

Theater Review: AN OCTOROON (The Fountain Theater in L.A.)

 stageandcinema.com/2021/06/19/the-octoroon-fountain

Tony Frankel



THE PLAY'S THE THING

It's no wonder that **Branden Jacobs-Jenkins'** brilliant adaptation of Dion Boucicault's 1895 suspenseful melodrama *The Octoroon* is eight times better and more exciting than any other offering on America's stages. It speaks to the current conversation of race in America while presenting a rather unknown actual nineteenth-century play that is rife with racism. It underscores issues from today's newspapers without being didactic. While the Fountain Theatre's production of *An Octoroon* can be curiously flat at times, this do-not-miss play is also wildly entertaining, unique, sharp, funny, and adventurous.



Kacie Rogers, Pam Trotter, Hazel Lozano and Lea Ayers

At the start, a young Black man comes out onto the stage in his underwear and tells us about a visit he had with his therapist, who asserts that his gloominess likely stems from his attempt to stage *The Octoroon*, failed because all his white male actors quit, calling the play racist.



Pam Trotter, Vanessa Claire Stewart and Matthew Hancock

The young man (**Matthew Hancock**) is the playwright BJJ (the author's initials), who then takes a moment to inform us that he does not in fact have a therapist, as he can't afford one, after which he continues to reenact for us this imaginary therapy session, exploring his motivations as a black playwright while putting on whiteface makeup in preparation for the performance. After a brief interaction with Boucicault himself (**Rob Nagle**), who is putting on red Indian makeup and feather headdress to play Wahnotee, a Native-American character, we find ourselves on a cotton plantation, inside *The Octoroon* proper. Well, sort of.



Mara Klein and Hazel Lozano

What we watch for the next 150 minutes is a highly meta-theatrical, delightful, provocative rumination on theater itself even as it highlights many layers of racism and its atrocities in America. Many characters have been cut, yet a goodly chunk of the lines remain intact (you can't, as they say, make this shit up) while dialogue among slaves is updated to ghetto vernacular. Equally fascinating is that Boucicault's play, which retains its spectacular nature, is hilarious in Jacobs-Jenkins' hands (his balance of shock and humor is also present in his plays *Neighbors* and *Gloria*).



Hazel Lozano and Rob Nagle

Ultimately, the Black playwright uses the stage in a classic sense by taking a black box and using it as a mirror for us to inspect an issue that *should* be talked about; one that is so complicated and uncomfortable that we would rather relegate the emotions surrounding the issue (in this case, race) to some comfy little corner of our soul, as if that makes the issue dormant. But the police murders of Black folk in the last year bring *An Octoroon* right to the fore.



Pam Trotter and Kacie Rogers

The plot centers on George (Hancock), a liberal young man of Southern birth who returns from Paris to his deceased uncle's Plantation Terrebonne in Louisiana, finding the property overwhelmed by debt and near foreclosure. George falls in love with Zoe (**Mara Klein**), who is 1/8th Black (an octoroon). Although Zoe is George's uncle's daughter from a slave, his uncle and aunt always treated her as their own, freeing her and giving her a European education. But Zoe has another admirer, the evil and repugnant M'Closky (also Hancock), an overseer who aims to buy both Terrebonne and Zoe, who rejects him. M'Closky is thrilled to discover that she was freed after the bank had issued the judgment against the plantation, which means that her freedom papers are void and she's in fact part of the property, and therefore available for him to buy. Drama, murder, arson, and more ensues. There are also laughs aplenty.



Vanessa Claire Stewart, Leea Ayers, and Hazel Lozano

Well, in the script — not so much with The Fountain Theatre's Los Angeles premiere of the play, which opened at SoHo Rep in 2014. You will never be bored, and I do recommend that you attend, but director **Judith Moreland** has yet to create a piece that balances melodrama and vaudevillian pratfalls with the utmost sincerity and believability. (This is the kind of script perfect for **Shirley Jo Finney**, whose previous Fountain endeavors *The Ballad of Emmett Till* and *In the Red and Brown Water* matched the playwrights' audacious writing with highly inventive and adventurous staging and stage pictures.)

Moreland's tech team triumphs on the new outdoor stage in the parking lot next to The Fountain: **Nicholas Santiago**'s spectacular video design and **Derrick McDaniel**'s clever primary lighting on set designer **Frederica Nascimento**'s moving platform made up of cubes and plantation shutters work seamlessly together. Miking actors outdoors is a tricky

affair, but **Marc Antonio Pritchett** ensured we heard every word, even with the noise of traffic close by (nothing could be done with actress **Hazel Lozano**, who incoherently mumbled lines playing a pickaninny child and an old slave).



Matthew Hancock and Hazel Lozano

Many in the eight-person cast, often playing against type, are tremendous. At the center is Mr. Hancock, a standout in his three major and completely different roles; at one point he has a knife fight with himself as George and M'Closky, and he pulls it off beautifully, playing it with just the right mix of drama and campiness (fight director **Jen Albert**). Mr. Nagle and **Vanessa Claire Stewart** as a rich belle besotted with George are masters of the blend of heightened reality and comedy (although they, too, seem to flounder at times to find that sweet spot). I adored **Pam Trotter** and **Kacie Rogers** as two women who look forward to being enslaved on a boat rather than at the swamps of home — a thought as startling as Br'er Rabbit making an appearance as a photographer (and as startling as Disneyland ditching Br'er Rabbit from the *Splash Mountain* ride). **Leea Ayers**, who wore the rabbit suit, also shone as a pregnant slave, and Ms. Klein goes from smitten love to manic desperation beautifully.

It may be in time the production will begin to soar higher, but whether or not it does isn't an issue. I can't wait to go back and see it again.



Matthew Hancock

photos by Jenny Graham

An Octoroon

Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue (at Normandie)

Friday thru Monday at 7pm

runs thru September 19, 2021

dark July 30–Aug. 2 and Aug. 27–30

for tickets (\$25–\$45; Pay-What-You-Want seating every Monday night),

call 323.663.1525 or visit [Fountain](#)