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AFRICAN AMERICAN PERFORMERS IN STALIN'S SOVIET UNION:  
BETWEEN POLITICAL PROMISE AND RACIAL PROPAGANDA

by

CHRISTOPHER SILSBY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2018

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African American Performers in Stalin's Soviet Union:  
Between Political Promise and Racial Propaganda

by  
Christopher Silsby

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

May 11, 2018

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

African American Performers in Stalin's Soviet Union:  
Between Political Promise and Racial Propaganda  
by  
Christopher Silsby

Advisor: Marvin Carlson

In the first half of the twentieth century, a significant number of African Americans left the United States for the promise of racial and economic equality in the supposedly class-less society of a post-Revolution Soviet Union. This dissertation uses a series of interrelated case studies to contextualize the theatrical work of Paul Robeson, jazz dancer Henry Scott, actor Wayland Rudd, and the 1955-56 international tour of *Porgy and Bess* within the overlapping social, political, and aesthetic landscapes of African American and Soviet performance in Moscow during the rise and height of Stalinism.

Starting with an overview of race in the Stalinist era through Paul Robeson's experiences in the 1930s and '40s, this dissertation reads Robeson as an interpretive structure for African Americans in the Soviet Union. It then looks at the racial ambivalence and suspicions of cultural loyalty apparent in the experiences of Henry Scott and Wayland Rudd. As an embodied representation of American jazz in the growing Stalinism of the 1920s and '30s, Scott's experiences intersect the trajectories of coloniality, antiracism, popular entertainment, and political cultural policy under Stalin. Wayland Rudd's career,

which began in the American theatre before the actor left for the Soviet Union in 1932, spans cultures and can help to highlight the differences in performances for the same actor in the United States and the Soviet Union. Rudd constantly negotiated and renegotiated his identity as an American, African American, and Soviet throughout his career in Russia during the 1930s and '40s. Ending with the Soviet interpretations of *Porgy and Bess*, the final case study examines failures of both US and Soviet propaganda to completely turn this transcultural performance to either nation's political purpose.

## Acknowledgements

Research for this dissertation took a rather circuitous journey, following archival trails across the country and across the globe. There is no central repository for the subjects in this project—material was scattered in collections, archives, and personal ephemera from New York to Atlanta, Cambridge to New Haven, and Washington, DC, to Moscow. As I gathered these dispersed sources, I relied on the support of many fellowships, organizations, and people.

Without the funding provided by the CUNY Advanced Research Collective Knickerbocker Archival Research Grant in American Studies, Rosette C. Lamont Fellowship for International Dissertation Research, and the Leon Levy Center for Biography Dissertation Fellowship, I would not have been able to travel to these distant archives.

Henry Scott's family—grandchildren Damian Robinson and Barrienne Brown, and children Ulemai "Margie" Scott and Scott Brown-Pempeit—provided many interesting personal recollections and newspaper clippings that led me to the sources used in Scott's chapter. Artist Yevgeniy Fiks and filmmaker Yelena Demikovsky pointed me in the right direction for posters, prints, and visual cultural artifacts for my archival trip in Moscow.

My committee was extremely supportive throughout the project. Marvin Carlson not only helped me focus this wide-ranging transnational project, but wrote countless letters of recommendation for fellowships and letters of introduction necessary for admittance to Russian archives. David Savran shared his enthusiasm for European jazz and Shostakovich, which were both circling around the chapters in this dissertation. James Wilson's advice helped me to make sure that my non-chronological structure still made sense.

Thank you for Lynette Gibson for all of her organizational and emotional support throughout this process from course registration, room scheduling, to final defense.

Without the support of my family, this would not have been possible. I am forever grateful to my parents and in-laws for their encouragement. Thank you to Ezekiel and Eliezer for keeping me focused on the end goal. And without Jessica, this project would not have been completed. Thank you for your support and sacrifices so I could take archival research trips and have time to write.

This dissertation is dedicated to Daniel Gerould, who inspired my initial research project, made the personal introductions that led to these chapters, and advised my early doctoral career.

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**African American Performers in Stalin's Soviet Union:  
Between Political Promise and Racial Propaganda**

In the first half of the twentieth century, a significant number of African Americans left the United States for the promise of racial and economic equality in the supposedly class-less society of a post-Revolution Soviet Union. Among these expatriates and visitors were the performers Henry Scott and Wayland Rudd. Scott traveled to the Soviet Union as a student in the 1920s and became a tap dancer in cabaret and jazz theatres around Moscow. Wayland Rudd arrived as part of the cast for Langston Hughes's 1932 film *Black and White*. The film never completed shooting, but Rudd remained in Moscow as a professional theatre and film actor. This dissertation uses case studies to contextualize the theatrical work of Scott and Rudd within the overlapping social, political, and aesthetic landscapes of African American and Soviet performance in Moscow during the rise and height of Stalinism.

While there is not much published specifically on Henry Scott and Wayland Rudd, a growing list of publications on the cross-cultural connections between African Americans and the Soviet Union by scholars like Kate A. Baldwin, Gerald Horne, and Dale Peterson provide the background with which my research converses. These writers examine the literary and political connection between African American and Soviet cultures; however, except for the global presence of Paul Robeson, theatrical performance is rarely if ever

discussed. Therefore, I intend to bring theatre into this discussion to explore the role of African Americans in the Soviet theatre of the Stalinist period.

### **Archival Sources**

Research for this project was primarily in archives in both the United States and Russia to examine African American-Soviet reception in the popular press as well as official theatre production archives. While Paul Robeson and the *Porgy and Bess* tour have their own archives and collections, neither Henry Scott nor Wayland Rudd have a centralized official archive. Since there is not an archive or collection specifically dedicated to African Americans in Russia, I consulted various smaller collections in archives on African American performers, Soviet theatre, and US political expatriates. The formal collected archives for this project included the New York Public Library's Billy Rose Theatre Collection and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Paul and Eslanda Goode Robeson Papers at Howard University, the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana Collection of Russian Theatrical Scripts and Papers of the Harvard Theatre Collection, Emory University's Billops-Hatch Archive in African-American theatre and Louise Thompsen Patterson Papers, and the Amherst Center for Russian Culture Special Collection at Amherst College. In Russia, my archives included the Rossiiskaya gosudarstvennaya biblioteka iskusstv [Russian State Library of the Arts], Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva [Russian State Archive of Literature and Art] (RGALI), and Rossiiskii

gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoi istorii [Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History] (RGASPI).

Yevgeniy Fiks, an artist, invited me to view his curated Wayland Rudd Collection. While not an archive, the collection includes over 200 photographs, paintings, and prints of Africans and African Americans in Soviet culture, spanning almost the entire period of the Soviet Union from the 1920s to the 1980s. Fiks asked other artists to “respond” to one or more of these archival images by creating a new work inspired by or contesting the Soviet representation. While the second part of Fiks’s project was beyond the scope of my dissertation, his collection of archival images—particularly from the 1920s to the 1960s—proved immensely useful in pointing me to specific collections in Moscow archives. Additionally, Henry Scott’s descendants—grandchildren Damian Robinson and Barrienne Brown, and children Ulemei “Margie” Scott and Scott Brown-Pempeit—graciously provided access to the family’s personal collections of clippings and other ephemera.

### **Relevant Literature**

African American performers in the Stalinist theatre as a field does not have a large body of secondary sources with which to consult. The framework for this project weaves together political and aesthetic theories from both African American and Soviet sources that are based in historiographic readings of the period. This project builds on Paul

Gilroy's theorization of the Black Atlantic,<sup>1</sup> but extends the transnational cultural exchange beyond the Africa-Europe-Americas sphere. Russia was never directly involved in the African slave trade which defined the economies of Europe and the Americas. Instead, Russian serfdom involved the owning of their own people, "souls" tied to specific lands. Serfs were not imported to work foreign soil but bought and sold as part of the land itself. Therefore, the cultural theories engaged by Gilroy hold different currency when viewed through the lens of Russian and African American encounters.

W.E.B. Du Bois, on whom Gilroy based his Black Atlantic theory, runs throughout the literature on African Americans in Russia. The arc of Du Bois's life follows the arc of cultural theory explaining connections between African Americans and Marxist internationalism. His early writings have come to be emblematic of the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance, but his later writings are more sympathetic toward the Soviet Union. Du Bois himself made trips to the Soviet Union, but since he traveled as a scholar rather than celebrity, his presence did not garner the attention of Langston Hughes or Paul Robeson. In the 1930s, Du Bois began to take a more international approach as he modified his famous statement that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" to include labor with color as a specific instance of oppression, a "special exploitation and a super profit."<sup>2</sup> Du Bois twice broke with the NAACP over his Marxist economic views of racial oppression and by 1948 had severed all

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1986), 6.

ties with the organization.

Erik McDuffie codifies Gerald Horne's writing about Du Bois and Black Internationalism into a thesis that states the powers of anticommunism and white supremacy combined to define African American political struggles in the middle of the twentieth century, and the Cold War, therefore, represented a rupture in African American life and political advancement. The Civil Rights Movement, according to McDuffie and Horne, turned into a "campaign to silence black leftists," which "removed some of the most committed African American activists from the local, national, and global political stage."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in order to situate the Black-Soviet connections within a larger socio-political theory, I am in some ways reading against the established Civil Rights discourse of assimilation and acceptance within the United States. One way to establish this is to place Du Bois's class and race theories in dialogue with theories from the Russian and Soviet context to examine those figures who did leave the United States to perform in the Soviet Union.

Kate A. Baldwin sees a connection between Slavic *ressentiment*, the feeling of extreme powerlessness that Leah Greenfeld claims led to the Russian Revolution and the Soviet attempt to "save the world" from oppression, and Du Bois's double consciousness as used by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*.<sup>4</sup> Both *ressentiment* and double consciousness explain "racially particularistic" modes of thinking, the aspirational nationalism of "ex-

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<sup>3</sup> Erik S. McDuffie, "Black and Red: Black Liberation, the Cold War, and the Horne Thesis," *The Journal of African American History* 96, No. 2 (Spring 2011): 237.

<sup>4</sup> Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 8-9.

slaves but not-yet-citizens," and "sometimes global and occasionally universalist" diasporic vision.<sup>5</sup>

James Smethurst argues that the "Black Belt" thesis "was plagued also by a romantic assessment of African-American rural culture based in no small part on European valorizations of peasants, soil, and blood."<sup>6</sup> Smethurst also sees this Black-Soviet connection as an alternative to Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic" theory. "Black Bolshevism," as Smethurst terms this internationalism, counters the triangle trade enslaver-slave relationship central to the "Black Atlantic" formulation.<sup>7</sup>

In a seeming contradiction, Baldwin supports Smethurst's argument by disagreeing with his initial reading of the Black Belt Thesis. Rather than seeing the Comintern's position as "European valorization of peasants, soil, and blood," Baldwin argues that the Comintern was "contesting Western paradigms of identity, subjecthood, and relatedly, nation."<sup>8</sup> The Black Belt Thesis coincides with the Soviet Union's view of itself as a union of multiple ethnic nations. Soviet culture in the 1930s was to be, as resolved by the 1934 First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, a culture which embraced the multiple nationalities within its borders toward a shared political goal. By repositioning slavery and serfdom as similar means of class oppression, rather than racial institutions, and by breaking down the geographic definition of nation in favor of internationalism, the Black-Soviet connection

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<sup>5</sup> Gilroy, 127.

<sup>6</sup> James Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>7</sup> James Smethurst, "The Red Is East: Claude McKay and the New Black Radicalism of the Twentieth Century," *American Literary History* 21, No. 2 (2009): 355-6.

<sup>8</sup> Baldwin, 6.

looks forward to a shared future free of race, class, and nation. The strength of the Comintern's propaganda over the Black Belt Thesis is that it achieves both Smethurst's and Baldwin's reading: forward-looking, yet rooted in shared past experiences.

Dale Peterson's book *Up From Bondage* centers more on formal similarities between Russian and African American literatures, rather than causal historiographic interconnections. Points of formal similarity between these two traditions of cultural production that Peterson describes include Du Bois's "double consciousness" and Russian polyvocal "double-voicedness" as well as Alain Locke's reading of Jean Toomer's use of soil/soul and the Russian serf's connection between soil and soul.<sup>9</sup> These similarities might explain why performers like Robeson, Scott, and Rudd found sympathetic Soviet audiences for their American performance styles. However, Peterson's analysis is more speculation on interesting formal parallels, rather than points of historical intercultural exchange. One exception is in Peterson's detailed analysis of Richard Wright's direct allusion to Soviet aesthetics. In "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), Wright specifically seeks to emulate Russian "complex simplicity" as a revolutionary technique for American writers. Peterson extends this single reference into an lengthy discussion which concludes that Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" "closely resembles" the speech in which Maxim Gorky defined Socialist Realism as the official aesthetic of the Soviet Union at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934.<sup>10</sup> For Peterson, both the American and the Soviet writers attempt to integrate the "positive" aspects of a tradition that they otherwise seek to

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<sup>9</sup> Dale Peterson, *Up from Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 1-3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-9.

overturn, incorporating historical popular and mass culture into their respective revolutionary aesthetics.

This project examines a period in flux between the aesthetic experiments of the immediate post-Revolutionary period, through the depths of Stalin's purges, to the international antifascist cultural front of the uneasy World War II alliance between the USSR and the USA, to the beginning of the Cold War. Racial representation became an important cultural as well as political tool throughout Stalin's era. Meredith Roman sees African Americans as "indispensable creators of and participants in this discourse [of Soviet anti-racism] and, by implication, in shaping the USSR's identity as an emerging world power. They helped bring awareness of Jim Crow to the USSR, making African American oppression central to Soviet representations of U.S. democracy, and concurrently, central to representations Soviet exceptionalism regarding race."<sup>11</sup> Rather than viewing African Americans as mere pawns in competing global propaganda campaigns, Roman examines their active role in contesting the various forms of racism and anti-racism in Stalin's Soviet Union. Roman defines Soviet anti-racism as a discursive field that did not neatly align with political aims, but which can generally be seen as occurring in three periods: pre-1928 "soft line" anti-racism, 1928-1933 "Black Belt/Third Period" policies, and post-1933 Popular Front antifascism.

Michael Denning argues that the Popular Front was not originated by the Communist Party with its 1935 policy, but that it "emerged as a social movement from the

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<sup>11</sup> Meredith Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 3.

upheavals of 1933 and 1934, before the Communist Party itself adopted the position"<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in order to harness this cultural movement within 1930s United States, the COMINTERN had to soften its stance in favor of an antifascism that spoke in universal human terms, rather than fighting US Jim Crow racism.

The State Department's support of the European tour of *Porgy and Bess* was not the only attempt to counter the cultural power of the Soviet Ministry of Culture during the Cold War. Rather, as Frances Saunders demonstrates, the CIA was integral in defining a Cold War culture war by secretly funding left—but not communist-sympathizing—arts and literary projects that never explicitly went against US policy.<sup>13</sup> Saunders also illuminates the contradictory efforts of different sections of governmental power in attempting to control the cultural cold war—and undo the communist ties of the Populist Front era outlined by Denning. While Congress was scrutinizing suspect artists, the CIA would provide funding to export US culture abroad.

Building on Hazel Carby's *Race Men*, which explores black masculinity in its American context starting with W.E.B. Du Bois, my project extends her analysis to examine the black male body as viewed in the Soviet Union by placing the racial "uplift" figure of Du Bois's "race man" like Paul Robeson in dialogue with the lived experiences of less famous African American men and the aesthetic histories of Black-Soviet theatre, jazz, and performance.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998), 444.

<sup>13</sup> Frances Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999).

In his more recent interpretation of Du Bois in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy claims double consciousness as expressed in *The Souls of Black Folk* was “underpinned by a cosmopolitan imagination, which, in turn, shaped the way that he was able to make his experiences of displacement and relocation—inside as well as outside the U.S. national state—useful and appealing to readers who were remote from his immediate circumstances.”<sup>14</sup> Gilroy uses Du Bois to highlight the way in which cosmopolitanism questions attachments to social constructions like race, claiming “the project Du Bois initiated does not only look toward cosmopolitan culture for a transcendental antidote to the damage produced by ‘race.’ Instead, it invites us to lament the failures of parochial culture and local politics where they are defeated by mistaken and parochial attachments to ‘race.’”<sup>15</sup> One source of this attachment is seen in the problem of local civilization, requiring, in light of Montesquieu, that “we must learn to practice a systematic form of disloyalty to our own local civilization if we seek either to understand it or to interact equitably with others formed elsewhere.”<sup>16</sup> Not all of these figures practiced a “disloyalty” that brought the public attention of the HUAC attack on Robeson. The existence of US performers willing to travel to and live in the Soviet Union questions both local civilizations—the United State and the Soviet Union—as well as the very concept of a local civilization. Wayland Rudd chose to remain in the Soviet Union when the film funding fell apart and a series of denuncements and counter-denuncements marred the Americans’ group dynamics. Henry Scott turning to jazz dance when the Soviet educational system

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

failed him seems a startlingly familiar, capitalist pattern for a society that announced itself as a new proletarian utopia.

Anti-colonialist theorists Mignolo and Tlostanova argue that since Russia was not a major participant in the transatlantic slave economy, it therefore did not benefit from colonies in the same way as the other European powers. The Russian Empire, and the subsequent Soviet Union, engaged in a “logic of coloniality” not dependent on overseas properties through its subjugation and restructuring of central Asia.<sup>17</sup> According to Mignolo and Tlostanova, the revolution did not bring liberation to central Asian nations because despite propaganda to the contrary, the mindset of coloniality remained.<sup>18</sup> According to Mignolo and Tlostanova, Du Bois's double consciousness is not specific to the experience of living under the colonialism of the transatlantic, but to being “classified by the imperial-national gaze” no matter the source of the logic of coloniality.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, double consciousness is still a valid tool for interpreting the logic of coloniality in performances like Henry Scott's jazz dancing in Moscow clubs, Wayland Rudd's Soviet filmic portrayal of the noble African slave, Paul Robeson's standing on the ground of Soviet friendship in defiance of US governmental interference, or the treatment of *Porgy and Bess* cast members in the Soviet Union.

A definition of cosmopolitanism outlined by Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen in “Conceiving Cosmopolitanism” is “a non-communitarian, post-identity politics of

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<sup>17</sup> Madina Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 53.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 47

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

overlapping interests and heterogenous or hybrid publics in order to challenge conventional notions of belonging, identity and citizenship." They continue to categorize six perspectives and "argue that cosmopolitanism can be viewed or invoked as: (a) a socio-cultural condition; (b) a kind of philosophy or world-view; (c) a political project towards building transnational institutions; (d) a political project for recognizing multiple identities; (e) an attitudinal or dispositional orientation; and/or (f) a mode of practice or competence."<sup>20</sup> Paul Robeson's intentionally activist transnational performances are easily seen as cosmopolitan. The state-backed international tour of *Porgy and Bess* was officially the display of US anti-racism—a very state-centered, non-cosmopolitan project. However, the practice of African American bodies performing on Soviet stages and interacting with Soviet citizens in post-show galas belies an unintended cosmopolitanism that negotiates multiple identities against the script of official state propaganda. Similarly, a dancer like Henry Scott who did not see his own performances as necessarily political exists within a socio-cultural condition that exhibits competencies in performing cosmopolitanism. Whereas Wayland Rudd became a Soviet citizen during a period of transition for the official Soviet view of cosmopolitanism as a tool of the proletarian international to a term that defined counter-revolutionary enemies of the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Fine and Robin Cohen, "Four Cosmopolitan Moments," *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 146.

## Organizational Structure

The chapters of this dissertation constitute a series of interrelated case studies. Starting with a kind of overview of race in the Stalinist era through Paul Robeson's experiences in the 1930s and '40s, I read Robeson as an interpretive structure for African Americans in the Soviet Union. I then look at the racial ambivalence and suspicions of cultural loyalty apparent in the experiences of Henry Scott and Wayland Rudd. Ending with the Soviet interpretations of *Porgy and Bess*, the final chapter examines failures of either US or Soviet propaganda to completely turn this transcultural performance to either nation's political purpose.

The first chapter examines the three visits by the most famous African American performer to visit the Soviet Union under Stalin—Paul Robeson's trips in 1934, 1936, and 1949. Robeson's time in the Soviet Union span the era from introduction of Socialist Realism to the deepest Stalinist repressions. The level of global celebrity that met these tours ensures that Robeson's experience was part of a carefully constructed vision by Soviet authorities. However, this is not to say that Robeson was an unwitting accomplice in Stalin's propaganda project. Rather than looking at the political questions of Robeson's alleged Communist Party affiliations or his supposed ambivalence to the horrors of Stalin's Terror—a debate which has already been waged in the scholarship—this chapter focuses on Robeson's role as a theatrical figure in the history of African American performers in the

Soviet Union. Using his public appearances and statements during Stalinism, I examine how Robeson constructed a performed identity negotiating among the conflicting political pressures of being an African American, a global celebrity, and a Soviet sympathizing United States citizen. He established a means by which Soviet audiences interpreted Black performance—the theatrical figure against which all other African American performers would be understood.

Central to understanding Black-Soviet connections in my project is the Soviet race policy of the “Black Belt” thesis, which stated that the Southern United States were a black nation under the oppression of a white minority. Initially proposed in the 1920s, the Black Belt Thesis influenced policy and propaganda throughout the Civil Rights Era and served as a means to explain a shared history in cultural oppression. Robeson’s three visits in the Stalinist era trace a trajectory from public agreement with this official, stated Soviet “Black Belt” policy on race to a performance of nuanced disagreement with the later, more blatant, enactment of Soviet xenophobic racism during the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> Robeson’s 1934 visit occurred following Kirov’s assassination, his 1936-37 concert tour began only two months after the first Stalinist show trial, and his 1949 visit occurred during the anti-Semitic “Zionist” purges. Robeson visited the Soviet Union during periods of heightened sensitivity to the potential terror of the government’s whims. These three visits reveal the

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<sup>22</sup> This chapter is based on a project I began in a class with James Wilson. I presented on this topic at the Theatre, Globalization and the Cold War conference, Center for Advanced Studies, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany, May 17-19, 2012. This paper and talk were then expanded to the chapter “Spirituals, Serfs, and Soviets: Paul Robeson and International Race Policy in the Soviet Union at the Start of the Cold War,” *Theatre, Globalization and the Cold War*, eds. Christopher Balme and Berenika Szymanski-Düll (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International, 2017).

simultaneous implementation of the Soviet “Black Belt” theory and, to re-purpose a phrase from Alan Rice, Robeson’s “strategic Sovietophilia.” Rice’s term, “strategic Anglophilia,” implies a deliberate omission of guilt in the slave trade in order to highlight similarities between African American US culture and the British Isles.<sup>23</sup> A similar conscious omission of guilt from Stalin’s political repressions can be seen in Robeson’s statements made in the Soviet Union in order to facilitate an international front against racism in the inter-war US. However, Robeson’s pro-Soviet stance is more complex than a clear-cut, Cold War, dualism would admit. From within the Soviet Union, through his formal and informal performances, Robeson used the structures of Soviet and African American performative cultures to critique both US and Soviet political policies. Robeson’s performances formed a discourse with identities—both American and Soviet—that influenced the way in which other African American performers were seen in the Soviet Union. For that reason, this chapter also serves as an organizing structure for interpreting Henry Scott, Wayland Rudd, and the *Porgy and Bess* company.

The second chapter focuses on Henry Scott as an embodied representation of American jazz in the growing Stalinism of the 1920s and '30s. Scott’s experiences intersect the trajectories of coloniality, antiracism, popular entertainment, and political cultural policy under Stalin. As primarily a tap dancer in a cabaret theatre, Scott’s career in Moscow is seemingly apolitical. But since aesthetics and politics grew increasingly close in the Soviet Union after the Revolution, Scott’s light-hearted entertainment included serious political ramifications—as was evident by the arrest, torture, and execution of Scott’s

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<sup>23</sup> Alan Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London: Continuum, 2003), 172-87.

roommate by the NKVD in 1938. Scott arrived in the Soviet Union as a student at the Communist University for Toilers of the East (KUTV), where his political education and lived experiences came into conflict. While officially an “anti-racist” society, specifically mentioned in the KUTV archives are the theatrical excursions Scott and other KUTV students viewed as part of their international education. Some of these performances included depictions of race that run counter to the official anti-racism, and provide a more nuanced view of not only racial performance, but how non-white students reacted to such performances.

