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Ruby Dee, 1922-2014

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In memoriam: Ruby Dee
Judith E. Smith

Ruby Dee (1922-2014) was a marvelously expressive actor and a life-long risk-taking radical committed to challenging racial and economic inequality. She made history as part of an extraordinary group of Black arts radicals --including Paul Robeson, Lorraine Hansberry, Harry Belafonte, John O. Killens, and Julian Mayfield, as well as her husband Ossie Davis—who actively protested white supremacy and thought deeply about the political implications of conventional racial representations, creating new stories and introducing new black characters to convey deep truths about black life. In small parts and choice roles, Dee's presence lit up stage and screen. In her work as an actor and at rallies and on picket lines, Dee stood with working men and women, black and white, and dedicated her talents to righting the wrongs articulated by the black and labor left.

Dee was born in Cleveland, Ohio, but her father and step-mother moved her, her brother and sisters, to Harlem soon after. Her father, Edward Nathaniel Wallace, worked when he could as a waiter on the Pennsylvania Railroad, and her stepmother, Emma Amelia Brown, a former teacher, rented out rooms to supplement their modest living. She encouraged Ruby to submit her poetry to contests and to compete in oratorical contests sponsored by the black Elks, and she took Ruby with her to stand in the relief line to get canned goods, and to join those picketing stores on 125th Street in support of the "Don't Buy Where you can't work" campaign. Emma's efforts positioned Ruby on a path to college. By 1939, Ruby graduated from Hunter College high school, and entered Hunter College, hoping also to find work on radio.

By August 1940, Dee had become an actor, describing herself as getting "hitched" to the American Negro Theatre, a theatrical co-operative she enthusiastically identified as "progressive" (96). Led by black labor radicals such as Frederick O'Neal and Alice Childress, ANT encouraged and trained black actors and writers to break into work in theater. ANT productions provided the opportunity for Dee to act on stage, and her work attracted notice, even in short-lived productions. In a poem later written for founding writer/director Abe

Hill, Dee noted the power of ANT's affirmation of her "particular gifts. A first opened door where someone says yes, Come in, you belong here among us" (164). Here she also met her first husband Frankie Dee Brown, whom she convinced to legally drop the "Brown," giving her the name she would keep after their marriage ended in 1944.

In the second half of the 1940s, new kinds of plays building on the civil rights momentum of the WWII Double V campaign seemed to auger a new era in theater for black actors. Dee met Ossie Davis, who would become her partner in life and struggle, in one such play, *Jeb*, protesting the color line facing black WWII vets. Both she and Davis got substantial parts in the touring company for ANT's blockbuster production of *Anna Lucasta*, a black cast revision of Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*. But hoped-for expanded opportunities for black actors, on stage and screen, turned out to be few and far between, up against all-white segregated institutions and deeply entrenched informal practices, and further limited by the rightward turn in postwar political culture. Black actors attempting to find work in theater and film had to be skilled in negotiating racial hierarchy and managing their own marginalization.

Over the next years, Dee shone in the parts she could get, and when she was unemployed, she took acting classes with the blacklisted actor Paul Mann. Dee knew she would have to fight for new forms of representation, and had willingly invested—and lost-- her own *Anna Lucasta* earnings in black filmmaker Bill Alexander's *The Fight Never Ends* (1947), produced for black audiences, in which she was featured, along with popular singers the Mills brothers and boxing champion Joe Louis. Dee and Davis had small parts in a few Hollywood film experiments in challenging segregation, but overall they struggled to find work in the early 1950s, and took whatever modest roles they were offered, Dee frequently playing a "devoted wife" and Davis cast as an interchangeable minor black character.

By the early 1950s, Dee and Davis's involvement in the Black Arts Left and their union, Actor's Equity made them targets of McCarthyism and the anti-communist blacklist, and acting work became even more scarce; looking back, Davis observed "we never knew if we couldn't get work in film and TV because we were black or we were red" (*Variety*, 3/6/2001). Dee declaimed Margaret Walker's

poem “For My People” at Harlem rallies protesting the silencing and marginalization of the multi-talented singer/actor/ radical activist Paul Robeson. When they were asked to participate in a March, 1953 Carnegie Hall meeting calling for clemency for Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, convicted of espionage and sentenced to death, Ossie remembered hesitating because “we might lose our jobs” while Ruby’s response was “Hmmm. What jobs?” Dee, horrified that a mother and father of two small children were about to be killed as spies in peacetime, spoke eloquently at the meeting (Ossie was not there; he later recalled that he might have been babysitting). The very next day, Ed Sullivan identified Dee as a “fellow traveler” in his newspaper column.

