



**May 17 Sunday at 2pm The Proud Valley (1940) with soundtrack**

Metcalf Auditorium, State Library NSW. 76 minutes

**Tickets \$25/ \$20 at the website home page right hand side or call 0419 267 318.**

By the start of World War II, Paul Robeson had given up his lucrative mainstream work to participate in more socially progressive film and stage productions. As David Goliath, in the popular British drama *The Proud Valley*, Robeson is the quintessential everyman, an American sailor who joins rank-and-file Welsh miners organizing against the powers that be.



"*The Proud Valley* (d. Penrose Tennyson, 1940) was written for Paul Robeson by Herbert Marshall and his wife, Alfreda Brilliant. Both were associated with the left-wing Unity Theatre and, in 1938, Marshall had directed Robeson in Unity's *Plant in the Sun*.

The film is remarkable for its time for its believable working-class characters, not caricatures. Dick Parry (Edward Chapman) and his wife are not one-dimensional comic stereotypes but resourceful human beings, while the story affords Robeson's character a similar respect: David Goliath is a convincing working-class person, kind, generous and good-natured. It was extremely rare for a black character to be presented in this way in the 1930s and 1940s, when cinema audiences were used to seeing Stepin Fetchit playing the fool in American comedies.

However, not everyone was impressed. Graham Greene was particularly scathing in his review in *The Spectator*, describing David as a "big black Pollyanna", who kept "everybody cheerful and dying nobly at the end."

The Welsh actors in the supporting cast, notably Rachel Thomas, Charles Williams, Jack Jones (who also contributed to the script) and Clifford Evans, give the film its authenticity. The setting of the film is realistic, too. Some location work took place in the Rhondda Valley and working-class life (and death) isn't glamourised. The pit disaster at the end of the film, in which David is killed, is horrifying.

On 25 February 1940 *The Proud Valley* made history as the first film to be premiered on radio, when the BBC broadcast a sixty-minute version, reproduced from its soundtrack, on its Home Service. Its cinema release, on 8 March 1940 at the Leicester Square Theatre in London, was marred by the newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook, who banned any mention of Robeson and the film in his newspapers, apparently because of certain pro-Russian remarks Robeson had made before his return to America.

The film enabled Robeson to express his socialist beliefs and portray the struggles of the working-class people of South Wales, and he found making it a rewarding experience. "It was the one film I could be proud of having played in," he said, "That, and the early part of *Song of Freedom*."

After the film, Robeson was never forgotten in South Wales. In the years that the American government denied him a passport (1950-58), the Welsh people were among the most vocal and active groups who came to his support.” BFI



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