Scott was not the first African American “jazz dancer” to appear in the Soviet Union. Meyerhold used jazz music and dance in his popular production of *D.E. (Give Us Europe)*, which premiered in 1924 and ran, with various revisions, into the 1930s. African American bandleader Sam Wooding led a 1926 tour of Russia with a production called *Chocolate Kiddies*. The “Negro Operetta,” as the Soviet press called the show, received critical praise from luminaries of the Russian stage, including Lunacharsky and Stanislavsky.<sup>24</sup> Pairing these earlier jazz dance performances in the 1920s with the interpretations of “black” characters protested by KUTV, this chapter reads Scott through the musical and theatrical politics of early Stalinism to interrogate the cultural meaning of “American,” “jazz,” and race.

The third chapter examines Wayland Rudd, who had a career in the American theatre before leaving for the Soviet Union. Since Rudd's career spans cultures, his

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<sup>24</sup> *Negrityanskaya Operetta*, 1926, Amherst Center for Russian Culture Special Collection, Amherst College. Original in Russian.

trajectory can help to highlight the differences in performances for the same actor in the United States and the Soviet Union. While Hazel Carby argues that Paul Robeson was the modernist performer par excellence,<sup>25</sup> Wayland Rudd's roles on both sides of the Iron Curtain placed him in a similar position, but one that directly interacted with the Soviet theatre when he joined Meyerhold's theatre. This chapter examines the ways in which Rudd constantly negotiated and renegotiated his identity as an American, African American, and Soviet throughout his career in Russia.

The fourth chapter interprets the US State Department-sponsored tour of *Porgy and Bess* in 1955 and 1956 in terms of the conflicting propaganda claims of the United States and Soviet critics. *Porgy and Bess* seems a strange choice for a global tour aimed at countering the propaganda of the "Black Belt" theory. While, as Charlotte Canning explains in an essay on this US State Department sponsored tour, the performances succeeded in developing personal connections between the African American performers and Soviet audiences, the political work of the opera seems to play into the vision of separate and antagonistic black and white Americas.<sup>26</sup> This ambiguity and confusion of purpose allowed both Soviet and American propaganda to operate simultaneously within the performance, subject to interpretation by each side's partisan criticisms. While the tour occurred immediately after Stalin's death, Soviet audiences had not yet entered into Khrushchev's de-Stalinization and were interpreting the performance based on Soviet critics' familiarity

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<sup>25</sup> Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Canning, "The Cold War Battle Ground of Catfish Row Versus the Nevsky Prospekt: A US production of *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union," *Theatre, Globalization and the Cold War*, eds. Christopher Balme and Berenika Szymanski-Düll (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International, 2017).

with Socialist Realism. This chapter looks at how both propaganda purposes operated during the tour's performances in Russia, with each side attempting to project what a global "African American culture" meant at the end of Stalinism.

While the first and fourth chapters deal with African Americans who toured and left, the second and third chapters examine African American performers who stayed to make the Soviet Union their home. From this approach, I hope to elucidate the similarities and differences between how temporarily visiting global celebrities and permanently emigrated working performers experienced the Soviet Union's proclaimed anti-racism policy and the aesthetics of Socialist Realism.

Questions which have been asked of the African American theatre in other contexts take on new currency in the Soviet Union. How is the male black body depicted on stage? What is the relationship between celebrity and protection from racism? What role does history play in the creation of an African American Soviet identity? Socio-political and aesthetic theories intersect in the Soviet viewing of Robeson, *Porgy and Bess*, Scott, and Rudd. Questions of propaganda—both Soviet and US—intersect with questions of representation and self-determination. While these performers left—in some cases permanently—a nation under the shadow of Jim Crow for the promise of anti-racist Soviet utopia, what they encountered in Russia was a complex intersection of political performances both on stage and off.

## Chapter 1

### Paul Robeson in the Soviet Union

“I would appreciate you to explain to me. Why is Paul Robeson not in with the players? He is a colored person, yes?” [. . .] Miss Lydia leaned back in her chair with a cunning, you-can't-fool-me expression. “It is because *you*,” she said, smiling at Miss Ryan, “do not permit him his passport.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul Robeson’s visits in the 1930s and ’40s were some of the most widely known examples of African American musical theatre culture performing in the Soviet Union during the early Cold War. The revocation of his US passport only fueled the Soviet narrative that his performances and presence in the USSR revealed something truthful about the treatment of black culture in the United States embarrassing to the US government. These performances occurred as part of a concerted effort by the Soviet Union under Stalin to “speak antiracism,” a tactic that continued to influence Soviet responses to the Jim Crow policies of the United States long after Stalin.<sup>2</sup> Robeson’s public display of his outspoken leftist stance while in the Soviet Union was as much a part of his political performance as his concerts in Moscow. Despite the difference in the venues of these two

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<sup>1</sup> Truman Capote, “Onward and Upward with the Arts: Porgy and Bess in Russia,” *The New Yorker*, Part I, October 20, 1956; Part II, October 27, 1956; Part 1, 94.

<sup>2</sup> See: Meredith Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937* (Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

modes of performing, Robeson entered into dialogue with Soviet culture both on the street and in the concert hall. Robeson was used by Soviet cultural critics as an example of the connections and divergences between African American and Soviet politics and aesthetics.

### **Why Paul Robeson?**

Robeson's "lived experience" while in the Soviet Union confirmed the official propaganda that the Soviet Union was a friend to African Americans, which Lauren McConnell argues held a stronger psychological pull than the "experience distant" of Stalin's terror that contradicted Robeson's interactions.<sup>3</sup> An attempt to analyze Robeson's state of mind approaches dangerously close to what Tony Perucci described as the "politicized discourse of psychopathology" used to discredit Robeson and other African American leftists.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, rather than attempting to psychoanalyze Robeson for his political choices, I will look at how Robeson's performances established the structures of discourse and counter-discourse through which other African American Soviet performances of the Stalinist era—those of Henry Scott, Wayland Rudd, and the tour of *Porgy and Bess*—would be viewed.

Robeson's performance practices and his reception by Soviet audiences both followed in the historical trajectory of earlier African American sojourners to the Soviet

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<sup>3</sup> Lauren McConnell, "Understanding Paul Robeson's Soviet Experience," *Theatre History Studies* 30, no. 1 (2010): 139.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex: Race, Madness, Activism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 2.

Union and became the model by which Soviet and American audiences gauged contemporary and future African American performers in the Soviet Union. Paul Robeson was one of the first questions from the official translator assigned to the 1956 *Porgy and Bess* company: “I would appreciate you to explain to me. Why is Paul Robeson not in with the players?”<sup>5</sup>

The interpretation of Robeson’s performances themselves as discourse with various American and Soviet identities sets up a theoretical framework for not only for the reading of history, but other chapters in this dissertation. As the most famous African American visitor to Stalinist Russia, this simultaneously future and historically looking view made Robeson an accessible entry point to analyze Henry Scott, Wayland Rudd, and the *Porgy and Bess* company.

Hazel Carby viewed Paul Robeson as a model of and for a certain black male American modernism.<sup>6</sup> However, his status in the Soviet Union differed from his position in the United States. The Du Boisian “talented tenth”-view, which is central to Robeson’s early image in the United States, does not hold the same currency in a country without a similar relationship to African American history. While undoubtedly a figure used for propaganda purposes by Soviet officials, Robeson operated as more than merely an anti-US symbol. His metropolitan identity as a black citizen of the world both upheld and challenged Soviet formulations of African Americans. Throughout the 1930s and ’40s, he simultaneously

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<sup>5</sup> Capote, Part 1, 94.

<sup>6</sup> Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998).

championed the Soviet project, while remaining staunchly American in his African American identity. Robeson was not merely a pawn used by Stalinist forces to attack the United States by way of its racism. Although antiracism was certainly a component to Robeson's Soviet ties, he took an active role in performing an identity that also challenged the official Soviet line, both on and off the concert stage.

Robeson placed himself within the historical lineage of Russian culture, Soviet internationalism, and African American history. The Du Boisian "race man" of Carby's analysis was extended by Robeson's travels to the Soviet Union to blend with the Soviet Socialist Realism hero. The central figure of Socialist Realism is required to be a positive hero-type, representative of the people as a whole, adhering to the socio-economic policy of the time, and a good member of the Communist Party—the meanings of which did change over the development of the form. Paul Robeson—and by extension a generalized African American man sympathetic to the Soviet Union—became a dramatic type very closely aligned with the Soviet Socialist Realist hero: physically strong, overcoming oppression, politically engaged, and behaving according to the morals of Soviet culture.

### **Paul Robeson and International Race Policy in the Stalinist Soviet Union**

In 1934, Paul Robeson was considered a popular American performer living abroad in London. Over the course of the next fifteen years as the World War II alliance came to an end and the Cold War commenced, Robeson would transform from a figure of broad US

acclaim to the object of CIA, FBI, State Department, and Congressional anti-communist investigations, leading to the revocation of the artist's passport in 1950. The source of these investigations was the perceived threat of Robeson's growing political activism. I will first look at the official policies of the Soviet Union regarding race, and then turn to the development of Robeson's use of racialized, transnational performance in his visits in 1934, 1936, and 1949. Robeson's reception in the Soviet Union was heavily influenced by the Communist Party's "Black Belt" theory of internationalism, a propaganda technique attempting to identify an oppressed African-American nation within the US South similar to the ethnic nations in Imperial Russia. These three visits trace a trajectory from public agreement with the official, stated Soviet policy on race to a performance of nuanced disagreement with the later, more blatant, Stalinist enactment of Soviet xenophobic racism during the Cold War. These visits reveal the simultaneous implementation of the Soviet "Black Belt" theory and, to re-purpose a phrase from Alan Rice, Robeson's "strategic Sovietophilia." Rice's term, "strategic Anglophilia," implies a deliberate omission of guilt in the slave trade in order to highlight similarities between African American US culture and the British Isles.<sup>7</sup> A similar conscious omission can be seen in Robeson's statements made in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>7</sup> Alan J. Rice, "Dogs of Old England Meet the Lions of the New World: The Travels of Frederick Douglass and Paul Robeson in the Black Atlantic and the Development of a 'Strategic Anglophilia'" in *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London: Continuum, 2003), 172-87.

## Minorities in the Soviet Union

In the 1930s, the Soviet Union promoted the cultures of “national minorities”—such as the Uzbeks, Yakuts, and Tazhiks—in an attempt to undo the Russian Imperial policies that stripped these cultures of self-identity in the name of allegiance to the Empire, as well as to put a positive inter-cultural face to Soviet propaganda. On his 1934 trip, Robeson spent much time with his official host, Soviet director and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. In a discussion with Robeson, “Eisenstein said he disliked the unfair implications of inferiority which the term ‘primitive’ conveyed—which was why, he explained, the Soviets had preferred to use the phrase ‘national minorities’.”<sup>8</sup> Eventually, protection of national minorities was written into the 1936 “Stalin” Soviet Constitution; it became official policy that racism could not exist in the Soviet Union. Paul Robeson singles out his admiration of the Soviet Constitution for the law, which would punish the “propagation” of the idea that people are not equal.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, in Robeson’s formulation, the Soviet Union outlawed not only the act, but also the thought, of discrimination.

Official Soviet pronouncements and propaganda emphasized a lack of distinction between “brown-skinned” Central and Eastern Soviets and white European Soviets.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 187.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Robeson, *Soviet Worker*, 1937, n.p., Box 19, Paul Robeson Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Lilly Golden, “Black People in the Soviet Union,” *New World Review*, September-October 1975, 16-21, Box 158-1, Folder 13, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

However, such totalizing colorblindness both inverts the “identity problem” of Russia—which suffers from national anxiety over its identity as neither Asian nor European—and praises the Soviet Union for one of its cultural paranoias. Cultural colorblindness also ignores a peculiar linguistic trait of the Russian language. According to Barbara Keys, “the Russian word *chernyi* (black), for example, was often used to refer to non-Slavic peoples such as Chechens, while Africans and blacks were called *afrikantsy* (Africans) or *negry* (Negroes), but there was no category corresponding to ‘white’.”<sup>11</sup> If “white” did not exist as a linguistic category, the total erasure of racial identity only existed for Slavs, whereas everyone else could be coded as “other” by any various racialized categories.

Even though the official policy of anti-racism in the Soviet Union was not a part of the constitution until 1936, the basis for a national policy of anti-racism could be seen in Lenin’s and Stalin’s 1913 writings. In *Marxism and the National Question*, Stalin rejected the nineteenth-century concept of “nation” that depended on a shared racial identity.<sup>12</sup> In place of the racial requirement, Stalin emphasized the necessity of shared location, language, mind-set, and—of course, since he was providing a Marxist definition—economy.

In a letter written to *Pravda* in 1951, Robeson directly cites Lenin as drawing a connection between African-American slaves and the Russian serfs:

Lenin writes in 1913: “There is a striking similarity between the economic position of the American Negroes and that of the former landlord peasants of

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Keys, “An African-American Worker in Stalin’s Soviet Union: Race and the Soviet Experiment in International Perspective,” *Historian* 71, no. 1 (2009): 37.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars: A New Pandora’s Box* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 74.

the central agricultural region of Russia. What is the economic foundation of which this beautiful superstructure now rests? The foundation of the typically Russian, truly Russian *otrabotki*, i.e. share-cropping system.”<sup>13</sup>

According to Lenin’s purely Marxist analysis, the connection between Americans and Russians is entirely economic. As in the United States, emancipation in Russia did not arrive until the early 1860s, but the effects of enslavement continued to haunt the socio-economic position of former serfs until the revolution. Since all concerns for a Leninist-Marxist interpretation necessarily flow from the economic, the shared position of formerly enslaved agrarian peoples is the most fundamental of possible parallels. The Comintern used Lenin’s connection between serfs and slaves to suggest that “American Communists should oppose the Tsarist-like American imperialists who oppress the ‘peasant’ black nation living within its borders.”<sup>14</sup> This was the heart of the “Black Belt” theory of internationalism, linking the African-American experience to the suffering of Soviet “national minorities” under the tsarist regime.

Robeson, however, saw the connection between African-Americans and Russians as one that ran much deeper than the shared economic position outlined by Lenin:

When I sing the “Spirituals” and work songs of the Negro people to Soviet audiences, I feel that a tremendous bond of sympathy and mutual understanding unites us. The Russian folksongs and those of the Soviet

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Robeson, “Negro in America,” *Pravda*, May 1951, 7. Folder “Writings by” 1951, Paul Robeson Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>14</sup> Dawahare, 79.

National Republics, which were formerly tsarist colonies, bear a close relationship to folksongs of the Negro people. In each instance these songs were born out of the misery and suffering, exploitation and oppression of the people.<sup>15</sup>

For Robeson, suffering became the legitimizing experience that tied Soviet and Negro artistic expression. As Kate Baldwin writes, Robeson came to view “‘suffering’ as fundamental to a certain kind of knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> A history of extended physical and psychic pain that extended beyond mere economics, and that was systematically exerted on the Russian serf and American slave, became a means of transferring the memory of enslavement.

Conversely, in both countries, bodily pain was transferred to music, and then used as a means of combating oppression. Even before his travels to the Soviet Union, Robeson was aware of musical analogues between Russian and Negro songs, and emphasized the importance of cultural experience to the type of music produced:

The Russians have experienced many of the same things the American Negroes have experienced. They were both serfs and in the music there is the same note of melancholy, touched with mysticism. I have heard most of the great Russian singers on the gramophone and have occasionally found whole

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<sup>15</sup> Robeson, *Soviet Worker*, 1937, n.p..

<sup>16</sup> Kate Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 226.

phrases that could be matched in Negro melodies.<sup>17</sup>

Robeson's views on folk art coincided with the resurgence of folk culture in the Soviet Union under Stalin. The Soviet interest in folk culture was not a dispassionate anthropological exercise, but a "politicized folk adaptation" used to educate the whole Union in the various national music, dance, and art forms.<sup>18</sup> This Soviet interest in folk culture was to be the point most often used by Robeson to connect his work to the history of the Soviet Union.

### **1934: "Public Expression of Private Political Views"**

In 1934, Robeson made his initial trip to the Soviet Union. Paul Robeson's son claims of his father that this 1934 visit "marked the beginning of the public expression of his private political views"; a fact either unknown even to the artist himself, or intentionally obscured in his public pronouncements, in which Robeson "cast his [1934] visit as an exclusively cultural one. He was going as an artist, rather than as a political figure."<sup>19</sup> At this point, Robeson could still distinguish, at least in public, between artist and political activist. In three years, he would loudly deny the possibility of such a division between art and

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 303.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 78-9.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898-1939* (New York: Wiley, 2001), 217.

activism. However, since Robeson, a performer, was constantly aware of the power of public display, he may have been consciously feigning the distance between artist and political activist. But, if we take Robeson at his public word that he had no intention of politicizing this trip, the same cannot be said of his host country, since the Soviet Union was carefully crafting a global image as a country free of racism. Before Robeson's 1934 visit, the jazz dancers of *Chocolate Kiddies* the 1920s and Henry Scott in the early 1930s had also attempted "exclusively cultural" performances that were nonetheless interpreted by Soviet and US critics through the racialized lens of global politics.<sup>20</sup> During this visit, Robeson's views of race came closest to the official policy of the Soviet Union.

Robeson arrived in the Soviet Union on the verge of the deepest repressions of the Stalinist era. The first Conference of the Union of Soviet Writers, which outlined the Socialist Realist aesthetic to be enforced as the official artistic movement, was held in 1934; the year also saw the assassination of Sergei Kirov, the only potential challenger to Stalin's authority.

Prior to Robeson's 1934 visit, none of his records were officially available in the Soviet Union, and the single radio broadcast of Robeson's "Steal Away" provoked controversy because the song had overtly religious lyrics.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, on this initial trip, Robeson was known less for his music and more for his renown in the rest of the world. He was considered an important foreign visitor because of his high cultural position in Western Europe and the United States.

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<sup>20</sup> See Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>21</sup> Boyle and Bunie, 307.

Even though Robeson did not sing on an official concert tour during the 1934 visit, he did perform. Using a tactic later perfected in the United States during his tours of union halls and factories during the 1940s and 1950s, Robeson gave impromptu *a capella* concerts for the House of Cinema Workers, the bus drivers of the Moscow Foreign Workers' Club garage, and factory workers at a ball-bearing plant in Leningrad.<sup>22</sup> Even in these spontaneous concerts, Robeson's choice of repertoire revealed a concern with internationalism and resistance to hierarchical valuations of art. These unplanned concerts for workers included Russian and English, opera and folk songs, an aria from *Boris Godunov* and "'Ol' Man River', which he introduced to them as a song of protest."<sup>23</sup> The juxtaposition of the high art of Mussorgsky's opera alongside the American commercial musical and the low art of folk songs and workers songs leveled all cultural value hierarchies, singing not to a paying audience who were restricted to assigned seats within a concert hall, but to people at their site of labor. While not as drastic as Robeson's 1937 rewriting of Hammerstein's lyrics to emphasize a positive political struggle, the impact of reframing a musical theatre number as a protest song similarly decouples the song from its original source in order to claim authorial control. Robeson could establish a new political meaning for this song to an audience unaware of its original context in the troubled history among Broadway, minstrelsy, and African-American performers.

In an article explaining why he brought his son to Moscow, Robeson remembers a Russian children's theatre performance from the 1934 trip. A black African child loses his

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>23</sup> Robeson, Jr., 2001, 221.

favorite pet monkey to the capitalist ship labeled “U.S.A.,” while a Soviet ship helps him to retrieve his friend and become a Young Pioneer. Robeson claims that the children in the audience at this performance hugged and greeted him with such love and compassion, that one child would not let go of his hand throughout the second act. The reception caused him to realize that his own son could grow up and be accepted among these open-hearted Soviet Young Pioneers-in-training.<sup>24</sup>

Robeson does not name the performance, but it was Natalia Satz’s *The Negro Boy and the Monkey*.<sup>25</sup> The performance itself is not examined by Robeson in his reminiscences, except with the most superficial of propagandistic readings that the Soviet Union is the true friend of Africans.<sup>26</sup> Robeson focuses instead on the reaction of the children in the audience to his presence in the auditorium. Robeson recounts a similar anecdote about walking by a playground and being called “black Grandfather Frost” while little children hugged his leg and wouldn’t let go because they “hadn’t been taught to fear black men.”<sup>27</sup> In both examples, however, a live black man is treated with love and kindness by Russian children, who nevertheless misrecognize him as a fictional figure, or symbol: either equivalent to the pitiable African boy who loses his monkey or the kindly Slavic version of Santa Claus. Public displays of acceptance by Soviet audiences, particularly children, was an important survival and political tactic for African American performers in the Stalinist Soviet Union, as exercised by US jazz dancers in the 1920s, Henry Scott in the 1930s, Wayland Rudd from

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Robeson, “Why I Left My Son in Moscow,” *Russia Today*, February 1938, n.p., Box 19, Paul Robeson Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>25</sup> Boyle and Bunie, 310.

<sup>26</sup> For an analysis of how race was depicted in Satz’s play, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>27</sup> Robeson, Jr., 2001, 221.

the 1930s until his death in 1952, and the 1955-56 *Porgy and Bess* tour.

### **1936: Polyvocality and Doublings**

Robeson returned to the Soviet Union for an official concert tour in 1936. While the 1934 visit occurred following Kirov's assassination, this October 1936 concert tour began only two months after the first Stalinist show trial. Thus, Robeson launched his singing career in the Soviet Union during a period of heightened sensitivity to the nascent terror of the government's whims. While Dale Peterson has remarked on the similarity between Du Bois's "double consciousness" and Russian polyvocal "double-voicedness,"<sup>28</sup> Robeson put this connection into practice through his ability to sing to multiple audiences through his concerts.

The director and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein was under particular scrutiny for his attempts to make films that were banned by the authorities. Therefore, he had to be careful when praising Robeson, so as not to appear a supporter of foreigners more than the Soviet Union. Eisenstein, as the man who first invited Robeson to the Soviet Union, had much to lose if the tour was not a success. Of particular interest to potential denouncers would be Robeson's use of religion in his spirituals.

Under Stalin, religion in the Soviet Union faced a particular form of double identity. Freedom of religion was officially protected, even by Stalin's 1936 constitution. The African

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<sup>28</sup> Dale Peterson, *Up from Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 1-3.

American cast of the 1955-56 *Porgy and Bess* tour even attended Christmas services in an “Evangelical Baptist Church, whose Leningrad parishioners number two thousand and, incidentally, sing the standard, familiar Baptist hymns in Russian.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Robeson’s use of hymns and spirituals as part of his concerts would not have been completely foreign to at least these couple of thousand Soviets. They were familiar with and utilized the songs and—according to Truman Capote’s account—even the practices of African American Baptist Churches. Nonetheless, at this time overt religious displays were often criticized and denounced in the media or violently repressed. Therefore, Eisenstein’s attempt to recast Robeson’s spirituals as class-based folk songs played on this double nature, in much the same way that Robeson had recast “Ol’ Man River” as a protest song. In the Soviet press, Eisenstein defended Robeson’s choice to include spirituals in his concerts, calling attention to the “class content in the folk tradition of Negro songs.”<sup>30</sup> Eisenstein’s review of Robeson’s spirituals avoided “the patronizing tone, the endless harangues over the artistic merit” that was present in Western reviews of Robeson’s concerts.<sup>31</sup> Rather, Eisenstein used a tactic of exposing the double-consciousness inherent in these songs at the risk of conflating all spirituals into atheistic songs of coded-rebellion. Audience members could openly appreciate the songs of struggle while privately listening for the religious meanings, in an almost direct inverse of the coding used on plantations in the United States where the songs were allowed precisely because of their religious overtones.

The structure of Robeson’s Russian concerts was similar to his concerts in America.

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<sup>29</sup> Capote, Part II, 91.

<sup>30</sup> Robeson, Jr., 2001, 280.

<sup>31</sup> Boyle and Bunie, 363.

A Russian reviewer described it as “[drawn] from Negro folk songs, worker songs of democratic America, ancient folk songs of France and England, Russian musical classics and works of contemporary Soviet composers. . . . [interspersed with] short but instructive commentary which immediately defines the progressive civic trend of the song.”<sup>32</sup> For Soviet reviewers like Solodobnikov and Eisenstein, the context and educational aspect of the concert was just as, if not more, important in justifying this foreign performer to the country.

Using a formulation similar to Robeson’s own view that Russian and African-American music shared a common history in embodied suffering, the strenuous physical work of Robeson’s performing is highlighted by the reviewer. This connection further justified Robeson to the Soviets as a fellow laborer, but also showed a fascination with the muscular black male body under stress similar to American viewings of the black male body:

[In the song “Waterboy,”] Robeson accompanies the conclusion of a verse with a gesture which seems to express the unbearable burden of forced labor. The artist’s face is distorted with suffering, his hands tremble; they are in no condition to do any more heavy work.<sup>33</sup>

The review, of course, only ties this “burden of forced labor” to the American context of

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<sup>32</sup> A. Solodobnikov, “Paul Robeson, Artist and Fighter,” n.d., n.p., Box 158-6, Russian Letters, Folder 2, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

slavery and Russian serfdom, but not to the then-current context of Stalinist gulags. The danger of rebellion coming from such conditions is safely contained either by historical or geographic distance.

