

# A History Of African American Theatre



WILLIAM & MARY'S TWENTY-SECOND TACK LECTURE

A HISTORY OF

## AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE & BLACK THEATER



AT WILLIAM & MARY

MAR  
**06**  
7PM



**Phi Beta Kappa  
Memorial Hall**  
Glenn Close Theatre

Reserve at [wm.edu/lecture](http://wm.edu/lecture)  
#wmTackLecture





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WILLIAM & MARY  
CHARTERED 1693

**A history of African American theatre** is a rich tapestry woven through centuries of struggle, creativity, and cultural expression. It reflects the broader narrative of African American life in the United States, from the days of slavery to the contemporary stage. This article will explore the evolution of African American theatre, highlighting key periods, influential figures, and significant works that have shaped its development.

# **The Beginnings of African American Theatre**

The roots of African American theatre can be traced back to the early 19th century, during a time when African Americans were largely denied the opportunities to express themselves artistically. However, even in the face of oppression, they found ways to entertain and communicate their stories.

## **The Minstrel Shows**

One of the earliest forms of entertainment that involved African American themes was the minstrel show, which began in the early 1800s. These performances, often characterized by white performers in blackface, perpetuated racial stereotypes and caricatures. Despite their problematic nature, minstrel shows provided a platform for African American performers to showcase their talents.

- Notable figures in the minstrel genre included:
- Jim Crow: A character created by performer Thomas Dartmouth Rice, which became synonymous with racial segregation.
- Bert Williams: An African American comedian and actor who gained fame in the minstrel era and later broke barriers on Broadway.

While minstrel shows were exploitative, they also paved the way for African American artists to enter the theatrical world.

## **The Birth of African American Theatre Companies**

As the 19th century progressed, African Americans began to establish their own theatre companies, creating spaces for authentic representation and storytelling.