



Casting His Own Shadow

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

continued

Following a famous father was never a problem for Mel Tolson Jr., with each man pursuing his own heart's desire.

In no other situation is the idea of “a hard act to follow” any more appropriate than in discussing a man who serves as “Jr.” to a renowned “Sr.” “Large shoes to fill” and “in his father’s shadow” also are apt descriptive phrases. In the case of Melvin B. Tolson Jr., son of revered poet-professor Melvin B. Tolson Sr., however, not act, shoes nor shadow ever posed much of a problem.

“I have wondered sometimes in thinking of the impact on my life of having my father as my father whether some of it may depend on the degree to which the senior pressures the junior to imitate,” says the 85-year-old Tolson, who retired in 1990 after three decades teaching French at the University of Oklahoma. “The senior and the junior didn’t regard themselves in my case as copies of each other or as supposed-to-be copies of each other. We were alike in some ways, but there were great differences.

“I was always just me; I was not him, and I knew that from early on.”

Tolson, in fact, has in some ways increased the size of the shoes, the fall of the shadow and the length of the act. He has proudly burnished Tolson Sr.’s legacy by talking about his father’s political activism, academic career and poetry—including his having served as Poet Laureate of The Republic of Liberia—at various types of events through the years. In a critical essay in 1990 for *World Literature Today*, the son celebrates the father as, “This poet, orator, teacher of English and American literatures, grammarian, small-town mayor, theater founder and director, debate coach . . .”

In that last role, of course, Tolson Sr. has become the focus of the public eye and popular culture more than 40 years after his death. This new attention comes through the 2007 Denzel Washington film, “The Great Debaters,” a fictionalized version of the story of the all-black Wiley College debate team of 1935. Tolson Sr.

coached that team to a winning season that culminated in besting the powerhouse all-white team from the University of Southern California.

Pamela Genova, chair of the OU Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Linguistics, describes Tolson Jr. as a modest man, always more inclined to talk about the accomplishments of others, including his father, than his own.

“In 1967, he won the Regents Award for Superior Teaching,” she says. “When I came as a new assistant professor, he had retired, but he stayed involved in the life of the department. He loved to speak French with us, and he was always supportive. He taught as an adjunct for a time, and he has frequently attended our student awards ceremony. The students fall silent in awe of this man. He’s not only a fine scholar and a wonderful teacher but also a person of high caliber.

“His interests have always been widespread. Important is that in 1975, he organized and directed the first Francophone Literature Symposium, which would focus on Caribbean and African writers. That was early for that to happen. Now those voices are central to French studies. He had great foresight. He knew early on, more than 30 years ago, that those works and writers deserved our attention.”

Born in 1923, Tolson was raised in Marshall, Texas, home of two colleges in addition to Wiley. The atmosphere of learning and creativity within the Tolson

home found support outside it.

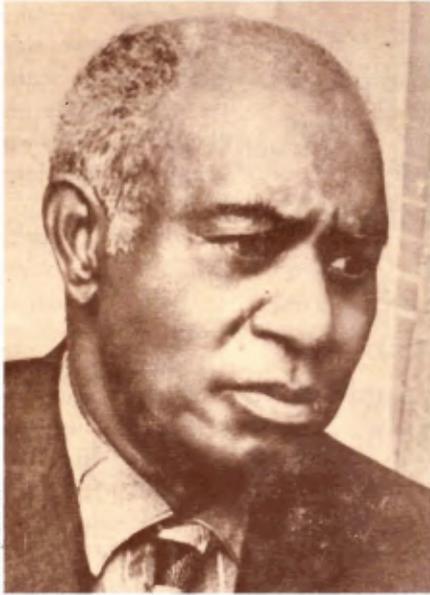
“I grew up in an atmosphere in which students and teachers discussed major concerns and argued with each other all over campus,” he recalls. “There is a famous stump on the Wiley College campus that they have encased in cement at which students and teachers used to stand and talk.

“Around the table, we talked vigorously. Mom and Dad discussed, and the children learned to defend their arguments in much the same way his debaters did. I remember a sister-in-law who, the first time she came to visit the family after the marriage, had left the dinner table. I went to her room and asked her was something the matter. She said she had never been in a place where the family argued like that. That’s what we did.”