In 1937, following the concert tour, Robeson attended a gala performance of Uzbek opera at the Moscow Bolshoi Opera House—with Stalin himself in the audience. Writing for the *Left Review*, Robeson summarized the opera as about Uzbek women struggling for freedom from the “double yolk” of Islam and Russian serfdom (ie, from religion and imperialism). He drew contradictions between the treatment of “indigenous cultures” in the United States and the Soviet Union, stating that:

[in the United States,] indigenous cultures exist mainly as museum pieces, reflecting in no way contemporary social reality . . . [or are] destroyed or allowed to decay, [while] the great masses are flung upon the mercy of alien forms, which in the final analysis benefit the few who share the privileged position with the foreign rulers. . . . But apparently, here in the Soviet Union, there was no such contradiction. Before me was a theatre of a coloured people of the East, which had created opera in its own form—a form which must have served this people for centuries. But it was filled with the substance of their present-day life.<sup>34</sup>

For Robeson, the content of the opera—the overthrow of religious and imperial

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Robeson, “National Cultures and the Soviet Union,” *Left Review* (November 1937), 577, Box 19, Paul Robeson Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

oppression—matched the form of the opera—a traditional Uzbek cultural expression. This was not merely a stultifying “tolerance” of indigenous culture, rather it was the flourishing of Uzbek culture within the protections afforded by the Soviet system. In opposition to the treatment of minorities in the rest of the world, Robeson saw that under Soviet rule, the Uzbeks “were not being told that their language and culture were ‘either dead or too primitive to develop’ and had to give way before the ‘superior’ utility of alien forms.”<sup>35</sup> The concept of “progress” demanded of all by the Soviet Union was not restricted to an assimilation into a single racialized culture. Soviet culture in the 1930s was to be, as resolved by the 1934 First All-Union Writers Congress, a culture which embraced the multiple nationalities within its borders toward a shared political goal.

Robeson credited Stalin with the multiple nation policy that allowed these types of cultural art to exist. Referencing the leader’s presence in the theatre that night, Robeson writes:

. . . in a box on the right – standing and applauding the audience and the artists on the stage – stood the great Stalin. . . . Here, a people, quite comparable to some of the tribal folk of China – quite comparable to the proud Yoruba or Basuto of West & East Africa – but now their lives flowering anew under the Socialist way of life – 20 years matured under the guidance of Lenin and Stalin.

And in this whole area of the development of national minorities of their relation to the great Russians – Stalin had played and was playing the

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<sup>35</sup> Duberman, 211.

most important role.<sup>36</sup>

Robeson, for all of his praise of Stalin in this passage, was not blind to the realities of the purges occurring at the time. Robeson was aware of the increasing disconnect between the official policy of the Soviet Union and the dangers of Stalin's growing nationalistic practices. When Robeson decided, on this tour, to leave his son in Moscow to be educated, he did so "with maximum publicity" in order to avoid the problems of other Americans whose children would be kept by Soviet authorities as a means of guaranteeing the parents' allegiance to the Soviet Union.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps most telling of his complicated relationship with Stalin is Robeson's final trip before the revocation of his passport by the US State Department.

### **1949: Post-War Shifts**

By 1949, the largest of the purges had already occurred, and Soviet policy was beginning to turn against "Zionists," ostensibly a term used to denounce Jews who placed foreign governments above the Soviet Union, but in actuality a term used to politically justify any anti-Semitic persecution.

The Soviet Union's official racial policy of the past was beginning to crumble, and not only the policy against Jews. When Robeson was asked to speak at the gala commemorating

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Robeson, [Stalin, remembrances of], n.d., n.p., Box 20, Paul Robeson Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>37</sup> Duberman, 207.

the sesquicentennial of Alexander Pushkin's birth, the Soviet government specifically informed Robeson that "comrade Stalin has pointed out that Pushkin should be referred to as a *Russian* poet," rather than referencing the poet's African heritage.<sup>38</sup> Despite the fact that Pushkin's own ethnic history was erased from all speeches given at the celebration, the "published proceedings of the sesquicentennial repeatedly refer[red] to Jim Crow and lynchings in the United States."<sup>39</sup> For official Soviet policy, the way to counter racism of the kind found in the United States was to ignore the issue at home, to forcibly deny by omission any attempt to raise the complexities of these issues, and redirect all efforts toward depicting the horrors of the American system. The policy was not an attempt to correct the problems of racism, but rather to use race as one prong of attack in the larger propaganda assault on the United States.

Robeson's view of race was neither the "melting pot" of American liberalism, nor the erasure of difference of the Soviet 1949 policy line. According to Mihailovic:

Robeson change[d] the lyrics of the song "Native Land" [by Dunaevsky] to reflect his own cultural ideology. Rather than the erasure of difference implied by the lyrics "for us there is nether black nor light-skinned," Robeson rewrote the line to emphasize a multi-cultural view: "Side by side, the black, the white, the yellow."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom, 1939-1976* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2010), 152.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Mihailovic, "'Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child': Paul Robeson and the 1949 Pushkin Jubilee" in C. Theimer Nepomnyashchy, N. Svobodny, and L. A. Trigos (eds.) *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 310-11.

<sup>40</sup> Mihailovic, 312.

As shown in his rewriting of Dunaevsky's "Native Land," Robeson was not averse to subtly challenging the Soviet mentality within the country's own borders. However, on this 1949 trip, the stakes were much higher for such a musical challenge to authority.

Robeson had many Jewish friends living in Russia during his previous visits in the 1930s, most famously the actor Solomon Mikhoels and the poet Itzik Feffer, who were both persecuted under the new "anti-Zionist" purges. Mikhoels had been killed by the secret police before Robeson's arrival, and Feffer was only allowed out of a secret prison to meet with Robeson because the American had made multiple inquiries with authorities. In their brief meeting, Feffer communicated on two levels. Verbally, the poet carried on a banal conversation, assuring Robeson that life in the Soviet Union was wonderful—in order to satisfy any bugged recording devices in Robeson's hotel room. Simultaneously, Feffer visually communicated using hand gestures and written notes to inform Robeson of his imprisonment and Mikhoels's murder.<sup>41</sup> The conversation led Robeson to add an encore to his concert on his final night in the Soviet Union.

At the end of an otherwise standard concert of the type given on his previous tour, Robeson dedicated the Yiddish "Song of the Warsaw Ghetto Rebellion" to Mikhoels and Feffer, specifically calling on "the deep cultural ties" he felt with both Jewish and Soviet culture—overtly placing this song in the same tradition as his Negro spirituals/Russian folk song formulation, while covertly protesting the treatment of Soviet Jews and signaling his distance from Stalin. Martin Duberman sees this gesture as "all that [Robeson] could have

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<sup>41</sup> Duberman, 353, and Robeson, Jr., 2010, 153.

done without directly threatening Feffer's life."<sup>42</sup> Robeson's son goes further to say that this gesture "temporarily 'rehabilitated' Feffer," since "anyone allowed to visit an honored guest such as Paul Robeson could not at the same time be an 'enemy of the people'."<sup>43</sup> Mihailovic, however, dismisses the interpretation by Duberman and Robeson, Jr. that the inclusion of the Yiddish song was a political statement against the Stalinist regime, instead merely calling it a song of solidarity.<sup>44</sup> Yet, the very act of using a Yiddish "song of solidarity" during a time of the Soviet Union's internal fragmentations and turning against fractions of society makes Robeson's choice of an encore a political challenge. The American performer—sympathetic to the Soviet cause—had begun to subtly oppose Stalin's policies. This is a nuanced and double-coded political message that attempts to correct the course of the ship of state, rather than capsize the Stalin regime through revolt. The tactic worked temporarily, and Feffer's life was spared for three years, by which time Robeson would be stranded in his home country and unable to return to the Soviet Union due to the anti-communist policies of the Red Scare.

### **Robeson's Shift of Counter-Discourse**

Kate Baldwin claims in her analysis of African-American intellectuals in the Soviet Union that "the frame of the Soviet Union alters the black Atlantic model," and later specifically argues that Robeson's time in the Soviet Union "prefigured the transnationalist

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<sup>42</sup> Duberman, 353.

<sup>43</sup> Robeson, Jr., 2010, 154.

<sup>44</sup> Mihailovic, 318.

thrust of the counter-discourse Gilroy maps in black Atlantic expressive cultures.”<sup>45</sup> African-American lines of flight to and from the Soviet Union do not retrace the historical forced migrations. In contrast to Europe’s troubled colonial and exoticizing dual lens, Russia and the Soviet Union never held colonies on the African continent. The “counter-discourse” voiced by the travels of African-Americans in the Soviet Union is initially a discourse based on seemingly similar histories of oppression, enslavement, and the promise of equality.

These three visits from 1934 to 1949 trace a decisive change in Robeson’s public pronouncements of his “counter-discourse” political ideology. Robeson started in 1934 as an artist who was attempting to find a way to integrate his public art with his personal politics. He followed in the steps of earlier African American performers in the Soviet Union, like Henry Scott and jazz dancers of the 1920s who privileged their politics or art to varying degrees. Robeson established a form of hyper-visible and demonstratively political metropolitanism to align with the 1930s anti-fascist Soviet position. He encouraged other African Americans in the Soviet Union, specifically Wayland Rudd, to use such tactics of visibility to protect their own interests and stand up for African Americans on a global stage. This era was typified by his famous quote that “the artist must elect to fight for Freedom or for Slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.”<sup>46</sup> He completed this set of visits with a final concert in 1949 that covertly questioned Stalin’s actions, displaying a hesitancy to accept blindly the party line, and which reveals a willingness to insert his

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<sup>45</sup> Baldwin, 9, 216-17.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 52.

own voice into rewritings of official Soviet art. This refiguring Russian culture—even the seemingly supportive “erasure of difference” view of Soviet anti-racism—to insert his Black voice presaged the critiques in which *Porgy and Bess* would be interpolated into Soviet cultural norms. In these ways, Robeson stands not just as an example, but as an interpretive lens through which past and future figures were critiqued in transnational African American and Soviet cultural history.

## Chapter 2

### Henry Scott and His Precursors:

#### Soviet Racial Ambivalence and Black Jazz Performance

“They were on the rostrum doing their stuff like nobody’s business. At that point came drama in the person of [the] first Negro jazz performer, a Harlemitte called Henry Scott. The crowd nearly burst with enthusiasm and Henry ran sweat but liked it. No one who has not lived in the Soviet capital can quite get the nuances of that drama.”<sup>1</sup>

Henry Scott was a celebrated African American dancer in Moscow jazz clubs under 1930s Stalinism. He performed at hotels and jazz clubs with one of the more famous Soviet jazz orchestral leaders, Alexander Tsfasman. With Scott as a headliner, Tsfasman was able to Americanize the image of his Russian jazz music in a way that placed his orchestra in the tradition of jazz and touring African American dancers in Soviet theatrical venues in the previous decade. Scott was not only a dancer with Tsfasman’s orchestra, but originally a student who seized the opportunity to escape the post-Harlem Renaissance United States for the promises of a racially egalitarian Soviet education. Scott’s studies in Moscow included theatrical outings and social interactions that belied the propaganda of race-blindness favored by the official curriculum. While Scott only lived in Moscow for a decade

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Lyons, *Variety*, February 28th, 1933, 62.

between 1928 or 1929 and 1939, his specific position as an African American student turned jazz dancer in Stalinist Moscow placed him on the intersection of two incongruent, but related, historical trajectories: the lived experience of racism in cosmopolitan Soviet internationalist education—including the theatrical use of racist imagery—and the global jazz craze of the 1920s and '30s as played out in Moscow. Through these intersecting histories, Scott constantly authenticated and contested Soviet positions with respect to African Americans. On the one hand Scott stood as an example of antiracist Soviet education policies, on the other he protested blackface in Moscow theatres; he was celebrated for his jazz dancing, while the form was seen as an anti-Soviet Western decadence; he lent American authenticity to a Soviet jazz band, while causing that same band to come under suspicion for being too foreign. Scott negotiated these contradictory positions throughout his time in Moscow.

Scott did not travel to the Soviet Union with the intention of becoming a performer. He arrived in Moscow in 1928 or 1929 to attend the Communist University for Toilers of the East (KUTV), which was a special university for training foreigners in Soviet Marxism.<sup>2</sup> While at KUTV, Scott was subjected to the tension between the Soviet Union's official stated policy of anti-racism and the experience of being an unknown black man in Moscow. This tension was documented in an official complaint by the KUTV students over representations of black characters in famous Moscow theatrical productions. Not until

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<sup>2</sup> 1928 date from NYT, 1929 from LA Times. Aljean, Harmetz, "U.S. and Soviet Sisters Meet at Last," *New York Times*, November 5, 1989; Gerard Garza, "Storybook Meeting in S.D.," *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1989.

after he left KUTV did Scott became the popular jazz dancer in Alexander Tsfasman's orchestra. Scott was not the first jazz dancer in Moscow, nor even the first black jazz dancer. His performances with Tsfasman occurred well after jazz bands appeared on Meyerhold's stage and the international tour of the black musical *Chocolate Kiddies* was reviewed by Stanislavsky. Scott's transition from student of political training to performer of popular dance occurred within the context of these earlier performances to reveal many points of ambivalence in official Soviet racial attitude toward African Americans.

Like the *Paris noir* of the 1920s, Stalinist Moscow of the 1920s and '30s presented itself as a cosmopolitan global capital free from the prejudices of race.<sup>3</sup> According to Brent Hayes Edwards, *Paris noir*—as the more well-known example of African American European culture of the era—was seen as “liberatory and ‘free of racism’ precisely at the height of French colonial exploitation.”<sup>4</sup> Borrowing from Léopold Senghor's conception on the gap between black African Americans and black Africans in “Problématique de la Négritude” (1971), Edwards uses the untranslatable term *décalage* to describe a point of disarticulation exposing “a difference or gap in time (advancing or delaying a schedule) or in space (shifting or displacing an object).”<sup>5</sup> For Edwards, the French *décalage* refers to both a removal of something “propped up” and a temporal “jet lag” that accompanies the meeting of African, African-American, and French cultural spaces.

Moscow all but declared itself the anti-capitalist, anti-racist cosmopolitan capital,

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 1 of this dissertation for a discussion on the Stalinist constitution and official antiracism.

<sup>4</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

less debased by commercialized decadence than Paris. While the Soviet Union did not hold official colonies like its French counterpart, Moscow still practiced what Walter Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova call the “logic of coloniality.”<sup>6</sup> The experiences of Henry Scott served as *décalage* that removed the “propping up” of Soviet anti-racist policy to expose the underlying logic of coloniality. Scott also lived in the fog of “jet lag” that constantly displaces him from the official historical record, either performing too late or leaving too soon to be documented by most Soviet critics. His presence brings together, but does not quite align, many aspects of African American and Soviet theatrical representation in the 1920s and early '30s. Scott began an education at KUTV that taught him to use Soviet Marxist logic in a critique of racist theatrical performance, but was kicked out of the school. Scott was part of the Soviet jazz lineage, yet relegated to footnotes in the history of Soviet jazz despite his importance to Tsfasman’s success. Scott was a popular black artist performing in the capital, but ignored by the same critics who praised the earlier touring black American jazz musical. As a figure, Scott runs throughout the history of Soviet African American jazz performance of the late-1920s and early-'30s, but always appearing at the periphery of the official record, undercutting the “propping up” of the racialized propaganda. In other words, Scott operated in Edwards’s fog of *décalage*.

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<sup>6</sup> Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 53.

### **Double Consciousness of Coloniality at KUTV**

Unlike the English, United States, and French colonialisms, which each involved maintaining control of imperial structures particularly in Africa, the Soviet Union emerged from imperialism into a different form of global coloniality that simultaneously contested these capitalist positions while employing similar stereotypes and rationales. Walter Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova argue that “Russia was not part of the Atlantic monopolistic capitalism, and therefore, it found itself on the margins of European modernity and the emerging logic of coloniality.”<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that Russia did not engage in colonialism, just because it was not involved in the transatlantic slave trade. Mignolo and Tlostanova view the Russian imperial and Soviet treatment of central Asia as a form of coloniality. Even the revolution did not overturn this mindset, but merely realigned the language used: “Soviet modernity would rebuild itself as an integral and seemingly secular system in which the rhetoric of modernity would change but the logic of coloniality would remain intact, altering only in its content.”<sup>8</sup>

For Mignolo and Tlostanova, W.E.B. Du Bois’s double consciousness depends not on the specific experience of transatlantic colonialism, but on this wider logic of coloniality: “Double consciousness emerges from the experiences of being someone (Black, inscribed in the memory and histories of the slave trade in the Atlantic economy) who was classified by the imperial-national gaze (European imperial frame of mind, U.S. emerging imperial

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<sup>7</sup> Tlostanova and Mignolo, 53.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century).”<sup>9</sup> So while Du Bois was concerned with being both an American and a “Negro,” the logic of coloniality sees this as a particular instance that occurs whenever an existing people have been classified by an imperial-nationalism. Therefore, a kind of “double consciousness” or “logic of coloniality” must be confronted by African Americans, even when removed from the frame of the United States, because the structures which led to Du Bois’s formulation are not particular to the legacy of Trans-Atlantic slavery in the United States.

African and African American students at KUTV negotiated this Du Boisian double consciousness of coloniality when travelling to the marginally European Soviet Union from the US, Europe, or Africa. With the experience of double consciousness from their home countries, these KUTV students were acutely aware of similar structures of logic—what Mignolo and Tolstanova identify as the logic of coloniality—in the Soviet Union. This logic of coloniality was experienced even in the capital, and not limited to the regions at the border of the Soviet Union where national cultures like Uzbek, Tajik, Buryat, and other non-Russian cultures were more prevalent. In this modern city on the margin of Europe, far from the Asian nations within the Soviet Union, the black KUTV students witnessed and experienced racialized othering that jarred with the utopian “raceless” society promoted in the official political statements.

On September 19, 1930, Henry Scott was officially assigned to the “Eastern” school (i.e., KUTV) according to a ribbon stamped by the Communist Party USA granting transfer of Party membership to the Soviet Union for five Americans who would “be staying for an

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 69.

indefinite period of time as students.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike the International Lenin School, which accepted students from Western Europe and the US, KUTV was primarily a school for students from the Eastern Soviet Republics and Asian countries. Most African American students were also assigned to KUTV, instead of the more prestigious Lenin School. Robert Robinson and Joy Carew suggest that this is because of the educational inequalities that African American students would have faced in the US, which left them ill-equipped to keep up with European Marxist students already trained in classical and contemporary political philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Even within KUTV, African and African American students were placed together in the English-speaking Section 9. Despite the official policy that the Soviet Union was an anti-racist country, the structural segregation of KUTV Section 9 was not the only racism the black African and African American students experienced.

In January 1933, an official declaration from the black students of KUTV Section 9 focused on theatrical representations. The students sent a resolution to the Comintern titled “Resolutions in Connection with Derogatory Portrayal of Negroes in the Cultural Institutions of the Soviet Union.”<sup>12</sup> Since the arts were an integral component of Soviet culture, education, and propaganda, the theatre became the basis on which the students built their formal complaint. As documented in the state archives, KUTV students were frequently given opportunities to attend the theatre. A diary entry in the archives lists

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<sup>10</sup> F. 495, op. 261, d. 3899, Rossiyskiy gosudarstvenniy arhiv socialno-politicheskoy istorii [Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History] (RGASPI). Original in English.

<sup>11</sup> Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 41; Robert Robinson, *Black on Red: My 44 Years inside the Soviet Union* (Washington, DC: Acropolis Books, 1988), 302-303.

<sup>12</sup> “Resolutions in Connection with Derogatory Portrayal of Negroes in the Cultural Institutions of the Soviet Union,” f. 532, op. 1, del. 441, l. 17-26, RGASPI. In English and Russian. Title from the English version.

organized theatre outings for KUTV Section 9 in the fall of 1932,<sup>13</sup> but not included on that list are the two productions the students cite in their denunciation: Natalya Satz's *The Negro Boy and His Monkey* and Sydney Jones's *Geisha*.

### **"The Negro Boy and His Monkey"**

Paul Robeson used his experiences in the audience of this play to describe the lack of racism in the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> The KUTV students did not experience the same kindly reception from Soviet children after viewing this play. In their letter to the Comintern, the KUTV students wrote:

The play "Negro child and Ape" [sic] for children at the Moscow children theatres also incorrectly shows the Negro having no language, crying like an ape and talking with his hands. Rename the play "The Negro and his pet"[sic] and show the Negro with his language or something like his language (being that the people of Russia do not know the Negro languages of Africa). And those who see the play will not receive the incorrect, distorted, conception that the language and musical abilities of the Negro is not much more than that of the ape. Children in particular must be correctly educated and trained.

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<sup>13</sup> F. 532 op. 1 del. 439, l. 23 (obverse), RGASPI. Original in Russian.

<sup>14</sup> See: Chapter 1 of this dissertation, and Paul Robeson, "Why I Left My Son in Moscow," *Russia Today*, February 1938, n.p., Box 19, Paul Robeson Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

Maybe it is because of this play that some rude children on the streets see a Negro and say “ape”.<sup>15</sup>

Woodford McClellan incorrectly states that “Evidently only the title of the popular play offended the blacks.”<sup>16</sup> While the KUTV students did advocate for a title change, the play’s racial and cultural representation were the more informative criticism from this letter. The text of this letter fails to convey the extent that such a change would mean to the production. The production was one of the most popular in the Soviet children’s theatre canon. To improve the “incorrect, distorted, conception” of the play would require more than merely changing a few lines of dialogue and music.

The company of white Soviet actors played the “Negroes” in dark bodysuits covering the skin from legs to wrists, dark makeup on face and hands, and wigs. The play opens with a character named the “Good Negress,” who wears an overly stuffed dress with an apron—differentiated from an American minstrel mammy dress in its modernist geometric pattern: light circles on a dark background, mirrored in negative across a center vertical line. Unlike an American minstrel “wench” role, the “Good Negress” was played by a female actor. However, the role did share another trait with a minstrel role. The “Good Negress” acted as a kind of interlocutor, welcoming the audience to the theatre, remaining on stage for the entire play, introducing the actors, interacting with the characters in scenes, commenting on the action, and filling in narrative that is not performed.

In her memoirs, Natalia Satz explains that she was proud of the show’s technical feat

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<sup>15</sup> F. 532, op. 1, del 441, l. 23, RGASPI. Original in English.

<sup>16</sup> Woodford McClellan, “Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools, 1925– 1934,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 382n44.

blending projected animations with the live action: “At a certain moment, the actress playing Nagua [the Boy of the play’s title] disappears and the action is continued in the cartoon. Now, why is the substitution imperceptible and quite unimportant? Because the manner in which the cartoons are drawn blends with the scenery and . . . because the costume, characteristic movements and habits with which the actress and the director have endowed Nagua are identical in the scenic and cartoon interpretation. . . the transition from scenic action to the screen is quite natural.”<sup>17</sup> This acting style may have made for a “natural” transition from stage to screen, but it also implies that the characterization of Nagua is more cartoonish than realistic. Heightening the non-realistic depiction of the African characters, Satz removed language and had them communicate through gesture and dance, interpreted when necessary by the “Good Negress”: “As I saw it, *The Black Boy and the Monkey* should be entirely musical, a pantomime-and-dance show. Only ‘the person of the proscenium’ would have a few lines to say.”<sup>18</sup>

As the KUTV letter suggests, this “distorted conception” was visible in at least three instances of Nagua’s cartoonish behavior: “having no language, crying like an ape and talking with his hands.”<sup>19</sup> A description of what this distorted depiction looked like can be read in the ostensibly positive review from English-language communist journal *New Theater*:

Up and down these steps and slide and all over the floor the Negroes gamboled. They spoke to one another in squeaks and shrill cries. They gave

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<sup>17</sup> Natalia Sats, *Sketches From My Life*, trans. Sergei Syrivatkin (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1985), 112.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>19</sup> F. 532, op. 1, del 441, l. 23, RGASPI. In English.

solo dances in turn while the rest watched, striking colorful attitudes. They joined in a wooden rattle dance. Underneath the naïve clowning, each one was obviously an expert dancer—the dance was really a modern ballet.<sup>20</sup>

The clear talent of the Soviet dancers was hidden under the “naïve clowning” of an ersatz African dance. “Colorful attitudes”—which would fit in the fantastical world of children’s theatre fairy tales—dehumanize the “Negro” characters, making them more like a cartoon than a naturalistic interpretation. This is even clearer when contrasted with the realism of the monkey.

