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# **White People Do Not Know How To Behave At Entertainments Designed For Ladies And Gentlemen Of Colour: William Brown's African And American Theater**





## Synopsis

In August 1821, William Brown, a free man of color and a retired ship's steward, opened a pleasure garden on Manhattan's West Side. It catered to black New Yorkers, who were barred admittance to whites-only venues offering drama, music, and refreshment. Over the following two years, Brown expanded his enterprises, founding a series of theaters that featured African Americans playing a range of roles unprecedented on the American stage and that drew increasingly integrated audiences. Marvin McAllister explores Brown's pioneering career and reveals how each of Brown's ventures--the African Grove, the Minor Theatre, the American Theatre, and the African Company--explicitly cultivated an intercultural, multiracial environment. He also investigates the negative white reactions, verbal and physical, that led to Brown's managerial retirement in 1823. Brown left his mark on American theater by shaping the careers of his performers and creating new genres of performance. Beyond that legacy, says McAllister, this nearly forgotten theatrical innovator offered a blueprint for a truly inclusive national theater.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"McAllister paints a three-dimensional portrait of Brown as both a man ahead of his time and a man trapped in a warped time machine where preoccupation with unruly white spectators, conniving white business competitors, and a corrupt legal system significantly prevent his theater from taking root and flourishing." McAllister paints a three-dimensional portrait of William Brown as both a man ahead of his time and a man trapped in a warped time machine where preoccupation with unruly

white spectators, conniving white business competitors, and a corrupt legal system significantly prevent his theater from taking root and flourishing. (Sandra G. Shannon, author of "The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson")

A book that offers the most comprehensive and detailed history to date of William Brown's attempts to establish a commercial theater for African American actors in the early nineteenth century.--American Literature Every now and then, scholars set out to do more than they should--and succeed. . . . [An] important institutional moment in the history of American performance.--Journal of American History McAllister has presented a provocative interpretation of Brown's theater management career. He has taken what seems to be fragmentary historical evidence and has woven it together within an interpretive framework of cultural, literary, performance, and at times, feminist theory. . . . [He] has opened the door for others with an interest in the shaping of American cultural and racial identity.--Journal of African American History Relying upon the scholarship of numerous theater historians and critics, McAllister paints a three-dimensional portrait of William Brown as both a man ahead of his time and a man trapped in a warped time machine where preoccupation with unruly white spectators, conniving white business competitors, and a corrupt legal system significantly prevent his theater from taking root and flourishing.--Sandra G. Shannon, Howard University New and recommended.--Black Issues Book Review A surprisingly thoughtful book. It is a comprehensive study that takes us to the epicenter of African-American theatre.--American Theatre McAllister's book is the first to give Brown and the African Grove Company the in-depth, critical investigation that this much noted period in African American theater history has so sorely needed for so long. While others have cited Brown as a pioneer, McAllister provides him and his theatrical endeavors with more body and substance in an insightful work that is thoroughly researched and richly detailed. McAllister provocatively and effectively argues that Brown's African Company was not only a groundbreaking moment in black theater but an early adventure in diversity that embraced this country's multiethnic potential and as such was a truly American theater. Bold and engaging, this important book fills a void in American theater history.--Harry Elam, Stanford University

The book is a historical account of one of the first theaters to feature primarily actors of African descent in America. It seems like a book that would be of great utility to university's theater history program and African American history. This book chronicles the introduction of William Brown and his theatrical endeavors, from pleasure garden to Minor Theater, to American Theater. This is done

somewhat oddly, not by a William Brown autobiography, but of various first sources in many cases that were meant to disparage the reputation of a reputable, interracial, multiethnic theater in the 1820s. Remarkable mentions. The fact that Brown's theater, had interracial, multi-ethnic (African American, White American, American Indian), multi-social strata seating is truly remarkable for the time. An integrated theater in the 1820s, was a social experiment cut short as we can see from the title and history; white mob destroyed the theater and disrobed the actors. This was part pure bigotry and part racist (bigotry with economic motive or maleffect) from a rival theater, Park Theatre. Most of the interesting things that are written are done so as an aside; blacks were able to vote in New York in early 1800s, but couldn't hold an office, Brown retired in 1800 and got an apartment in the predominately white West side area of Manhattan before starting the pleasure garden, Ira Aldridge was a protege of Brown, the evolution of the meaning of black face minstrelsy and its connection with circus performers and a tool of white supremists, the transition of theatre from being common to elitist/privileged and only certain persons doing what was viewed as available to everyone now restricted (Shakespeare) to Brits to perform. The text is very rich in describing Black culture in Manhattan at the time and the relation of Irish Americans to African Americans. These little nuggets I found very rewarding; reading about the dandy's and them blocking the sidewalks and not acquiescing to Whites on this particular day, and Thanksgiving day (Jan 1.), finding out about Black philanthropy and fundraisers during that time by Blacks for Greeks who were being oppressed by Turks. This just provides a fuller picture of Black life in America when others were in slavery and suffering certain hardships, there were other freemen trying to make the American dream a reality rather than hypocrisy. It can get a little dry at times, but in all it is a great resource! Very inspiring to see what others were able to do in the midst of quasi-rights and blatant racism.

This is really an invaluable book. I didn't care that it was used.

This work is an absolutely fascinating treatment of an obscure period of American history, interweaving dimensions of the American story that deserve a stronger voice. It is all here: entrepreneurship, law, emerging national identity, culture, economics, politics, and of course, the tensions of race relations. This book deserves a wider audience, for far too much of our understanding of race relations in the United States is shaped by the Civil Rights Era, and the intervention of the Federal Government in states rights. Marvin McAllister's "White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African and American Theater" tells our story from an entirely different perspective that is

forgotten and overshadowed. In the 1820s The United States was still emerging as a nation (1776 was less than 50 years earlier) and entrepreneurs of any color had opportunities unprecedented in history. William Brown was a man of vision who rose to success with enterprise, financial acumen, determination, and savvy marketing skills. He saw an opportunity and delivered a service that had great demand. McAllister does not flinch from the ultimate decline of Brown's business, sadly driven by attracting attention because of its success, and brutally unfair treatment motivated by abhorrent base racism. The tone of the book is neither an apologist for the times, Brown, his patrons and associates, or his detractors. Rather, it tells the story straightforwardly. Of course, the result is sad, but this is our history, and we must face it honestly. A wonderful book that tells American history in the way it should be taught, as the events of individuals and their efforts rather than a survey of zeitgeist. Highly recommended.

(...). If you actually read the book then you would realize that the title was actually on a sign at William Brown's theater, a theater created for blacks in a time when we were not allowed admittance to musical or dramatic performances. It also allowed black performers to develop their art and show that we were not just silly "minstrels" or clowns. I am very proud to have the William Brown Theater as a part of my African American heritage!

This is a racist text. Very little is going on here except typical racist rhetoric against european-americans. Not worth a read and certainly out of place in a time when everyone is being told to be multi-cultural.

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