

BFI SPOTLIGHTS THE GREAT PAUL ROBESON

A SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE RENOWNED ACTOR, SINGER &
POLITICAL ACTIVIST



The Proud Valley

- Screenings of *The Proud Valley*, *Song of Freedom*, *Jericho*, *Borderline*, *Body and Soul* and *Show Boat*
- Dedicated Paul Robeson collection available to audiences across the UK on BFI Player through Black Britain on Film
- Nationwide tour across Wales of *The Proud Valley*
- Exhibition showcasing Paul Robeson's film career

London: Thursday, 3 November, 2016 – The BFI is celebrating the work of the towering **Paul Robeson** (1898-1976) as part of its **BLACK STAR season** and new **Black Britain on Film collection**, aiming to bring his work and legacy to a new generation of fans. The American-born actor, singer, athlete, lawyer and political activist was a true transatlantic trailblazer with a central role in the American Civil Rights Movement who found fame in the UK and went on to make a significant impact in British film and theatre.

Paul Robeson travelled to the UK in the late 1920s, searching for opportunities that were not available for black actors in America at the time. In the UK, he took to both stage and screen, becoming the first black actor to play *Othello* (1930) in over a century and originating the iconic role of 'Joe' in the West End theatre production of *Show Boat* and later in the film adaptation, which went on to become a box office hit.

Determined to break through the stereotypes associated with black actors, Paul Robeson was insistent on playing challenging and insightful roles and this can be seen through his work, particularly in *The Proud Valley* and *Song of Freedom*, the two films he cites as his most significant.

*"In addition to Paul Robeson's myriad talents as an entertainer, he showed extraordinary moral courage and political conviction at each step. In Britain, he enjoyed a phenomenally successful screen career, effectively becoming the UK's first black screen star. In the case of **Big Fella** (dir. J. Elder Wills, 1937), Paul Robeson was given final cut approval, an unprecedented option at the time for an actor of any race. – Ashley Clark, BFI BLACK STAR Season Programmer*

The BFI's Paul Robeson retrospective will include **screenings at BFI Southbank in London** of 1940's classic, *The Proud Valley* (dir. Pen Tennyson), a gritty and heartfelt social drama, in which Robeson plays an American stoker who finds work in a Welsh mining community; *Song of Freedom* (dir. J. Elder Wills, 1936), about a London dock-worker who finds fame and fortune as an opera singer and then uses his wealth to seek out his African heritage; *Body and Soul* (dir. Oscar Micheaux, 1925), Robeson's feature film debut, where he stars as an escaped convict trying to pass as a local preacher in the Deep South; *Jericho* (dir. Thornton Freeland, 1937), which follows an American WWII soldier who flees to Africa after being unjustly sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit and becomes the powerful leader of an Arab tribe; *Borderline* (dir. Kenneth Macpherson, 1930), the ground-breaking psychological thriller about an interracial love triangle; and *Show Boat* (dir. James Whale), the musical in which Robeson originated the iconic role of Joe in both the West End theatre production in 1928 and the film adaptation in 1936, introducing audiences to his unforgettable rendition of the classic song, 'Ol Man River.

As part of the **BFI's Black Britain on Film** project, newly digitised versions of Paul Robeson films will also be available on BFI Player from 11 November to audiences across the UK, including *The Proud Valley*, *Song of Freedom*, *Body and Soul*, *The Black Emperor* (1949), a short excerpt from *Song of Freedom*, which charts the rise of Paul Robeson's character to stardom as an international opera singer; *King Solomon's Mines* (dir. Robert Stevenson, 1937), in which Robeson plays a dispossessed African King who accompanies a group of English explorers on a perilous journey to find the gold mines of King Solomon; *Mining Review 2nd Year No. 11: A Star Drops In* (dir. Peter Pickering, 1949), a newsreel in which Paul Robeson visits Woolmet Colliery near Edinburgh and sings 'I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hall Last Night' for miners in the canteen, a song about an American trade unionist who was allegedly framed on a murder charge and executed in 1915; and *Sanders of the River* (dir. Zoltan Korda, 1935) about a West African chief (Robeson) who helps a British Commissioner restore order to his kingdom. Robeson disowned this film as it uncritically retains the patronising racism of Edgar Wallace's novel. However, *Sanders of the River* is presented as part of the Paul Robeson collection as an interesting turning point in Robeson's film career, when he became insistent on playing roles that broke away from racial stereotypes.

