

Donloe's Lowdown

 donloeslowdown.blogspot.com

The Fountain Theatre's 'An Octoroon,' Pushes The Boundaries

By Darlene Donloe

There is a lot to unpack in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins', *An Octoroon*, currently playing at The Fountain Theatre's outdoor stage through Sept 19.

The Fountain Theatre turned its parking lot into an outdoor venue complete with socially distanced seating and ticketless check-in. Masks were not required outside. The hot days have turned into perfect, warm nights at the theater.

The Obie Award-winning play, by Jacobs-Jenkins, a MacArthur Foundation 'Genius Grant' recipient, is the first production to be held at The Fountain Theatre since COVID-19 hit in March 2020. The show was originally scheduled for a summer 2020 run, but, of course, was rescheduled due to the pandemic.

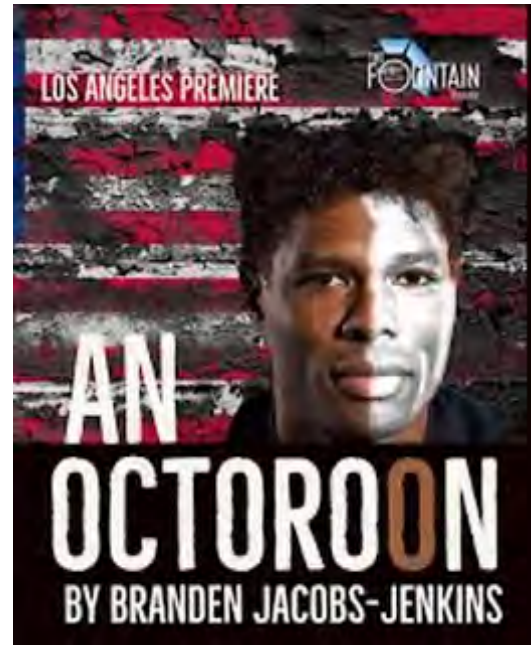
It has been described as radical, incendiary, and subversively funny. No lies detected there. But, it's so much more. I'd add controversial, thought-provoking, wicked, and smart.

Proponents and dissidents of Critical Race Theory will have a healthy and robust conversation after watching this shocking deconstruction of a mustache-twirling farce by 19th-century playwright Dion Boucicault.

It's interesting that the theater would choose a play with a heavy and sometimes controversial subject matter to open its new season. The gamble seems to have paid off.

Within the 2 hours and 30 minutes that is this postmodern, theatrical stunner, there are elements of humanity, slavery, decency, deceit, ownership, freedom, morals, love, and murder – all needing to be addressed, digested, understood, and unwrapped. There's a lot going on, but through Director Judith Moreland's steady hand, it all comes together.

The time and place is 1859 America, and, curiously America today.



Although the central theme of the play is about humanity and slavery on a plantation, located in a muggy swamp, its relevance is eerily on point post the Black Lives Matter movement and the George Floyd lynching.

Thankfully, Jacobs-Jenkins offers the audience a time to laugh at things that are clearly uncomfortable. In a mixed audience, it was interesting to watch white patrons quickly decide whether it was appropriate to laugh at something that is traditionally and historically painful to a specific ethnic group.

Thank goodness for the comedic elements in the show – which eased the tension of the reality being acted out on stage. The projected lynching of two Black men hanging from a tree, while in the foreground a crowd of white spectators smiles for the camera while pointing at the bodies, was a shocking moment in more ways than one. The audience didn't see it coming. A hush fell over the outdoor theater. You could have heard a pin drop. The audience became witnesses to something so atrocious, some chose to look away.

This show forces the audience to contemplate, question, and accept this nation's racist history, a notion we have found out is easier said than done.

The show opens with a modern-day Black playwright played brilliantly by Matthew Hancock, trying to work out some elements of a show. At one point he's in his therapist's office getting advice, or so he tells the audience. It's not revealed whether he really was seeking advice from a therapist or whether he was convincing himself to move forward. Either way, he proceeds to write an over-the-top tome, that brings him and the audience face-to-face with some hard truths.

The show is in your face. It's raw! It's unhinged! If you are easily offended, this is NOT the show for you. There is frequent, and I mean frequent use of the word N*gger, and other rather brutally satirically racial stereotypes presented in the show.

Once the Black playwright decides to go forward with the show thus begins the no-holds-barred telling of the story of an octoroon woman (a person who is one-eighth Black), and white plantation owner's love story.

