

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • CELEBRITY

# In This Life Together

*Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, Fifty-Six Years of Shared Purpose*

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## Who They Are

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Ossie Davis was born Raiford Chatman Davis on December 18, 1917, in Cogdell, Georgia — his first name reportedly the result of a courthouse clerk misreading his mother's spoken "R.C." on the birth certificate — and left Howard University in 1939 for New York to pursue acting. Ruby Ann Wallace was born October 27, 1922, in Cleveland, Ohio, and raised in Harlem, graduating from Hunter College in 1945 and training at the American Negro Theatre alongside Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte. The two met in 1946 working on the play *Jeb* and married on December 9, 1948 — not, as sometimes retold, on the set of *A Raisin in the Sun*, which they starred in together more than a decade later, first on Broadway in 1959 and then in the 1961 film. Whatever the sequence, the partnership held: fifty-six years of marriage, three children, and a joint career in which each was, by every account, the other's closest collaborator.

## Voices at the Center of the Movement

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Davis and Dee served together as emcees for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. On February 27, 1965, Davis delivered the eulogy at Malcolm X's funeral at Faith Temple Church of God in Christ in Harlem, a passage that remains one of the most quoted pieces of American oratory from the era.

*"And we will know him then for what he was and is — a prince — our own black shining prince! — who didn't hesitate to die, because he loved us so."* — Ossie Davis, eulogy for Malcolm X, February 27, 1965

Both remained active in civil rights and later social-justice organizing for the rest of their lives — Dee's involvement stretched from CORE and the NAACP through decades of activism, and in 1999 the couple, then in their late seventies and eighties, were arrested together protesting the NYPD shooting of Amadou Diallo. Davis wrote and starred in the satirical play *Purlie Victorious* (1961) and directed films including *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970); Dee earned an Academy Award nomination for *American Gangster* (2007) and won the Screen Actors Guild's Life Achievement Award in 2000. They were jointly honored with the National Medal of Arts in 1995 and the Kennedy Center Honors in 2004, and co-wrote a shared 1998 memoir, *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together*.

## An Ending Written Together

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Davis died February 4, 2005, in a Miami Beach hotel room at eighty-seven; roughly 2,100 people attended his funeral at Harlem's Riverside Church. Dee died at home in New Rochelle, New York, on June 11, 2014, at ninety-one. Their ashes share a single urn at Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York, inscribed with the title of their memoir: *In This Thing Together*.

## NC Local Lens

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Ruby Dee has a genuine, documented Cumberland County connection: the Fayetteville State College student newspaper *The Voice*, in its April 1, 1966 issue, reported on the front page that Dee gave a dramatic recital and spoke with students during the college's Fine Arts Week that year, meeting with the college's president and its Fine Arts Week Committee afterward. A student writer for the paper called her appearance "spell-binding." This entry treats the appearance as confirmed by a contemporary campus newspaper account, while noting that the full page images have not been directly reviewed in this research pass beyond indexed search results, and the exact college president's name should be

confirmed before this detail is presented as fully settled. No comparable personal connection to Fayetteville or Cumberland County was found for Ossie Davis; his only documented tie to the area is posthumous — Fayetteville State's theater and academic programs have engaged with his written work and his Malcolm X eulogy in later decades, which this entry distinguishes clearly from a personal Davis connection to the city.

## Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

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**Presidential Medal of Freedom:** a claim that Davis received this posthumously in 2015 could not be confirmed against the official recipient list and may be a conflation with the confirmed National Medal of Arts (1995) or Kennedy Center Honors (2004) — do not state as fact without independent verification.

**How they met:** corrected here to Jeb (1946) rather than A Raisin in the Sun, which came later in their shared career.

**Ruby Dee/Fayetteville State appearance:** confirmed via a contemporary student newspaper (The Voice, April 1, 1966) found through DigitalNC indexing; the full page images should be directly reviewed to confirm exact quotes and the college president's name before further publication.

**Malcolm X eulogy exact wording:** the passage quoted above is extremely widely cited in this form but was not checked against a primary audio/transcript source in this pass.

## Citations

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*Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.*

1. Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together* (New York: William Morrow, 1998).
2. "Ruby Dee Charms Fine Arts Week Audience," *The Voice* (Fayetteville, NC), April 1, 1966, Fayetteville State University student newspaper collection, DigitalNC, North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, <https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/>.
3. Ossie Davis, eulogy for Malcolm X, Faith Temple Church of God in Christ, Harlem, February 27, 1965.
4. "Kennedy Center Honors, 2004," The Kennedy Center, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.kennedy-center.org/>.
5. "National Medal of Arts, 1995 Recipients," National Endowment for the Arts, accessed September 13, 2026.

*Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.*