

“An Octoroon” at The Fountain Theatre

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Matthew Hancock—Photo by Jenny Graham

What a joy it was last night to once again be seated with an audience in a real theatre in anticipation of a great show. It was in The Fountain Theatre's splendid new outdoor stage with the audience seated in pairs and social distancing. And the company does not disappoint. Their production of *An Octoroon*, written by **Branden Jacobs-Jenkins**, is inspired the 1859 play, *The Octoroon*, by the inexhaustible Nineteenth Century playwright **Dion Boucicault**. Whereas Boucicault's play is a melodrama with a hero and heroine and villains, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' play, as produced at The Fountain, is a stunningly outrageous re-imagining of the old play that does not shy away from stereotypes and language that may unsettle some people in the audience who have adapted themselves to avoid the hard truths and images from our sadly racist past.

The show opens with **Matthew Hancock** taking the stage and addressing the audience as a playwright. Soon **Rob Nagle** (who is billed as The Playwright) enters wearing a union suit and lurks. Before long Mr. Hancock starts to put on whiteface. Another actor, **Hazel Lozano**, billed as "Assistant," comes on and serves as a factotum taking a number of roles onstage and off. Eventually, she applies blackface which serves her well as young black innocent and an ancient, servile house slave.



Pam Trotter, Vanessa Claire Stewart and Matthew Hancock—Photo by Jenny Graham

Eventually, the play proper begins, with Hancock as George, a white, blond upper-class young man just back from Paris. A white woman, Dora (**Vanessa Claire Stewart**), from a neighboring plantation, swoons for George. Meanwhile, the house slaves, Dido (**Vanessa Claire Stewart**) and Minnie (**Pam Trotter**) chew the fat. Rob Nagle, who has put on redface, comes on as the Indian, Wahnotee, who, of course has a drinking problem. The beautiful octoroon, Zoe (**Mara Klein**), catches the eye of George and they soon fall in love.



Mara Klein and Hazel Lozano—Photo by Jenny Graham

Matthew Hancock is an extraordinary performer who not only plays George, but also takes on the role of the villainous M'Closky, an overseer type, a slime ball who covets the beautiful octoroon. Boo...hiss!! What becomes remarkable toward the end of the show is the spectacle of Hancock playing both George and M'Closky simultaneously! It must be seen to be believed. Oh! And by the way, Brer Rabbit (**Leea Ayers**, who also plays a pregnant slave, the aptly named Grace), shows up mysteriously from time to time to jam up up works. I am puzzled but intrigued.



Vanessa Claire Stewart, Leea Ayers, Hazel Lozano—Photo by Jenny Graham

An Octoroon is one of the most engrossing, confounding, and outrageous plays I have ever seen. It is extraordinary in so many ways. It challenges an audience to look at the past and squirm. At intermission, projections appeared up on haphazard screens that played old racist cartoons and more. Up there on the screen was Mickey Rooney unfortunately playing a buck-toothed, myopic Japanese man in “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.” It is unnerving to see Rob Nagle as an alcoholic Indian chief. The show commands an audience to look at the past through comedy and pathos. Brecht would be proud!



Hazel Lozano and Rob Nagle—Photo by Jenny Graham

An Octoroon is excellent all the way around with direction by **Judith Moreland**. The extensive creative staff includes Costume Director **Naila Aladdin-Sanders**; Fight Director **Jen Albert**; Prop Master **Michael Allen Angel**; Audio Engineer **Noele Kyle Cunanan**; Lighting Designer **Derrick McDaniel**; Set Designer **Frederica Nascimento**; Sound Design & Original Composition **Marc Antonio Pritchett**; Choreographer **Annie Yee**; and Costume Maintenance **Terri Roberts**.

The company staff also includes Production Photographer **Jenny Graham**; Video Design **Nicholas Santiago**; Dramaturg **Daphne Sicre Ph.D**; Production Stage Manager **Deena Tovar**; and Outdoor Stage Prod. Mgr. **Shawna Voragen**. **James Bennett** is Producer.

An Octoroon runs Friday, June 11, 2021 7:00pm—Sunday, September 19, 2021 7:00pm. For more information go to <https://www.fountaintheatre.com/events/an-octoroon>.