It then becomes a mad dash for everyone involved. There is a white man (Rob Nagle) in red face, a light-skinned woman (Hazel Lozano) in Black face, and Hancock in white face, all telling this poignant story.

At one point, Hancock plays George Peyton, the owner of Terrebonne plantation. He happens to fall in love with Zoe (Mara Klein) who he thinks is a white woman, but turns out to be An Octoroon. He doesn't care – and neither does she upon learning of her new heritage. Drama ensues once it's learned that Zoe, technically a slave, is now property and, therefore, part of the plantation's sale. Thus, she is sold at auction to a rather nasty sort named M'Closky, also played by Hancock.

Nagle plays Wahnotee, a Native American accused of killing a Black child. Once again, a minority is thrown to the wolves without any proof. While it's presented as a throwaway, it's a powerful and pivotal moment in the show and adds to the melodrama.

Along the way, we meet a hodgepodge of characters helping to move the story forward.

Hancock, an Ovation award-winner for *Hit the Wall*, deserves a standing ovation and an award for all three characters he plays, including the playwright, M'Closky and George. In what can only be called stellar, award-winning performances, Hancock leaves it all on the stage. He completely brings the house down when he wrestles himself as both the good (George) and evil (M'Closky) characters. That scene is worth the price of admission and is worthy of applause. It's a hilarious bit of business that leaves the audience in stitches.

The cast includes Hancock, Kacie Rogers (Dido), Pam Trotter (Minnie), Rob Nagle (playwright, Wahnotee, and LaFouche), Hazel Lozano (Assistant/Pete/Paul), Vanessa Claire Stewart (Dora/Captain Ratts), Mara Klein (Zoe), and Leea Ayers (Grace/Br'er Rabbit).

Rogers, Trotter, and Ayers as slave women bring the funny with their hilarious, modern-day urban slang intertwined in this period piece. Each one's timing and delivery are superb. The heart of the play, they steal the show every time they take the stage.

Sample dialogue includes:

MINNIE: You ever had to f*ck him?

DIDO: Who?

MINNIE: Mas'r/Peyton

DIDO: Oh, naw! You?

MINNIE: Naw, he only like lightskinnded girls. But Renee, you know, who was f*ckin' him all the time .

MINNIE: Would you f*ck him [George]?

DIDO: No, Minnie! Damn. Would you?

MINNIE: Maybe.

DIDO: Yeah, well, I get the feeling you don't get a say in the matter.

After they learn most of the slaves on the Louisiana plantation have run away and left them behind, Minnie and Dido devise a plan to get bought by Captain Ratts who has a boat.

They fantasize about living on a boat instead of a muggy swamp.

Minnie: Imagine if we lived on a steamboat, coasting up and down the river, looking fly, wind whipping at our hair and our slave tunics and sh*t and we surrounded by all these fine, muscle-y boat nigg*s who ain't been wit a woman in year?

The dialogue speaks to Minnie's delusion after having lived her entire life on the plantation.

Minnie's best line is when she gives Dido some advice.

Minnie to Dido: "I know we slaves and evurthang, but you are not your job."

Golden!

The banter is witty, fast, and carries more importance than is realized. It raises disturbing questions about violence and rape perpetrated on female slaves, although the word is never mentioned in the show.

Luckily for audiences, there isn't a weak link in this chain of accomplished actors.

Moreland, who clearly understands the importance of the play, has put together an impressive cast worthy of doing the material justice.

Frederica Nascimento's scenic design is stark but workable. Naila Aladdin Sanders' costume designs are appropriate. Nicholas E. Santiago's video design is traditional. Derrick McDaniel's lighting design achieves practical effects.

As the Black playwright's assistant says in the play, "The point of this whole thing was to make you feel something."

On the DONLOE SCALE: D (don't bother), O (oh, no), N (needs work), L (likable), O (oh, yeah), and E (excellent), *An Octoroon* gets an E (excellent)

An Octoroon, The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue, Los Angeles;

Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, and Mondays at 7 p.m., except July 30 through Aug. 2 and Aug. 27 through Aug. 30 which will be dark, through September 19; \$25-\$45; Pay-What-You-Want seating is available every Monday night in addition to regular seating (subject to availability); For reservations and information, call (323) 663-1525 or go to www.FountainTheatre.com.
