African American Theatre and Performance
Prof. Robin Bernstein

African and African American Studies 120x
Harvard University, Fall 2013
Mondays and Wednesdays, 11am-noon
Barker Center, Room 211

Prof. Bernstein’s email: <rbernst@fas.harvard.edu>
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Course website:
http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k96416&login=yes

This course investigates the history of African American theatre and performance from the antebellum era through the Depression—with an occasional leap into the present. Our goal is not to complete a comprehensive survey but instead to learn through deep engagement with local resources, particularly archival resources at Harvard and live theatrical events in Boston. Our class follows an unusual format: in a typical week, we meet on Monday in an ordinary classroom and on Wednesday in Houghton Library to work hands-on with archival materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection. We will dig into original manuscripts, letters, photographs, programs, sheet music, and other rare items. Students will not only gain broad knowledge of the history of African American theatre but will also develop skills and confidence in archival research.

Our orientation toward local resources extends beyond our archival work. We will consider performance itself as a resource—one that African Americans have historically used and continue to use to create art and politics and to shape everyday life. Performance is a form of self-expression but it is also a means by which African Americans have generated and transmitted political analysis, shared knowledge and wisdom, organized communities, and galvanized resistance. Performance has been an especially useful resource to African Americans because of a unique quality of live theatre: it is both supremely local and persistently transnational. Live theatre is local in that it only exists as an immediate, embodied presence (unlike, say, film), but it is also transnational in that actors have historically traveled, often over great distances, to earn their livings. Through these travels, African American performers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became cosmopolitan subjects—sophisticated cultural agents who shaped the modern world.
Assignments and requirements:

Archival presentation (varying dates) 25%
Mid-semester paper, due Friday, October 17, 3pm 10%
Attendance at Splendor, November 1 or approved alternative evening (graded full credit/no credit) 5%
Proposal for final paper, due November 18 (graded full credit/no credit) 5%
Final Paper, due Wednesday, December 11, 3pm 30%
Thoughtful, engaged, and respectful classroom participation 25%

General information:

All books are on reserve at Lamont Library and for sale at the Harvard Coop.
Each student will co-lead one archival session with materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection. This assignment entails working in advance with curators to select relevant primary documents for the class to examine, familiarizing yourself with context that is necessary to understand the documents, sharing this knowledge formally with your colleagues, and leading the class’s engagement with the materials.

Each student will complete a substantial final paper that relates clearly to the topics, ideas, or materials in this course. Undergraduates’ papers should run 15 pages; graduate students’ papers should run 20-25 pages.

Late assignments will be docked one third of a letter grade for each day or partial day overdue. Please note that failure to complete any assignment can lower your final grade in excess of the stated percentage.

Each student will receive a free ticket to the play Splendor by Kirsten Greenidge. Attendance is required. If you know you will be unable to attend with the rest of the class on Friday, November 1, please alert the professor as soon as possible and a ticket for the show on an alternative date will be provided for you.

Professor Bernstein holds office hours on Mondays from 3:15-5pm. You are welcome to drop in, but students with appointments receive priority. You may reserve time online at http://wgs.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k53419&pageid=icb.page449095. If you have class during office hours, please email Professor Bernstein at <rbernst@fas.harvard.edu> to make alternative arrangements.

With a student’s consent, meetings during office hours will be “walking meetings.” The professor and student will talk while strolling around campus. Any student may opt for a traditional, “sitting meeting” instead. If you opt for a sitting meeting, you need not offer any explanation, and no questions will be asked. We will, of course, stay inside during inclement weather. For more information about the intellectual and health benefits of walking meetings,

Any student needing academic adjustments or accommodations should present a letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor as soon as possible. All discussions will remain confidential, although AEO may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation.

This course adheres to Harvard University policy on permitted collaboration, which reads as follows:

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in this discipline and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work. If you received any help with your writing (feedback on drafts, etc), you must also acknowledge this assistance.

