black theatre,

in the United States, dramatic movement encompassing plays written by, for, and about blacks. The minstrel shows of the early 19th century are believed by some to be the roots of black theatre, but they initially were written by whites, acted by whites in blackface, and performed for white audiences. After the American Civil War, blacks began to perform in minstrel shows, and by the turn of the century they were producing black musicals, many of which were written, produced, and acted entirely by blacks. The first known play by an American black was James Brown's King Shotaway (1823). William Wells Brown's Escape, or a Leap for Freedom (1858), was the first black play published, but the first real success of a black dramatist was Angelina W. Grimké's Rachel (1916).

Black theatre flourished during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s. Experimental groups and black theatre companies emerged in Chicago, New York City, and Washington, D.C. Among these was the Ethiopian Art Theatre, which established Paul Robeson as America's foremost black actor. Garland Anderson's play Appearances (1925) was the first play of black authorship to be produced on Broadway, but black theatre did not create a Broadway hit until Langston Hughes's Mulatto (1935) won wide acclaim. In that same year the Federal Theater Project was founded, providing a training ground for blacks. In the late 1930s, black community theatres began to appear, revealing talents such as those of Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. By 1940 black theatre was firmly grounded in the American Negro Theater and the Negro Playwrights' Company.

After World War II black theatre grew more progressive, more radical, and more militant, reflecting the ideals of black revolution and seeking to establish a mythology and symbolism apart from white culture. Councils were organized to abolish the use of racial stereotypes in theatre and to integrate black playwrights into the mainstream of American dramaturgy. Lorraine Hansberry's Raisin in the Sun (1959) and other successful black plays of the 1950s portrayed the difficulty of blacks maintaining an identity in a society that degraded them.

The 1960s saw the emergence of a new black theatre, angrier and more defiant than its predecessors, with Imamu Amiri Baraka (originally LeRoi Jones) as its strongest proponent. Baraka's plays, including the award-winning Dutchman (1964), depicted whites' exploitation of blacks. He established the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem in 1965 and inspired playwright Ed Bullins and others seeking to create a strong "black aesthetic" in American theatre. The powerful and prolific dramatist August Wilson was the most important creator of black theatre in the 1980s.