

Ruby Dee, American actress and activist, dead at 91

David Walsh
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The illustrious African American stage and screen actress, writer and social activist Ruby Dee died Wednesday at her home in New Rochelle, a suburb of New York City, at the age of 91. Dee, married to fellow actor Ossie Davis for more than half a century, is still perhaps best known for stage performances in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), about a working class family in Chicago, and Davis' *Purlie Victorious* (1961), as well as the screen version of the former released in 1961.

Although she was limited by the roles available to black performers in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as by her longtime left-wing political views and associations, Dee won Grammy, Emmy, Obie, Drama Desk and Screen Actors Guild awards during her remarkable career, and was also nominated for an Academy Award for her role in Ridley Scott's *American Gangster* (2007).

Dee was born Ruby Ann Wallace in 1922 in Cleveland. Her father was a waiter on the Pennsylvania Railroad, among other occupations. Her biological mother, according to Dee in *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together*, soon afterward "found religion ... [and] left her husband and her brood to follow a preacher man."

Dee was raised by her father and his second wife, Emma Amelia Benson, in New York City's Harlem. Dee writes that Benson "had gone to Atlanta University and had studied under W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the nation's greatest philosophers and historians; she had been a teacher and had saved money to continue her studies at Columbia University." Instead, however, Benson used the savings to pay for a divorce for Dee's father and bought an apartment "on Seventh Avenue in a just-turning colored neighborhood."

The autobiography explains that "Emma was a good mother ... She read to us, introduced us to poetry, and encouraged us. At the time, we, like most people we knew, had some kind of piano in the house. We took piano, violin, and dancing lessons. She gloried in our achievements at school. When Angelina [Dee's sister] and I began to write poetry, she submitted the work to magazines and newspapers."

Dee attended Hunter College in New York, graduating in 1939, and was soon a member of the American Negro Theater (ANT), founded in Harlem in 1940 by writer Abram Hill and actor Frederick O'Neal. Other well-known performers at the company over the years included Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte. Dee appeared in six ANT productions, among them Hill's indictment of racism, *Walk Hard* (1944). She made her Broadway debut in the play *South Pacific* (unrelated to the musical) in 1943 and the

following year appeared in the successful Broadway production of Philip Yordan's *Anna Lucasta* (inspired by Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*).

In 1946 Dee played the female lead in Robert Ardrey's *Jeb*, the story, according to *Playbill*, of a "black soldier [who] returns to his Southern town after World War II to find it rife with the prejudice he expected to be gone, forcing him to face down the Ku Klux Klan in order to marry his sweetheart and forge a life for himself." The male lead was Ossie Davis. Dee and Davis (her second husband) married in 1948.

She made her film debut in *The Jackie Robinson Story* (Alfred E. Green), playing the baseball player's wife, and the same year appeared in *No Way Out* (1950), Joseph L. Mankiewicz's melodrama about two racist brothers, with Richard Widmark, Linda Darnell and Poitier.

Dee and others later complained, with some legitimacy, that she was too often relegated to playing "quietly suffering helpmates opposite strong males." Although not a helpmate in Anthony Mann's *The Tall Target* (1951), Dee no doubt plays a "quietly suffering" character, the slave maid Rachel. However, she performs the role with such dignity and delicacy as to virtually steal the film (about an assassination plot against Abraham Lincoln).

Like many other black artists and intellectuals of their generation, with no reason to feel the slightest allegiance to American capitalism, Dee and Davis gravitated to the left, toward the Communist Party. In an interview, Davis later explained, "Ruby came from Harlem, and in Harlem the Communists were looked upon as very friendly, because in many instances people would have their stuff set out on the sidewalk by the landlord, and the Communists would come along and put it back in! The stigma of being a Communist came later. People felt freer to express themselves any way they wanted to. The Depression had sort of broken down the old political assignments, then World War II had come along."

Dee added, "We felt the excitement of our times, and we were asked—both of us, before we knew each other—we were asked to join [the CP]. But we weren't joiners; I don't know why. But many of our friends were, you know."

Dee and Davis publicly associated themselves with opposition to the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, as Soviet spies, in 1953. In 1983, Davis recalled how the couple were asked to take part in a rally that had been called to protest the electrocution.

