

BWW Interview: The Versatile Matthew Hancock Inhabits Many Characters - Just in AN OCTOROON

 broadwayworld.com

by Gil Kaan

June 10, 2021

The Fountain Theatre will inaugurate their new outdoor stage with Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' 2014 Obie Award-winning *AN OCTOROON*, with previews beginning June 11, 2021. Judith Moreland directs the cast of Leea Ayers, **Matthew Hancock**, Mara Klein, Hazel Lozano, Rob Nagle, Kacie Rogers, Vanessa Claire Stewart and Pam Trotter.

Between final rehearsals, Matthew, who plays the playwright's alter-ego among other characters, made some time to answer a few of my inquiries.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Matthew!

***AN OCTOROON* is not the first production you've done with the Fountain. You did *THE BROTHERS SIZE* in 2014, *I AND YOU* in 2015, and *BETWEEN RIVERSIDE AND CRAZY* in 2019. What is it about the Fountain that keeps you coming back to play there?**

Yes! I also did *HYPE MAN: A BREAK BEAT PLAY* in the spring of 2019. There are two reasons why I end up back at the Fountain. The plays they produce - I have had the opportunity to play some amazing, dynamic characters on the Fountain stage. And the people. It's been a creative home for me. The Fountain staff feel like extended family at this point. The relationships are effortless, and it just feels good to be there.

Skip Ad

What cosmic forces initially brought you together with *AN OCTOROON*? Your Fountain connections? Auditions?

The simple answer is, I emailed artistic director Stephen Sachs. The longer version of that is I had a connection with director Judith Moreland, as she was one of my producers earlier this year on The Road Theatre's production of *THIS BITTER EARTH*. But nothing is



guaranteed, and there was still a vetting process. I did have to read, and Judy and I had a several conversations about the play, the characters(s), and the approach to how we dive into a piece like this.

Have you ever worked with any of the cast or creatives before?

Yes, I got to work with Derrick McDaniel (lighting designer) and Nicholas Santiago (video designer) on ***THIS BITTER EARTH***, and, as stated before, Judy was one of the lead producers on that project. It's always a joy to reconnect with costume designer Naila Aladdin-Sanders; I've gotten to work with her many times throughout the years. This will be my first time collaborating with this stellar cast. But I had been a fan of Kacie Rogers and Rob Nagle from seeing them in productions around town. I am excited for the Fountain audiences to meet Pam Trotter, Vanessa Claire Stewart, Mara Klein, Hazel Lozano, and Leea Ayers (who is also from my hometown Columbus, OH and is also an alum of Fort Hayes Metropolitan Education Center).

For those not in the know, can you define what an "octoroon" is?

An Octoroon is a term used to define a person who is 1/8 black.

Had you seen a production of this Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' 2014 Obie Award winner for Best New American Play before?

I had not had the opportunity to see any production of this play before reading the script. But if I did, I am sure I'd have to see it more than once. This is truly one of those pieces where you will catch something different every time.



What would your three-line pitch of *AN OCTOROON* be?

A Black playwright is tasked with adapting a classic play set in the Antebellum South. All the white actors drop out. "*AN OCTOROON*, A Subversive Satirical Look at Ourselves" through the lens of the American theatre.



With more and more people becoming aware of/admitting to systemic racism, do you think theatre audiences today will be more, or less, receptive to a play depicting slavery, than the theatre audiences in 2014 when Branden wrote *AN OCTOROON*?

I think that a topic like slavery is always going to illicit very visceral responses. I think the difference now is we've seen so much. The world watched George Floyd take his last breath on camera. That changed us. And I think woke a lot of people who aren't Black, woke them up to the fact of how Black bodies are treated in this country. So I think people are more open to the conversation, they are more empathic. However, this play turns the concept of race and color on its head. And anytime, in this play, when you feel like you think you know what's going on, it takes a turn to remind you just how uncomfortable and dangerous this world is.

Have your initial rehearsals been on Zoom? Or in a safe common area?

We spent the first week on Zoom doing table work. Dr. Daphne Sicre, our dramaturg, gave us a wealth of information about the history of the play, the world and time period in which this play is set, as well as the melodramatic elements that are so integral to telling this story. We then moved on site to the outdoor stage where we've been rehearsing ever since. We are COVID-compliant with temperature checks, testing, sanitizing stations, and face masks while not on stage.



Are you excited to actually perform on stage with a live audience after all these quarantined months?

Excited, grateful, and overjoyed to be back in front of a live audience. There is nothing like being in front of a live audience. The energy, the immediate response, the communal nature of what we do was what was missing from my life in these pandemic times. And in theatre, the audience is the final element that brings what we do to life. Cannot wait!

