

Light Up The Summer at Fountain Theatre's New Outdoor Stage

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What a breath of fresh air — literally — to experience the Fountain Theatre's new outdoor venue at the opening of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' send-up of Dion Boucicault's 1859 depiction of slavery in the Old South. You may think that times have changed, so why watch this? But Jacobs-Jenkins has turned the old chestnut on its head and shaken out the cobwebs to appall us (or at least, me) and enlighten us to how time may have changed, and laws may have passed, but African-Americans (Blacks? Negroes? Here, even our terms are suspect) are still suffering the effects of 150 years of being "less-than."

To his credit, Boucicault's motivations (other than making a mint on Broadway) seemed to be sincere. A master of melodramatic techniques, he used tried-and-true mechanics of theatre to bring home the plight of loyal retainers of the plantation, "Terrebonne" while their owner's mismanagement jeopardizes their home. But never fear, the integrity of Zoe, the beautiful and devoted Octoroon, illegitimate daughter of the plantation's dead owner, will save the day. But only in a socially acceptable manner.

Into this potent stew, Jacobs-Jenkins has taken theatrical conventions of the period and mixed them up: the white characters are played by the versatile Matthew Hancock in white-face; the red-Injun (please forgive the indiscretion!), is played in red-face by Rob Nagle and non-binary Hazel Lozano plays the black characters in, of course, black-face. Their costumes, unlike the anti-bellum Southern clothing that we might expect, are instead, 19th century long Johns.

Rather than stopping there, however, Jacobs-Jenkins peppers the original narrative with his own imagination and insights. In the opening of this pastiche “The Playwright” (played by Hancock) introduces us to his therapist, only to be told in the next breath that the therapist doesn’t exist.

Act two introduces the dapper Brer Rabbit (also Lozano), a character that has disappeared from acceptable literature in the 21st century, who is called upon to comment on or create mischief at every turn. As complications mount, Jacobs-Jenkins combines the original with his own sly commentary until all the complications have been unknotted, all the plotlines resolved, except the fate of Zoe, the title character.

That’s when Jacobs-Jenkins pulls out all the stops; the ending-that-shall-not-be-divulged is ameliorated with the characters out of character and a rousing spiritual anthem that leaves us humming along instead of weeping.

Director Judith Moreland manages to juggle a juxtaposition of styles, while inserting some truly hilarious business such as the fight (designed by Jen Albert) between Our Hero, George, and Our Villain, MCloskey, which ends in a knock-out even though both characters are played by one actor. Marvelous!

With this production, the new outdoor stage gets a work-out. Frederica Nascimento’s utilitarian set must provide for video (designed by Nicholas E. Santiago), wig storage (various cubbies), stairs to nowhere, and dancing in hoop skirts (choreography by Annie Yee). The costumes from Naila Aladdin Sanders are inventive and suggestive of the period at the same time. The entirety leaves plenty of room for after-performance discussion upstairs, or under the stars!

An Octoroon continues outdoors at The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., LA 90029, Fridays through Mondays through July 26th. Tickets available online at www.fountaintheatre.com. Or call the box office at 323-663-1525.