

Review: L.A. theater is back with a boundary-breaking ‘Octoroon’ outdoors at the Fountain

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By Charles McNulty Theater Critic June 21, 2021 10:25 AM PT

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Pam Trotter, left, Vanessa Claire Stewart and Matthew Hancock in the Fountain Theatre’s “An Octoroon” by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins.

(photos by Jenny Graham)

How natural it felt to be back, sitting among colleagues, acquaintances and strangers at a press performance for a show! I wondered if I might be moved to tears at my return to the theater, but instead I felt grateful and relieved that human ingenuity wasn’t thwarted by a virus.

The miracle of vaccines allowed us to come together again, but the Fountain Theatre, acting with foresight and dispatch, turned its parking lot into an outdoor venue to ensure the earliest possible resumption of in-person performance. Everything was handled with

extraordinary care and concern, from the ticketless check-in to the spacing of the quite comfortable chairs.

Indeed, seeing a show alfresco at the Fountain is in many ways a more relaxing experience than seeing one in the theater's cramped indoor space. This outdoor production is an ideal way of easing back into this most public of art forms, free of any pandemic misgivings about breathing the same air of fellow theatergoers.

"An Octoroon," the play that drew us together, is a tricky work to pull off under optimal conditions, and I worried how this postmodern riff on Dion Boucicault's musty "The Octoroon" would fare under the moonlight, amid the blare of car mufflers and police helicopters. This much-celebrated work by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins toys with the machinery of melodrama, a form that relies on the elaborate sets and over-the-top spectacle of the illusionist stage.

Plot contrivances and scenic coups, musical bombast and sentimental treacle, desperate poses and flamboyant gestures — the genre's hallmarks are deployed with an anachronistic difference in "An Octoroon." The play's language darts from Boucicault's exaggerated Southern cadences to Jacobs-Jenkins' modern urban slang. Suspense — the melodramatist's best friend — is sent up even as it's savored.

The Fountain's ambition in reopening the theater with this multilayered play must be acknowledged and applauded. Where larger, better funded theaters in Los Angeles have played it safe, the Fountain has made room for bold, boundary-breaking drama.

But how a work is produced matters too, and "An Octoroon" requires directorial sensibility and skill that aren't always in evidence in Judith Moreland's production. I know Moreland primarily as a superb actor — she was faultlessly good in Robert Schenkkan's "Building the Wall" at the Fountain — and by reputation as a respected acting teacher at UCLA.

Those qualifications have much to offer, but what "An Octoroon" needs is an auteur who's alert to the way the tempo and visual composition of a scene can shape its meaning. There's something too straightforward in the approach to the staging, too oriented to the basic elements of storytelling to handle the dynamic shifts among parody, commentary and appreciation.

When Boucicault's play premiered at New York's Winter Garden Theatre in 1859, it was a controversial hit, angering both pro- and anti-slavery factions. Enfolded in the mortgage melodrama of a Louisiana plantation is a love story involving George, the young romantic heir of the estate, and the illegitimate daughter of the dead patriarch, Zoe, who was raised at Terrebonne as part of the family.

George doesn't know at first that Zoe is an octoroon, meaning she's 1/8th Black, but he refuses to let miscegenation law stand in the way of his heart's desire. Harder to overcome will be the discovery by M'Closky, the villainous overseer who now owns half the estate, that



Zoe's freedom papers are not valid and therefore she's to be sold with the rest of the enslaved.

Boucicault's racial attitudes are both progressive for his day and unmistakably traditionalist, which is to say white supremacist. The term "octoroon" is thankfully not in circulation anymore, and it is likely that the melodrama would have remained in history's dustbin were it not for Jacobs-Jenkins' ambivalent curiosity.

"An Octoroon" begins with a prologue, in which a surrogate for the author, BJJ, introduces himself to the audience as a "Black playwright," a label he doesn't fully comprehend. This role is played by Matthew Hancock, who while delivering a sprawling monologue, applies whiteface in preparation of taking on the roles of both George and M'Closky.

Adding to the meta-theatrical fun, Rob Nagle, who plays the part of Playwright (a.k.a. Boucicault), transforms himself into the Native American character Wahnotee by smearing his face with red makeup. Blackface is applied by Hazel Lozano, as she exaggeratedly morphs from the Playwright's assistant to two enslaved characters.

This shuffle of identities is insouciantly performed as a minstrel carnival. BJJ, trying to wrest himself from a depressive funk, had wanted to investigate what still speaks to him in Boucicault's drama. But white cast members, offended by the unapologetic racism of their nasty slave-owner characters, dropped out.

This is the origin story of the play we're watching, but BJJ is an unreliable narrator. He doesn't want audience members to feel too secure in what they're seeing. To that end, every now and again an actor dressed as a rabbit makes a surreal cameo. Literally, anything can happen.

After a strong start, the production loses its way rhythmically as the plot of "The Octoroon" is jauntily sketched. The performers are in effect asked to simultaneously exist in two theatrical realms — Boucicault's and Jacobs-Jenkins'.

This is no easy task, and the cast has mixed results. Hancock, who has the toughest challenge of playing both hero and villain, occasionally seems underpowered. But he hits full-throttle in the violent confrontation between George and M'Closky, a fight scene in which Hancock has to wrestle himself. The solitary scuffle thrillingly raises the production's pulse.

Nagle overdoes it in the early going as Playwright and Wahnotee, but by the time he plays LaFouche, an auctioneer, he has a better handle on the cartoon dial. Mara Klein as Zoe is tragically demure in a sweet yet one-note manner. Vanessa Claire Stewart, who plays Dora, a rich Southern belle infatuated with George, and Ratts, the captain of a steamer open to buying some human chattel, works her costumes to funny effects. But the production's scattered tone leaves everyone looking unsettled.

The most striking characterization is by Pam Trotter, who as Minnie, one of the enslaved workers at the house, seizes every moment of her stage time. Minnie's banter with Kacie Rogers' Dido and bickering with Leea Ayers' Grace provide choral commentary with a jaded Gen X twist. The incongruous mix of modern idiom and antebellum narrative fuels the wit of Jacobs-Jenkins' project. Minnie's hilarious advice to Dido: "I know we slaves and evurthang, but you are not your job" captures both the madness of slavery and the stupefying cruelty.

Scenically, this production of "An Octoroon" is limited. Naila Aladdin-Sanders' costumes hit the right rompish note, but Frederica Nascimento's set establishes little and Nicholas Santiago's video gets lost in the nighttime shuffle.

The designers, however, were no doubt operating on a shoestring. Just getting the production up and running in this new outdoor playing area was miracle enough. Yet when the staging must focus attention on an image encapsulating the evil violence of America's racist past, a picture is not just found but held for a length of time that makes it impossible to look away.

Jacobs-Jenkins knows Boucicault's play can't be redeemed, but he challenges us to see what's there. Through the playful lens of theater, "An Octoroon" invites us to take a good long look at the cultural history of slavery. It isn't pretty. Melodrama only magnifies the moral ludicrousness. But neither the absurdity nor the horror will disappear by closing our eyes.

'An Octoroon'

Where: The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., L.A.

When: 7 p.m. Fridays-Mondays. (Check schedule for exceptions.) Ends Sept. 19

Info: (323) 663-1525 or www.FountainTheatre.com

Price: \$25 – \$45; Pay-What-You-Want on Monday nights, subject to availability.

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Charles McNulty

Charles McNulty is the theater critic of the Los Angeles Times. He received his doctorate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from the Yale School of Drama.

