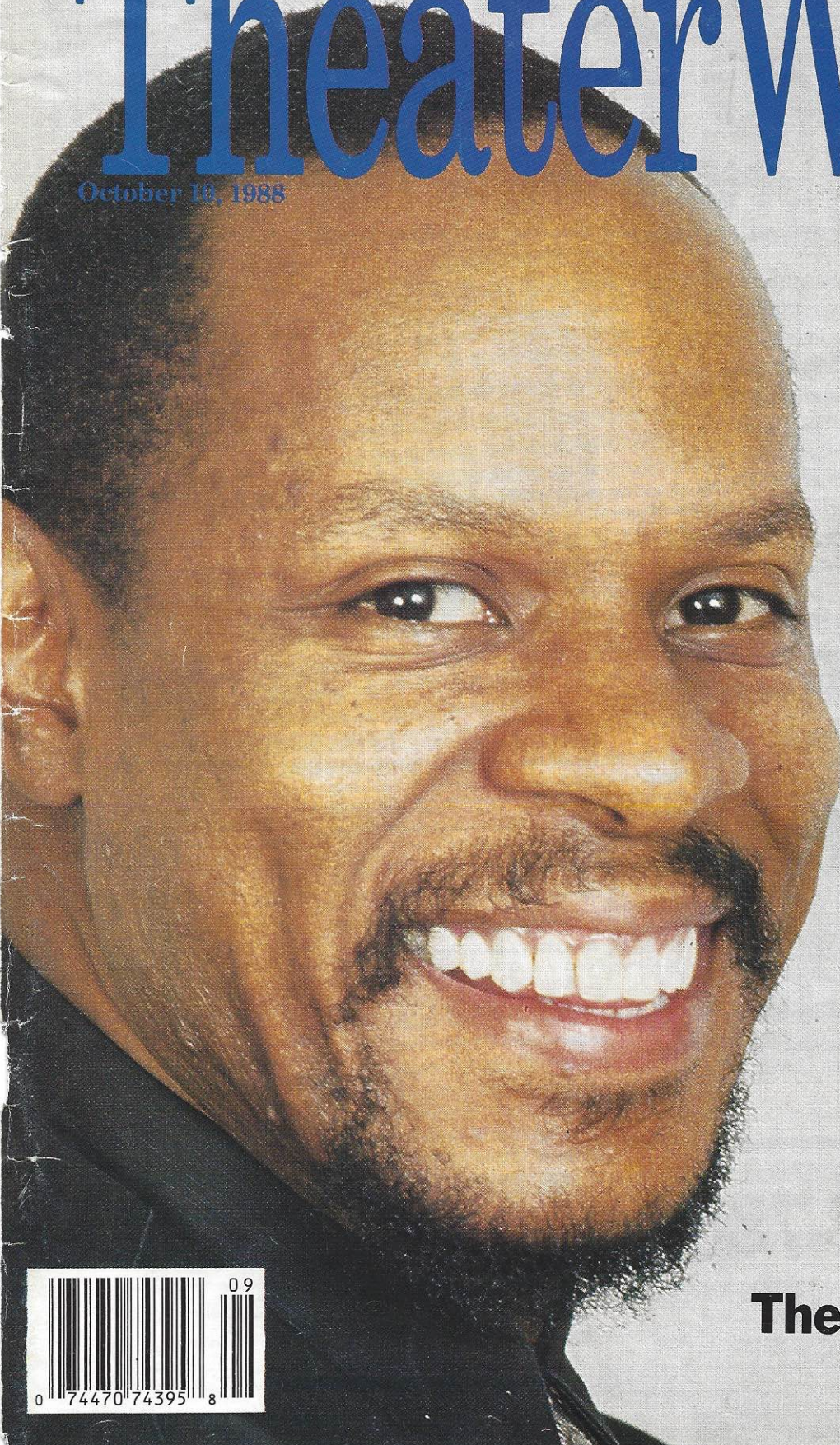


A Comprehensive Guide to American Theater

TheaterWeek

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**Avery
Brooks
Tackles
Paul
Robeson**

**Michael
Crawford:
Hail and
Farewell**

**Shubert Alley
Turns 75**

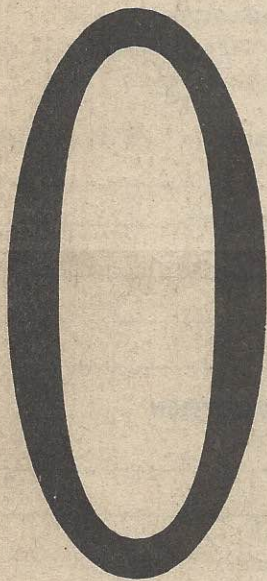
**The New Theater
Of Brooklyn**



Avery Brooks, “Theater Artist”

The actor grapples with the larger-than-life legend of Paul Robeson in a one-man show at Broadway's Golden Theater

by Sheryl Kahn



On or offstage, actor Avery Brooks is a force to be reckoned with. Presently electrifying audiences at Broadway's Golden Theater in Phillip Hayes Dean's *Paul Robeson*, Brooks speaks about his career and the future of Afro-American culture with a fire and drive not unlike his character's.