BFI's Film Hub Wales, together with venues across Welsh communities, will be conducting an immersive nation-wide tour of a remastered version of *The Proud Valley*. Filmed on location in the Rhondda Valley coalfields in Wales, *The Proud Valley* was significant in its portrayal of the struggles of the Welsh working class. **The tour will launch in Cardiff on Sunday, 13 November**, where the screening will be accompanied by a performance from the Treorchy Male Choir and followed by a panel discussion, exploring Paul Robeson's impact on Welsh life, politics and in particular, the mining communities. The full BFI Film Hub Wales programme can be found at <http://filmhubwales.org/projects/bfi-black-star>

Also on display during the season is the **exhibition Paul Robeson: Black Star**, which runs until 22 January in the Mezzanine Gallery at BFI Southbank. Included are **original posters** from the BFI National Archive (*Sanders of the River* and *The Proud Valley*) and the Separate Cinema archive

(*Song of Freedom*); **original press campaign books** for films including *Song of Freedom*, *Sanders of the River*, *Big Fella* and *The Proud Valley*; **Edward Steichen's 1933 Vanity Fair portrait of Robeson** to promote the film version *The Emperor Jones*; and there is also **a chance to hear Robeson singing** in short compilation *The Black Emperor* and in a featurette from *Mining Review 2nd Year No. 11: A Star Drops In*.

*"Paul Robeson felt a strong affinity with Wales and the Welsh miners. In the late 1920s he joined in their hunger marches and performed in Wales many times from the late 20s onwards. **The Proud Valley**, in which Robeson plays an American ship's stoker who becomes a miner in the Rhondda Valley, reinforced this relationship. Lord Beaverbrook refused to promote the film because of pro-Soviet comments made by Robeson at the outbreak of World War II. When Robeson's passport was revoked by the American authorities in 1950, the South Wales miners were among the protestors who lobbied the US government for its return. **Mining Review** shows Robeson being given a warm welcome when visiting miners in Woolmet Colliery near Edinburgh a decade on from **The Proud Valley**." - Nathalie Morris, Senior Curator, BFI National Archive.*

The **BFI's BLACK STAR season**, which runs until the end of the year, is the UK's biggest season of film and television dedicated to celebrating the range, versatility and power of black actors. The season's aim is to bring the work of black actors to a new generation of UK audiences, helping to reposition them and their performances in our collective memory.

Black Britain on Film, a major new collection of over 150 film and TV titles that uncovers the heritage of black Britain. It features some of the earliest appearances of black Britons in two films by Mitchell & Kenyon, as well as ground-breaking post-war documentaries with fascinating insights into black communities. The collection includes lesser-known TV drama, contemporary features and films of iconic figures including **Paul Robeson, Muhammed Ali, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King**. **Black Britain on Film** charts changing attitudes and hidden histories spanning more than a century.

Black Britain on Film complements the BFI's new blockbuster season **BLACK STAR** and is available to view on the BFI's VOD platform, BFI Player, mostly for free. It is part of the BFI's five-year **Britain on Film** project to digitise, and make available online, 10,000 films, from the BFI National Archive and the UK's national and regional film archives, by 2017.

<http://player.bfi.org.uk/collections/black-britain-on-film/>

BLACK STAR will be available to audiences everywhere in the UK; in cinemas including BFI Southbank, on BBC Television, on BFI DVD/Blu-ray and online via BFI Player until 31 December.

