for their race or denied the dignity of life because of the color of their skin, I'll be there! Whenever workers are beaten or denied a living, I'll be there!

**UTA HAGEN**

*(noting his fragility.)*

Yes, you will!

**ROBESON**

*(continuing in passion and emphasis)*

And I'll fight Apartheid. And I'll sing in Trafalgar Square tomorrow! And I'll go to Moscow and sing! And whenever I do, it will be the same song from all our dark and bleeding hearts!

*It is getting to him. He stumbles forward. Uta joins him there, holding him as he sings.*

“When Israel was in Egypt's land  
Let my people go!  
Oppressed so hard, they could not stand  
Let my people go...”

*The two hold one another for a moment.*

I have to go back, dear friend. I have to go back to Mother Russia one last time.

**UTA HAGEN**

*(almost by reflex)*

At your peril.

*(To be continued. If you would like to see the full script you may contact Robert Joseph Ahola at:*

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