

An Octoroon

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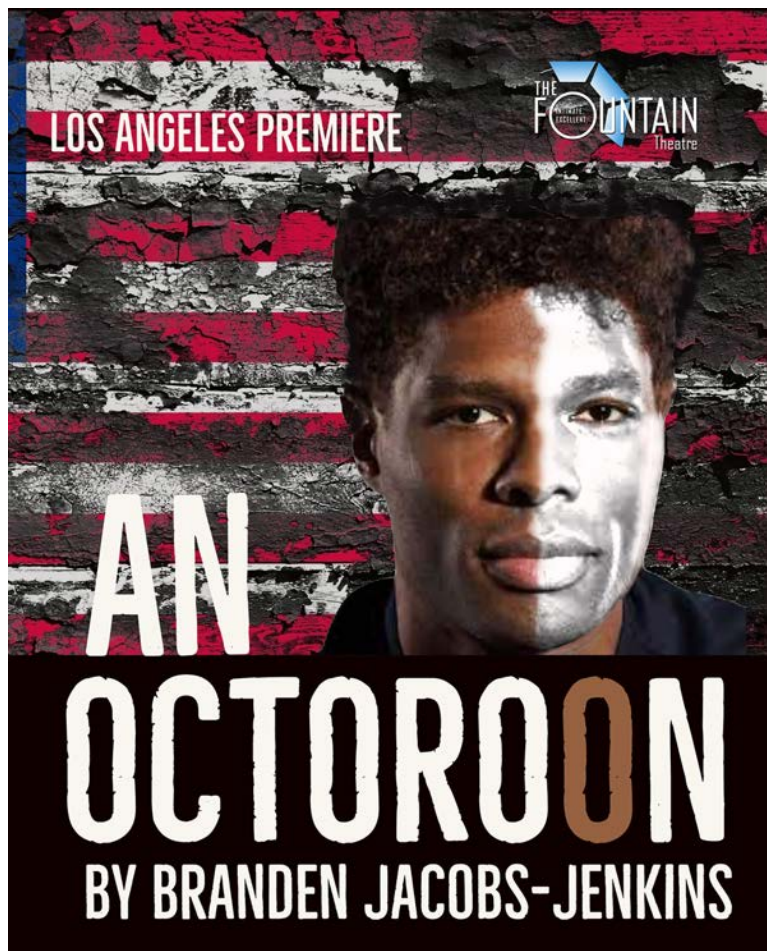
Vanessa Claire Stewart, & Matthew Hancock
Photo by: Jenny Graham

In 1859, *The Octoroon* by Dion Boucicault opened at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York City. A melodrama in 4 acts. In brief, a young man, George, unwittingly falls in love with Zoe. She is a fetching woman that seems to be a part of the family on the plantation that George has inherited. All would be well, but Zoe is an octoroon. That fact, coupled with complex entanglements (the prime movers of conflict in melodrama), makes the relationship impossible. Just as importantly, aside from enlightening us on the effects of slavery, we garner insights and attitudes of white America as perceived by a white Irish immigrant, Dion himself.

Whether Mr. Boucicault meant to shine a light on the evils of slavery or not, the play most assuredly relied on the heated arguments about slavery that was an important topic throughout America in 1859. Originally, Zoe pulls an Ophelia. And the villain is brought to justice. For the production in England, George and Zoe lived happily ever after. An interesting comment on white culture judgment in London vs. the same in America.



The Cover of the original production,
The Octoroon
UCSB Library



Cover art for An Octoroon

The Octoroon was a very popular play. It and seven touring companies performed throughout the United States. White performers originally played the black characters in black face. The harsh treatment and draconian laws that enslaved most African Americans were a backdrop and device for the play. And while slavery was a subject of the play, most of the black characters appeared for humor and the object of sympathy.

Skip forward, a hundred and fifty plus years, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, an African American playwright, takes hold of this nearly forgotten bit of American Theatre. He engages the same storyline, same characters, and conflicts and creates a play called An Octoroon. At first blush, you would think it is just a rewrite. But West Side Story is not Romeo and Juliet. So too; The Octoroon and An Octoroon are very different plays. And it really can be reduced to the significance of the articles: An and The in the title.

Perspective! The original story is about THE octoroon, Zoe. Jenkin tells the same story, with the voices of the slaves that lived it and watched what's happening to AN octoroon, again Zoe. Mr. Jenkins mixes the language of the time. He blends it with the perspective of an African American in modern times.

An Octoroon begins with a prologue, in which Jenkins puts the characters of himself as the playwright on stage. The character is attempting to mount a production of the play by Boucicault. Whatever is his intent, it

is countered by the added character of Boucicault, performing as an actor and serves as a verbal sparring partner in the scene.

So the confusion and mirth begin. Matthew Hancock, an African American, plays Branden Jacobs-Jenkins as a producer actor who was unable to cast white roles. The white actors were afraid of being canceled for playing racist roles. The solution, Jenkins' the character, takes on the part of George, the white hero. At the same time, also for lack of available white performers, Jenkins plays McCloskey, the white villain.

Jenkins straight out tells us he's not interested in the bullshit conversations that run to explain or give meaning and excuse to slavery. He says, here's what I see, and then has all the characters playing slaves utter their lines but with all the consciousness and perspective of modern man.

The result is masterful. The cost? Patience. Lots of confusion before we can easily follow the plot. In the performance I watched, one audience member found the material too confusing and probably more than a bit offensive. Sadly, he missed an insightful production. But offense is sometimes the very point. This troop of exceptionally talented artists leads us into uncomfortable laughter throughout the show. All the while setting us up for the slap in the face, with repercussions we feel even today.

Judith Moreland, the director, leads us down a tricky path. It may be easy to decry the original play as stereotypical. Too heavy-handed, overly wrought with anxiety and dreadful premonitions. But is that not reality? Judith lets us laugh. First, she helps bring the story's implications to the full potential of humor. Then we are forced to stare at an image that haunts us and should plague humanity in perpetuity.

The entire ensemble energetically works to make this a compelling production. Matthew Hancock is brilliant and enthusiastic in his performance as Jenkins/George/M'Closky. Hazel Lozano is brilliant in delivery and physical dexterity in her roles as Assistant/Pete/Paul. Rob Nagle Brings his considerable skills to play Dion/Wahnotee/Lafouche. Rob also does a dance number that could be a show stopper. A trio of pithy performers, Kacie Rogers, Pam Trotter, and Leea Ayers, offer wit and insights that sear the soul. Mara Klein, as the winsome Zoe, is delightful. And Vanessa Claire Stewart, as Dora and Cpt. Ratts plays the part of a southern belle with designs on the hero with a scary exactness. Coy and guile with more than a touch of humor.

There are only a few weeks left of this incredible production. Do yourself a favor and go. You will come away with more than you brought. The new outdoor stage at The Fountain Theatre is beautiful. Any concerns about being surrounded by noisy streets in an active neighborhood are quickly washed away by just passing through the gates into the promised land of great theatre.



Matthew Hancock
Photo by: Jenny Graham



Hazel Lozano & Rob Nagle
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