

# At last.. AN OCTOROON at The Fountain

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[onstagerosangeles.blogspot.com/2021/06/at-last-octoroon-at-fountain.html](http://onstagerosangeles.blogspot.com/2021/06/at-last-octoroon-at-fountain.html)

As the dreaded plague fades, the theatre emerges. Takes a breath.. and builds a stage.

Two Planks and a Passion?

The Fountain Theatre launches into the brave new world with what may be a wonderful experience.

In discussing what theatre must do for us, 19th Century Irish playwright Dion Boucicault in *The Art of Dramatic Composition* writes:

“If such an imitation of human beings, suffering from their fate, be well contrived and executed in all its parts, the spectator is led to feel a particular sympathy with the artificial joys or sorrows of which he is the witness. This condition of his mind is called the theatrical illusion.

The craft of the drama is to produce it, and all its concerns conduce to, and depend upon, this attainment.”

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Vanessa Claire Stewart and Matthew Hancock Photo by Jenny Graham

When you make reservations to see Branden Jacobs -Jenkins' play, staged in the former parking lot at The Fountain Theatre in Hollywood, pack a sweater. Be prepared to not only sit with your bubble, but to feel actual others there with you: challenged by what can only be described as a successful fulfillment of Boucicault's conceit of what the theatre is supposed to do.

'Engage the 'theatrical illusion.'

The importance of live theatre with an audience in attendance is fulfilled with director Judith Moreland's steady hand and a cast that doubles and triples to keep us guessing. In The Prologue of An Octoroon, we meet 'the playwright, BJJ, (amazing Matthew Hancock) as he pretends to have a 'session' with his therapist (just kidding he can't afford a therapist), he begins to transform into the hero of The Octoroon: George. Lurking stage left is a drunken white guy, Rob Nagle, The Irish Playwright. Boucicault, himself. He faces down Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and in an exchange that takes a page or two right out of Michael McClure's The Beard, we see Hamlet's Advice explode as the two 'hold a mirror up to Nature' as the aggressive and dynamic duo blast one another with a fusilade of "Fuck YOUs!"

Keeping in mind that BJJ tells his imaginary therapist that his favorite playwright, Boucicault, the now obscure author of the original melodrama, The Octoroon, circa 1859, we hear from Boucicault through Nagle bragging that he invented copyright and matinees!

There's disparity in the actors' approach that is mostly forgivable. We shift from The Prologue that sets the scene for the author's take on the original romp. As the acting style shifts, we meet Dido and Minnie, ( spot on Kacie Rogers & Pam Trotter). They are life long slaves on the plantation that may fall into possession of the cheater, the rotten to the core McCloskey(again Hancock!). The exposition is expository. The characters, including Old Pete (Hazel Lozano doing triple duty including Paul and the Assistant) carry on in broad strokes that waffle between hip modern language and the language of the darkies. Extensive use of terms that are forbidden turns us back to confront our own polite society. We sit... too passively, inured to the words as we are drawn into the sad story of love and loss.

In The Prologue, BJJ challenges himself to discuss his deconstruction and/or appropriation of African Folk Tales to create his work. Now and then, in a beautiful and silent entrance, we meet Brer Rabbit (extraordinary Leea Ayers, also effective as Grace: a grace note to the slavery experience with grit). How this matters is still a bit of a mystery. But, it works. I like the rabbit.

As The Playwright Boucicault / The Red (literally) Indian: Wahnotee as well as the auctioneer, Nagle brings the characters home without skipping a beat.

Vanessa Claire Stewart as Dora is the spoiled white girl who has set her cap to capture George and emerge as the Lady of the Plantation because George is back from Paris and is supposed to fix everything. But!! He is blindsided by Love. Enter the lovely Zoe (gorgeous Mara Klein)

.. The Octoroon (one drop of Negro blood in eight). Society forbids the marriage of any white person to anyone with any hint of colored blood and here in hangs the tale, well sort of.

As the melodrama unfolds with some sticky wickets to unravel, the dark purpose of Jacobs-Jenkins to force (or guide?) the audience to confront our own biases comes down. The Truth be told, every privileged white person in the audience must deal with it in no uncertain terms. Like BJJ's play Neighbors, reviewed at The Matrix in 2010, Boucicault's edict for the audience to have an honest and visceral reaction to the play emerges.

It is an opportunity to engage with one's deep nature held up to the mirror of our times. It's a lesson not taught in school but engages an overhead projector and is inescapable.

We attend the theatre for many reasons. The social aspect is vital and that The Fountain has moved to be able to do a play as it's meant to be done is wonderful. We need live theatre. Really.

Innovative set design by Frederica Nascimento. Projections by Nicholas E. Santiago echo the silhouettes of Kara Walker, certainly with effect, using amazing video that The Fountain has gained a reputation for. It's professional theatre with a strong polemic that demands our attention.

## **AN OCTOROON**

by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

Friday, June 11, 2021 7:00 PM

Sunday, September 19, 2021 7:00 PM

The Fountain Theatre

5060 Fountain Avenue

Los Angeles, CA, 90029