

RHONEL ROBERTS

Hugh Masekela, 2014
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

“Sit in an office doing paperwork at Fort Dix in New Jersey.”

“That’s important work too, isn’t it?”

“You don’t get it, do you?”

Anna winced. She’d never heard him raise his voice before.

“My father fought in the last war and wouldn’t even look at me after I told him. He said if I didn’t spend so much time listening to music and watching other people do things, I’d have a stronger heart.”

“Do you believe that?” Anna asked.

“I believe in doing what’s right. But it doesn’t matter what I believe, if my heart can’t take it.”

Nothing Anna said was able to pull Danny out of the pit of shame he’d dug for himself. And she didn’t quite understand why not being able to do something he believed in made him so upset. Most of what had always made her feel bad had had to do with things she believed about herself on the outside, not the inside. It had never really occurred to her that she could believe in things like Danny did and feel ashamed in a way that had nothing to do with how she looked. She wondered if the difference even mattered, since both of them still ended up feeling like shit.

One night at the Savoy, Wardell followed his usual practice of holding forth, especially when the audience included several women. He’d started wearing the latest style called the “zoot suit.” If Sylvia was in the group, Wardell made sure she received most of his attention. She was thick-limbed like Anna, and didn’t need pads in her dresses to accentuate the shoulders. Sylvia’s hair was usually teased up on top and cropped close at the temples, which highlighted her smooth apple-butter-brown skin against beautiful coconut-white teeth. Anna thought they hit it off so well because of how similar they were in size. Wardell would often say they were both built like a “brick shithouse,” making it sound like a compliment.

Wardell stood up and pulled everyone into his eyes who was waiting to hear what he had to say.

“My friend Danny and me are hip to the style that’s keeping up with the pace of music. When we make the scene together, I’m the mouthpiece, ’cause with Danny, ‘mum’s the word.’ So on behalf of both of us, I’m a give you the zoot suit tour.”

He proudly took hold of the lapels of his suit jacket.

“Notice my sadistic cape and its murderous shape, shiny as a halter. See how it’s draped, dropped, socked, and locked at the pocket. My pants make their entrance from my waist, wide as a boulevard, cruising down thirty-one inches to a knee that narrows politely to a twelve-inch cuff, making it necessary for me to grease my Garbos to slip ’em on. As for the flashy color of my zoot suit, the rainbow was my guide.”

Applause greeted Wardell’s butter-smooth way with words, and Anna could tell Danny’s spirits were lifted by the zoot suit routine. But the music that made their feet frisky on the floor of the Savoy was about to be stopped in its tracks. Without warning, in the spring of 1943, the police were ordered by the government to temporarily padlock the doors of the Savoy. Anna, Danny, Wardell, and Sylvia were among the angry crowd on the sidewalk in the front of the ballroom who heard it was closed because several servicemen had contracted venereal disease from women they met there.

“Do you think it’s true?” Anna asked.

“Shhiit!” Wardell hissed. “The only ‘VD’ those servicemen might’ve caught up here was of the ‘very dark’ variety.”

“You got that right!” Sylvia chimed in.

“But even if the government was really worried about ‘VD,’” Anna said, “I don’t ever remember seeing any G.I.’s trying to pick up colored girls.”

Anna thought she had given an example of the government looking for fire where there wasn’t even smoke. But she saw Danny drop his head, Wardell raise his, and Sylvia smile in her direction, which was hardly a welcome.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure I get your point, Anna,” Sylvia said. “Are you saying, since you never see white soldiers sniffing after colored girls, it doesn’t happen?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Maybe you were thinking it and that’s why it came out the way it did.”

Sylvia’s words had the sting of a slap in the face. Anna opened her mouth but could barely get the words out.

“I wasn’t thinking that!”

“Well, if you weren’t thinking it, that’s even worse!”

“Let it go, Sylvia,” Wardell said.

“Excuse me, Wardell. But we’re not on the dance floor