

Course Proposal

Theatres of the African Diaspora

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Course level: undergraduate upper-division

Envisioned enrollment: 15-20 students

Catalogue description:

Theatre has been practiced in Africa since before recorded history and taken a variety of performative forms: storytelling, masking, puppetry, music, and dance among them. This course introduces these traditional forms and traces their influence across the globe as they were spread and hybridized through the African diaspora. Studying not only traditional forms but also playscripts written by Africans and African-Americans in various countries, this course examines the lasting legacy of African performance across Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the U.S.

Course format:

This course, designed to form a part of a proposed new Africana Studies curriculum at Utica College, introduces Africana Studies students to the performing arts aspects of diaspora history and Theatre students to the lasting impact that African performance traditions have had on theatre as we know it today. Bringing these two groups of students together, the course focuses thematically on the changes to art and performance effected by the attempted cultural genocide of the transatlantic slave trade (the hybridization, retention, and erasure of different performance forms), and the use of performing arts as a tool in the construction and dismantling of racism. Focusing on a different tradition (and an accompanying play which utilizes it) each week, students will trace lines of influence across national borders through a combination of writing and performance-based exercises that engage both critical thinking and embodied knowledge. Final projects will be partially designed by the students using their input, and will likely involve a performance aspect with audience involvement—a key legacy of African performance.

Selected plays (country) [tradition]:

Ana Maria Gonçalves, *Diverse* (Brazil) [hybridization]
Femi Osofisan, *Once Upon Four Robbers* (Nigeria) [audience participation]
Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play* (U.S.A.) [blackface/whiteface/facepaint]
Sistren Theatre Collective, *QPH* (Jamaica) [ritual]
Efua Southerland, *The Marriage of Anansewa* (Ghana) [storytelling]
Wole Soyinka, *The Swamp Dwellers* (Nigeria) [masking]
Jane Taylor, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (South Africa) [puppetry]
Derek Walcott, *Pantomime* (Trinidad) [signifyin']
August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (U.S.A.) [music]