**Required Books** (all on reserve at Lamont Library and for sale at the Harvard Coop):


SCHEDULE

Wednesday, September 4. Introductions

Monday, September 9. Defining Black Theatre


Wednesday, September 11: Introduction to the Harvard Theatre Collection

- Meet at Houghton Library to work with materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection!
  - Please note the following rules for the Houghton Library:
    * No food or drink is permitted in the Library and all bags, knapsacks, folders and other containers must be placed in lockers. Lockers require quarters to operate, but you will receive your quarter back when leaving.
    * Students and faculty should bring as little as possible to the Seminar Room itself. Laptop computers are welcome; pencils and paper for note-taking are provided. The lobby guard must inspect all items that seminar participants bring in and out of the Seminar Room.
    * All classes will be introduced briefly to the repository and provided with basic handling instructions.
    * The material will be arranged on the Seminar Room table or in a display case. Students can circulate around the table to examine the material closely but books and manuscripts may not be passed from hand to hand.
    * Equipment (such as scanners or light sources) that rests directly on collection material is not permitted.
- Before class, please view “Handling Harvard’s Special Collections,” a 4-minute video online at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOv0SOQ8B68&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOv0SOQ8B68&feature=youtu.be)
Monday, September 16. Ira Aldridge and His Milieu

Wednesday, September 18. Ira Aldridge and His Milieu
- Meet at Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, September 23. Resistant Performances in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

Wednesday, September 25. Resistant Performances in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century
- Meet at Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, September 30. Black Women and Modernism

Wednesday, October 2. Black Women and Modernism
- Meet at Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, October 7. Early Black Broadway: *In Dahomey*
• Daphne Brooks, “Alien/Nation: Re-Imagining the Black Body (Politic) In Williams and Walker’s In Dahomey,” in Brooks, Bodies in Dissent, pp. 207-280.


• Guest speaker: Monica White Ndounou, Assistant Professor of Drama and Dance, Tufts University <http://ase.tufts.edu/drama-dance/faculty/facultyNdounou.asp>

Wednesday, October 9. Early Black Broadway: In Dahomey
• Meet at Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, October 14. NO CLASS—COLUMBUS DAY

Wednesday, October 16. Escape and Freedom

• After class, we will visit a Harvard building that contains a secret room that some believe connects to the Underground Railroad. If possible, please arrange so you can spend about half an hour after class ends to participate in this visit.

FRIDAY, October 17, 3pm: Mid-semester paper due to Prof. Bernstein’s mailbox in the Department of African and African American Studies, Barker Center.

Monday, October 21. Slavery, the Gaze, and Performance

Wednesday, October 23. Slavery, the Gaze, and Performance
• Meet at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 11 Divinity Avenue, Collections Viewing Room B 8 (basement), for hands-on engagement with primary materials! We will work with Ilisa Barbash, Associate Curator of Visual Anthropology, and Pat Kervick, Archivist.
Monday, October 28. Living with Lynching


Wednesday, October 30. Living with Lynching


FRIDAY, November 1: Class visit to *Splendor*, by Kirsten Greenidge, directed by Shawn LaCount, Boston Center for the Arts, Plaza Theatre, 539 Tremont Street, 8pm. See [http://www.companyone.org/Season15/current_season_shows.shtml#Splendor](http://www.companyone.org/Season15/current_season_shows.shtml#Splendor)

Monday, November 4. Plays and Playwrights

- Guest speaker: Kirsten Greenidge!
- Megan Tench, “A Place on Stage for the Quirky: Kirsten Greenidge Aims to Broaden What Counts as Black Drama,” *Boston Globe* 16 March 2008. Access online at <http://www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2008/03/15/a_place_on_stage_for_the_quirky/?page=full>
- [http://newdramatists.org/kirsten-greenidge](http://newdramatists.org/kirsten-greenidge)

Wednesday, November 6. Plays and Playwrights


Monday, November 11. Josephine Baker


Wednesday, November 13.

- Meet at Houghton Library for hands-on engagement with primary materials!
Monday, November 18. **Proposals for final papers due at the beginning of class. Please bring FIVE copies of your proposal.** You will share your proposal with your colleagues in class.

Wednesday, November 20. Coming Attractions: E. Patrick Johnson’s *Sweet Tea*

- Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, “Re-Presenting Blackness” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 32.3 (July 2012): 254-258
- Please note that E. Patrick Johnson will perform *Sweet Tea* at Harvard on Saturday, February 1, 2014 at 8pm in the Adams Pool Theatre. *Johnson is retiring this show; after 2014 he will never again perform it.* So please mark your calendars now!

Monday, November 25. (Re)Defining Black Theatre

- RECOMMENDED: the rest of this issue of *Theatre Journal*.

Wednesday, November 27. NO CLASS—THANKSGIVING BREAK

Monday, December 2. (Re)Defining Black Theatre


Wednesday, December 4. Wrap-up and discussion of final papers.

**WEDNESDAY, December 11, 3pm: Final papers due** to Prof. Bernstein’s mailbox in the Department of African and African American Studies, Barker Center.

*Enjoy your break!*