A famed stage actor, singer, athlete, lawyer, and political activist, Robeson was born April 9, 1898 and died January 23, 1976. He was perhaps best known for his definitive performances of “Old Man River” in the stage and screen versions of *Show Boat*. Traveling worldwide, he mastered over 20 languages. Though often accused of being a member of the Communist Party, Robeson clung to his love for the Soviet Union and the struggle against racial injustice.

For two and a half hours, Brooks acts and sings as Robeson, using only a chair for a prop and a piano for accompaniment. The show opened off-Broadway several weeks ago at the South Street Theater, and runs at the Golden through October 30. *Paul Robeson* originally opened on Broadway ten years ago, with James Earl Jones in the title role. Dean's depic-

tion of the actor caused considerable controversy among black intellectuals, controversy which has not arisen this time around.

In an interview, Brooks answers questions with more questions; offers riddles instead of responses, and his voice is a mixture of learned scholar and passionate preacher. Speaking with Brooks late at night, following six hours of rehearsal for the show, you get the distinct feeling you are about to learn a lesson in life.

Sheryl Kahn: *You are presently portraying Paul Robeson, yet you've played that role many times before—in 1978 in Are You Now or Have You Ever Been both on and off-Broadway at the Promenade Theater; in Dean's play at New Jersey's Crossroads Theater; in 1986 in New Hampshire, then again at the Strand Theater in Boston in 1987. Has your portrayal changed over the years?*

Avery Brooks: *Wouldn't you think so? You see, I am not an actor, I am a theater artist. That is what I am and what I have decided to be. I have trained extensively and I have truly explored every aspect of theater—acting, directing, drama, music, move-*

Harry Rubel



With Ernie Scott in *Paul Robeson*

ment. I have done and experienced all of theater, yet my journey is not complete.

Paul Robeson is ultimately a tribute from one artist to another. Robeson is not a character; he is a man who walked on the earth. Phillip Hayes Dean has constructed a monodrama, so the notion of character has never entered. We're more concerned about addressing the essence of the man, and it took a *long* time, all those years, for that to happen.

I hope that I am informed of something now, being older. That I have grown with the years, with the experience. I've learned things. But what, that I couldn't tell you for certain.

May I ask how old you are?

No.

Why not? Does your age bother you?

No. I'm 39, rapidly approaching 40, and it really doesn't bother me.

What was it like playing Robeson for the first time?

I was full of trepidation and anxiety about being able to deliver Paul Robeson, because of the size of the man. We went line by line, word by word. We looked at the man, not the role. It's not a caricature, it's more of a portrait, so that we only intend to suggest the essence, that spark. And

what is the essence? His great integrity, his intellect, his singing, his athletic ability, his desire for America to own up to the glorious documents that created it, his patriotism, his fight for the struggle of oppressed people in the world.

And even now, in Dean's play, this is not a character that one creates but one who truly lives. But making this great human being into a character in a play is part of the life of theater. How else could we communicate him? We couldn't ultimately live his life in two and a half hours.

How do you begin to portray such an individual?

Well now, that's the question, you see. How do you make your intent clear? How do you create an evening full not only of good intention, but calculated intention, and not get in the way of your dramatic license?

How do you?

I get out of the way. Avery Brooks must get out of the way in order for Paul Robeson to surface. Everybody in the world knows that I'm not Paul Robeson, especially me, but I'm also aware that if I can somehow communicate by the tools of my craft and by what is in my heart, then I can feel good about myself, good about Robeson, and good about my people.

I don't ever try to force some kind of transformation. I think there is a collective transformation and we start to embrace a collective memory that we have for the Paul Robeson in all of us—the human being who insists on fighting for human dignity. We all share in that, so instead of me becoming Paul Robeson, we—meaning the artists and the audience—all do.

You've also repeatedly portrayed another great man, Malcolm X, in Anthony Davis's opera on his life and times, in 1985 and '86 and again this year at the Schomburg Library.

Yes, and I feel much the same about him as I do about Robeson. It is important for me to talk about and communicate the lives of two extraordinary men, irrespective of their color. Their stories are extraordinary American stories—not just brown American stories. The odyssey of Malcolm X or Paul Robeson is, I think, important to brown people, but ultimately important to society at large.

I may be idealistic, but I think that we are perhaps one of the most important nations; we have a chance to turn the corner into the 21st century in some glorious way. We stand always at the brink of making some historical turn in history, so we must address the



great of us, the battles and triumphs whether they are big or small. I feel a responsibility as an Afro-American person to preserve that which I think is important. My history dictates that. *You've also done some directing in the West End—Ntozake Shange's For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf. Is London theater very different from American theater?*

Well, wouldn't you say so? They say the sun never sets on the British empire.