The full BLACK STAR Paul Robeson programme can be found at:
<https://whatson.bfi.org.uk/Online/paulrobeson>

***Body and Soul* (dir. Oscar Micheaux, 1925)**

With Paul Robeson, Marshall Rogers, Lawrence Chenault

In his screen debut, Robeson delivers an electrifying performance as an escaped convict trying to pass as a local preacher in the Deep South. *Body and Soul*, which firmly established the 'Micheaux style,' is a seminal film in the history and advancement of black cinema.

***Sanders of the River* (dir. Zoltan Korda, 1935)**

With Paul Robeson, Leslie Banks, Nina Mae Mckinney, Charles Carson, Robert Cochran

British Commissioner Sanders rules the West African territories in the manner of a strict father, watching over his subjects with a combination of force and indulgence. When Sanders takes a period of leave, his kingdom falls into disarray, until order is restored with the help of the loyal chief Bosambo (Robeson).

Despite the objections of Zoltan, who had wanted a more sensitive study of African culture and society, *Sanders* is an unwavering celebration of British colonial rule. As a result, *Sanders of the River* uncritically retains the patronising racism of Edgar Wallace's novel. Although Robeson subsequently disowned the film and vowed never to work with Korda again, his dignified performance and powerful bass voice contributed much to the film, and gave it a popular hit song, 'The Canoe Song'. *Sanders of the River* is presented as part of the Paul Robeson collection as an interesting turning point in his film career when he became insistent on playing roles that broke away from racial stereotypes.

***Borderline* (dir. Kenneth Macpherson, 1930)**

With Paul Robeson, Eslanda Robeson, Hilda Doolittle, Gavin Arthur

Robeson and his wife star in his tense, fragmented psychological thriller about an interracial love triangle. Pete and Adah are reunited when Adah discovers her lost love is working in a nearby hotel, but her new partner, a white man, erupts into a deadly rage. Formally and socially innovative, this groundbreaking film uses what lesbian poet HD (also starring) called 'clatter montage' to draw out the raw, emotional inner worlds of its diverse cast.

***Song of Freedom* (dir. J. Elder Wills, 1936)**

With Paul Robeson, Elisabeth Welch, Esme Percy, Ecce Homo Toto

A lowly London dock-worker suddenly finds fame and fortune as a world-famous opera singer, then uses his wealth to seek out his African heritage. Robeson, in the lead role, is a powerful onscreen presence in this unusual and entertaining early Hammer drama, which includes highlights such as 'Sleepy River' – delightfully performed as a duet with his co-star Elisabeth Welch.

***Show Boat* (dir. James Whale, 1936)**

With Paul Robeson, Irene Dunne, Allan Jones, Helen Morgan

A stunning screen version of the ground-breaking Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein II musical, itself based on the Edna Ferber novel, about life on and around a Mississippi steamboat. Robeson had played the role of Joe, the stevedore, over 500 times on the stage, and his rendition, in a tour-de-force four-minute sequence, of 'Ol' Man River' is a definite highlight of the film.

***Jericho* (dir. Thornton Freeland, 1937)**

With Paul Robeson, Henry Wilcoxon, Wallace Ford, Princess Kouka

Despite saving the lives of his comrades aboard a torpedoed military ship, courageous American WWI soldier 'Jericho' Jackson (Robeson) is unjustly sentenced to death after he's involved in the accidental death of a sergeant. Escaping and fleeing to Africa, Jericho becomes the powerful leader of an Arab tribe. This compelling drama also sees Robeson, on fine form, sing some splendid songs.

***King Solomon's Mines* (dir. Robert Stevenson, 1937)**

With Paul Robeson, Cedric Hardwicke, Roland Young, John Loder, Anna Lee

Africa, the 1880s. Umbopa (Robeson), the dispossessed King of the Kukuana people, is determined to return home and reclaim his throne. He poses as a guide and accompanies a group of English explorers on a perilous journey to his homeland, and the gold mines of King Solomon.

When they reach Kukuana land, Umbopa reveals to the explorers his true identity, and takes charge of the expedition. The explorers support Umbopa in his battle to defeat the evil, one-eyed King Twala. After the battle, Umbopa is restored to his throne, and in gratitude to the explorers he leads them to the gold mines of King Solomon. Umbopa has to rescue them when they are trapped in the mines by the ancient witch doctor, Gagool, believed to be hundreds of years old. Umbopa becomes the proud king of an independent African country.

