This course investigates the history of African American theatre and performance from the antebellum era through the Depression—with an occasional hop 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. Our class follows an unusual format: in a typical week, we meet on Monday in an ordinary classroom and on Wednesday in the 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 performance 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 19, 3pm 10%
Proposal for final paper, due Wednesday, Nov. 14 (graded full credit/no credit) 5%
Final Paper, due Monday, December 17 35%
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 session at 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.
If you need reasonable accommodations for a disability, please let Professor Bernstein know as soon as possible.
Professor Bernstein holds office hours from 2-3pm every Wednesday and 3-5pm every Tuesday (except when Harvard holds a faculty meeting, in which case Prof. Bernstein holds office hours from 3-4pm). 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> to make alternative arrangements.

SCHEDULE

Wednesday, September 5. Introductions

Monday, September 10. Defining Black Theatre

Wednesday, September 12: Introduction to the Harvard Theatre Collection
• Meet at Houghton Library! Please note: you will not be able to bring any personal belongings into the Houghton.

Monday, September 17. Leap into the Present: Hiphop Performance
• Guided tour of the Hiphop Archive! Meet at the Hiphop Archive in the Du Bois Institute, 104 Mount Auburn Street, 3R: http://hiphoparchive.org/

Wednesday, September 19 Queer Hiphop
• Guests: C. Riley Snorton and Scott Poulson Bryant
• Readings TBA

FRIDAY, September 21: The Queerness of Hip Hop/The Hip Hop of Queerness Symposium!

Monday, September 24. Back to the Nineteenth Century: Ira Aldridge and His Milieu
• Ira Aldridge, *The Black Doctor* (1847). Access through Hollis databases Literature Online or Black Drama.

Wednesday, September 26. Ira Aldridge and His Milieu
• Meet at Houghton for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, October 1. The Late Nineteenth Century

Wednesday, October 3
• Meet at Houghton for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, October 8: NO CLASS, Columbus Day

Wednesday, October 10. Key African American Plays I
• William Wells Brown, The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom, 1858. Access through Hollis database Black Drama.
• Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad, 1879. Access through Hollis database Black Drama.

Monday, October 15. Photographic Performance

Wednesday, October 17
• Meet at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 11 Divinity Avenue, for hands-on engagement with primary materials! We will work with Ilisa Barbash, Associate Curator of Visual Anthropology.

FRIDAY, October 19, 3pm: Mid-semester paper due to Prof. Bernstein’s mailbox in the Department of African and African American Studies, Barker Center.

Monday, October 22. Key African American Plays II
• Paul Laurence Dunbar, In Dahomey, 1902. Access through Hollis database Black Drama.
• 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.
Wednesday, October 24
• Meet at Houghton for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, October 29. Black Women and Modernism
• Guest: Jayna Brown

Wednesday, October 31
• Meet at Houghton for hands-on engagement with primary materials!
• Guest: Jayna Brown

Monday, November 5. Josephine Baker

Wednesday, November 7
• Meet at Houghton for hands-on engagement with primary materials!

Monday, November 12: Leap to the Present: The Jazz Aesthetic
• Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Lisa L. Moore, and Sharon Bridgforth, Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: Art, Activism, Academia, and the Austin Project (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010)
• Guest: Sharon Bridgforth
Wednesday, November 14
• Proposal for final paper due! Please bring FOUR copies of your proposal to class. You will divide into groups to read and discuss each other’s proposals.

Monday, November 19. Key African American Plays III

Wednesday, November 21: NO CLASS, Thanksgiving Break

Monday, November 26. Redefining Black Theatre
• RECOMMENDED: the rest of this issue of *Theatre Journal*.

Wednesday, November 28.

Monday, December 3. Wrap-up and discussion of final papers.

**MONDAY, December 17, 3pm:** Final papers due to Prof. Bernstein’s mailbox in the Department of African and African American Studies, Barker Center.

*Enjoy your break!*