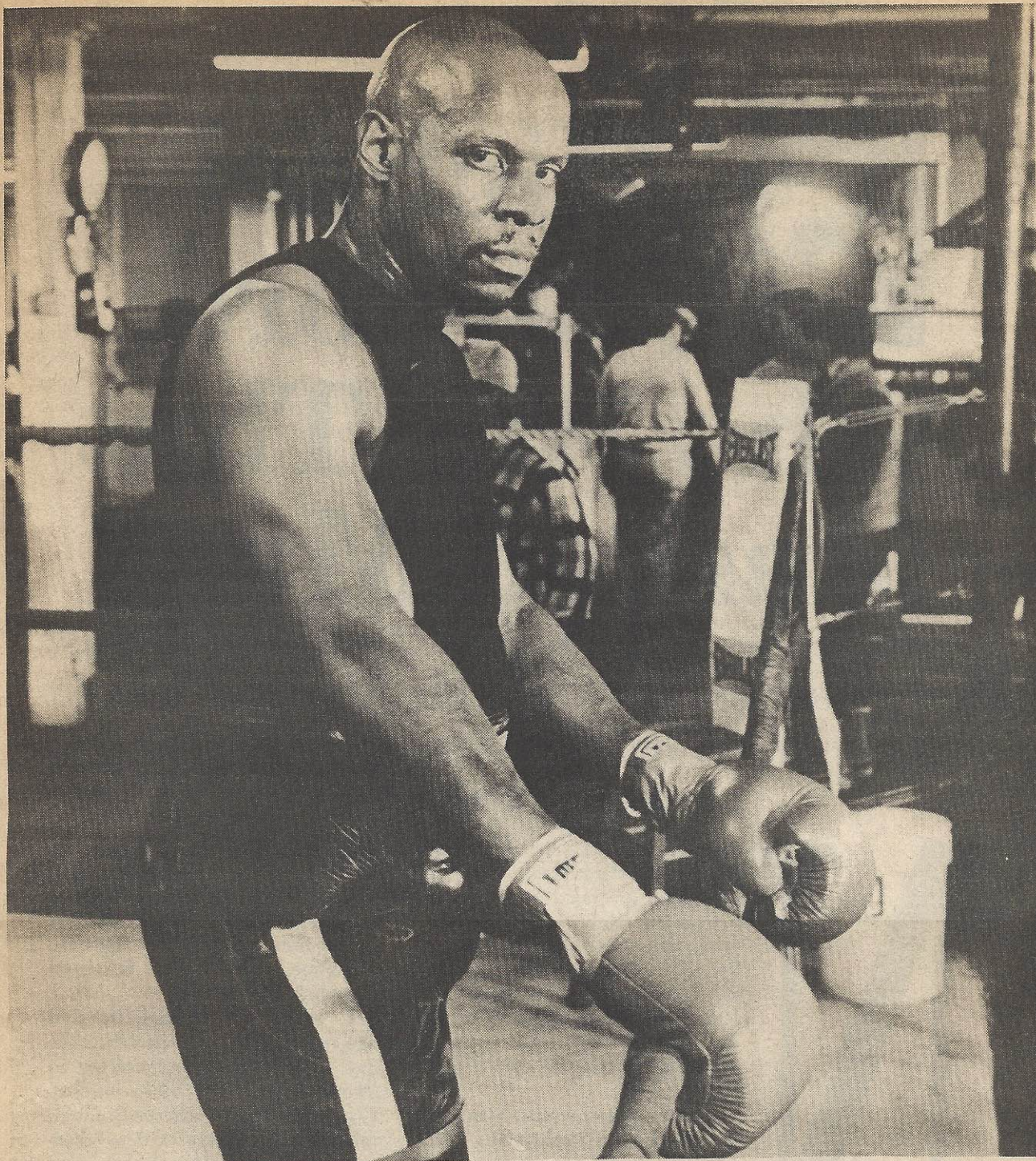
Meaning?

Meaning many things. It's kind of ironic, isn't it, that what we call mainstream theater now, all the Broadway successes, have come from England. Still, one can analyze Shange's work in terms of the western world, but it can't be contained in that world. For the English to admit or embrace her work is difficult. There is a different understanding between here and there because she is a black woman who was raised in this country and writes as such. So the play is taken differently by different people.

You were the first black MFA graduate in acting and directing from Rutgers, you are a tenured professor of theater at Mason Gross School of the Arts, and you have taught at Oberlin

George de Vincent





As Hawk on television's *Spenser: For Hire*

I'm kind of shy about that subject. What I do is singular in nature, even though my wife and I reflect on each other. What I do, although it is public, is distinct from my personal life. When I walk away from it I go home and I don't bring my family into a life that they have not chosen.

On Paul Robeson's opening night at the South Street Theater, you were driven to tears during your perform-

ance. Does that happen every night you play Robeson?

I don't know what tears are about, ultimately. If we are doing what we are supposed to be doing, the show is different every night. It's spontaneous, and I live through it every night. Years ago, I would not have been able to deliver it emotionally like I do now, but there are things that have happened in my life, the things

that we have talked about, that are the wealth from which I draw.

I don't want to cry in front of people who I have never met and will never meet again, but I have decided that I am an artist, and I do these things for no apparent reason. But if I can share what I know with you, what I have learned and experienced, then we have a chance of making some small explosion. □