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Henrietta Vinton Davis

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Davis, Henrietta Vinton (b. Baltimore, Maryland, 25 August 1860; d. Washington, DC, 23 November 1941). US actress. Known as one of the brightest stars of the nineteenth-century American stage, Davis began her training in elocution in the early 1880s, while working as a copyist in the Washington, DC office of the Recorder of Deeds, where Frederick Douglass was appointed Recorder of Deeds in 1881. She sought further training at the Boston School of Oratory and debuted as an elocutionist in Washington, DC in 1883, introduced by Frederick Douglass. The *Washington Bee* reported: 'she became a queen of the stage . . . she will in due season become our star on the stage of tragedy and the drama'.

As a result of limited performance opportunities for African Americans, her performances often comprised classical speeches, monologues, and scenes. Though she performed for more than thirty years, Davis only appeared in four full-length productions, all of which she helped to direct or produce. The first was Astor Place Company's 1884 New York production of John Banim's *Damon and Pythias*. In Chicago in 1893 Davis directed and performed in a production of William Easton's play *Dessalines*, about the black emperor of Haiti, a show produced to protest against the exclusion of African Americans from participating in presentations at the World's Columbian Exhibition. In 1912 she staged and performed in another of Easton's works about the Haitian king, *Henri Christophe*. She also co-wrote, with John Edward Bruce, and staged *Our Old Kentucky Home* (1898), a Civil War drama.

Davis also served as a spokesperson and advocate for the United Negro Improvement Association founded by Marcus Garvey, travelling to the Caribbean and Africa on its behalf.