Tolson discovered early his love of language: Latin in the all-black high school across the street from Wiley, then, at the college, German and, finally, French. The latter, of course, became his academic focus. He says his father “was interested in languages as a source for developing his talent or genius or inventiveness in the English language,” while the son “became attracted to foreign language for itself, for its exoticness.” After a few years of teaching French at Prairie View College in Texas, Tolson decided to earn a master’s degree. His father had by that time moved from Wiley to Langston University.

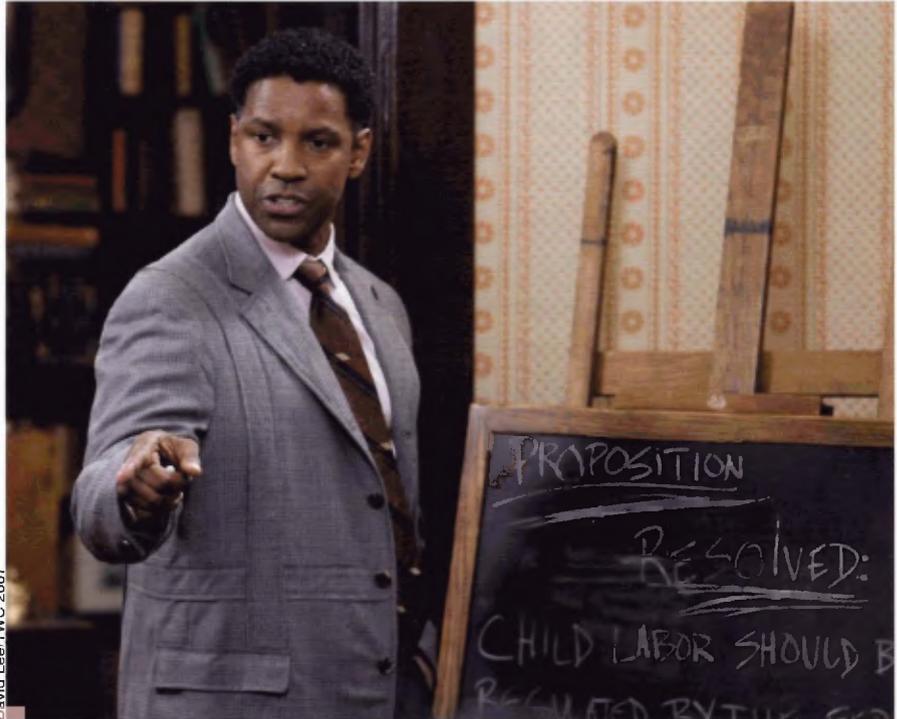
“I, along with four alumni of Langston University decided to try to go to Oklahoma

Photo provided



Melvin B. Tolson Sr. left Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, the actual venue of "The Great Debaters," to become a professor at Langston University.

David Lee/TWC 2007



Denzel Washington stars as Mel Tolson Sr. in "The Great Debaters."

A&M, now OSU," he says. "We were accepted. Two of us stayed the whole year. Three dropped out after the first semester saying the psychological pressure was too much. We were the first two blacks to earn master's degrees there.

"[The other fellow] had a car, and I did not. On the days we didn't have class together, I would take the bus that passed through Langston. I remember one cold morning walking from the bus station to the campus and passing a group of three or four white fellows. I was all bundled up. As I passed, one said to another, 'Is that a Negro?' The other said, 'No, no. There aren't any Negroes here.' That was 1949."

In 1959, having returned to teaching at Prairie View after finishing his master's in 1950, Tolson entered the doctoral program at OU, the initial step to becoming the first full-time black faculty member at the University. George Henderson had taught a year earlier but not as a full-time faculty member.

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Photo provided



Attending the dinner preceding the College of Arts and Sciences' campus screening of "The Great Debaters" are Jeanette Davidson, left, director of the OU African-American Studies Program, Mel Tolson Jr., and former OU Regent Melvin Hall, who now teaches in the AFAM program.

"I was offered a teaching assistantship, and I also got a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship," Tolson says. "I was a serious student. I came to *get* it. I remember from a very early age my father would several times a year urge the four of us to plan on getting a Ph.D., not because it would make us any smarter, necessarily—he didn't have an earned doctorate, but he had several honorary degrees—

but because our employment would be more reliable and better compensated. I took for granted that we would all become Ph.D.s. My two brothers also got doctorates, one in history and one in biochemistry. My sister took a master's in library science at OU, then one in history."