Satz recounts the story of a child, upset that the show was sold out:

“You’ve seen the play, dear, and there are no tickets for today. Let’s go to the Zoo, and see a real monkey.”

“It’s not real there”, the girl protested indignantly, “It’s real here.”<sup>21</sup>

The problem, according to the KUTV students, is that the realism convincingly employed by the actor portraying the monkey does not match the cartoonish exaggeration of the other actors. Both interpretations are placed on stage at the same time, thus drawing visual equivalences between the depiction of the monkey and the Negro characters. If the monkey is realistic, then the pantomime of the Negro is also taken as realistic—despite the clear intent to denaturalize the character—assuring that the black characters are seen as less real than the monkey. Or as the KUTV letter accuses, the Negroes are not much more than

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<sup>20</sup> Lucile Charles, “Theatre for Children—Moscow,” *New Theater*, June 1936, 13, Box 29, Folder 11 Moscow Theatre for Children, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana Collection of Russian Theatrical Scripts and Papers, Harvard Theatre Collection.

<sup>21</sup> Satz, *Sketches From My Life*, 115.

apes.

Rather than dismiss this as merely children's theatre, and therefore unimportant, the KUTV students claim that it is precisely because of its audience that the racism in the play is significant. Since the Revolution, theatre had been under the control of the Narkompros, Commissariat of Education. The purpose of Satz's theatre was not only entertainment, but education. In an article written to explain the importance of children's theatre in the Soviet Union, Satz claimed, "The Great Socialist Revolution of October gave rise to the idea of a theatre for children . . . theatres for children have become an integral part of the children's life, assistants of the Soviet school, places where our children enjoy a pleasant rest."<sup>22</sup> Satz stated in a "Word of Welcome" provided to foreign visitors to *The Negro and the Monkey*: "Artistic taste should be cultivated from earliest childhood. . . . children often remain slaves of their first impression. It is more difficult to reeducate than to educate in the first instance."<sup>23</sup> The KUTV students followed in Satz's own tradition by criticizing the theatre's aesthetics in terms of the educational and social impact. Incorrect racial representation in children's theatre led directly to incorrect social behavior on the street. Unlike Robeson's positive experience of being called "Grandfather Frost" by Russian children at Satz's theatre, the KUTV letter outlined an alternate dehumanizing and familiar racist trope. Without the instant recognition in the USSR that Robeson's fame brought or a global popular audience following their travels, the KUTV students' concerns depicted the

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<sup>22</sup> Natalia Satz, "Children's Theater," *Sovietland*, no. 7, 1936, 25, Box 29, Folder 11, Moscow Theatre for Children, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana Collection of Russian Theatrical Scripts and Papers, Harvard Theatre Collection.

<sup>23</sup> Charles, 14 and 33.

quotidian experience of being unknown. Not only were the children “rude,” but also acting in a way that contradicted the official propaganda that the Soviet Union was anti-racist. So as not to contradict this official anti-racist position, the letter was careful to describe this as the actions of only “some rude children” and not as a castigation of institutionalized racism in the Soviet Union. The corrective for this behavior was not to ban the play, but to more correctly depict African culture for Soviet children. However given the importance of this popular children’s play to the institution of Soviet cultural education, the KUTV letter was in fact an acknowledgement of the methods by which institutionalized racism not only existed but promulgated in the Soviet Union despite the official propaganda.

Despite the concerns stated by the KUTV students in their letter, the official “Resolutions in Connection with Derogatory Portrayal of Negroes in the Cultural Institutions of the Soviet Union” does not demand action on Natalya Satz’s play, but another production:

WHEREAS, on the night of the 13th instant, in the “Theatre of Reviews” Tverskaya 15, City of Moscow, the negroes were depicted in the most degrading manner (painting them to appear [not] unlike real monkeys), an act which is now-a-days becoming extinct even in capitalist countries, thereby causing the negroes who were present to feel that the people of the Soviet Union also think about the negroes in a chauvinistic trend of mind<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> F. 532 op. 1 del. 441, l. 26, RGASPI. Original in English. Note: I have interpolated the missing word based on the Russian version of the resolution in the same archive, which translates as “they were portrayed almost like monkeys,” F. 532, op. 1, del. 441, l. 20, RGASPI. Original in Russian.

The performance to which this resolution refers is the English operetta *The Geisha*. The KUTV students described the specific “degrading manner” in their accompanying letter: “When, the pre-revolutionary play “Geicha” in the “Theatre of Opperet’s,” like certain Toothpaste and Shoepolish trusts here absolutely distorts the physiomy of the Negro exaggerated red lips with eyes painted white awful costumes etc. Only minstrels and clowns paint their faces and lips as shown in the above mentioned cases, and not Negro slaves, servants and workers under any form of society.”<sup>25</sup>

The students used an English operetta as the case study for their resolution, and not the highly regarded Soviet children’s play. *The Geisha* is specifically described as “pre-revolutionary” and likened to capitalist toothpaste and shoe polish company advertisements. The distorted and degrading presentations are not blamed on Soviet culture, but pre-Soviet, non-Russian performance. The resolution is carefully worded to express the danger is not in explicit Soviet racism, but that such foreign culture could lead to the feeling that Soviets were racist. Trained in the art of Soviet political speech, the KUTV students criticized the perception rather than the existence of Soviet racism.

Scott’s name is not signed to the KUTV students’ “Resolutions in Connection with Derogatory Portrayal of Negroes in the Cultural Institutions of the Soviet Union” or letter, but he would have attended classes with some of the signatories, probably attended the theatrical outings that the resolution and letter outlined, and definitely experienced the disconnect between official Soviet antiracist policy and personal interactions that were the

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<sup>25</sup> F. 532 op. 1 del. 441, l. 24, RGASPI. Original in Russian. Note: the letters and resolutions in Russian and in English varyingly refer to the theatre as “Theatre of Reviews,” “Theatre of Opperet’s,” or “Theatre of Satire,” but the date and address indicates that all references are to the same production.

concerns of the resolution and letter. Scott had been expelled from KUTV sometime between September and November 1932. While Scott had shared the theatrical and lived experiences of the signatories during his time at KUTV, he was no longer a student when the letter was written.

According to Robert Robinson's memoirs, Scott was kicked out of KUTV after two years (along with every other black student).<sup>26</sup> However, McClellan states that the course at KUTV was only scheduled to last fourteen months, and "most students stayed at KUTV from six to eighteen months."<sup>27</sup> Expulsion after two years—the length of time given by Robinson for Scott's time at KUTV—would imply that Scott nearly completed his studies and had stayed longer than most students. A September 16, 1932 report documented expulsions due to the findings into a racially motivated "conflict between a black American and white Englishman over a woman—presumably Soviet and white."<sup>28</sup> While McClellan only mentions "two whites and one black, Gary Johnson ('Robert Ross') of Minneapolis," as being expelled for "white chauvinism" and "political hooliganism," Joy Gleason Carew claims that both Ross and Scott were expelled for "hooliganism".<sup>29</sup> Whatever the cause, Scott left KUTV, and by November 20, 1932, was not listed among the names of aliases on the official roster of "Sector A, Section 9 (Negroes)."<sup>30</sup>

Both African and African American KUTV students contested the Soviet logic of

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<sup>26</sup> Robinson, 303.

<sup>27</sup> McClellan, 375 & 375n17.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 377n23.

<sup>29</sup> Carew, 40. Unfortunately, RGASPI f. 531—which McClellan cites as his source for the 1932 report—was not made available to me on my archival research visit to Moscow.

<sup>30</sup> F. 532 op. 1 del. 439 l.6, RGASPI. Original in Russian.

coloniality through their denouncement of cultural performance that contradicted official state race policy. Unlike their colleagues from African countries, African Americans like Scott also challenged the Soviet conception of America. Jazz was central to this contested view of America. On one hand, jazz represented the decadent and capitalist West, while on the other it was celebrated as a modernist cultural expression by an oppressed minority. After leaving KUTV, Scott began performing as a dancer with Soviet bandleader Alexander Tsfasman's jazz ensemble.

### **Jazz Dance in Moscow Before Scott**

Tsfasman's ensemble was one of the most famous collections of Soviet jazz musicians in the early 1930s, but jazz performance—including on-stage dancers—was not a new phenomenon in Moscow. Almost a decade before Scott joined Tsfasman, a jazz band and dancers were allowed to appear in Meyerhold's revue performance *D.E. (Give Us Europe)*.<sup>31</sup> Soviet officials tolerated jazz in Meyerhold's production because it ostensibly critiqued decadent Western culture. However, audiences also flocked to *D.E. (Give Us Europe)* to experience the modernist music of that same culture which was being critiqued.

*D.E. (Give Us Europe)* premiered in 1924 and ran in various forms until the 1930s, the last reinvention starting in 1930 re-titled as *D.S.E. (Give Us a Soviet Europe)*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold and Edward Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 192-194.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 202.

Meyerhold's production was a loose adaptation of the novel *Trust D.E.* by Ilya Ehrenburg into a series of short scenes, using agit-prop and musical revue techniques to non-narratively explore the theme of the capitalist takeover of Europe. According to Konstantin Rudnitsky, this was Meyerhold's first turn against Constructivism: "Constructivism began to disintegrate literally before one's eyes. During the performance one of the actors displayed some absurd and enigmatic drawing. 'What is it?' he was asked. 'Constructivism!' he declared importantly. Thus, with a smile, theatre admitted to its betrayal of Constructivism."<sup>33</sup>

In keeping with this "betrayal of Constructivism," the political content of agit-prop scenes were of paramount importance—countering the strict functional formalism of Constructivism—and scenes were rewritten to keep up with contemporary news and politics. The most popular scene in the production included an on-stage jazz band depicting the decadent West. Over the course of the production, the "theatrical" jazz band was even replaced by visiting jazz bands, including a guest appearance by Sidney Bechet's quintet in 1925.<sup>34</sup>

Even in the context of an anti-Western propaganda script, many official critics disliked Meyerhold's use of jazz music and dance as it made the capitalists seem exciting and entertaining. As Mel Gordon described the reaction: "Most Soviet critics too were confused and irritated over *D.E.*'s meandering plot turns and the jazz-tinged episodes (choreographed by Valentin Parnakh and Kasyan Goleizovsky), which were meant to

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<sup>33</sup> Konstantin Rudnitsky and Lesley Milne, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Traditions & Avant-Garde* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 103.

<sup>34</sup> Llewellyn Hedgbeth, "Meyerhold's 'D.E.,'" *The Drama Review* 19, no 2. (June 1975): 28.

expose the artistic squalor and depravity of Western popular culture. Both the Comintern delegates and Russian playgoers, naturally, remembered the decadent episodes with special delight.”<sup>35</sup>

Meyerhold’s production served as both a piece of Soviet propaganda and a source of entertainment for Soviet audiences. This pairing of anti-Western propaganda with Western entertainment was also seen in the official reception to a 1926 tour of Sam Wooding’s *Chocolate Kiddies*. Headlined by the vaudeville “class act” of Rufus Greenlee and Thaddeus “Teddy” Drayton, Sam Wooding’s orchestra brought African American musical theatre to the Soviet stage without the framing device of an existing Soviet production. Recalling the reception of Meyerhold’s *D.E.*, official critics used the jazz performances in *Chocolate Kiddies* to condemn the capitalist West. This time, however, the critiques attacked Europe and the US through celebrating the black performing bodies of oppressed African Americans.

In an attempt to explain the African American art form to Soviet audiences, the Soviet journal *Circus* published a special edition on Negrityanskaya Operetta, or Negro Operetta. While called an operetta by the Soviets, *Chocolate Kiddies* was an American black musical in the style of the Cotton Club. Specialty acts comprised the first half and the second half was an onstage orchestra concert.

The stars of *Chocolate Kiddies*, Greenlee and Drayton, served as a direct historical connection between blackface minstrelsy and the “class act” of white tie and tails tap dance. Greenlee had started his career as a blackface minstrel performer. In 1923, he teamed up

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<sup>35</sup> Mel Gordon, “Agit-Fantasy: Meyerhold’s *D.E.*,” *Theater* (1991): 53.

with Drayton to perform on Broadway in *Liza*, a black musical which opened soon after and capitalized on the success of *Shuffle Along*. In the *Liza*, the duo “carried canes, wore monocles, and danced the Virginia Essence in top hats and tails,” a style that would become their signature act.<sup>36</sup>

Garvin Bushnell, who played woodwinds in Sam Wooding’s band, described *Chocolate Kiddies* as it started its European tour:

*Chocolate Kiddies* was built around [Rufus] Greenlee and [Thaddeus] Drayton. [. . .] They had an international act where they’d come out dancing and talk in all these different languages. They’d start with Hungarian, then they’d speak Russian, then French, Yiddish, English, and finally wind up in German.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to Greenlee and Drayton, the show included numbers performed in blackface: Willie Robbins and Chick Horsey as “Two Happy Boys” and the Three Eddies “Redcap” act.

Echoing Robeson’s famous quote, Bushnell said, “Russia was the first country I’d ever been in where I was considered a human being—a person like anybody else.”<sup>38</sup> This made the three months in Russia some of the best weeks of the tour with adoring audience members hosting spontaneous dinners at their houses, and the cast attending a weekly standing gig at the Artist’s Club by Sidney Bechet—who also performed in *D.E.* at Meyerhold’s theatre. Bushnell’s quote belies the negative aspect of being black in the Soviet

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<sup>36</sup> Marshall Winslow Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance; The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 144.

<sup>37</sup> Garvin Bushnell and Mark Tucker, *Jazz from the Beginning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 56.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

Union. “A person like anybody else” in Moscow includes constant official surveillance. While being greeted with such private hospitality, the cast was also watched by Dzerzhinsky’s OGPU, “like anybody else.” Bushnell described a very helpful “valet who ran errands for us,” but at the end of the company’s stay revealed his identity as secret police and promised “to send in a marvelous report [. . .] about you and your people in the show.”<sup>39</sup> The cast and orchestra of *Chocolate Kiddies* earned the dubious honor of at least partially dispelling Soviet concerns about decadent black Americans. The aesthetic response to the tour proved a similar use of *Chocolate Kiddies* to celebrate the African Americans as separate from their bourgeois American culture.

The special issue of the journal *Circus* focusing on *Chocolate Kiddies* included commentary by Soviet theatre luminaries during the period of transition from Revolutionary forms to Stalinism.<sup>40</sup> Party politics demanded that bourgeois European and American art be condemned, while simultaneously championing African Americans who were oppressed in the United States.

While the Soviet theatre was not as avant-garde as during the Revolutionary period, the Russian stage had not yet given way to totalizing socialist realism, therefore the African American artists’ physical and musical virtuosity were praised as possible models for “eccentric” and energizing modernist Soviet performance. Criticism became a question of form and content over performance technique. Bourgeois plots and lyrics were described

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Negrityanskaya Operetta*, 1926, Amherst Center for Russian Culture Special Collection, Amherst College. Original in Russian.

as limiting the talents and performance possibilities of black Americans. According to the critics, this “Negro operetta” succeeded in spite of the European framework, and allowed Soviet audiences to witness both the skill of black performers and how that skill was denigrated by Western demands.

In his praise for *Chocolate Kiddies*, Lunacharsky turned to a construction of African primitivism that countered the bourgeois Europeanism:

I in no way want to diminish the merits of the "Negro" performance. It must be seen, if only to once again see firsthand how cleverly the bourgeoisie is able to once again use "innocent" barbarous people for their own purposes.

As for the jazz band, it should be noted that this is particularly peculiar and interesting combination of sound dissonance--like a kaleidoscope of light waves, interrupted by sudden bursts of guttural and cutting screams--gives the impression of the sun-drenched south, in which erratically, but happily, bathes the naive savage life.<sup>41</sup>

Multiple articles in the issue used language related to blood to describe the spread of black performance throughout bourgeois Europe. Jazz was either infectious or a necessary transfusion for a stultifying European bourgeois culture. Such performance was contagious for Soviet audiences, too. Nikolai Podgorny, a leading MXAT actor, wrote: “The Negro

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<sup>41</sup> Anatoly Lunacharsky, “Negrityanskaya Truppa vo Vtorom Gostsirke [Negro Troupe at the Second State Circus],” *Negrityanskaya Operetta*, 5, Amherst Center for Russian Culture Special Collection, Amherst College. Original in Russian. Note: Unnumbered pages in original, page numbers refer to the sheet in the archive, starting at 1 for the cover.

operetta—this great theatrical event of the day, and the ‘black danger’, bearing down on us—will not bring harm to modern music and theater. On the contrary: it will heal it.”<sup>42</sup>

As a “healing” antidote to degenerate bourgeois popular culture, black musical performance needed to be classified and shown in relation to Russian cultural forms. Echoing Lunacharsky’s concern with dissonance and “cutting screams,” critic Samuel Margolin focused on the dancers’ crisp, sharp movements: “What is the genre? Extravaganza, musical comedy, slapstick, vaudeville with a mixture of melodrama, ballet? No. But something unexpected. One that has not yet been seen, even in the Soviet capitals, in the well-known art of theater. Sharp sounds. Sharp motifs. Sharp lines. Movement on angles. Diagonal. Vertical. Horizontally. All lines are mechanized.”<sup>43</sup>

Yuri Ardi, who contributed to the issue of *Circus*, also wrote a published booklet in 1927 chronicling the global phenomenon of “chechetka.” As described by Ardi, “chechetka” was loosely equivalent to “tap” but was a broader term that included other dance forms: American “jig” and English “clog-dance,” as well as Charleston, Black Bottom, and Russian folk dance by way of Egyptian, Greek, and Roma (“gypsy”) dances. Building a historical precedent for the Russian acceptance of American jazz dancers, Ardi not only described African American tap dance style, but argues that the form can be seen as natively Russian.<sup>44</sup> While such an argument may at first seem preposterous, Greenlee and Drayton

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<sup>42</sup> Nikolai Podgorny, “‘Chernaya Opastnost’ [‘Black Danger’],” *Negrityanskaya Operetta*, 8, Amherst Center for Russian Culture Special Collection, Amherst College. Original in Russian.

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Margolin, “Evropa i Afrika [Europe and Africa],” *Negrityanskaya Operetta*, 7, Amherst Center for Russian Culture Special Collection, Amherst College. Original in Russian.

<sup>44</sup> Yuri Ardi, *Chechetka* (Moscow; Leningrad: Kinopechat, 1927), Houghton Library, Harvard University. Original in Russian.

who headlined the *Chocolate Kiddies* tour had a “Russian dance” finale as part of their act long before their tour to the Soviet Union.<sup>45</sup> Tap dance—or *chechetka*—was already an international form, borrowing from and recognizable to Europe, Russia, and the United States.

Stanislavsky wrote that black performance like *Chocolate Kiddies* “requires great attention since Negro rhythm is not only musical, but also a completely unusual rhythmical movement. In this sense, I think, their art will have a great influence on the future of music. Rhythm is very important to our dramatic art. Therefore, I would advise artists to pay great attention to our guests. Their sense of rhythm is very subtle.”<sup>46</sup> Stanislavsky’s call for attention does qualify black performance as “unusual,” but it is not so foreign as to be incompatible with Russian performance technique. Rather, the famed director saw African Americans as inevitably tied to the development of Russian theatre and music. One Russian musician who demonstrated Stanislavsky’s prescience on the “future of music” was Alexander Tsfasman, who hired Henry Scott to legitimize Russian jazz.

### **Scott with Tsfasman**

Jazz orchestras were popular in the Soviet Union, “especially after 1932, when the RAPM (Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians), which had fiercely fought against the spread of jazz – branded “music of the fat” by M. Gorki – in the country of the victorious

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<sup>45</sup> Stearns and Stearns, 249.

<sup>46</sup> Konstantin Stanislavsky, “Iskusstvo Negrov [Art of the Negroes],” *Negrityanskaya Operetta*, 4, Amherst Center for Russian Culture Special Collection, Amherst College. In Russian.

proletariat, was disbanded.”<sup>47</sup> By February 1933, four to five months after leaving KUTV, Scott had become established with one such popular jazz orchestra, the group led by Alexander Tsfasman. Tsfasman was a bandleader and composer who brought “hot”-style American jazz to the Soviet Union: “In the course of his career he fronted at least six bands, beginning with the AMA Jazz Band [1926-1930] and ending with a large Glenn Miller-type orchestra in the years 1945-47. Of these groups, the most significant was the Thirteen Virtuosos of 1933-37.”<sup>48</sup> The years of the Thirteen Virtuosos from 1933 to 1937 were also the years that Scott performed with Tsfasman.

Advertisements for gigs in *Vechenraya Moskva* (*Evening Moscow*) for the week of February 22, 1933, list five jazz orchestras in the city.<sup>49</sup> The listings for Leonid Utesov’s “Thea-Jazz” ensemble, a band at the Palace Hotel, and “the largest Concert-Jazz in the USSR,” all avoid including foreign descriptions: not mentioning American music and using only Cyrillic letters. The connection to an international culture is more clearly defined by the Hotel Savoy, which not only used Roman characters for their English hotel name, but spelled “jazz” in English and translated in parentheses: “(русск. Джаз)” [(russek. Dzhaz)]. However, the Metropole Hotel went even further in advertising the American-ness of Tsfasman’s music. In addition to similarly listing the hotel name in English, Tsfasman’s orchestra was initially billed in blended English and Russian as “Jazz (Джаз), Metropol

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<sup>47</sup> A. N. Golubev, *Aleksandr Tsfasman: Korifei sovetskogo dzhaza* [Luminary of Soviet Jazz] (Moscow: Musika, 2006), 24. In Russian.

<sup>48</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917-1991* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1994), 141.

<sup>49</sup> Advertisement, *Vechenraya Moskva*, February 22, 1933, 4; February 23, 1933, 4; February 24, 1933, 4; February 28, 1933, 4. Original in Russian.

Boy's" [sic] at the "Bar Американ," mixing Cyrillic and Roman characters within a single word.<sup>50</sup> Immediately below Tsfasman's name, Henry Scott received named billing as "Pri uchastii negriyanskogo artista Genri Skott" [starring Negro artist Henry Scott]. Scott's presence in the band was important enough to garner special notice in the limited space of the advertisement. By the end of the week, the Metropole specified Tsfasman as "американский jazz (джаз)," <sup>51</sup> differentiating their music from the other Soviet jazz orchestras performing "thea-jazz," "concert-jazz," or the simple unadorned "jazz (dzhaz)."

This Cyrillic/Roman Russian/English admixture embodies a Soviet version of Brent Hayes Edwards's *décalage* point of translation failure.<sup>52</sup> These jazz performances exist in a perpetual state of displacement that is neither Russian nor American and cannot be adequately expressed in either language. Similarly, Tsfasman and Scott themselves negotiated this *décalage*.

While attempting to secure his own small apartment, Scott roomed with Tsfasman, sleeping on the bandleader's couch. Tsfasman's infatuation with the performance of American culture predated this close professional association and personal friendship. Both men shared a fondness for Western-style clothes and American cars.<sup>53</sup> Whether this is a case of the Russian's view of American culture rubbing off on the American or the American's taste influencing the Russian, both the conductor and the dancer performed a particularly conspicuous version of "The American" in the midst of Soviet culture.

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<sup>50</sup> *Vechenraya Moskva*, February 22, 1933, 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Vechenraya Moskva*, February 28, 1933, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Edwards, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Robinson, 303.

According to Eugene Lyons of *Variety*, Tsfasman's compositions were American-sounding and of high enough quality to be competitive in Tin Pan Alley: "If only Alex's people had decided to migrate to America in time, Broadway might have had another master of mammy songs."<sup>54</sup> By comparing the Soviet composer to the racial ventriloquism of American "mammy songs," Lyons hits upon a central contradiction in Tsfasman's and Scott's collaboration. Scott's presence onstage alongside Tsfasman both contested and authenticated the Soviet bandleader's performance of jazz. As an African American, Scott's appearance onstage instantly signified to audience that Tsfasman's style of jazz more closely aligned to the American roots of jazz than other Soviet bands. However, this same presence also questioned Tsafman's Soviet loyalties.

Including a foreigner in his orchestra unsettled Tsfasman's position as a composer of "Soviet" jazz. Music critic Grigoriy Spektor did not consider Valentin Parnakh's experiments with jazz—including the performances with Meyerhold's theatre—as a truly "Soviet" jazz band. Since Parnakh relied on foreign orchestras placed within a Soviet context, Spektor claimed that Tsfasman's ensemble—which appeared years after Parnakh—deserved the appellation of "First Soviet Jazz Band."<sup>55</sup> Following this logic, Tsfasman's inclusion of the American Scott would also disqualify the band from Spektor's formulation. Therefore Spektor either erased Scott from the history of Tsfasman's band or took the American to be Soviet.

