

**ANITA
BUSH
GIVENS**
1883-1974



**HISTORIC
BLACK
REPERTORY
COMPANY**

Anita Bush founded the Anita Bush All-Colored Dramatic Stock Company, a pioneering black repertory company that helped her gain the moniker “The Little Mother of Colored Drama”. She wanted to prove that blacks were capable of taking on serious, dramatic roles. Her film career brought her to Boley to act in “race films”.

She was born in September 1883 in Washington D. C. and soon moved to Brooklyn so her father, a master tailor, could become a theatrical costumer for professional white actors. As Anita delivered wardrobes to them, she experienced serious theater firsthand. While father and daughter were working at the Bijou Theater, she saw the black Williams and Walker Company perform on the stage. After getting her father’s permission to audition for the group at seventeen, she became a dancer touring the world with the company.

After a brief marriage in 1907 to John Givens, her dancing career was abruptly halted when a ladder fell on her back one night in the dimly-lit backstage of a theater. Frustrated after a year of recuperation, Bush decided to attend a 1915 play at the Lincoln Theater, one of two black theaters in Harlem. The theater had recently been beautifully refurbished but there were few people in the audience since vaudeville was dying as movies took over.

After the play, she went backstage and told manager Marie Downs, a wealthy Cuban entrepreneur, she had a dramatic stock company to hire out to the theater if she was interested. Bush guaranteed that she could assemble a production within two weeks – even though she didn’t have a company! Downs was interested so Bush promised to bring actors to meet Downs on Monday – even though it was Saturday afternoon. She immediately went out on the street and grabbed any warm body passing by whom she thought had any kind of talent. By Monday, these actors became the core of the Bush Players. The actors included Dooley Wilson, who later appeared in “Casablanca”. For the next six weeks, the company performed a different play every two weeks.

As they grew more successful over the next two years, Downs wanted to change their name to the Lincoln Players, but Bush refused – and moved her company to the Lafayette Theater, the other black theater. She later sold her company to Lafayette Theater management, who changed their name to the Lafayette Players, becoming one of the best-known black dramatic stock companies in America until 1932.

Bush left the group in 1920 to pursue a career in movies when Jacksonville, Florida movie director Richard Norman saw her in a Broadway play and cast her in a race film opposite rodeo sensation Bill Pickett. The Norman Studios was among the first white film companies to produce “race films”, films with positive, family-friendly storylines starring African-American characters in non-stereotypical roles. These films had been originated by early black filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux.

Pickett invented the rodeo style of bull-dogging, used to wrestle cattle. Norman was so sure that Pickett and Bush would be stars in Pickett’s first movie *The Bull Dogger*, he also cast Bush in his second movie *The Crimson Skull* with Pickett and Lawrence Chenault, a popular race film star and Lafayette Players veteran. Both movies were filmed simultaneously in 1921 in Boley, Oklahoma, the all-black town chosen perhaps for its fame as the location of rodeos for African-American cowboys. Norman used dozens of local black cowboys as extras. Though a beautiful and accomplished stage actress, Bush would star in just two movies – both for Norman.

The plot for the first all-black Western film was unique for the time. To rid the range of an outlaw gang called Skull and his Terrors that rustled cattle and robbed banks and stagecoaches, cowhand Bob Calem, who was in love with the sheriff’s beautiful daughter Anita, infiltrated the gang by donning a skeleton costume to strike fear into the gang-leader’s superstitions. The film is considered lost, but press books and props still exist.

During the 1930s and 1940s Bush appeared in productions by the WPA and taught acting at the Harlem YMCA. For many years she was the executive secretary of the Negro Actors Guild, retiring in 1943. In 1972, she made an audio recording (<https://transcription.si.edu/project/51185>) about her life experiences. Bush died in February 1974 at age 90 in Bronx, New York.