In spring 1961, when Tolson had been working on the degree for two years, the head of the department asked him to consider filling a faculty opening. Seymour Feiler, retired David Ross Boyd Professor of French, who taught Tolson in graduate school, then worked with him as a colleague for many years, remembers the hiring vividly.

"He was a very good student, so good, in fact, that the faculty voted unanimously to hire him before he had completed his doctorate," Feiler says. "It was a tough time racially, but Mel made it look easy. I know it wasn't, but he made it look that way. I expected something that didn't happen during the process. I thought surely that in this part of the country at that time, someone would have protested, said something against the idea of a black colleague, but the department vote for him was unanimous. I was prepared for some argument. We had none."

"While Melvin Tolson Sr. deserves all of the recognition which he has received, we should never forget the historic role played by Professor Tolson Jr. at the University of Oklahoma. He helped build the foundation for a true spirit of community at OU where diversity is a source of strength. He has been an inspiring role model for an untold number of students working for academic excellence as the first African American faculty member to become a full professor and as a force for leadership by African American students by founding the Black Student Association. OU is a much stronger university today because of the impact of Melvin Tolson Jr."

—OU President David L. Boren

During those often-turbulent times, Tolson worked with Henderson and Lenny Marie Townsend, who taught for a time in the School of Social Work, to support students in the formation of what was then called the Afro-American Student Union and is now the Black Student Association. (For that story, visit ou.edu/student/bsal/history.htm). In 2002, the University named the Henderson-Tolson Cultural Center, a home for the organizations and activities of black students, in honor of the two professors' contributions.

Norris Williams, director of the Henderson Scholars Program, came to OU as the first full-time coordinator of black student affairs in 1977. For 31 years, he says, he has turned for guidance to Tolson and Henderson.

"Doc Tolson was instrumental in beginning the Afro-American Student Union," Williams says. "He worked with a core of students—some who were members of the fraternity he advised, Omega Psi Phi—to focus on creating a student organization that would give the black students a collective voice, to create a coalition to deal with the real issues black students were facing."

Williams says for Tolson and

Henderson to take such an active role with students rather than focusing on furthering their own careers showed deep dedication.

A 1965 graduate, Willie Wilson, a retired special education teacher who lives in Oklahoma City, says it took courage as well.

"To give a perspective: In the union they had a list of apartments that blacks could rent off campus, and there

weren't that many," he recalls. "Dr. Tolson brought black students together to let us know about our own background. He gave us strength to carry on despite the adversity on campus. He risked his career, I think, by helping us. He was strong."

After what became, of course, a highly successful career, Tolson is focusing in retirement on enjoying a number of cherished pursuits. He reads in French, Spanish, German, Portuguese—and sometimes even in English. He studies, at the moment, the history of Islam and slavery. He listens to music, perhaps the deepest love of his life. He taught himself piano as a child but gave up playing while working on his doctorate.

"There has never been anything that I could spend as many consecutive hours doing as deciphering the correspondence between those notes on the page and the piano," he says. "Hours. Until my shoulders ached. I couldn't do that with language or literature or any other kind of learning. My father wouldn't let any of us children take lessons and didn't encourage us to play because he felt his younger brother didn't go to college because of music. He was a jazz pianist in Kansas City."

“I grew up in an atmosphere in which students and teachers discussed major concerns and argued with each other all over campus.”



Robert Taylor

President David Boren, right, participates in honoring Mel Tolson Jr. at the dedication of the Henderson-Tolson Cultural Center.



Robert Taylor

Members of OU's black community gather at the site of the former Stovall Museum for the dedication of the Henderson-Tolson Cultural Center, the naming of which honors the two men most prominent in the support of OU's black students over the past four decades.

Tolson clearly takes great delight in recounting a family story involving music.

“There were at least two music teachers at Wiley who asked my father to let them teach me,” he says. “He didn’t want that. But I taught myself. My first job teaching after college—a country teaching job for one year—came because the school needed not only someone who could teach fourth and fifth grades but who could play for the student body choir. My mother and I couldn’t help but chuckle. The reason I got the job was because I could play the piano.”

While he may have been the second Melvin Tolson, Tolson Jr. has been first in many significant areas of both personal and professional achievement. Being “just me,” it turns out, has been way more than enough. 

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