Left-wingers and Left-led institutions offered Dee and Davis the performing work that sustained their family economy through the 1950s. Former Group theater, Broadway, and Hollywood actors black-listed character actors Morris Carnovsky and Howard Da Silva, who were moved by Dee’s statement at the Rosenberg rally, offered her a role as the Defending Angel (and work for Davis as stage manager) in their off-Broadway production, *The World of Sholom Aleichem*, which found a receptive audience and had a successful run. Da Silva helped book Dee and Davis to perform dramatic readings, poetry, and sketches for union teachers and at synagogues and community centers. Starting in 1954, Moe Foner, the blacklisted clerk- turned-union leader, paid them to produce and perform in Black History week events for the largely Jewish, Hispanic, and black membership of his union, Local 1199. Later Dee and Davis noted how these appearances taught them how to convert any space into a “people’s theater, ” and they continued find opportunities to celebrate black arts as a culture of resistance, producing a weekly radio show, “The Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee Story Hour,” for five years in the 1970s, and a PBS television series, “With Ossie and Ruby” for three years in the 1980s.

Left-wing dramatists, black and white, created the multi-faceted characters that enabled Dee’s break-through performances: Ruth Younger in Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* (1959); Lutiebelle in Davis’s play *Purlie Victorious* (1961), Julia in Alice Childress’s *the Wedding Band* (1966, 1972) and Lena in South African Athol Fugard’s play *Boesman and Lena* (1970). Dee’s small

but noteworthy parts in Spike Lee's films *Do The Right Thing* (1989) and in *American Gangster* (2007) won awards and reintroduced Dee to contemporary audiences.

Dee herself contributed to the writing in some of the plays and films in which she appeared. She worked with Julian Mayfield on Davis's play *Alice in Wonder* (1953), and informally consulted during the gestation of *Purlie Victorious*. Later, she played a primary role in developing new forms of racial characterization when she helped Jules Dassin and Julian Mayfield write the screenplay for Dassin's 1968 film *Uptight!*, exploring parallels between the Irish rebellion against the English and the riots and social upheavals challenging white supremacy in a northern black community. In the 1970s and 1980s Dee published collections of her poetry and short stories.

From the beginning, Dee matched Davis's drive in pursuing their passions: Dee's vocation as an actor but also as a writer, and Davis's commitment to writing, supporting himself as an actor. Their working partnership expressed a shared vision of women's equality: they collaborated in both performance and writing, and consciously balanced career opportunities, economic responsibilities, and the tasks of parenting their three children. Despite reluctance to write about her personal experience with abortion, Dee spoke publicly in support of women's rights to safe and legal abortion. One of her last stage performances was in the 2003 Women's Theater Project's production of *St. Lucy's Eyes*, portraying a grandmother who provided both advice and back room abortions for women in the neighborhood.

Dee also shared with Davis a political vision that emphasized black cultural nationalism alongside internationalism and principled interracialism. They both were willing to boldly articulate this vision in public -- to participate in benefits and demonstrations, to walk picket lines and to organize colleagues to stand up and speak out. Dee and Davis were part of Black Left activism in the late 1940 and early 1950s. They recognized Martin Luther King, Jr.'s new leadership when he came to New York in 1956 to raise money for the Montgomery bus boycott, and Dee traveled to Washington on her own to participate in the 1957 SCLC Prayer Pilgrimage. In the early 1960s, they helped raise money for SNCC, and for the Freedom

Riders, and in rage and grief after the Birmingham church bombings in September 1963, they joined James Baldwin and John O. Killens to form the Association of Artists for Freedom, calling for a boycott of Christmas shopping to help collect money for the four girls' families. They also became close to Malcolm X, whom they got to know when Dee's brother, a member of the Nation of Islam, took them to hear him speak, and when Malcolm X came backstage in 1961 full of praise for *Purlie Victorious*. Especially after his return from Mecca in 1964, Dee and Davis became Malcolm's liaison to the Black Left arts community. When Malcolm X was assassinated, Dee help organize a group of "Concerned Mothers" to find housing and support for his widowed wife and children.

Dee, with Davis until he died in 2009, continued to stand up and speak out, against the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, against apartheid in South Africa, against police brutality, and the school-to-prison pipeline for black youth. In 1999, Dee (77) and Davis (82) were arrested in New York as part of a protest against the police shooting of the immigrant Amadou Diallo. The words Dee wrote near the close of the 1998 memoir she authored with Davis evoke the flavor of her political sensibilities and offer her fighting spirit to inspire others to carry on. She urged her readers to "...get out in the street. Scream; sound alarms. Democracy is in danger!...We got to wake up. We got to protest. We got to work. We got to love each other. We got to struggle. We cannot become pit bull contenders for the amusement of the greedy, global big spenders. The bottom line cannot, must not be the dollar sign" (422-3).

Quotations from Ruby Dee taken from *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together* (1998)

Dee's publications include *Glow Child and Other Poems* (1972); *My Own Good Nerve* (1987, and editing and forward for Ossie Davis, *Life Lit By Some Large Vision: Selected Speeches and Writings* (2006)

The website www.ossieandruby.com lists Dee and Davis's stage, screen, and television credits, and also includes a timeline of historical context, biography and political activism, early twentieth century to the present.