
Fountain Theatre's first play on its pandemic outdoor stage? 'An Octoroon'



Playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' "An Octoroon" at long last comes to L.A. (John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation)

The Fountain Theatre will open its pandemic-inspired outdoor stage in June with the Los Angeles premiere of an acclaimed satire centered on race, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' "An Octoroon."

Anticipation among L.A. theatergoers has been high since the Fountain announced in January that it had received clearance from the Los Angeles City Planning Office [to build a stage](#) in its parking lot. At the time, the theater's artistic director, Stephen Sachs, had no idea when performances might be possible, pegging his hopes on county health guidelines that are only now beginning to shift into focus [as infection rates decline](#) and more residents are vaccinated against COVID-19.

"Everything now depends on the COVID numbers," Sachs said in the announcement. "Once they drop to a level where the county Department of Public Health allows a gathering outdoors of 100 people, with safety guidelines in place, we're good to go."



An artist's rendering of the outdoor stage to be erected in the parking lot of the Fountain Theatre. (The Fountain Theatre)

The Fountain's plan requires a repaving of the parking lot, which is adjacent to the two-story East Hollywood theater. A modular stage is composed of 18 pieces that can be broken down and stored; after it's erected, lighting and a sound system can be brought in. Chairs for up to 84 people will be positioned according to health

guidelines. Sachs told The Times the theater's restrooms will get additional ventilation, and that bathroom monitors will be posted to prevent crowding.

The local premiere of "An Octoroon," with its emphasis on social and racial justice issues, is a coup for theater fans eager for the immediacy and personal interaction of live theater.

"It could not be timelier," Sachs said in the announcement. "The moment has come for our nation to confront its own racist history. Branden uses satire to get to the dark core of American slavery and the racial stereotypes that continue to plague this country today."

"An Octoroon," which opened in 2014 at Soho Rep. in New York, won an Obie award for best new American play. It toys with the plot of Dion Boucicault's 19th century play "The Octoroon," which is about a forbidden interracial relationship between a plantation owner and a girl of mixed race. (An octoroon is someone whose ancestry is one-eighth Black.) In Jacobs-Jenkins' work, a similar romance is examined from a largely meta standpoint that pays homage to its own artifice. There is whiteface, redface and blackface, along with narrative flourishes delivered by a stand-in for the playwright himself.

Times theater critic Charles McNulty cited "An Octoroon" and Jacobs-Jenkins in a column about the renaissance in American drama delivered by [gifted, young Black playwrights](#).

Health authorities said Monday that Los Angeles, Orange and San Bernardino counties were [poised to hit revised benchmarks](#) Tuesday that would allow them to move from the purple tier of COVID-19 classification to the less restrictive red tier, allowing for more outdoor gatherings so long as health protocols are in place.

Ticket prices and an on-sale date for the Fountain production have not yet been announced. Information: fountaintheatre.com.