At the risk of offending the construction of Soviet identity by critics like Spektor,

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<sup>54</sup> Eugene Lyons, *Variety*, February 28, 1933, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Grigoriy Spektor, "Mister Dzhaz" [Mister Jazz], *Muzikalnaya zhizn* [Musical life] 12 (2006): 37. Original in Russian.

Scott added an air of “authenticity” to Tsfasman’s jazz orchestra. Scott’s physical black body justified the western black music that Tsfasman played. Even in its authorization, as the only black body performing along with the white Soviet bodies on stage, Scott served as a multi-faceted political symbol where the same event could be contradictory in interpretation. A February 1933 gala was reviewed by both Eugene Lyons of *Variety* and Langston Hughes for the *Pittsburg Courier*.

Tsfasman moved from the Grand Hotel which “has lapsed into neglect” to the Metropole Hotel with “grandeur on the scale of the Grand Central station.”<sup>56</sup> The beaux-art grand hall of the Metropole served as both a restaurant and ballroom. At the center of the room sat an indoor fountain with a fishpond in the base and an intricate geometric-design stained glass dome covered the entire hall.<sup>57</sup>

Lyons described the festive atmosphere and excitement building up to Scott’s entrance:

Diminutive Sfasman [sic] appeared in a blare of instruments followed by a band of 16—the largest to appear in any jazz outfit here. They paraded around the fountain and fishbowl which is the pride of the Metropole, hammering out one of the latest. Then they were on the rostrum doing their stuff like nobody’s business.

At that point came drama in the person of first [sic] Negro jazz performer, a Harlemite called Henry Scott. The crowd nearly burst with enthusiasm and

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<sup>56</sup> Lyons, 62.

<sup>57</sup> In 1991, the Metropole was restored to something similar to this original design—but without the fishpond.

Henry ran sweat but liked it. No one who has not lived in the Soviet capital can quite get the nuances of that drama. Be it remembered that an American Negro here is not just a human being with a black skin. He is a symbol—of suppressed races, anti-imperialism and a lot of other things.<sup>58</sup>

Attempting to explain this “symbol,” Lyons framed Scott’s social role in terms of propaganda, fearful restraint, as well as a release from such Soviet cautiousness:

[A Negro] always represents a Cause—political prisoners, anti-slavery, what not. He must speak guardedly and live up to his role as a revolutionary symbol. But Henry Scott was let loose without any ideological strings or inhibitions. He was hired to be himself, and he was. He banjoed and sang and moaned and tap-danced and in general earned his rubles.<sup>59</sup>

While referencing a Du Boisian double-consciousness where an African American in the Soviet Union “must speak guardedly and live up to his role as a revolutionary symbol,” Lyons implies that Scott’s performing method was a more authentic expression, and not merely a symbol. This conclusion would depend on the banjo, tap dance, and “moaning” as being somehow more authentic expressions of Scott’s identity, instead of cultural symbols of a different kind. Performing the role of the “American Negro” for Tsfasman’s jazz band required Scott to take on these internationally circulating symbols of African American jazz. Tsfasman, who had never visited the United States, authenticated his jazz through the addition of Scott’s performing already appropriated American cultural symbols. While

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<sup>58</sup> Lyons, 62.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Lyons stated that Scott had to “live up to his role” in Soviet symbolism, the same is also true of his role as the symbol of American jazz.

Langston Hughes attended the same gala but wrote a very different interpretation of the night’s events:

Henry Scott, an American Negro dancer and guitarist, opened last week as a featured performer with the Alexander Tafasman [sic] orchestra at the Hotel Metropole in Moscow. This orchestra plays for dancing from 12 to 3 a. m. in the grand dining room of Russia’s largest and finest hotel. Scott and his guitar occupy the center of the platform, surrounded by the Russian jazz artists, and the spotlights from the high crystal dome of the dining room play on the Negro artist. Scott sings the vocal refrains to the American jazz pieces that are played. Occasionally he dances a chorus, or rises to conduct the band a la Cab Calloway. On the opening night he was well received by the huge crowd that packed the tables and the dance floor.<sup>60</sup>

Hughes, writing for the black press in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, did not rely on the same racializing language as Lyons in *Variety*. Lyons’s description reads like the legacy of minstrel performance: banjo, “moaning,” tap dance, building white pleasure on the strenuous labor of the black male body—“Henry ran sweat but liked it.” Hughes, by contrast, depicted a more refined scene—in the tradition of Greenlee and Drayton’s top hat and tails “class act”—calling attention to Scott’s location at the center of the orchestra, raised on a platform, where “spotlights from the high crystal dome play on the Negro

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<sup>60</sup> Langston Hughes, “Russia Night Life Features Negro Artists,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 4, 1933, A7.

artist,” and “occasionally he dances a chorus.” Rather than describing Scott’s role as primarily a dancer—as reported in other records—Hughes depicted Scott as a singer and instrumentalist. Scott’s dancing was placed on the same “occasional” level as his conducting. His blending of performance modes—singer, instrumentalists, dancer, and conductor—and his central location on the raised platform, described a fundamental role with Tsfasman’s ensemble that eclipsed Tsfasman himself.

Scott performed with Tsfasman over the next five years, garnering popular acclaim, but scant official or critical press. On April 5, 1934, the Radio-Theatre on Gorky Street hosted a “Grand Concert of Estrada.” The headline attraction was “Jazz under the direction of A. Tsfasman,” but immediately after the bandleader whose name had become synonymous with Soviet jazz, “starring Negro singers Henry Scott and Wayland Rudd.”<sup>61</sup> This was not the first time the two Americans had joined Tsfasman on stage. According to Vladimir Feyertag, historian of Soviet jazz, “In 1933 the step-dancer Henry Scott and vocalist Wayland Rudd performed with [Tsfasman’s] band,” although he does not give the locations of these concerts.<sup>62</sup> Scott’s shift in billing between singer and step-dancer underscored his ability to perform in multiple modes, as described by Hughes, rather than as solely a dancer.

By the end of 1936, light-hearted entertainment included serious political ramifications. Scott appeared in photos of Tsfasman’s band in 1936,<sup>63</sup> but a picture of the

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<sup>61</sup> Advertisement, *Izvestiia*, April 5, 1934, 4. Original in Russian. For more on Rudd, see chapter 3.

<sup>62</sup> Vladimir Borisovich Feyertag, *Istoriya dzhazovogo ispolnitel'stva v Rossii* [History of Jazz Makers in Russia] (St. Peterburg: Skifiya, 2010), 63. Original in Russian.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

group from 1938 no longer includes Scott.<sup>64</sup> The years between 1936 and 1938 marked not only Scott's departure from Tsfasman, but a change in official Soviet policy toward Tsfasman's jazz. An article on December 27, 1936, in the *Evening Moscow* covered a "technical" exposition of jazz, where orchestras from across Moscow showcased their talents.<sup>65</sup> The article initially praised Tsfasman as a skilled arranger with a "good feeling for the particularities and possibilities of a jazz orchestra" who was "one of the pioneers of Soviet jazz." This acclaim was quickly tempered, however, by a critique of Tsfasman's American influences:

Unfortunately, Tsfasman is excessively inspired by American jazz orchestra conductors, particularly Ellington. An excessive taste for dissonance, for rhythmic complexity, makes Tsfasman's orchestra somewhat pretentious, and sometimes gives it a somewhat 'snobbish' character. Even the 'Russian Plyaska [Folk Dance]' in an arrangement by Tsfasman feels like a decadent American foxtrot.<sup>66</sup>

A few months later, an article appeared in *Soviet Music* denouncing American-style jazz, demanding "Soviet jazz must find its own style, drastically different from the style of contemporary western jazz."<sup>67</sup> Tsfasman's group was too westernized. Within a year, Tsfasman lost his band when the officially sanctioned State Jazz Orchestra of the USSR was

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>65</sup> E. Gabrilovich, "Vecher Dzhazov [Evening of Jazz]," *Vechnraya Moskva*, December 27, 1936. Original in Russian.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Golubev, 34.

created out of most of his “Thirteen Virtuosos.”<sup>68</sup>

While Tsfasman merely lost his orchestra, associating with such American-style and Americans could prove more dangerous. That same year, Scott’s name appeared in the NKVD records. Scott’s roommate, an American-born Latvian named Arthur Talent, was arrested, tortured, and executed by the NKVD.<sup>69</sup> Talent’s supposed crime was allowing his apartment to be used as a “clandestine address” for foreign spies. Adam Hochschild claimed that in the NKVD files, which have since been resealed, Talent named Henry Scott and John Goode—Paul Robeson’s brother-in-law. Goode avoided arrest by the NKVD because he had returned to the United States. Scott himself also emigrated back to the United States in 1939, in order to escape the growing tensions and World War II. Unable to find work as a performer in his home country, Scott died in obscurity in 1945, less than six years after returning to the United States.<sup>70</sup>

Henry Scott’s life in the Soviet Union demonstrated how Soviet coloniality and the untranslatable *décalage* worked both with and against the antiracist propaganda of the 1920s and ’30s. Scott experienced systems of coloniality and racism as a student at KUTV as shown in the official letter of collective opposition to theatrical representations of blackness, specifically Natalya Satz’s *The Negro Boy and His Monkey*. However, using the double consciousness of coloniality as well as the logic of Soviet propaganda, the KUTV student official resolution named the problem as the perception, rather than existence, of

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<sup>68</sup> Starr, 143.

<sup>69</sup> Adam Hochschild, “Never Coming Home,” *Mother Jones*, Sep-Oct 1992, 50-56.

<sup>70</sup> *Dallas Times Herald*, Sunday, February 4, 1990, A20.

Soviet racism.

Jazz in the Soviet Union initially contested Soviet arts, was later accepted as an international cosmopolitan form to critique American race relations, and then absorbed into official Soviet art. Scott capitalized on this Soviet ambivalence toward jazz to secure a prominent role in early-to-mid-1930s Moscow popular culture. Scott's presence operated in the *décalage* of the untranslatable, simultaneously authenticating and challenging the jazz of Alexander Tsfasman. As Stalinism began to threaten foreigners and foreign jazz in the late 1930s, Scott fled the Soviet Union to return to the anonymity of a black man in the United States.

## Chapter 3

### Wayland Rudd: “Becoming Soviet”

Wayland Rudd had started a moderately successful career as an actor in the United States from 1929 to 1932 when he traveled to the Soviet Union to take part in a film with Langston Hughes. The film, *Black and White*, was never completed and most of the all-black company returned to the United States. Rudd, however, did not. He stayed to study and perform with Meyerhold. Unlike Henry Scott and Paul Robeson, Rudd permanently remained in the Soviet Union. This action of relocation alone was not enough to place him above Soviet suspicion. Despite his own praise for race relations in the Soviet Union, he could not shed his identity as an “American”—a dangerous identity in the Soviet Union of Stalin’s secret police investigations, abductions, and executions. Through his stage roles, public statements, denunciations, touring the front during the war, and giving up his US citizenship, Rudd constantly proved his Soviet identity and renegotiated his position among American, African American, and Soviet cultures both on stage and in print.

This chapter focuses on Rudd’s stage performances. While he was cast in a few Soviet films—an adaptation of O. Henry stories (1933), a few character roles as sailors in 1946 and 1947, and most famously as Jim in a Soviet film adaptation of *Tom Sawyer* (1937)—Rudd himself claimed the central importance of the theatre rather than film for African American performance. In a 1934 article for W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Crisis*, Rudd

wrote: “The Negro has long since had something vital to give theatre but theatre hasn’t wanted it, or rather it has only wanted the ‘song and dance’ and the ‘saucer burial’ part of it.”<sup>1</sup> Like Lunacharsky, Satz, and Meyerhold, Rudd understood the position of theatre in the global Soviet artistic and educational project.<sup>2</sup> Theatre was to be both a critical lens for teaching Soviet ideology and an artistic exemplar showcasing the superiority of Soviet theatre to a global audience. Speaking directly to the role of African Americans on stage, Rudd advocated: “Develop a theatre of consciousness and we’ll get perspective on ourselves that laughing America doesn’t want only because it doesn’t know what it is missing. And once we get perspective we might even save not only American theatre, but ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> While Rudd wrote or co-wrote a handful of plays—both in English and in Russian—dealing with race and capitalism, they were never successfully staged.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, live performances became the way in which he attempted to embody his call for a theatre of critical perspective. Rudd’s performances in the Soviet Union simultaneously critiqued American racism while building that critique on his own American identity. Through the Soviet stage and the power Rudd saw particularly in live performance, he hoped to transform the minstrel traditions and cultural appropriation of what he called the “song and dance” and the “saucer burial” parts—parts that he knew intimately from his

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<sup>1</sup> Wayland Rudd, “Russian and American Theatre,” *The Crisis*, September 1934, 270.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 2 if this dissertation for more on Soviet theatre as global education.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>4</sup> Rudd’s English plays included *Andy Jones*, f. 652, op. 4, d. 93, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva [Russian State Archive of Literature and Art], hereafter cited as RGALI; *House of Virtue*, f. 656, op. 3, d. 2249, RGALI; and, *Shadow on the Road*, f. 656, op. 3, d. 2250, RGALI. His Russian co-authored plays included *Byeli negr* [The White Negro], f. 656, op. 5, d. 6777, RGALI; *Dzhimmi Krouford* [Jimmy Crawford], f. 656, op. 5, d. 6778, RGALI; a revision of *Byeli negr* called *Pryamaya doroga* [The Straight Path], f. 656, op. 5, d. 6779, RGALI; a revision of *Dzhimmi Krouford* called *Tsveti, kotoriye topchut* [The Flowers which They Trample], f. 656, op. 5, d. 6780, RGALI.

time as a writer for the black press and from his “race” roles on Broadway.

### **Rudd in the United States**

Wayland Rudd was born in 1900, attended high school in Washington, DC, and in 1921 won a scholarship to attend the Howard University Conservatory of Music.<sup>5</sup> While studying music at Howard, he wrote for a black newspaper in Washington, DC. Rudd appeared on Broadway and at regional theatres from the late 1920s to early 1930s. While his career in the United States did not seem to be distinctly communist, Rudd’s early performances influenced and supported both his artistic and political Soviet performances in Stalinist Russia.

As a reporter, Rudd covered Washington, DC for the *Chicago Defender* from 1920 to 1923. His articles ranged from governmental and political reports<sup>6</sup> to reviews of art song performances.<sup>7</sup> While his work for an African American newspaper provided him with the experience he would later utilize in his carefully constructed public statements, his acting roles on the stage were what eventually took him to Moscow.

Rudd appeared on Broadway in Robert Mamoulian’s 1929 production of the Heywards’ *Porgy*, where he played supporting roles and understudied Frank Wilson as Porgy. After *Porgy*, Rudd became a member of the repertory Hedgerow Theatre in suburban Philadelphia. Most notably, Rudd performed roles made famous by fellow Soviet

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<sup>5</sup> “Dunbar High School Commencement,” *Washington Bee*, July 9, 1921, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Wayland Rudd, “Under the Capital Dome,” *Chicago Defender*, June 19, 1920, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Wayland Rudd, “Roland Hayes Shows Capital European Way,” *Chicago Defender*, January 20, 1923, 5.

traveller Paul Robeson. In 1930, Rudd played *Othello*<sup>8</sup> the same year as Robeson, and the following year he appeared as *Emperor Jones*,<sup>9</sup> six years after Robeson's revival. Rudd also took part in a joint production of the Philadelphia Orchestra Association and the League of Composers as the "Speaker" for the American premiere of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*.<sup>10</sup> The multi-media puppet, opera, and narrated work was performed both in Philadelphia and in New York at the Metropolitan Opera—twenty-four years before Marian Anderson's famed debut.<sup>11</sup> Rudd returned to Broadway in 1932 for *Sentinels* and *Bloodstream*. Though he was praised for his acting,<sup>12</sup> the productions were considered failures.<sup>13</sup> In between these Broadway flops, Rudd appeared in the Provincetown Playhouse's race drama *The Marriage of Cana* by Julian L. McDonald.<sup>14</sup>

By the end of 1932, Rudd had been offered an opportunity to work on a film with Langston Hughes and travel to the Soviet Union.

### **Rudd with *Black and White***

The German-Russian Soviet film studio Mezhrabpom wanted to produce a film

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<sup>8</sup> Society section, *New York Amsterdam News*, April 9, 1930, 4.

<sup>9</sup> "Race Actors in Social Register," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 10, 1931, A8.

<sup>10</sup> "Negro Actor to Explain Drama Performed by 13-Foot Puppets," *The Plain Dealer*, April 17, 1931, 1.

<sup>11</sup> "'Oedipus Rex' Gets American Premiere," *New York Times*, April 11, 1931, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Burns Mantle, "Laura Bowman and Wayland Rudd 'Steal' Show in White Play," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 2, 1932, A7.

<sup>13</sup> Dewey Roscoe Jones, "Race Actors Find Broadway Hard Road to Travel, but No One Gives Up," *Chicago Defender*, November 26, 1932, 10.

<sup>14</sup> "Another Play of Negro Life Here: Show Is Scheduled for the Provincetown Theatre the Coming Week," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 13, 1932, 10.

about the horrible conditions for black workers in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Rudd, Langston Hughes, Louise Thompson, Lloyd Patterson, and others made up a group of twenty-two African Americans traveling to Moscow to take part in the film. According to Hughes, Rudd “came to Moscow with the Negro moving picture group and had been chosen for the leading role in the sound film, ‘Black and White.’”<sup>16</sup> As Rudd was one of the only company members with any acting experience, it is not surprising that he would be cast as the film’s lead. Unfortunately, after travelling to Moscow, the company of Americans found delays and rewrites, and eventually cancellation of the project.

Meredith Roman, who was able to access the Soviet classified archives, found that Stalin’s top advisors, Lazar Kaganovich and Vyachislav Molotov, met with American businessman Col. Hugh L. Cooper to discuss canceling the film. Roman’s research indicates that Cooper demanded that continued American assistance on the construction of the Dnieprostoi dam depended on stopping the production portraying American racism. The US businessman met with the Soviet officials in July 1932, and the Politburo officially canceled the film on August 22, “advising against the release of any formal announcement.”<sup>17</sup> This same day as the unannounced cancelation, the *Black and White* company met to discuss the film’s “postponement.”<sup>18</sup> The meeting quickly turned to debate over whether to issue an official denunciation of their treatment by Mezhrabpom.

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<sup>15</sup> I have opted for the more Russian transliteration of the studio name, but it also appears as the more Germanic “Meschrabpom.”

<sup>16</sup> Langston Hughes, “Mixes Russian and Jazz on Soviet Stage,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February, 25, 1933, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Meredith Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 137.

<sup>18</sup> Writings: Notebooks, notes on trip to Soviet Union, 1932 (3 of 3), Series 2.1, Box 10, Folder 10, Matt N. and Evelyn Graves Crawford Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

While taking Mezhrabpom at their word that the film was merely “postponed” and not cancelled, the company correctly identified Col. Cooper as the driving force behind the delay. Using very carefully worded phrasing, the group determined: “On the surface, at least, it appears that this picture, (opposed by Moscow [and] Americans, including Col. Hugh Cooper) may have been postponed on account of Am[erican] opposition, due possibly to the need for Am[erican] recognition of the Soviet Union. Is this a compromise against the Negroes of the world, and all oppressed darker colored peoples?”<sup>19</sup> Rather than leveling a direct critique, the company expressed concerns as to the appearance of deference to white American interests and appeared to ask a question about the betrayal of African Americans. Mezhrabpom replied to this carefully phrased question by threatening the group. A representative from Mezhrabpom continually stressed the need to resolve the question before making any formal complaints, likening a denouncement to “going to war”<sup>20</sup>

When it was clear that some members of the company were not prepared to back down, Mezhrabpom replied through a spokesman: “I will say, you are wrong. At the end, you must speak with us. If you make difficulties of a formal character for us, you are wrong.”<sup>21</sup> This statement implied that filing a formal complaint, rather than speaking only through the Mezhrabpom, would result in disaster for both the film producers and the Americans. By channeling all complaints through Mezhrabpom, the film company could control when and how much information was relayed to Soviet officials. An official public statement would force the film and Soviet government’s hand, demanding some kind of

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 18.

response rather than merely letting the matter quietly fade away.

After speaking with Mezhrabpom, and not believing their explanations that the film was merely delayed, an official denouncement was introduced by company member Theodore Poston and signed by four others:

We charge Mesch[rabpom] film with base betrayal of Negro race and revolutionary movements:

[Theodore] Poston

[Henry] Moon

[Thurston] Lewis

[Laurence] Alberga<sup>22</sup>

This official charge, however, was not accepted by the rest of the cast, who wrote a clarifying denouncement of the denouncement, stating their belief in the explanations of delays offered by the Soviets' and their commitment to global anti-racism.<sup>23</sup> After the meeting, in order to diffuse the situation, the Soviet government hastily arranged for eleven members of the company to take a tourist visit to Uzbekistan, but Rudd did not join the group in Tashkent.<sup>24</sup> Government officials used the Tashkent trip to showcase the Soviet Union's success among "national minorities"—the official term for native non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union. The trip would prove to be influential in Langston Hughes's

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>23</sup> Langston Hughes, Evelyn Louise Crawford, and Mary Louise Patterson, *Letters from Langston: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Red Scare and Beyond* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 89-90.

<sup>24</sup> "Black and White" Film, Series 869, Box 1, Folder 21, Page 1, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

writing his memoir, *I Wonder as I Wander*, where the poet made similar connections to those seen by Paul Robeson between African Americans in the US South and “national minorities” in the USSR Central Asia.<sup>25</sup> After the tour, the *Black and White* company disbanded, with most choosing to return to the United States. Rudd and a few others, however, remained in the Soviet Union. Rudd’s refusal to join the Central Asian tour was not a political statement rejecting the government’s placating offer. Rather, Rudd had an artistic reason to remain behind in Moscow: he wanted to study with Vsevolod Meyerhold.

### **Rudd and Meyerhold**

Even after the majority of the *Black and White* company returned to the United States, Rudd remained in Moscow to study with Meyerhold, and ended up being cast in one of the famous director’s productions. *Vstuplenie* [variously translated as “The Prelude,” “The Entrance,” “The Entry”] was adapted for Meyerhold by Yuri German from his novel. Rudd’s involvement with *Vstuplenie* ran from 1932 to 1937. According to Soviet literary critic A.V. Fevralsky, the play depicted the “exaggerated theme of crisis in bourgeois culture.”<sup>26</sup> The plot follows a white Western-European engineer named Kelberg fleeing the decaying opulence and exploitation of bourgeois capitalism. One of Kelberg’s fellow German engineers commits suicide because of the humiliating conditions of the only work he can find—selling pornography. Kelberg travels to Shanghai where, in the dramatic

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapter 1 for Paul Robeson’s experiences with Soviet use of Uzbek culture as propaganda tailored to address questions of race.

<sup>26</sup> A.V. Fevralsky [review], f. 2437, op. 3, d. 74, l. 34-37, RGALI. Original in Russian.

climax, he witnesses the Chinese workers' exploitation at the hand of white capitalists. As with all good Socialist Realist heroes, this realization of the racist violence of capitalism leads to the engineer's socialist political awakening, whereupon he sets off for the promise of a workers paradise in the Soviet Union.

In *Vstuplenie*, as written, Meyerhold had nothing to offer Rudd in terms of acting roles. While race was not completely absent from German's original script, it focused on white, Western-European characters and the sympathetic Chinese laborers. By including Rudd, Meyerhold extended the crisis to include the treatment of African Americans, alongside the script's focus on the white, Western-European bourgeoisie. Meyerhold utilized Rudd's vocal training and a jazz underscoring to build what Fevralsky called the "musical-rhythmic development of the performance."<sup>27</sup> In a critique of the New York, Paris, and Berlin jazz craze, the political crisis of Western European and American bourgeoisie, as depicted in the script, unfolded to the music most emblematic of that culture.

Meyerhold's theatre was not Rudd's only public jazz performance. While in rehearsals and performances for *Vstuplenie* in 1933, Rudd sang with African American performer Henry Scott and Soviet jazz impresario Alexander Tsfasman.<sup>28</sup> The three also headlined a "Grand Concert of Estrada" on April 5, 1934 at the Radio-Theatre on Gorky Street.<sup>29</sup> By performing with both Tsfasman's jazz orchestra and Meyerhold's theatre, Rudd simultaneously worked with two of the most famous Soviet cultural artists: one in popular

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Vladimir Borisovich Feyertag, *Istoriya dzhazovogo ispolnitel'stva v Rossii* [History of Jazz Makers in Russia] (St. Peterburg: Skifiya, 2010), 63. Original in Russian.

<sup>29</sup> Advertisement, *Izvestiia*, April 5, 1934, 4. Original in Russian. For more on Scott, see chapter 2.

music and one in academic theatre.