You play three characters in *AN OCTOROON* - BJJ (a black playwright), George (the white heir to the Plantation Terrebonne and a photographer), and

M'Closky an evil white overseer who plots to buy Terrebonne and Zoe). Since *AN OCTOROON* was not taped to be streamed online, how do you physically navigate the costume changes between your three characters?



A part of the brilliance of this play is that the audience is a part of the story. We break the fourth wall almost immediately. So the audience will see me go from BJJ to the two white men that I play. We've worked out some fun quick changes between George and M'Closky.

The playwright's notes have different characters in blackface, whiteface and redface. Did you have any preliminary reservations in donning whiteface yourself?

Oddly enough, no. My senior capstone show at Adelphi University was Suzanne Lori Parks' *TOPDOG/UNDERDOG*. I played Lincoln, who enters the show dressed in his Abe Lincoln garb and whiteface. So one could say I've been here before.



You're submitting your three characters on a dating site. What personality traits of each would you list?

Ha ha! It is kind of terrifying to think of these characters on a dating website. For BJJ: intelligent, seeking spirit, good natured. For George: wistful, dreamer, and artist's heart. For M'Closky: aspirational, cunning, and cutthroat.

What personality flaws would you omit?

For BJJ, I would probably omit the mild depression he experiences. For George and M'Closky, I would maybe omit their racism. George is a racist, albeit a nicer racist than M'Closky. But nice racism and mean racism are still racist.

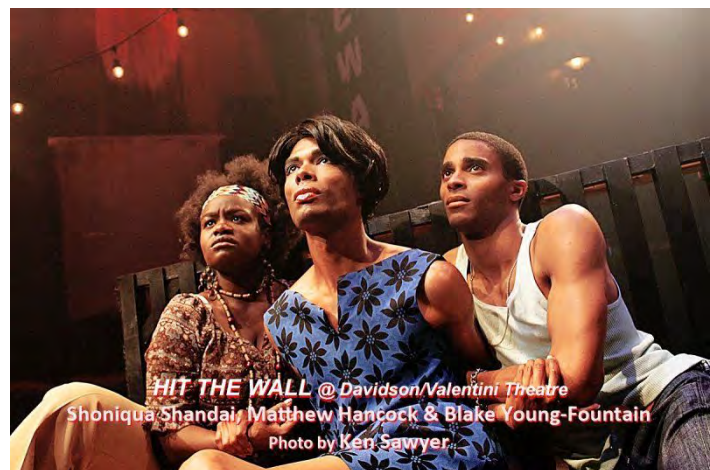
I saw two very powerful plays you were in over the years - *THE VIEW UPSTAIRS* at Celebration and *HIT THE WALL* at Los Angeles LGBT Center. What criteria do you look for before you involve yourself with a theatrical project?

Interesting, because I always feel like the projects choose me. I don't know if I have a criterion, but it definitely needs to challenge me in some way. Either challenging a preconceived notion or idea I had or have, or challenging my artist to master something new. Usually if I am nervous that's a good sign, I am on to something good. There's usually a certain level of risk that is involved when taking on a story. I find, as an artist if you push past that risk, there are some really special treasures/lessons/insights for you to take with you.



When you inhabit a drag persona onstage, do you have a particular diva you emulate?

No, it's usually a compilation of several. I've had the benefit of being surrounded by women my whole life. My mom is probably always in there somewhere. For Carson/Molly in *HIT THE WALL*, it was a combo of Judy Garland and Whitney Houston with a splash of Tina. But in something like Showtime's *I'm Dying Up Here*, the influence was very Foxy Brown. It all depends on what is being asked or the story being told, and also the wigs inform a lot for me.



What is your musical alter ego Michael Siren up to?

Recording!!! The pandemic had really slowed Michael Siren as we couldn't gather and perform live. They were last seen at Tramp Stamp Granny's in Hollywood. They're re-opening again once the restrictions are lifted, so I am sure there will be a resurrection of

Michael Siren live before the year is up.

**What's in the near future for
Matthew Hancock?**

Opening this Incredible play ***AN OCTOROON*** at The Fountain Theatre's outdoor stage. Also the pandemic-inspired romantic comedy film ***Distancing Socially*** starring Sarah Levy, Alan Tudyk, Jim O'Heir, and yours truly to name a few.

Thank you again, Matthew! I look forward to seeing you live in *AN OCTOROON*.

For tickets for the *LIVE* performances of ***AN OCTOROON*** through September 19, 2021; log onto www.FountainTheatre.com.

