

An Octoroon Review – Sensational Drama and Racial Fluidity

losangeles.splashmags.com/index.php/2021/06/21/an-octoroon-review-sensational-drama-and-racial-fluidity

Elaine Mura

June 22, 2021



Pam Trotter, Vanessa Claire Stewart, and Matthew Hancock in AN OCTOROON - Photo by Jenny Graham

The Fountain Theatre has long been known for presenting controversial and eye-opening drama in Los Angeles. On two fronts, the Fountain Theatre has outdone itself in 2021. As the pandemic is (hopefully) taking its last gasp, the Fountain Theatre inaugurates its new outdoor stage in a beautifully refurbished parking lot next to the theater – with a genuine modular stage and all the cables and wires accompanying world-class sound and light. And with socially distanced chairs seating 84 lucky audience members. But the setting is only part of Fountain’s contribution to LA theater this pandemic year. By selecting AN OCTOROON as its debut production after more than a year of silence, Fountain Theatre again confirms its uncanny ability to blend current events with gripping drama.



Vanessa Claire Stewart and Matthew Hancock – Photo by Jenny Graham

In order to tell this historic – and painfully contemporary – story, playwright Branden Jacob-Jenkins takes advantage of “The Octoroon,” a nineteenth century melodrama by Irish playwright Dion Boucicault based on Thomas Mayne Reid’s novel, “The Quadroon.” “The Octoroon” opened in New York City in 1859, just four days after the hanging of slave rebellion leader John Brown in Harpers Ferry. A highly controversial play famous in its own time, “The Octoroon” was scheduled to open at Washington DC’s Ford Theatre on April 15, 1865 – but cancelled after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated the day before.



Mara Klein and Hazel Lozano – Photo by Jenny Graham

Author Jacob-Jenkins weaves Boucicault’s “sensation drama” into a tapestry rich with contemporary conflicts about racism, slavery, and the American antebellum South. In *AN OCTOROON*, no one is cast in conventional roles. Makeup defines characters as black becomes white, white morphs in red, and brown turns into whatever. A quick application of white-face, and Matthew Hancock becomes a superhero named George and a supervillain dubbed M’Closkey. And just wait until you see the two engage in a knock-down, drag-out fight!



Hazel Lozano and Rob Nagle – Photo by Jenny Graham

AN OCTOROON is the tale of Terrebonne, a classic pre-Civil War Southern plantation with some economic problems which will soon affect everyone who lives there, including black slaves Leea Ayers (Grace), Kacie Rogers (Dido), Pam Trotter (Minnie), and Octoroon Mara Klein (Zoe). Rob Nagle (Wahnotee) and Hazel Lozano (Assistant) soon join in the fun. Get ready to chuckle, for this contemporary satire is clever and comical as it pokes fun at Victorian melodrama, stereotyped originals, and the temper of times past and present. Jacobs-Jenkins has managed to pull together every trope from the time (even including Brer Rabbit) to prove that nothing changes easily.



Kacie Rogers, Pam Trotter, Hazel Lozano, and Leea Ayers – Photo by Jenny Graham

Kudos to director Judith Moreland, who has taken this mish-mash of past and present and given its participants life and strength. Each actor takes on multiple roles and does so with talent, grace, and charm. Special congrats to Matthew Hancock and Rob Nagle, who have mastered some very special roles with skill – and pretty good hand/eye coordination and physical contortions too.



Pam Trotter and Kacie Rogers – Photo by Jenny Graham

The final product would not be nearly as satisfying without the special talents of Frederica Nascimento (scenic design), Derrick McDaniel (lighting), Marc Antonio Pritchett (sound/music), Nicholas E. Santiago (video), Naila Aladdin Sanders (costumes), choreography (Annie Yee), and Jen Albert (fight direction). The entire production team clearly put their all into this production.



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

AN OCTOROON is highly recommended for all audiences. It remains controversial, outrageous, and hilarious at the same time. Especially in today's world – with its contemporary focus on systemic racism and racial history – AN OCTOROON will ring lots of bells and start lots of overdue conversations.

AN OCTOROON runs through September 17, 2021, with performances at 7 p.m. on Fridays (6/18 through 9/17; dark 7/30 and 8/27), at 7 p.m. on Saturdays (6/26 through 9/19; dark 7/31 and 8/28), at 7 p.m. on Sundays (6/20 through 9/19; dark 8/1 and 8/29), and at 7 p.m. on Mondays (6/27 through 9/13; dark 6/21, 8/2, and 8/30). The Fountain Theatre is located at 5060 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles CA 90029. Tickets range from \$25 to \$45 (and, if available, some Pay-What-You-Want on Monday nights). For information and reservations, call 323-663-1525 or go [online](#).