*Vstuplenie* was also not the first time Meyerhold used popular jazz as musical-rhythmic inspiration. Jazz played a similar role in Meyerhold's earlier *D.E. (Give Us Europe)*, where jazz was simultaneously enjoyed by audiences and used as a social critique of Western bourgeois culture.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the hit revue of the previous decade, *Vstuplenie* attempted a serious—rather than satirical—depiction of the bourgeois crisis.

Rudd's role in *Vstuplenie* was a "Negro" American jazz singer, performing before white audiences. On an early table of characters in the show's rehearsal reports, this character was only listed as "Negr" and performed in just one scene.<sup>31</sup> Although Rudd started rehearsing for *Vstuplenie* on December 9, 1932, his character's name, "Dzhonson" (Johnson), did not appear until February 1, 1933,<sup>32</sup> seeming to indicate that Rudd's presence somehow increased the role from a nameless "Negro" into a more fully-developed, named character. By the time *Vstuplenie* reached performances, Rudd's character had significantly expanded to become the featured role in this scene, and was listed in some programs as "Johnson" and in others as "Johnston."<sup>33</sup>

Changing the character from a generic "Negro" to a named role initially appears to concretize and humanize the character. Rather than performing a nameless "type," reminiscent of the minstrel roles of Broadway, Rudd's character could theoretically be seen as an individual. This shift was an important distinction in a play that based part of its anti-

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<sup>30</sup> See Chapter 2 for discussion of jazz in *D.E.*

<sup>31</sup> F. 963 op. 1 del. 748, RGALI. Original in Russian.

<sup>32</sup> F. 963, op. 1, del. 747, RGALI. Original in Russian.

<sup>33</sup> F. 963 op. 1 del. 756, RGALI. Original in Russian.

capitalist propaganda on exposing the racism of Western European and American bourgeois society. In the play, the witnessing of Chinese workers' dehumanization by capitalism leads to the protagonist's communist awakening. Similarly, the shift from a stereotype "Negro" to the named individual can be seen as reflecting a more fully-developed humanizing of Rudd's character. However, the anti-racist tendencies in the performance did not extend to all aspects of staging, as a photo of the finale seems to show that the role of a Chinese worker was performed in yellowface as the "Chinaman" stereotype.<sup>34</sup>

In much the same way as Rudd himself, Rudd's role straddled the divide between Russian and American cultures. Theatrical programs blended Cyrillic Russian and Roman English to describe Rudd's role. Transliterating his English name to the Cyrillic "Родд" (Rodd), his character was printed in English letters while the description was in Russian: "Johnston – артист театра Риялто (в Нью-Йорке)."<sup>35</sup> While blending Cyrillic and Roman characters was not unheard of, for example in advertisements for jazz ensembles,<sup>36</sup> Meyerhold's theatre was not describing an abstract concept like a musical style, but a physical character embodied by an African American actor in Russia. By combining transliteration, translation, and original Cyrillic in the program, Rudd was coded as different from the rest of the production, not American and not Russian, even before he appeared on stage.

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<sup>34</sup> Photo, Herman, Yuri- "Vstuplenie" ["The Entrance"], 1934-1938, Box 34, Folder 9, Dana collection, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University.

<sup>35</sup> Program, Herman, Yuri- "Vstuplenie" ["The Entrance"], 1934-1938, Box 34, Folder 9, Dana collection, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University. Original in Russian and English.

<sup>36</sup> See Chapter 2 for a discussion of this point of translation failure with regards to "jazz."

Whether “Johnston” or “Johnson,” Rudd’s character was to be viewed as distinctly—and yet generically—African American. This character with an interchangeable African American name stood apart from the rest of the cast in his major scene. This scene, set in an opulent European-style hotel in Shanghai, was named “The Salon” and shifted between being the fourth or third scene in the play. Attempting to depict the extravagance of bourgeois culture, it constituted a diagetic performance within the play, including Rudd’s singing and dancing a foxtrot.<sup>37</sup> While the Salon scene was ostensibly included as a critical examination of American or Western European cultural production, Soviet audiences commended and thoroughly enjoyed Rudd’s virtuosic performance. Official rehearsal reports, which also note audience reactions during performances, mention that the scene in which Rudd appeared was always well liked. In the report for the night of March 14, 1933, Rudd’s singing was singled out for “isolated applause greeted: the song of the Negro.”<sup>38</sup>

Homer Smith, Rudd’s former cast mate from the failed *Black and White* film, documented Meyerhold’s enthusiasm for Rudd in the *Chicago Defender*. Writing under the penname “Chatwood Hall” for American audiences, Smith claimed that Meyerhold “highly praised Comrade Rudd for his performance of this part.”<sup>39</sup> The positive reception documented in the performance report and by Smith was supported by a newspaper review in *Krasnaya gazeta* from September 1933. The paper called attention to Rudd—though not by name: “As for the musical episodes, they are well executed and made memorable by a singular negro, who sings lullaby songs in English at a drunken colonial

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<sup>37</sup> “Reklama repetitsii” [Rehearsal Call Sheet], f. 963, op. 1, d. 753, RGALI. Original in Russian.

<sup>38</sup> F. 963, op. 1, d. 745, l. 70, RGALI. Original in Russian.

<sup>39</sup> Chatwood Hall, “A Column from Moscow,” *Chicago Defender*, March 4, 1933, 10.

hotel on New Year's Eve."<sup>40</sup> The newspaper simultaneously celebrated Rudd's performance while making sure to note it was "in English," continuing the work of the theatrical program in highlighting Rudd's foreignness.

Langston Hughes reviewed Rudd's performance, focusing on the American's performance, rather than the play itself. By naming the review "Mixes Russian and Jazz on Soviet Stage," Hughes made explicit the negotiation between Rudd's Russian Soviet and "foreign" African American identities. Russian reviewers only mentioned Rudd's singing performance, if they mention him at all, while Hughes detailed Rudd's mundane actions during the opening scene: "Rudd takes the part of a Negro singer who, in the first scene, is one of the passengers on a ship, bound from Hamburg to Shanghai. He is shown resting on deck, conversing with passengers, and playing records on his portable victrola."<sup>41</sup> This emphasis on the uneventful, daily actions of Rudd's performance in a crowd scene evidenced the level of detail Rudd and Meyerhold brought to the character. Rudd was not merely a singer in a single scene, but a member of the company, performing alongside Russian actors—which went unremarked in the Soviet reviews. For Hughes's American review, however, such ordinary onstage integration proved worthy of special note.

When Hughes wrote about Rudd's more well-documented "Salon Scene," he illuminated racial nuances uncommented on or unseen by Russian critics:

In the last scene of the first act, he is one of the artists at a fashionable New Year's celebration in a big Shanghai hotel. Here a crowd of beautifully

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<sup>40</sup> F. 963, op. 1, d. 745, l. 31, RGALI. Original in Russian.

<sup>41</sup> Langston Hughes, "Mixes Russian and Jazz on Soviet Stage," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February, 25, 1933, 9.

gowned European white women beg him to sing for them. He sings a popular American song by Irving Berlin and the curtain falls with the stage in darkness, except for a spotlight on the dark face of the Negro singer.<sup>42</sup>

Along similar lines to the Soviet critique of white European bourgeois appreciation of African American jazz performers that I discussed in the previous chapter, Hughes's review indicated a gendered component to Rudd's performance. It was not white Europeans, but specifically European white women begging Rudd to sing. Hughes was not the only American to comment on Rudd's desirability for European women; Chatwood Hall's article in the *Chicago Defender* also mentioned this fact in a wry comment on Rudd's performance: "By the way, Comrade Rudd has that 'Sex-Appeal' which all continental women admire and desire when they see a dusky man."<sup>43</sup> Hughes's and Hall's use of the infamous trope of white women's attraction to the black male performer—a trope which served as an excuse for lynchings in the United States—cannot be ignored. From the safe distance of "anti-racist" Soviet Union, Hughes and Hall could celebrate Rudd for the international interracial desire that his performance generated.

While I could not track down the exact song Rudd performed, by pairing Hughes's description of the song as "a popular American song by Irving Berlin" with the review from *Krasnaya gazeta* calling the song a "lullaby in English," it is likely that Rudd interpolated Berlin's 1927 "Russian Lullaby" into the performance. The closing lyrics of "Russian Lullaby" provide particular poignancy when sung by Rudd:

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Hall, March 4, 1933, 10.

Rock-a-bye, my baby,  
Somewhere there may be  
A land that's free  
For you and me  
And a Russian lullaby.<sup>44</sup>

The lyrics take on different meaning depending who sings and where the song is sung. What may appear as a Tin Pan Alley fantasia on Russian yearning for escape from oppression written by a Russian Jewish émigré, gained added complexity when sung by an African American in the context of a theatrical critique of capitalist racism from a stage in Soviet Russia. While an initial reading seems to imply that the “land that is free” refers to the United States as an opposite to Russia, when sung by Rudd from the Soviet stage, it could also mean freedom from the Jim Crow United States. The meaning that is critical of United States racial policy was made clearer by Meyerhold’s staging which focused on Rudd at the end of the scene leading into the act break. With Irving Berlin’s lyrics still echoing, Hughes’s description of “the stage in darkness, except for a spotlight on the dark face of the Negro singer” evoked a haunting image of the African American floating in space, without a country, searching for the “land that's free for you and me.” The “you” simultaneously points to the “baby” of the lyrics, the desirous European white women of the onstage audience, and the Soviet audience of Meyerhold’s theatre. In this interpretation, the song suggests a Soviet anthem in the style of Isaac Dunayevsky promoting equality of races,

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<sup>44</sup> Irving Berlin, “Russian Lullaby,” in *The Complete Lyrics of Irving Berlin*, ed. Robert Kimball and Linda Berlin Emmet (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2001), 251.

genders, and classes. The ideal of the Soviet Union presented as the answer for this wandering search. However, as in the cases of Henry Scott and the students at KUTV,<sup>45</sup> such optimistic anti-racism proved to be more effective as artifice than in practice.

### **Dangerous Suspicions**

In a 1949 article for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Paul Robeson recalled a 1934 encounter with Rudd:

Together with my compatriot and comrade on the stage Wayland Rudd, I sat in the stands at Red Square under the shadow of the ancient Kremlin walls. Wayland had lived and worked in Moscow for a few years. I told him how with every day it was harder to be an artist, it was more colorful in the world of money.

Passers-by greeted us. Children ran up crying: "Uncle Jim, Uncle Jim!"—and turned to Wayland.

I was interested, had he changed his name? It seemed, that he had been in the film "Tom Sawyer" and everyone was sympathetic toward his hero.<sup>46</sup>

The timing of this 1934 meeting does not coincide with the release of the 1937 *Tom Sawyer*

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<sup>45</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Robeson, "Two Worlds," *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (14 June 1949), f. 495, op. 261, d. 194 (I), Lichniye dela chlenob Kompartii SShA [Personal files of members of the Communist Party (USA)], l. 267, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoi istorii [Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History]. Original in Russian.

film, but the story is reminiscent of one of the events that Robeson credits with his decision to leave his son to study in Moscow. Robeson claims that on this same 1934 trip, Russian children ran up to him crying “Grandfather Frost.”<sup>47</sup> The historical accuracy of both encounters notwithstanding, the value as propaganda is similar: to prove to the world and the Soviet press that Soviet children had not been taught to fear African American men.

By situating Rudd both next to the more famous Robeson and “in the stands at Red Square under the shadow of the ancient Kremlin walls,” Robeson’s account worked double-duty to equate Rudd with Robeson’s Soviet-sympathizing fame and to place them both in politically important Russian historical locations. Robeson’s article also distanced Rudd from the suspect capitalist American theatre—the “more colorful . . . world of money,” as Robeson phrased it. Since Rudd’s art was found in the Soviet Union, he was not tempted by the bright lights of Broadway and Hollywood to become mere bourgeois entertainment. Robeson vouched for Rudd’s commitment to Soviet art in 1934. The timing of this assurance was important because in that same year, 1934, Rudd returned to the United States for a short visit.

Coinciding with his brief return, Rudd published an article in *The Crisis* outlining the differences he had experienced between Russian and American theatres, as well as the importance of African American performers to save the American theatre.<sup>48</sup> Defending Soviet censorship of content, Rudd countered with the freedom of production: “that is the glorified privilege of the Russian director: to work unhampered by expense limitations,

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<sup>47</sup> See: Chapter 1 of this dissertation, and Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist’s Journey, 1898-1939* (New York: Wiley, 2001), 221.

<sup>48</sup> Wayland Rudd, “Russian and American Theatre,” *The Crisis*, September 1934, 270, 278.

though he must worry about what the play says. The government which subsidizes all theatres in the Soviet says, 'we'll make up all deficits, but your plays must be healthful to our society'. The Broadway Angels say: 'look out for our pocketbooks, society be d-----ned.'"<sup>49</sup> Rudd changed the conversation from "censorship" to what is "healthful to our society":

Watching theatre, with a definite purpose given it by government censorship, and an unlimited artistic scope because of government subsidy, inject healthful and constructive ideas into the minds of a society, makes one shudder to think what theatre has been doing to the minds of American society for the past several generations, to say nothing of what it has not done. [. . .] But let me be constructive by suggesting that all who share with me a deep love and true for theatre, turn their eyes again to the Negro, transfuse his blood of artistic expressiveness into the veins of our dying American theatre.<sup>50</sup>

Continuing this use of medical and health language to attack the results of commercial American theatre, or what Robeson called "world of money," Rudd echoed the Soviet critics of jazz performances who thought "Negro blood transfusions" would save white European art.<sup>51</sup> Rudd argued for the equivalence between Soviet ideology and African American art as both were "healthful" injections for their respective societies. Implied in this argument,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>51</sup> See: Chapter 2. Particularly, Nikolai Podgorny, "'Chernaya Opastnost' ['Black Danger']," *Negrityanskaya Operetta*, 8, Amherst Center for Russian Culture Special Collection, Amherst College. Original in Russian.

though never explicitly stated, was that the Soviet theatre allowed African American art to flourish. For African Americans to rejuvenate the American theatre, they should make Soviet-style theatre in the United States, just as Rudd could in Moscow. This conclusion held power as propaganda, but would not completely hold up under serious scrutiny. Not only were there very few African American performers involved in Soviet theatre, the growing Stalinist repressions throughout the late 1930s ensured that African Americans would remain suspect in Soviet society. Despite his article for *The Crisis*, returning to Moscow, and performing in Meyerhold's company, Rudd was still not completely accepted as Soviet.

By the summer of 1937, the Soviet Union was in the middle of the Great Purges and only months away from the show trials of 1938. Intourist, the state travel agency, organized yearly Moscow Theatre Festivals for foreign tourists. In August 1937, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, a Harvard professor and advocate for Soviet theatre, wrote a letter to Intourist because Glen Carrington was refused Soviet visa to attend the theatre festival. After explaining the facts of the denied visa, Dana offhandedly described Carrington as "incidentally he is a negro."<sup>52</sup> Developing this seemingly inconsequential interjection further, Dana acknowledged "certain prejudiced Americans in Southern States have occasionally objected to the presence of negroes at the same table, in the same busses, and in the same rows of the theatres during the Theatre Festival. I am confident, however, that the Soviet Union would not want to yield to any such racial discrimination."<sup>53</sup> Couching

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<sup>52</sup> Box 39, Folder 9, Dana collection.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

the dispute as American racism against Soviet anti-racism, Dana utilized the same tactics as the *Black and White* company denouncers' initial request to Mezhrabpom. By pointing out the way in which Soviet actions appear to betray the stated Soviet anti-racist propaganda, both Dana and the *Black and White* company pressured their respective Soviet organizations into reconsidering their actions. While these two instances show the power of anti-racist propaganda to be turned inward and force a response from Soviets, they also reveal the limits of anti-racism within the Soviet Union. Official actions did not always align with the official anti-racist propaganda, and could be ignored unless the disconnect between action and propaganda was specifically articulated. Even while this tactic of naming the appearance of racism elicited an official response, the result was not guaranteed to be resolved in an anti-racist manner. In 1937, race was still suspect in the Soviet Union. 1937 is also the year in which Meyerhold was officially denounced.

The previous year, in 1936, the Intourist-organized theatre festival for foreign visitors included Meyerhold's pointed adaptation of *Woe from Wit* as a recommended performance. By the 1937 festival Meyerhold's theatre was no longer listed among the approved venues. In December 1937, Meyerhold's company held a meeting to discuss their director. Unlike the meeting about Mezhrabpom, there are notes on Rudd's comments at this meeting. His statement reads:

Millions of Negroes understand what is happening in China [and] Spain. I speak on behalf of oppressed peoples. And I want to address myself to Meyerhold, as a non-party Bolshevik to a party member.

Incorrect pride inhibits Meyerhold.

He is a genius, that is true, and he acted as an individualist but not like a Bolshevik.

Meyerhold performs here not only in front of us, but also in front of you, oppressed peoples looking at the Soviet Union. Pride is a good quality, but it is needed for that pride to not sit on the neck, but to take in your hands.

We said it is wrong that Meyerhold doesn't love people. It is good that he loves Raikh. But he should also love us, too—all societies, as [should] a good Bolshevik.

Meyerhold must acknowledge his mistakes and say to the world: "We are united on the Art Front."<sup>54</sup>

S. Ani Mukherji argues that this denunciation was the result of dissatisfaction with casting.<sup>55</sup> I propose, however, an additional or alternative reading of Rudd's denunciation of Meyerhold. This was not merely a petty grudge over casting, but part of Rudd's attempt—whether conscious or not—to become Soviet. Similar to other public statements throughout Rudd's career in Russia, the former America had to make a public performance of his loyalties to the Soviet state, or risk being seen as sympathetic to the charges levied against Meyerhold. Rudd had experience with official denunciations while a member of the

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<sup>54</sup> F. 2437, op. 3, l. 18, RGALI. Original in Russian.

<sup>55</sup> S. Ani Mukherji, "Like Another Planet to Darker Americans: Black Cultural Work in 1930s Moscow," in *Africa in Europe: Studies in Transnational Practice in the Long Twentieth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 120-141.

*Black and White* company. His first acting job in the Soviet Union was cancelled due to conflicts between Soviet official stated anti-racism policy and behind-the-scenes negotiations between US and Soviet interests. Pragmatism won out, and the film was cancelled. As an American in a group of other visiting Americans, Rudd went on record to oppose the 1932 Mezhrabpom denouncement. As someone with a history as a newspaper political editorialist, Rudd would have understood the seriousness of publishing an official denouncement, as well as a more forceful statement against the denouncement.

Knowing that he planned to stay and study with Meyerhold, this inclusion of his name as a signatory to the anti-denouncement letter in 1932 proved to be of strategic importance. Matt Crawford's notes from the 1932 American company meeting do not indicate that Rudd spoke either for or against the denouncement in private.<sup>56</sup> In fact, he is not mentioned in the notes as being present at all, but his name did appear on the published letter of critiquing the denouncement. Rudd was therefore not on the record as having critiqued his Soviet hosts for acting with racist intent, as the signatories to the 1932 denouncement were. Rather, he placed his name in the published record as strongly supporting the Soviet film studio and government in their handling of the film project. This letter appeared mere months before Rudd began rehearsals for *Vstuplenie* in December 1932. Rudd could not openly accuse the Soviet government of acquiescing to racist United States business interests, while preparing to perform a role that critiques the same western capitalist racism.

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<sup>56</sup> Writings: Notebooks, notes on trip to Soviet Union, 1932 (3 of 3), Series 2.1, Box 10, Folder 10, Matt N. and Evelyn Graves Crawford Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

In 1937, however, Rudd significantly departed from his earlier experience with official denouncements. Rudd did not merely sign a declaration, but spoke at the meeting denouncing Meyerhold. By this time, Rudd was no longer a temporary visitor among a group of other Americans, but studying and working without the economic and political support that the multinational film project provided. In his 1937 statement, Rudd very clearly positioned himself as an outsider, not a party member, a foreigner with sympathy for China and Spain, and a Negro. However, Rudd's framing also attempted to claim the Soviet identity for himself. He not only stated his position as Bolshevik but also placed himself among the Soviet audiences. When saying, "Meyerhold performs here not only in front of us, but also in front of you, oppressed peoples looking at the Soviet Union,"<sup>57</sup> Rudd changed from speaking "on behalf of oppressed [non-Soviet] peoples" to speaking to them. No longer dividing himself from his fellow Soviet company members, Rudd attempted to shed the individuality of which he accuses Meyerhold, in favor of a united "Art Front" identity. Rudd's language held echoes of the official Comintern antifascist Popular Front policy, which was prevalent in leftist and liberal artistic circles in the United States. This performance of solidarity had the effect of attempting to avoid questions of suspicion as a foreigner by shifting doubt to Meyerhold's suitability as a Bolshevik. In order to remain on the right side of Stalin's whims during the growing Terrors, Rudd joined the rest of the troupe, rather than standing out as an easily identified dissenter.

Rudd utilized a tactic that was similar to the denouncers in 1932 and H. W. L. Dana in the summer of 1937. He cited the disconnect between action and propaganda. When

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<sup>57</sup> F. 2437, op. 3, l. 18, RGALI. Original in Russian.

Rudd said, “Pride is a good quality, but it is needed for that pride to not sit on the neck, but to take in your hands,” he spoke to Meyerhold’s needs to control pride rather than let pride control him. This phrase could also allude to Meyerhold’s awards and medals, which engender pride and merely sit around the laureate’s neck rather than inspiring further work. Rudd highlighted the propaganda of Meyerhold’s honor as a “People’s Artist of the RSFSR” and the action of working for his own artistic vision and personal life, rather than for the people of the Soviet Republic. The critique was phrased as a suggestion for how Meyerhold could correct this behavior: “he should also love us, too—all societies, as [should] a good Bolshevik. Meyerhold must acknowledge his mistakes and say to the world: ‘We are united on the Art Front’.”<sup>58</sup> This correction would supposedly rectify the disconnect between Meyerhold’s actions and the official propaganda role of a “People’s Artist.” Like the 1932 examples of public attacks against Mezhrabpom that questioned the distance between actions and stated propaganda, this tactic did prompt a response from the government. Meyerhold was officially removed from his own theatre in 1938, arrested in 1939, and executed in 1940.

### **Rudd after Meyerhold**

After Meyerhold’s theatre was dissolved, Rudd did not immediately join another theatre company. It wasn’t until 1941 that he began working with the Komsomol theatre,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

however World War II cut these rehearsals short.<sup>59</sup> The war provided an opportunity for the American to again prove his devotion to his adopted homeland. During the war, Rudd toured the front, giving concerts for Russian troops. "Mr. Rudd and his American wife and accompanist, Lorita, have been front-line entertainers for the Red Army ever since the war began, and are the only Americans engaged in this form of war work. They have given hundreds of concerts along the front and at base hospitals."<sup>60</sup>

In one particularly exciting account, "Their narrowest escape, said Rudd, came during the battle of Moscow, when they were half encircled by German tommy-gunners, but escaped into the city."<sup>61</sup> Describing the attack occurring during Rudd's concert, Hall wrote: "Hot shrapnel, falling at Rudd's feet . . . cut 'Old Man River' from 'just rollin' off his lips. When he resumed with 'This Is the Army, Mr. Jones,' the Germans attempted to 'create corresponding scenic and atmospherical effects' by laying down a barrage."<sup>62</sup>

Rudd's most substantial stage role after Meyerhold, however, would be *Othello*, the role which would tie Rudd to global theatre history, African American theatre history, and specifically African American Russian theatre history.

Rudd first performed *Othello* in the United States, at the Hedgerow Theatre in Pennsylvania in April 1930.<sup>63</sup> Overshadowed in history books by the more famous production that same year in London with Peggy Ashcroft and Paul Robeson, Rudd's

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<sup>59</sup> Austin Worth, "DIRECTS ART: Moscow Honors American Negro Employed At Big Theatre," *Chicago Defender*, March 1, 1941, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Chatwood Hall, "Rudd Doesn't Think Huns Like His Trench-Singing," *Baltimore Afro-American*, December 25, 1943, 8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Society section, *New York Amsterdam News*, April 9, 1930, 6.

performance in suburban Pennsylvania was the first interracial US production.<sup>64</sup> Soon after arriving in the Soviet Union with the company of *Black and White* in 1932, Rudd had already been offered the chance to perform the Moor in Moscow.

As of October 21, 1932, Rudd was still advertised as being set to play Othello with the “Moscow Music hall” starting November 18 “with an all-Russian cast,” including Clavdia Polovikova as Desdemona.<sup>65</sup> This production, like Paul Robeson’s promised Russian version, never materialized. While a 1932 production of *Othello* did occur, directed by Sergei Radlov, the role of *Othello* was played by a white Russian actor. Three years later in 1935, Hall again reported that Rudd would perform *Othello* in Russian at Radlov’s theatre.<sup>66</sup> Hall’s article confirms that Rudd did not perform the role in 1932, by citing Ira Aldridge’s famous enactment of the role in Russia as the last time “a Negro appeared as ‘Othello, the Moor’ on the Russian stage.”