***The Proud Valley* (dir. Pen Tennyson, 1940)**

With Paul Robeson, Edward Chapman, Edward Rigby

As an African-American stoker who finds work down the pit in a Welsh mining community, Robeson, in his last British feature, was provided with his best screen role, and the one of which he was most proud. *The Proud Valley* is a gritty and heartfelt social drama, but one with plenty of time for song – most memorably with Robeson’s moving performance of the spiritual ‘Deep River’.

***The Mining Review 2nd Year No. 11* (dir. Peter Pickering, 1949)**

The highlight of this 1949 issue is the visit of American actor and singer Paul Robeson to Woolmet Colliery near Edinburgh. Robeson was also a renowned (and often persecuted) left-wing political activist and he made several visits to British mining communities. On this occasion he sings ‘I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hall Last Night’ for miners in the canteen, a song about an American trade unionist who was allegedly framed on a murder charge and executed in 1915.

Robeson had long been something of a hero to the British mining community, ever since he starred in the film *Proud Valley* (d. Pen Tennyson, 1940) as an American sailor stranded in Cardiff who finds work in a Welsh colliery (the newsreel opens with a short clip from the film).

***The Black Emperor* (1949)**

Paul Robeson was one of British cinema’s most bankable stars of the 1930s and his 1937 feature *Song of Freedom* was repurposed after the war for home viewing. This short extract charts the rise of his character John Zinga to stardom as an international opera singer. It features two songs from the film, *Stepping Stone* and the song from the onscreen opera, *Black Emperor*.

Social Media:

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***** PICTURE DESK *****

A selection of images for journalistic use in promoting BFI Southbank screenings can be found at www.image.net under BFI /BFI UK Publicity /BFI /BFI BLACK STAR

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NOTES TO EDITORS

BFI BLACK STAR

BLACK STAR is the UK's biggest ever season of film and television dedicated to celebrating the range, versatility and power of black actors. BLACK STAR celebrates the relationship between stars and the audiences who love them, spotlighting great performances by black actors on screen from the earliest years of cinema through to the present day, whilst exploring why opportunities to shine on screen have been historically limited for black actors. BLACK STAR celebrates films that feature black actors in central roles, bringing their work to a new generation of UK audiences and helping to reposition them and their performances in our collective memory. BLACK STAR is currently taking place across the UK, at BFI Southbank, on BFI Player and on DVD.

BFI BLACK BRITAIN ON FILM

Black Britain on Film, a major new collection of over 150 film and TV titles that uncovers the heritage of black Britain. It features some of the earliest appearances of black Britons in two films by Mitchell & Kenyon, as well as ground-breaking post-war documentaries with fascinating insights into black communities. The collection includes lesser-known TV drama, contemporary features and films of iconic figures including **Paul Robeson, Muhammed Ali, Malcolm X** and **Martin Luther King**. **Black Britain on Film** charts changing attitudes and hidden histories spanning more than a century.

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<http://player.bfi.org.uk/collections/black-britain-on-film/>

Black Britain on Film will include a touring programme of archive for cinemas and community groups from the Independent Cinema Office (ICO) and complementary programming with broadcast partners such as the BBC and London Live.

ABOUT THE BFI

The BFI is the lead organisation for film in the UK with the ambition to create a flourishing film environment in which innovation, opportunity and creativity can thrive by:

- Connecting audiences to the widest choice of British and World cinema
- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK - investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

The BFI is a Government arm's-length body and distributor of Lottery funds for film. The BFI serves a public role which covers the cultural, creative and economic aspects of film in the UK. It delivers this role:

- As the UK-wide organisation for film, a charity core funded by Government
- By providing Lottery and Government funds for film across the UK

- By working with partners to advance the position of film in the UK.

Founded in 1933, the BFI is a registered charity governed by Royal Charter. The BFI Board of Governors is chaired by Josh Berger CBE.