“And those of us who dared to take that stand could not expect to go unpunished.... We sat down to ponder what we should do. How might this action affect our future? Should we take such a stand in view of the jobs that we held? A second’s reflection produced the startling information: What jobs? There we were, already blacklisted for being black—what would it hurt if we added a little red and got blacklisted too?”

Davis explains that Howard Da Silva and Morris Carnovsky, two distinguished actors associated with the Communist Party, hired the pair for their Off Broadway production of *The World of Sholem Aleichem* (Dee as a performer, Davis as stage manager), with which they stayed for two years.

For whatever reason, Dee and Davis were never officially blacklisted, although Dee’s next significant film role did not come until 1957, in Martin Ritt’s *Edge of the City*.

In a memoir, Davis recalls the time in the early 1950s when the authorities launched an investigation into a left-wing summer camp in New York state where they were performing in Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. Davis writes that the couple hid themselves in a basket of “costumes that the actors had used for the whole week. The costumes bore the sweat of their ardor, the odor of their activities, and it was a close-knit basket, but we were persuaded to climb into the basket, hide under the funky clothes, and stay until the minions of the state had come and asked everybody, ‘Where are Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis?’ Everybody denied that they’d ever heard of two such people, and finally the minions left and we were rescued from the basket. This is an indication of the madness of the time.”

The contradictions of the couple’s involvement with the American Stalinist party were discussed by the WSWs in 2004, at the time of their Kennedy Center Honors in the presence of George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice.

We commented then, “The Stalinization of the Communist Party led it to adapt itself in varying ways to racial politics, from the period when it called for self-determination in the so-called ‘Black Belt’ (the regions of 12 Southern states in which African Americans made up more than 50 percent of the population) in the 1930s, to its uncritical support for the middle-class leadership of the civil rights movement in the 1950s, to the emergence of Angela Davis as a leading party spokesperson in the late 1960s and beyond.”

We noted further, “Dee and Davis were associated with many left-wing causes over the years, from the defense of the Rosenbergs, to opposition to the McCarthyite witch-hunts, to anti-Vietnam war activity, to support for civil rights and, most recently, opposition to the Iraq war. Even as they became more and more entrenched in liberal Democratic Party circles, they continued to associate openly with Stalinist circles and activities.

“It apparently caused no embarrassment to Bush—or, rather, his aides, the president being largely ignorant of all such complexities—that the couple standing next to him last Sunday hosted a memorial service in New York City a little over a year ago for the Communist Party’s longtime leading theoretician, Dr. Herbert Aptheker.”

A through-line in the Stalinist party’s various tactical twists and turns was its devotion to the Democratic Party and ferocious

opposition to any movement arising in the working class independently of the Democrats. Dee and Davis were politically miseducated in this process. Never publicly associating themselves with socialism, they always referred to their involvement with the CP merely as a function of their identification with the struggle against racism. Davis, for example, once quipped, “I was ‘red’ only when I thought it was a smarter way of being black.”

Dee was perhaps most prominent during the 1960s, the era of the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War protest movements, from her appearance in *Raisin in the Sun* to her role as one of the master of ceremonies (along with Davis) at the massive March on Washington in August 1963 and eulogist at the funerals of both Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. She was praised for her performance in the television adaptation of Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and, later, James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1984).

Dee received her first Emmy nomination for a guest appearance on *East Side/West Side* (1963), the socially conscious television drama with George C. Scott. She co-wrote and starred (along with Raymond St. Jacques and Roscoe Lee Browne) in *Uptight* (1968), an attempt to update John Ford’s *The Informer* (1935), about Irish republican insurgents, to the world of black radicals, directed by blacklist victim Jules Dassin. Dee also featured prominently, along with Poitier (who directed as well) and Belafonte, in *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), about ex-slaves in the West following the Civil War.

In the mid-1960s, she starred as Kate in *Taming of the Shrew* and Cordelia in *King Lear*, becoming the first African American woman to play lead roles at the American Shakespeare Festival. In 1970, Dee won the Obie award for her role as Lena opposite James Earl Jones in South African playwright Athol Fugard’s *Boesman and Lena*.

Dee and Davis remained associated with various protests against American foreign policy and against racism. Dee’s attitude toward the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 can perhaps be gathered from her poem originally entitled “I’m Going to Miss the Russians.” In 1999, the pair were arrested outside the headquarters of the New York Police Department as part of a protest over the murder of Amadou Diallo, the Guinean immigrant shot 19 times by police. Davis died in 2005, at the age of 87.



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