Radlov presented two productions of *Othello* in 1935, one in Leningrad and one in Moscow. Rudd was preparing to perform in the Leningrad version. Hall quotes Rudd as saying this Soviet production would be based in “Russian ideology, which contains no race prejudice. Therefore, the beautiful white heroine, ‘Desdemona,’ becomes a living element in the life of ‘Othello’ and not an apparition, as she is in America because of a different ideology there which is opposed to as natural, wholesome, and intimate love as possible

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<sup>64</sup> Barry B. Witham, *A Sustainable Theatre: Jasper Deeter at Hedgerow* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 34.

<sup>65</sup> Chatwood Hall, “Russia Selects Rudd for Othello Role,” *Chicago Defender*, October 22, 1932, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Chatwood Hall, “Wayland Rudd ‘Makes Good’ as Actor in Soviet Country,” *Chicago Defender*, February 23, 1935, 11.

between the Blackamoor and the beautiful Venetian lady.”<sup>67</sup> Rudd’s own interpretation of this version of the play follows the letter of Soviet race propaganda stating that “race prejudice” does not exist in the Russia. He also implies the difficulty he faced in performing the role as a black actor in the United States where kissing Desdemona at the very end of the play was met with significant backlash from audiences.<sup>68</sup> Without the opportunity to explore the physical romance between the lovers, Othello’s jealousy and relationship with Desdemona becomes only a psychological condition—or what Rudd calls “an apparition.” Radlov’s production was to allow Rudd the opportunity to play the romance that leads to the tragedy as a more embodied, living relationship between Othello and Desdemona. Despite the official state position on race and Rudd’s enthusiastic appraisal in the *Chicago Defender* article, Russian audiences still did not see Rudd’s interpretation of the interracial “natural, wholesome, and intimate love” on stage. The American was again replaced by Grigori Eremeev who had also performed the role in Radlov’s 1932 production.<sup>69</sup> That same year, Radlov’s premiered a second production of *Othello* at Moscow’s Maly Theatre. This production also did not star Rudd, but rather Aleksandr Ostuzhov, who was white.<sup>70</sup>

Hall also mentions that Meyerhold promised to cast Rudd as Othello, “upon the completion of his new theatre.”<sup>71</sup> But that promise was never fulfilled, since “later the same year, Rudd was excluded from a revival of [Meyerhold’s production of] *Prelude*; [and] the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Wayland Rudd, “Moya novaya rodina” [My new homeland], *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* [Soviet Art] No 49, December 5, 1947, 2. Original in Russian.

<sup>69</sup> Yu. Yuzovskii, “Na spektakle v Malom teatre” [On the performance at the Maliy Theatre], *Literary Gazette* No 69, December 15, 1935, 4. Original in Russian.

<sup>70</sup> Mukherji, 138.

<sup>71</sup> Hall, February 23, 1935, 11.

head of Meyerhold's acting school sarcastically explained that 'he does not have a good command of Rash'n speech [*ne vladeiushchii khorosho rasskoi rech'iu*].'<sup>72</sup> Meyerhold did not stage *Othello* in his new theatre, and in 1938 he was denounced and had his theatre confiscated.

In 1941, Rudd was in "test rehearsals" to take over the role of Othello at the Komsomol Theatre. Again, hoping that "if successful, will be the first time that a real Negro has played this role [in Russia] since the great Negro actor Ira Aldridge."<sup>73</sup> It is unclear whether Rudd "passed" this test, but due to the war, all theatres were evacuated from the city in 1941, and Rudd did not take over the role.

While touring during the War, Rudd did perform an Othello-like role. In Tashkent, Rudd directed and acted in a production of Arnaud d'Usseau and James Gow's *Deep Are the Roots* with the Soviet Army theatre. He played the lead role of a black Lieutenant returning to the US South, where he falls in love with a white Senator's daughter ending in tragedy.<sup>74</sup>

After the War, in 1947, Rudd was again being promoted abroad for his appearance as *Othello*.<sup>75</sup> Unlike previous announcement, this time it appears Rudd did perform the Moor.<sup>76</sup> While Ira Aldridge acted in English for his famous bilingual European tour that performed in Russia in the 1850s, on June 9, 1947, Rudd played *Othello* in Russian. Rudd's use of Russian was—as in his performances with Meyerhold—again considered

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<sup>72</sup> Mukherji, 138.

<sup>73</sup> Worth, March 1, 1941, 2.

<sup>74</sup> Rudd, "Moya novaya rodina," 2. Original in Russian.

<sup>75</sup> "Negro Actor Plays Othello In Soviet Union Theater," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 26, 1947, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Press photo from Ivan Savvine, "African-Americans' Search for Equality Led to the Soviet Union," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, last modified October 1, 2017, [http://rbth.com/arts/2014/10/01/african-americans\\_search\\_for\\_equality\\_led\\_to\\_the\\_soviet\\_union\\_40113.html](http://rbth.com/arts/2014/10/01/african-americans_search_for_equality_led_to_the_soviet_union_40113.html).

noteworthy: “Critics attending the opening performance, June 9, reported that he handled the Russian lines creditably.”<sup>77</sup> While not a glowing review, the description of Rudd’s Russian pronunciation shows a marked improvement from 1935.<sup>78</sup> This would be his last major role, as Rudd died in Moscow in 1952 on the Fourth of July.<sup>79</sup> Even Rudd’s death was forced to contend with his American identity. Whether this date is accurate, or an embellishment by the Soviet press of a conveniently close date, Rudd could not escape his American past.

The same year as his *Othello*, in 1947, Rudd published an article in the journal *Sovietskoe iskusstvo* [Soviet Art] that outlined his rationale for moving to the Soviet Union and claimed to see himself in his role from the Tashkent production of *Deep Are the Roots*. Rudd drew parallels to his own life as the son of a black maid looking to the US after his time in Russia. Like his character, Rudd could not return to the racism and exploitation, stating, “No, I do not want to consider my homeland a country in which it is possible to propagate such terrible nonsense with impunity!”<sup>80</sup> He closes the article by invoking the promises of the Stalinist Constitution of 1936, which on paper enshrined racial equality in the Soviet Union: “In the Soviet Union, under the sun of the Stalin Constitution, I will live, work, create for the benefit of the great Soviet people, for the benefit of my native Negro

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<sup>77</sup> *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 26, 1947, 21.

<sup>78</sup> Mukherji, 138.

<sup>79</sup> “Veyland Rodd,” *Sovietskoe iskusstvo* [Soviet Art], No 55, July 9, 1952, 4. Original in Russian.

<sup>80</sup> Rudd, “Moya novaya rodina,” 2. Original in Russian.

people and all the peoples of the earth.”<sup>81</sup> Almost a decade after his denouncement of Meyerhold, Rudd still had to make public proclamations of his Soviet loyalties. Being publicly identified as American, and therefore a possible agent of a foreign capitalist nation, carried with it the constant threat of Stalin’s secret police. As an African American actor, Rudd was unable to blend in to predominantly white Soviet society to avoid detection. He therefore had to rely on strong public demonstrations of his Soviet loyalties. His acting roles, previous public statements, and even performing at the wartime front, all for the “benefit of the great Soviet people,” did not place Rudd above suspicion as an American in the Soviet Union. If, as Meredith Roman described, “‘speaking antiracism’ was another form of ‘speaking Bolshevik’” in the 1930s,<sup>82</sup> Rudd found that this did not transfer past the end of the speech act itself. For propaganda purposes, Rudd’s race was useful to point out the inequalities in the United States, but throughout his life in the Soviet Union—and even after—he constantly and publicly renegotiated his Soviet identity.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Meredith Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 92.

## Chapter 4

### *Porgy and Bess: A Soviet Opera*

*Porgy and Bess* operated as a polyvocal form of propaganda. Both US and Soviet critics used the 1930s musical work to showcase the position of African Americans in the United States. When performed by touring African Americans in Leningrad and Moscow immediately after Stalin's death, the results of the propaganda from both sides became less clear than their political leaders intended. Like the performances of tours, guests, and African American Bolshevik fellow-travellers discussed in my previous chapters, the 1950s touring cast renegotiated the meaning of "African American" for Russian audiences. This time, however, the Soviet Union itself was in the process of renegotiating its own definition at the verge of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization.

Unlike Robeson, Scott, and Rudd, the cast of *Porgy and Bess* was mostly apolitical in their public personae—many of them were not aware of Emmet Till's murder in August 1955 until asked for statements by Soviet reporters.<sup>1</sup> This was by design, as the State Department sponsored tour was meant to champion American culture, rather than raise questions as to the current state of oppression in the United States. Charlotte Canning argues that for the cast, "despite this [seemingly apolitical stance], they were all very much

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America's Most Famous Opera* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 225.

aware of how dominant white powers were using the cast to their own ends.”<sup>2</sup> While the inability to openly discuss politics marked a difference from earlier performers, the artists were still engaged in political performance by the very fact of their tour. If the tour was, as Canning describes, a Cold War cultural “guided missile” specifically designed as a cultural parallel to the highly specialized weaponry of traditional war,<sup>3</sup> it was imprecise in its targeting. Through the polyvocal nature of a staged opera, recontextualized and repurposed by Soviet critics, both US and Soviet propaganda lost the accuracy of any individual political intention. Read through a Russian cultural lens, the weaponized American opera became an exemplar of Socialist Realism, while simultaneously resisting the Soviet cultural norms. It was the State Department-sanctioned pinnacle of US cultural production, while critiquing US racial policy. *Porgy and Bess* was a cypher though which both the United States and Soviet Union read their own propaganda in order to lay claim to the art.

### **A State Department Sponsored Opera**

From 1952 to 1956, Robert Breen produced a global tour of US actors performing *Porgy and Bess*. Funded by the US State Department as a work of “cultural exchange” during the Cold War, this tour had a political purpose. As Frances Saunders demonstrates,

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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Canning, “A Cold War Battleground: Catfish Row Versus the Nevsky Prospekt,” *Theatre, Globalization and the Cold War*, eds. Christopher Balme and Berenika Szymanski-Düll (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International, 2017), 35.

<sup>3</sup> Canning, “A Cold War Battleground,” 25-26.

the CIA was integral in defining a Cold War culture war by secretly funding left—but not specifically communist-sympathizing—arts and literary projects that never explicitly went against US policy.<sup>4</sup> Such tactics could draw the support of otherwise communist-leaning American liberal and left artists, and by extension international audiences. The State Department and CIA attempted to take the Cold War to a cultural front—in a much more concealed manner than the communist Popular Front activities of the 1930s.

The *Porgy and Bess* tour was not Breen's first attempt to blend his artistic vision with Cold War political necessities. From 1946 to 1951, Breen attempted to establish his American National Theatre and Academy as a truly national theatre for the US, by lobbying Congress for funding through the State Department. State Department funding did not come to the ANTA until after Breen had left the organization. However, as Charlotte Canning shows, Breen's rationale for a State Department-sponsored national theatre, based on Cold War concern with the United States' international perception, is the argument that eventually won State Department (and even covertly, CIA) funding for ANTA as a kind of national theatre.<sup>5</sup> As Canning says, "The cold war would be fought on battlegrounds that depended more on impressions and affect, and less on body counts and military hardware."<sup>6</sup> These same concerns for impressions and affect followed Breen's *Porgy and Bess* international tour, especially on the leg behind the Iron Curtain and into the USSR.

The State Department set up many Latin America, Europe, and Middle East tours to

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<sup>4</sup> Frances Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte M. Canning. "'In the Interest of the State': A Cold War National Theatre for the United States." *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 3 (2009): 407-420.

<sup>6</sup> Canning, "'In the Interest of the State,'" 415.

promote a particular vision of US culture. Like all of these State Department-funded cultural exchanges, the *Porgy and Bess* tour was to act as propaganda countering the belief that the US did not have either a strong cultural tradition or national support for the arts. The choice to send this particular opera abroad held a second level of propaganda, specifically aimed at countering the Soviet claim that racist government policy oppressed African-American citizens.

This tour was pulled in opposite directions by the contradictory demands of the racial aspects of this propaganda policy. On one hand, the US chose this production—rather than a “white” musical—because “the talents of individuals could be marketed as a way of deflecting charges regarding the African-Americans’ collective inequality.”<sup>7</sup> This form of racial propaganda serves as a perversion of DuBois’s “talented tenth” racial uplift conception. Instead a few individuals leading change that improves social conditions for the whole race, racial equality is presumed because of the success of a few without the actual conditions matching that presumption. The “talented individual” method of propaganda could not stand on its own, as already proven by the successful individual talent—and outspokenness on racial politics—of Robeson in Cold War Europe and Rudd in the Soviet Union.

Therefore the talent in the State Department-supported tour needed to be diffused throughout a large cast of performers without the pre-existing fame of a Robeson. Noonan sees “the number and relative anonymity of the *Porgy and Bess* cast supplied a blank slate

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<sup>7</sup> David Monod, “‘He is a Cripple an’ Needs my Love’: *Porgy and Bess* as Cold War Propaganda,” *Intelligence and National Security* 18, no. 2 (2003): 302. Also see: Penny von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-57* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

upon which many opinions could be projected”<sup>8</sup> The various opinions and political ideologies projected onto that slate depended on the view of the journalist—whether Soviet- or US-sympathizing. The liberal Jesuit magazine *America* specifically depicted this European tour as an antidote to Paul Robeson’s radical politics: “We have come a long way since the day when almost the only American Negro artist known abroad was Paul Robeson, who spoke for only a very minute fraction of his race. Our Negro representatives are more and more showing to the world today that they are proud of their country and that their country is proud of them.”<sup>9</sup>

With its diffusion of talent throughout a cast of relatively unknown actors, the *Porgy and Bess* tour performed in Russia at the same time that leadership of the Soviet Union was being diffused from the Strongman of Stalinism to the multiple leaders of Malenkov-Khrushchev era. The US propaganda technique designed to sweep aside the influence of singular racial spokesmen like Robeson, coincided with the Soviet need to shift away from Stalin’s cult of personality. The political needs of both the US and Soviet Union were served by this diffusion. Despite the US State Department’s efforts to dispel any negative racial political interpretation, the polyvalent nature of musical theatre ensured that one coherent propaganda message would be impossible, which is shown in the odd funding situation for the Soviet leg of the tour.

In December 1955 and January 1956—only a month before Khrushchev’s secret

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<sup>8</sup> Noonan, 194.

<sup>9</sup> “*Porgy and Bess* in Titoland,” *America*, January 8, 1955, 374-5: 375, MSS 927, series 2, box 74, folder 16, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

speech that officially ended Stalinism—Breen’s tour performed in Leningrad and Moscow. While these Soviet stops were an extension of the European tour, the US State Department officially pulled its funding while the show played in the USSR. The Russian part of the tour was funded entirely by the Soviets, meaning that a show originally intended as US propaganda was being paid for by the government against which the propaganda was aimed. The Soviets had their own reading of the opera that made this funding choice seem like cultural diplomacy on the surface while simultaneously serving a pro-Soviet agenda.

This tour occurred well after the “Black Belt” thesis and the hard line race-based anti-U.S. policies of the 1920s and ’30s. However, the effects of such a concerted Soviet antiracist propaganda of early Stalinism meant that a generation of Soviet leaders like Khrushchev, as Meredith Roman argues, had been taught to “speak antiracism” for their entire careers.<sup>10</sup> This political skill, whether sincere or not, would prove useful once again in the post-WWII, Cold War era when confronting their former wartime Ally. While Breen and the State Department attempted to disconnect the production of *Porgy and Bess* from the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement in the US, this Soviet ability to “speak antiracism” insured that every theatrical review reported on the contemporary US racial politics, as well as the production itself.

The State Department and anti-communist publications like *America* would have liked to think that Paul Robeson was a distant memory on the global stage in the five years since his passport had been revoked. However, in 1955, Robeson was still the fundamental image of African America US culture in the mind of Soviet audiences. The official Russian

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<sup>10</sup> See: Roman, 1.

translator assigned to the *Porgy and Bess* company demonstrated how the passport incident had become part of the Soviet mythos surrounding Robeson's image:

Presently, Miss Lydia [the Russian translator] had a question of her own. "I would appreciate you to explain to me. Why is Paul Robeson not in with the players? He is a colored person, yes?"

Yes, said Miss Ryan [Nancy Ryan, Breen's white secretary], and so were fifteen million other Americans. Surely Miss Lydia didn't expect "Porgy and Bess" to employ them all?

Miss Lydia leaned back in her chair with a cunning, you-can't-fool-me expression. "It is because *you*," she said, smiling at Miss Ryan, "do not permit him his passport."<sup>11</sup>

Even though Robeson never performed in the opera, as the most famous African American singer in Russia and the most famous African American opera in Russia, the tour became tied to Robeson. In 1956, the *Evening Moscow* reprinted Robeson's New Year's greeting to the Soviet people in its review of the *Porgy and Bess* tour:

"I know," Paul Robeson wrote, "that they [the actors] are proud of the heroic struggle of their people which is now defending equality and human dignity in Mississippi and South Carolina where the events of the opera take place."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Truman Capote, "Onward and Upward with the Arts: Porgy and Bess in Russia," *The New Yorker*, Part I, October 20, 1956; Part II, October 27, 1956; Part I, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Review from *Evening Moscow* January 12, 1956, 1, MSS 927, series 2, box 74, folder 15, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

By publishing Robeson's greeting, the *Evening Moscow* not only connected this production to the singer, but also to the struggle for Civil Rights occurring in the United States—a connection the State Department had hoped would be dispelled by the aesthetic talents of the company.

In attempting to determine why the US State Department chose Breen's production to send abroad as the exemplar of US theatrical culture, David Monod argues: "Aesthetically, *Porgy* was part of a counter-reaction against the dominant trend of theater direction in the early 1950s, which was increasingly retreating from realism and embracing psychological ambiguities. One did not have to be a Zhdanov to resist this or to feel that theater needed not more abstraction, but a stronger dose of realism."<sup>13</sup> Breen's realism in direction seemed a safe, unambiguous and conservative choice to send abroad. However, for Russian critics used to reading the political meanings of realism after years of Zhdanov's Socialist Realism, this *Porgy and Bess* was received much differently than in the United States.

Because of the grueling schedule of performances on tour across Europe, Breen's production double and triple cast most of the named roles, with the cast changing for each performance. The tour included three Porgys (LeVern Hutcherson, Leslie Scott, and Irving Barnes), two Besses (Martha Flowers and Ethel Ayler), two Crowns (John McCurry and Paul Harris), and three Sportin' Lives (Lorenzo Fuller, Joseph Attles, and Earl Jackson).<sup>14</sup> The musical reason for such casting is to allow the singers days of rest between

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<sup>13</sup> Monod, 308.

<sup>14</sup> *Porgy and Bess* Russian program, Program Archive, MWEZ x n.c. 24, 147 #17, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Library of Performing Arts, New York Public Library.

performances, so as not to ruin their voices. However, this casting choice also had the effect of tripling the cast size—and adding to the US State Department’s “diffused talent” propaganda technique. The casting changes are not mentioned in the Russian reviews, where only the specific performance’s casting would be discussed, focusing on Scott, Flowers, McCurry, and Attles on December 28 in Leningrad, or Hutcherson, Flowers, McCurry, and Jackson on January 11 in Moscow. Despite the US State Department’s attempt at diffusion, Martha Flowers and John McCurry became the most reviewed actors, and their roles given particular weight in the critical press.

Breen attempted to distance the production from a Civil Rights inspired interpretation. In his program note, Breen stated:

Although *Porgy and Bess* is being performed in the Soviet Union for the first time in the U.S. it has long achieved the position of a classic. Musically speaking, it is a unique milestone in the development of the American theatre, although by now it is almost a “period” piece. Its subject matter is of another era, and conditions depicted in this musical drama are as far removed from today’s America as conditions depicted in the Russian opera *Boris Godunov* differ from those prevailing in the Soviet Union today.<sup>15</sup>

Despite his error about this being the first production of the opera in the Soviet Union, which had occurred in 1945, Breen contributed to an inclination to view *Porgy and Bess* in Russian cultural terms. His second error was in assuming that Russian classics were not

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<sup>15</sup> Noonan, 231. Breen’s note is not included in the version of the Russian program in the NYPL archive.

somehow commentary on contemporary conditions. Soviet theatre regularly reused these “classics” of Russian literature with a political reinterpretation.

### **Russian Framing of the Opera**

An overarching concern in the reviews of the 1955-56 tour was classification of the performance. This was not the “musical theatre” or “opera” question that *Porgy and Bess* continues to face in the United States, but a more politically engaged question of form. Soviet reviewers all seemed to accept the production as opera, but did not know what kind of opera.

Alexander Gauk in *Soviet Culture* directly addresses this question, and his inability to answer, by stating: “George Gershwin’s work cannot be squeezed into the framework of any one of the genres: it is not an opera, no, and not a musical drama in the meaning which is usual for us. Some people consider that *Porgy and Bess* is something like a ‘folk-opera.’ I don’t take it upon myself to state this because I don’t know what such a term, ‘folk opera,’ is in American music.”<sup>16</sup> This term that confused Gauk—“folk-opera”—was a description of the opera that Robert Breen intentionally used in the promotional materials for the Soviet Union performances.<sup>17</sup>

Even though the questions of form and genre confused Russian reviewers, points of

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander Gauk, Review from *Soviet Culture*, January 11, 1956, 1, MSS 927, series 2, box 74, folder 15, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>17</sup> Noonan, 206.

historical and cultural connection were made between the American opera and the Russian theatrical tradition. These commonalities served to make a “peculiar” American production seem more familiar for Russian audiences, to slightly warm the international political relationship after years of Stalinism, as well as, in the case of the official Soviet reviewers, to demonstrate how Russian culture influenced American artistic production.

### **Making *Porgy and Bess* Russian**

This was not Russia’s first experience with the American opera on Negro life. On May 14, 1945, the All-Russian Theatre Society staged *Porgy and Bess* at the Dom Aktera [House of the Actor].<sup>18</sup> This was less than a week after the German surrender—the pinnacle of the US-Soviet collaboration during the Popular Front antifascism period that officially began in 1935. Situated in a liminal period after the end of fighting in Europe but before the partition of Berlin, this performance demonstrates a peculiar moment of transcultural exchange between the wartime allies and soon to be Cold War enemies.

Without English lyrics or African American cast members, the opera was translated into Russian, directed by Konstantin Popov, and performed with “the ensemble of the Soviet Opera.”<sup>19</sup> The music and plot remained American, while the enactment became Russian. Thus, American opera was transformed, becoming Sovietized—or at least Slavonicized. Recalling this production eleven years later, the *Evening Moscow* stated that

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<sup>18</sup> F. 2037 op. 3 d. 77, RGALI.

<sup>19</sup> A grand name for a relatively minor opera company associated with the All-Russian Theatre Society.

the Soviet “representatives of the musical world of art of the capital, even at that time, gave very high credit to the musical merits of this somewhat unusual work.”<sup>20</sup> The review foregrounded the stellar contributions of Soviet artists while demonstrating unease with the work itself. “Unusual”—while not generally a positive term in criticism—marked this American opera as something different, confusing, and other than acceptable Russian fare.

Russian text and performers alone were not sufficient to ensure that Soviet audiences understood the opera. The cultural references and American music also had to be “translated,” in that they were explained and contextualized by official means as part of the performance. According to the printed program, the All-Russian Theatre Society production included “introductory words” and “explanatory text.”<sup>21</sup> Russian musicologist Grigori Schneerson gave the introductory remarks, and company members spoke the explanations between scenes. While a copy of these framing texts was unfortunately not included in the production’s archive, even in the unlikely event that the words were not heavily influenced by Soviet propaganda, the American opera was not performed by itself, but required interpretation for its Russian audience. Much like Paul Robeson’s concerts in which he contextualized and provided political commentary on his vocal selections, this 1945 Russian *Porgy and Bess* used the opera as a teaching tool.

This same technique would be used a decade later by Robert Breen. The printed programs were not ready for the Leningrad performances of Breen’s 1955-56 tour. Therefore to replace the synopsis that would normally appear in the program, one of the

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<sup>20</sup> Review from *Evening Moscow* January 12, 1956, 1, MSS 927, series 2, box 74, folder 15, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>21</sup> F. 2037, op. 3, d. 77, l. 2 and l. 4, RGALI.

Ministry of Culture's official interpreters addressed the audience between scenes.<sup>22</sup> By having a government official speak the words, this translation, whether deliberately or unintentionally, included not only plot, but also ideology. The inclusion of this interpreter's body placed Soviet officialdom alongside the African American company members as part of the onstage performance in a way that written text in a program does not.

