Facing racism in America through An Octoroon

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Painting on a white face and slipping on a wig, BJJ (Matthew Hancock) transforms himself from a present-day Black playwright to a plantation owner from 1859. Gliding and grooving to none other than Megan Thee Stallion, he takes the audience into a play within a play.

An Octoroon by Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins is a reimagining of Dion Boucicault's mid-19th century play, *The Octoroon* that intentionally uses make-up and narrative flips to critique racial stereotypes in the media. The leading man, BJJ, is not here to just press play and give you a show.

He's here to make us feel something.

Once some of the play's leading characters paint on a mask that alters their race, each word is meant to hit harder, stronger, and pierce through the years it jumps. However, the Fountain Theatre's production of the play falls short on building up to those words that punch and lead to the sensational drop of act four that is meant to haunt. Instead, the tempo of the play easily slips through the fingers of those trying to feel that something.

In *An Octoroon,* BJJ guides the audience through a play he's writing and rewriting as he takes on the role of George, the nephew of Judge Peyton who died and left him the heir to plantation Terrebonne. Upon arrival, he falls for Zoe, the character behind the title who is one-eighth Black. She and M'Closky, George's rival, pull him in each and every direction. Dido (Kacie Rogers), Grace (Leea Ayers), and Minnie (Pam Trotter), those enslaved on the plantation, observe and share how the mishaps of the white and wealthy impact their lives.

The production has a strong introduction to the world of BJJ and his play. Hancock embraces the outdoor setting of the Fountain Theatre's parking lot-turned-stage, pulling people in with each word. Arguments with the playwright (Rob Nagle) lighten up the stage before it is transformed into 1950s Louisiana.

Once we jump to the past and explore the world of the Peytons, the show slows down. Judith Moreland's direction is strong in making use of the stage and the new environment but spends too much time playing with the audience to knit each character's actions and words into a backdrop that portrays Jacobs-Jenkins' critiques in full view. Zoe in particular struggles to decide whether to share her words with the audience or the other characters, causing the tempo to fumble. The direction is overly playful, so much so that a punch to Dido only feels like a punch and less like a reverberating echo that would prepare the audience for each gut-wrenching truth Jacobs-Jenkins writes.

Despite some of the overly exaggerated quips between characters and audience members, there are still sharp and poignant moments that keep the play's critiques alive. The relationship between Minnie and Dido is comical and heartwarming as they badger each other and gossip about their mutual hate for Grace while still offering space for a loving friendship.

Leea Ayers, who plays both Grace and Br'er Rabbit, is a master of movement. Even when she has no lines, her presence takes up the stage. As Br'er Rabbit, a character that nods to a prominent figure in African American folklore, Ayers peeks into the story and plays tricks of her own on the characters. She even takes selfies with the audience. The character backs up from the story for a much-needed reflective pause and then continues to narrow in on the play through her silent hijinks across the set.

The set itself takes advantage of the outdoor space. Frederica Nascimento's scenic design makes use of mixed pieces of furniture and doors to create every part of the plantation. Together with the video design of Nicholas E. Santiago, the set uses screens placed in places you least expect to move the scene from outdoors to indoors. It even helped contextualize the critiques of racial stereotypes by providing examples that resound past what is already seen on stage.

Knowing the in-person, outdoor show would welcome the world we live in today—full of cars, alarms, and running children—there were anticipated concerns of interruptions. Luckily, the inaugural use of the outdoor stage added a level of theatricality to the story. Nagle smartly incorporated alarms into the world. The trick was knowing when the nod to the outside amplified the story or brought us back to 2021.

"An Octoroon" staged today allows larger questions to arise. Many may point to the Black Lives Matter marches that erupted across the nation after George Floyd's and Breonna Taylor's deaths. But it's nothing new. The wrongful death and abuse of the Black community

in America resound for years. The critiques of “An Octoroon”shouldn’t just be important this year. It was important before, at and after its conecpetion, and will continue to for years to come afterward.

The “sensation” of Act Four speaks to the importance of looking at racism in America critically. Although the direction slipped in building up to the act, the silence that resounds in the act’s performance still halts the breath of those who witness it.

“The point of this whole thing was to make you feel something,” the assistant says.

It’s safe to say that the racial tensions and stereotypes displayed did boil up the sensation Jacobs-Jenkins intended.

“An Octoroon” runs now until Sept. 19 at The Fountain Theatre. For more information, click here.