

# Theater Review: The Fountain's Uncomfortable & Unique "An Octoroon"

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Kacie Rogers, Pam Trotter, Hazel Lozano and Leea Ayers. Photo by Jenny Graham.

There couldn't have been a more fitting time to see *An Octoroon* than the week Juneteenth became a federal holiday. The play, currently running at the Fountain Theatre's terrific new outdoor space, fearlessly portrays life on a Louisiana plantation in the 1850s, integrating references to heinous racism during the 15 decades following abolition.

As Juneteenth teaches, the Emancipation Proclamation didn't wrap up slavery; the ensuing years have carried through painful remnants of oppression, income disparity, and contempt for those whose ancestors were slaves. *An Octoroon* plays out many examples, some of which, including images shown during intermission, serve as *Clockwork Orange*-style aversion therapy.



Matthew Hancock as playwright BJJ at the opening of *An Octoroon*

Playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins adapted Dion Boucicault's 1859 hit *The Octoroon* for his 2014 Obie Award-winning *An Octoroon*. The adaptation incorporates and manipulates much of the original play, with bookends and inserts of modern conceits and characters—including the playwright himself.

We go to the theater to be challenged as much as entertained, and with *An Octoroon*, the emphasis is on the challenge. It's a swirl of horror, humor, guilt and grief. Yes, humor is in there, but sparingly. And even then, you take a quick self-check before laughing—am I supposed to find this funny? With liberal N-words and other hard-to-hear slurs echoing through the evening air and onstage violence against people of color, the two-and-a-half-hour onslaught becomes overwhelming and heartbreaking—just as it's meant to do. It's hard even to find the words to discuss it afterwards.



During intermission, racist pop culture examples play on projection screens, from Shirley Temple in blackface in *The Littlest Rebel* and WWII-era Popeye cartoons with Asian stereotypes and other cartoons with offensive Black imagery, to Mickey Rooney as Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and Rob Schneider in yellowface in 2007's *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry*. All to a soundtrack of “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah” and “Amos and Andy.” It’s a lot, but nothing compared to the bombardment factor of a giant image of a double lynching that is projected for so long it brings tears.

The discomfort is assuaged by the quality of work behind *An Octoroon*. Director Judith Moreland skillfully handles all the moving parts. The talented performers embrace their roles, from modern playwright to slave-era tropes. Some wear whiteface, blackface and redface to portray their stereotypes. Matthew Hancock deftly ranges from black playwright to white hero George Peyton as well as his own nemesis, Jacob McClosky. Hazel Lozano dazzles as a modern trans character and two male slaves. As slaves Minnie and Dido, Pam Trotter and Kacie Rogers bring the biggest laughs, with taut dialogue incorporating modern speech. Mara Klein in the title role beguiles; her Zoe becomes the prize driving Peyton and McClosky. All the actors add nuance and perspective to vintage roles originally written as mainstream melodrama.

The play is undeniably long, starting in daylight and ending well after sunset. At two hours it could retain its power and make its points. But in the case of *An Octoroon*, the length is just one more element of the important message: enough, already, with racism.

*An Octoroon runs Fridays through Mondays at 7:00 pm, through Sept. 19. No performances July 30-Aug. 2 and Aug. 27-Aug. 30. It's two and a half hours with an intermission. Tickets are \$45 for adults, \$35 for seniors and \$25 for students; they can be purchased [here](#).*