Truman Capote was embedded with the international tour as a writer for *The New Yorker*, and while some of his recollections were admittedly embellished for comic effect,<sup>23</sup> his literary description made sure to include the official interpreter's translation. Capote reported on the government representative's speeches with as much detail as a performance review, noting that before the first act, the interpreter was heckled by the audience due to their frustration with having already heard over an hour of artists' and politicians' pre-curtain speeches, while after the intermission the same interpreter "received an ovation."<sup>24</sup> The jeers before the first act demonstrate that there were limits to the amount of official speech Soviet audience would tolerate—whether or not Capote embellished the length of time or severity of the dissatisfaction. Eventually the audience demanded that the lectures stop and the entertainment begin. After experiencing some of the opera, the audience was more willing to listen to another interpretive speech by a government official, even applauding his synopsis as part of the performance.

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<sup>22</sup> Capote, Part II, 96.

<sup>23</sup> Canning, "A Cold War Battleground," 32.

<sup>24</sup> Capote, Part II, 107, 111.

***Narodnost* of the “Negro Opera”**

The *Moscow Izvestia* made sure to emphasize that one purpose of this supposedly warm-hearted cultural exchange was to promote Soviet achievements to the US visitors: “We must remember that this is the first visit to the Soviet Union of American artists which gives us a chance to form an idea about the opera culture in the United States, and gives them a chance to find out more about the cultural achievements of the Soviet Union.”<sup>25</sup> *Leningrad Pravda* gives credit to Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko for Breen’s use of realism in the set and direction when stating that “here once more we find proof that the achievements of our great reformers in the theatre have awakened creative new thought in the opera artists of all countries of the world.”<sup>26</sup>

George Gershwin’s music itself was even explained in Soviet terms for Russian audiences. According to L. Grigoryev in the *New Times*, Shostakovich compared Gershwin’s opera to the “national opera form” of Mussorgsky and Borodin. “Characterizing Gershwin’s music, Soviet composer Dmitry Shostakovich says: ‘George Gershwin is an outstanding American composer. He did not stand aloof from life, did not seclude himself in an “ivory tower of melody.” What does he say in his music? He tells us of the life of the common people—their joys, their sorrows and their love. That is why it is genuinely national, notwithstanding the originality and peculiarity of its form.’ It is the national form of ‘Porgy

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<sup>25</sup> Review from *Moscow Izvestia*, January 12, 1956, 1, MSS 927, series 2, box 74, folder 15, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>26</sup> “American Opera in Leningrad,” Review from *Leningrad Pravda*, January 5, 1956, 3, MSS 927, series 2, box 74, folder 15, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

and Bess' that explains its unwaning popularity."<sup>27</sup> While Shostakovich's assessment of Gershwin may have been part of the Soviet composer's own attempts to prove his loyalty to Stalinist ideals, rather than to a westernized "ivory tower of melody," Grigoryev's use of Shostakovich performs a double role. This analysis was not only an attempt to explain Gershwin to Soviet audiences, but rehabilitate the American composer in terms of the official party line. After the 1945 All-Russian Theatre Society production of *Porgy and Bess*, Soviet cultural policy fell under the stringent control of Andrei Zhdanov. From 1946 to 1953, the official sanctioning of Gershwin's music would have been impossible. According to Viktor Gorodinsky, music critic for *Komsomolskaia Pravda* during the Zhdanov era, Gershwin was "a thoroughly reactionary product, thoroughly antidemocratic. . . Gershwin, like many talented artists, has been ruined by American society, by American capitalism."<sup>28</sup> For Zhdanovite critics like Gorodinsky, Gershwin's acceptance in the United States as a composer of middlebrow symphonic jazz was too commercialized, and therefore a symptom of Gershwin's "ruin" at the hands of American capitalism.

For Russian audiences for whom this kind of official denouncement was still fresh in mind, the American composer needed to be reinterpreted in a post-Zhdanov—but still Soviet—context. Critics in 1956 like Shostakovich and Grigoryev reformulated Gershwin's middlebrow position as a form of "the people," rather than the market. Grigoriev's use of Shostakovich's statement ties Gershwin not only to the Russian operatic tradition but also

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<sup>27</sup> L. Grigoryev, "Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess," *New Times* no 2, January 5, 1956, p. 26-27, MSS 927, series 2, box 74, folder 16, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University..

<sup>28</sup> A. N. Golubev, *Aleksandr Tsfasman: Korifei sovetskogo dzhaza* [Luminary of Soviet Jazz] (Moscow: Musika, 2006), 70.

to the then obligatory Soviet Socialist Realism. While Shostakovich saw the form of *Porgy and Bess* as “original” and “peculiar,” the official international party journal chose to highlight the national sentiment of Shostakovich’s quote and the opera.

The *Leningrad Pravda* review used similar language to the *New Times* to emphasize the “stylistic peculiarities” of the production—without directly naming them—while tempering the critique by describing the “national Negro” in Du Boisian terms as the “souls” of the black folk who performed in the leads: “All these happenings evoke deep response in the souls of the principals in the drama. Various arias, duets, ensemble and orchestral sections, besides bringing out the unifying national Negro background, give a particular style to the creative work of George Gershwin.”<sup>29</sup> Balancing the “peculiar” with the “national” was seen in most of the Soviet reviews, sometimes even within the same sentence, as in the *Evening Moscow* praise that “the music of the opera is full of fresh national color,” where “fresh” indicates something novel and non-Russian.<sup>30</sup> For these Soviet critics, the jazz elements that were previously rejected under Zhdanov became tolerable when reinterpreted through the lens of a “unifying national Negro background.”

The term “national” used in these reviews reflected the *narodnost* of Soviet Socialist Realism. One aesthetic requirement for the genre of Socialist Realism, the presentation of positive *narodnost* implied both “nationhood” and “people-ness.” An early guiding principle for this quality was the phrase, “national in form, socialist in content.” The phrase came to

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<sup>29</sup> “American Opera in Leningrad,” Review from *Leningrad Pravda*, January 5, 1956, 2, MSS 927, series 2, box 74, folder 15, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>30</sup> *Evening Moscow*, 2.

serve as a means of uniting the various arts of the multiple ethnicities within the Soviet Union into a diverse Soviet identity. “National” could mean localized for a specific cultural audience, but would also imply that the content was tied to an overarching Soviet ideology. For example, when Paul Robeson recalled watching the Uzbek opera in Moscow in 1936, Uzbek language, song forms, and folk dances were the means of cultural expression, but the content depicted the Soviet struggle for women’s freedom from Islam and serfdom.<sup>31</sup> Through a shared victory over the old social structures of religion and class, an Uzbek national form highlighted the Soviet Union’s ideology, privileging the advances brought by the Revolution.

In describing *Porgy and Bess* as a “national form,” the reviews simultaneously presented the opera as a representation of the United States as a whole, as a specific instance of the art form of the black nation-within-the-nation of the “Black Belt” thesis, as well as an example of Socialist Realism.

### **American Bodies, Russian Forms**

As for the performers themselves, reviewers were generally positive toward the leads—even when applying the standards of the positive hero type demanded of Socialist Realism. Martha Flowers, Leslie Scott, and the ensemble were all praised for their voices. The positive reviews, however, did not extend to Joseph Attles as Sportin’ Life. Not only did the reviews not know what to do with a comedic character who was the villainous drug

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<sup>31</sup> Robeson, “National Cultures and the Soviet Union,” 577.

dealer, but Attles's vocal quality did not meet with the reviewers' expectations of an "opera" singer. *Smena* praised Attles dancing while simultaneously criticizing his singing: "Naturally not all the performers can control their voices and their movements to the same degree. The excellent dancer, Joseph Attles (*Sportin' Life*), does not possess a strong enough or sufficiently well-trained voice."<sup>32</sup> *Evening Leningrad* called Attles "given to over-acting" and thought that "though his operetta style is well suited to the witty couplets at the picnic scene on the island where *Sportin' Life* tries to transform the religious outing into an orgy, this style does not fit the basic concept of the role, making of this character a too cynical one."<sup>33</sup>

It is clear from this reception of Attles that Russian audiences were unfamiliar with the strictures of the American "integrated" musical that require triple-threat performers who can sing, speak, and dance. Most of the reviews specifically noted the other leads' abilities to transition between singing and speaking, a talent that would hardly be remarked upon in US papers. The *Evening Leningrad* review even called it a "surprising" and "organic transition from the spoken word to the singing voice."<sup>34</sup> By singling it out as worthy of praise, the Soviet press revealed a fascination with the moment of transition. Neither fully a play, nor fully an opera, this American transgression of art forms surprised, and in this case, delighted the official Soviet reviewers. Slightly troubling, however, remains the fact that such transitions were seen as "organic" or natural for African American

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<sup>32</sup> *Smena*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> "Guest Performance of the 'Everyman Opera' Company," *Evening Leningrad*, December 29, 1955, 3, MSS 927, series 2, box 74, folder 15, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>34</sup> *Evening Leningrad*, 3.

performers.

As in the history of American reception of African American performance, critics credit innate talent, rather than cultivated technique, as the explanation for black virtuosity. This distinction can be seen more clearly in the critics' responses to the dance and other more "American" elements of the performance.

Unlike the emphasis on the transitions from speaking to singing celebrated by most critics, E. Grikruov in the *Moscow Literature Gazette* stated that he did not understand the transitions from dancing to singing.<sup>35</sup> Shifting the mode of vocal production was bearable if surprising, whereas moving from the body to the voice was not acceptable to this critic. These performing bodies—which were simultaneously black and American—were suspect as something too foreign.

Initially, the Leningrad *Smena* review praised—although in exoticizing terms—the cast's dancing: "The Negroes showed themselves to be excellent dancers, extraordinarily supple, plastic and indefatigable. Their dance technique is doubtless on a very high level. It is only the fact that that which they dance has nothing in common with the classic ballet nor with the character dances we are used to, that in the first moment the spectator is disconcerted by a feeling of bewilderment (the more so because the first scene opens with a very primitive 'boogie-woogie'). Woven through the entire production is a virtuoso pantomimic direction based on elements of the national Negro dance."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> F. 970, op. 13, ed. khp. 1073, l. 2, RGALI.

<sup>36</sup> *Smena* (Leningrad), December 29, 1955, 3, MSS 927, series 2, box 74, folder 15, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University..

Unlike most of the other reviews, the critic from *Smena* was careful to phrase the review to explain that the dance was in fact a practiced technique, rather than natural skill. However, *Smena* highlighted the unfamiliarity of such dance in the European tradition, and by the end of the paragraph contradicted the opening stance by claiming that there exists a primal “national Negro dance.” The review continued to discuss the “unpleasant” nature of the more erotic dance and their relation to this perceived “national” dance:

The astoundingly erotic coloring of some of the dancing scenes is unpleasant. And it is hard to lay the blame on a specific national dance. It is more the taste of the director and perhaps his kind of “tradition” stemming from Broadway “burlesques” and “revues.”

In other words, the vulgarity is not the fault of the fictitious “national Negro dance,” but capitalist Broadway entertainment. This position carefully avoids the conflation of a faux-African tradition and erotic dance—as seen in the French reception of Josephine Baker’s performances. Instead, with echoes of the “Black Belt”/Third Period hard line anti-racism of the late 1920s-early 1930s, capitalist American culture is seen as destroying the natural pleasantness of the “national Negro dance.” While the top-hat-and-tails, sophisticated jazz dance style of Henry Scott was popular in 1930s Moscow, in the decades since Scott, American-style jazz had become “unpleasant” and a reason to denounce a performance as too sexualized, too capitalist, and too foreign.

The dancing was not the only “unpleasant” thing they reviewers disagreed with. All elements of sexuality were received with negative press. The rape scene on the island was

considered especially “vulgar,” and the entire island act—including Sportin’ Life’s lascivious actions during “It Ain’t Necessarily So”—was not received well by what Capote termed the “prudish” audience.<sup>37</sup>

In every other country that Breen’s troupe visited, the scene after the picnic on the island ended when “[Crown] would order Bess into a thicket and, as she obeyed, move toward her, undoing his pants as the curtain fell.”<sup>38</sup> However, Russian audiences would see a different version of this scene. “Soviet officials demanded that producers drastically tone down the steamy scenes between Bess and Crown.”<sup>39</sup> While Soviet reviewers were much too cautious to describe this toned-down version of the scene, even this officially sanctioned and sanitized version caused Soviet reviewers to claim the Bess/Crown scenes were too vulgar. For example, in attempting to describe McCurry’s Crown, Gauk criticizes the American’s transgression of “artistic taste”: “I would like to note that this artist doesn’t always keep within the bounds of artistic taste. One feels this especially in the final episode of the picnic scene.”<sup>40</sup> Artistic taste was conflated with Zhdanov era imposed sexual norms, and the foreign, capitalist-influenced, sexualized black body—a connection espoused most clearly in the *Smena* review when laying the blame on “Broadway ‘burlesque’”—conflicted with this sanitized vision.

This negative response to the opera’s “vulgarity” contrasted with critics reception of Flowers’s Bess and Scott’s Porgy. Using compliments that show a deference to the

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<sup>37</sup> Capote, Part II, 111.

<sup>38</sup> Noonan, 200.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>40</sup> Gauk, 3.

standards of Socialist Realism, as opposed to the influence of American musical theatre on Attles's *Sportin' Life*, reviewers agreed with the racial uplift elements of the production. *Moscow Izvestia* complemented Martha Flowers's depiction of Bess: "Notwithstanding the very complicated pattern of the part, the actress has chosen the right way to show the positive character of her heroine."<sup>41</sup> Using similar Socialist Realist standards, *Smena* describes Leslie Scott's Porgy as a "hero [who] is endowed with a nobility and a high feeling of humanity"<sup>42</sup> and interprets the ending in positive terms, stating, "The audience leaves the theatre with the full assurance that Porgy will find his wife and that happiness will once again be established in his miserable hut."<sup>43</sup> Such an uncharacteristically positive interpretation of the ending seems highly influenced by the Socialist Realist demands for a positive resolution.

The *Evening Leningrad* followed the psychological approach of Russian realism—specifically recalling Stanislavsky—by defending the performance as "social drama":

the depth of the psychological delineation of the characters and the realism of the dramatic action described give the work an obvious direction. We, the Soviet spectators, realize the corrosive effect of the capitalistic system on the consciousness, the mentality and the moral outlook of a people oppressed by poverty. This lifts Heyward's play, as set to music by Gershwin, into the realm of a social drama.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Moscow Izvestia*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Smena*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Evening Leningrad*, 1.

By explicitly interpreting the opera as a critique of capitalist oppression, the *Evening Leningrad* read the ending differently from *Smena*—not as positive Socialist Realism, but as tragic. The positive characters were unable to triumph, due to the negative effects of the capitalist system in which they operate. So while not a traditional Socialist Realist positive ending, the tragedy was seen as the fault of capitalism, and therefore still serves to highlight the success of the Soviet socio-economic system.

Another way the *Evening Leningrad* placed Russian culture at the center of the analysis was borrowing from Stanislavsky. The performer's acting style, rather than just the singing, was lauded by this review because of the connection to psychological truths. "His [Scott's] acting is excellent. He plays the love scene with Bess, the fight with Crown and the tragically-touching final scene with undermining sincerity."<sup>45</sup> By describing Scott's acting as "undermining sincerity," the review critiques the seeming optimism of characters trapped in the dehumanizing tragedy of a capitalist system while alluding to the multi-faceted acting Stanislavsky attempted in his opera studio. Even clearer connections to a psychological-based acting method were apparent in Flowers's interpretation. In Flowers's performance, the paper specifically highlighted the Stanislavskian "psychological truthfulness": "The artist Martha Flowers showed, in the role of Bess, a real mastery of 'transfiguration'. With psychological truthfulness she depicted the different facets of the nature of her heroine."<sup>46</sup>

John McCurry's Crown was seen as something more than a mere brute or villain, in

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

an interpretation that seems unlikely to have been written by an American paper: “The artist creates a lively, sharp edged characterization of a man spoiled by the consciousness of his own strength, uncontrolled, vengeful and, at the same time, courageous.”<sup>47</sup> This reading almost borders on the racist trope of an out-of-control, dehumanized brute. However, by focusing on McCurry’s Crown as corrupted by physical power while “at the same time, courageous” the *Evening Leningrad* veers more toward a “noble savage.” It is not Crown’s strength itself that causes his undoing, but the knowledge of that strength. This reliance on the psychological recognition pushes the interpretation even further from a traditional “noble savage” or “dehumanized brute” trope. The *Evening Leningrad* instead interpreted McCurry’s Crown as a courageous anti-hero more in line with the familiar Russian dramatic and operatic tradition of staging Shakespeare’s and Verdi’s Othellos—a trope already celebrated in Paul Robeson’s and Wayland Rudd’s interpretations.

### **Accidental Success?**

The US State Department attempted to control foreign perception of US culture, and it was odd to choose *Porgy and Bess* as a vehicle for that propaganda at the start of the Civil Rights Era. In the United States, large numbers of white conservative and black liberal critics agreed that the subject matter of the opera was not the best “representative of American life,” for the same reason, but with differing rationales. The depiction of African American characters was seen as fodder for communist propaganda (which it was), or as

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

“such offensive racial stereotypes that it was virtually an argument in favor of white supremacy.”<sup>48</sup> In the Soviet Union, however, criticism was divided among praising the talents of individuals, attacking the racist capitalist system that produced the work, and attempting to describe the American “folk opera” in Soviet cultural terms. The strange choice by the US State Department to send this opera abroad unsettled cultural and political stances on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and—however inadvertently—opened a transcultural space for the intersection of Soviet and African American artistic production.

### **Robeson to *Porgy and Bess*: Frame of Stalinist Antiracism**

From 1934 to 1956, the state of relations between African American performers and the Soviet Union had shifted. By 1956, Stalinism had come to an end in the Soviet Union and the Civil Rights Era was moving racial discourse toward a liberal position away from the leftist politics of Paul Robeson. The Popular Front antifascism that had united liberals, Leftists, and communists during the 1930s splintered long before 1956. The House Un-American Activities Committee and Joseph McCarthy’s Senate committee had lost their influence, and the US State Department was funding international cultural projects to spread a softer form of pro-US propaganda. Soviet Realism and Zhdanov’s stranglehold on the aesthetics of Soviet culture had officially ended with Stalin’s death. The Soviet “Black Belt” theory had been discarded. Yet, all of these Soviet and US political influences remained in the culture, still visible in the Russian critiques of the *Porgy and Bess* tour and

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<sup>48</sup> Noonan, 218.

the lasting impression Paul Robeson, Henry Scott, and Wayland Rudd made on Soviet culture.

## Conclusion

In 2017, *The Washington Post* reported that the House Intelligence Committee concluded Russian accounts on social media platforms Twitter and Facebook retweeted and shared ads and articles denouncing the treatment of African American US citizens at the hands of mostly white police forces.<sup>1</sup> These social media accounts were using existing experiences of suffering at the hands of white supremacy to further a political goal of which followers of the accounts may not have been aware. Nonetheless, we can differentiate between the political goals of the propaganda and the people interacting with misleading social media accounts. Attempting to share information for liberating purposes—the intention of most social media followers of the accounts—intersects, but does not entirely coincide, with the propaganda of sowing discord and conflict. Black Lives Matter activists and other civil rights advocates are forced to reconcile the Russian interference with their own social media use, but not necessarily to cast aside their own experiences. As the ubiquitous Twitter profile warning states: Retweets do not equal endorsement.

This is not the first time American racial resentment was used for Russian propaganda purposes. In today's political and racial climate, it is important to look back to an earlier time when Moscow was found to be exploiting US internal cultural disputes to further international goals. While the Soviet Union was intentionally projecting Jim Crow

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<sup>1</sup> Babak Bahador, "Were Those Russian Social Media Ads Powerful Enough to Influence Us? Let's Look at the Evidence," *Washington Post*, November 14, 2017.

racism as the face of 1920s-'50s American capitalism, this propaganda does not invalidate the experiences of African Americans under that system. Nor does it mean that the Americans who travelled to the Soviet Union during this time completely believed the anti-racist propaganda that advocated for the USSR as a colorblind, multicultural utopia. Buying into such an absolutist Manichean worldview erases the work of performers like Henry Scott, Wayland Rudd, the *Porgy and Bess* company, and Paul Robeson to actively negotiate the US and Soviet propaganda. Leaving the United States for the Soviet Union may not have been perfect, but it was one option that a few African American actors saw as preferable to remaining under post-Harlem Renaissance Jim Crow. Some returned and some remained, but through their performances in the Soviet Union, all of these figures contested the rigidity of Iron Curtain dualism.

Paul Robeson became a figure through which Soviet audiences could approve of African American culture, while simultaneously engaging in counter discourse through the shared cultural practices of Du Boisian “double consciousness” and Russian “double voicedness.” Henry Scott found his way in a Moscow that attempted to establish itself as an anti-capitalist alternative to the Paris Noir jazz scene of interwar France. The Soviet Union wanted to be a global center for African American culture, but was unable to shake its own racism despite official anti-racist statements and publicized jazz tours like *The Chocolate Kiddies*. Attempts to make “jazz” into official Russian “dzhaz” both relied on Scott’s Americanness and rejected his foreign influence on Soviet musicians. Scott eventually left, no longer needing to continually prove his Soviet identity, but Wayland Rudd remained in

the USSR and became a professional actor with Meyerhold's company. While Rudd did perform on stage and screen, it was his pronouncements of Soviet allegiance that official audiences demanded over and over again, even after his death in his obituary. After Stalin, but before the official period of De-Stalinization began, *Porgy and Bess* proved to be a difficult opera for both Soviet and US propaganda to contain. The performance became a transnational experience, capable of speaking across the Iron Curtain, but not necessarily in the way either of the Cold War adversaries intended.

The legacy left by these African American performers was not merely figurative. For Robeson, Scott, and Rudd, the legacy was literal. They each left behind children to be educated and raised in the Soviet Union. Paul Robeson made a conscious political statement out of leaving Paul Robeson, Jr. in Moscow for education. The younger Robeson's stay was not indefinite, and he returned to the United States before the outbreak of World War II. However, his work as a historian and chronicler of his father's life became a lifelong passion, writing a two volume biography that mines family medical records to suggest Paul Robeson, Sr.'s famous psychological breakdown was a product of surviving both Soviet and US poisonings.<sup>2</sup>

Ulemei ("Margie") Scott, Henry Scott's daughter, became a dancer with the Bolshoi Opera. But like the previous generation, official acceptance of her talents was partial and conditional. She was a famous interpreter of folk dances of the non-white specialist

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom, 1939-1976* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2010).

characters in operas, but not considered a ballet dancer.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, during the 1988 Calgary Olympics, Margie Scott became an image for the Soviet Union to prove its racial acceptance to the world when she danced at Olympic cultural events.<sup>4</sup> The Cold War Soviet acceptance of Margie Scott, like the Stalinist “anti-racist” policies, depended on the intended audience.

Wayland Rudd, Jr. remained in Russia even after being offered a US passport in 1994 and performs as a jazz singer.<sup>5</sup> Rudd, Jr. not only followed the musical tradition of his father’s generation, but also found himself constantly contesting his identity. He grew up speaking Russian and never visited the United States; nonetheless he still listed his nationality as American on his Soviet passports. Describing his childhood encounters with Soviet racism, Rudd, Jr. remembered being called “‘monkey,’ ‘black ape’ or ‘chernomazy’ (smeared in black).”<sup>6</sup> The terms are familiar from racist expressions seen all over Europe and the United States—and the KUTV protest against the Natalia Satz play.<sup>7</sup>

This second generation continued the cultural work of the previous generation. Whether the project was historical or artistic, their work also operated in the space between Soviet and American identities. Robeson, Scott, Rudd, and *Porgy and Bess* were not just an isolated collection of African American artists who left the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, but part of larger trajectories between the Soviet Union

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<sup>3</sup> [Unknown title], *Dallas Times Herald*, Sunday, February 4, 1990, A20. Newspaper clipping on Henry Scott from personal collection of Damien Robinson.

<sup>4</sup> Aljean Harmetz, “U.S. and Soviet Sisters Meet at Last,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1989, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Hiatt, “The Ambivalent American: Wayland Rudd Has a Brand-New Passport to Take Him Out of Russia. So Why Hasn’t He Used It?,” *Washington Post*, July 10, 1994, F1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

and the United States, and within the Soviet Union.

The divergent political aims of the Soviet Union and African American performers under Stalinism often made for contradictory justifications in official propaganda. The figures I examined in this project were more than mere pawns in the US-Soviet conflict. Through their time in the Soviet Union, each performer questioned, contested, and found their own position between both the American and Soviet political stance on race.

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