

An Octoroon, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' play at the Fountain Theatre

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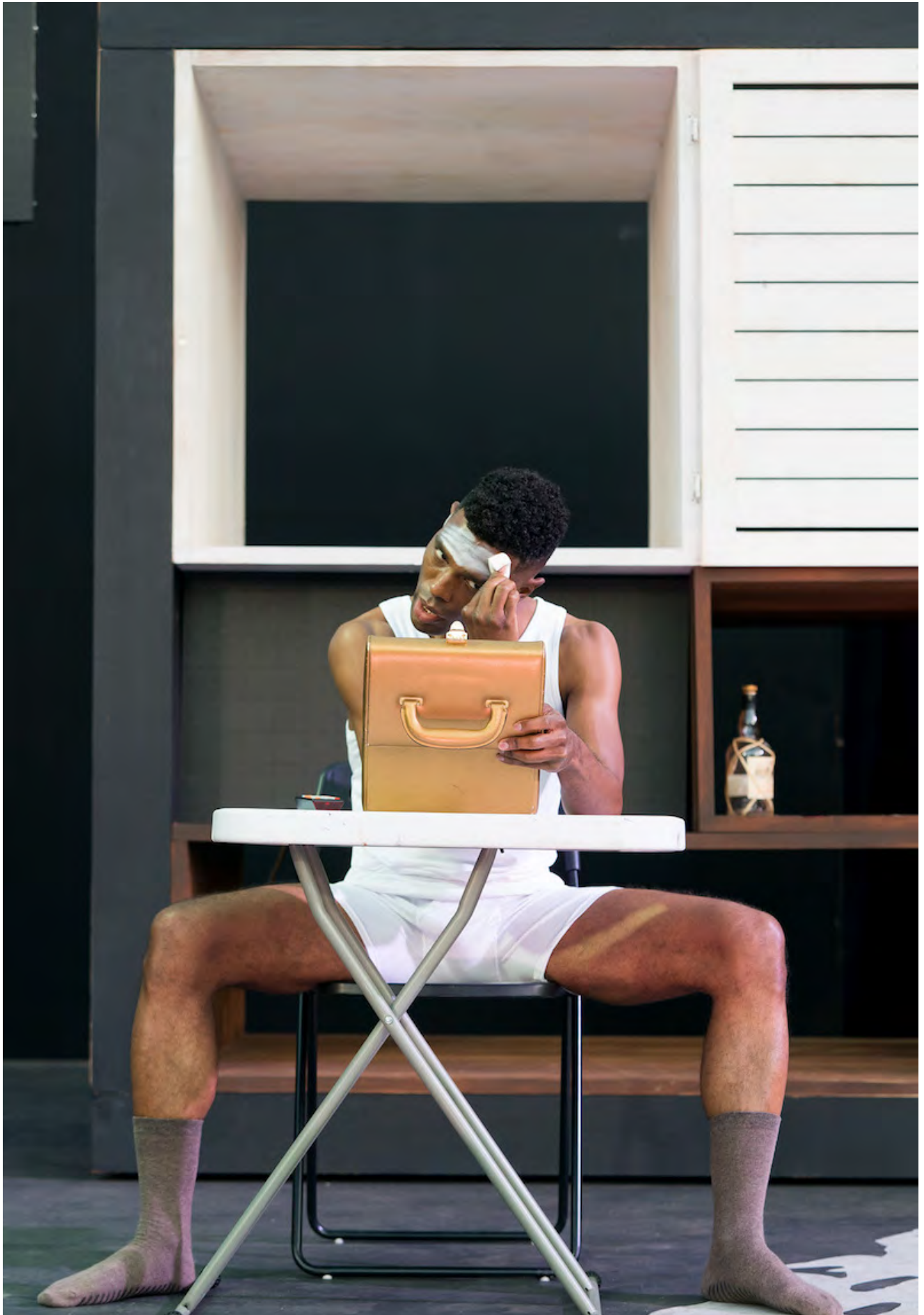
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Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *An Octoroon*, at the Fountain Theatre

Stereotypes and Bigotry roasted in satire

By Deborah Klugman





Matthew Hancock in AN OCTOROON. Top photo: Hancock and Hazel Lazano. (All photos by Jenny Graham)

“When is a play about race in this tragically divisive nation of ours ever not timely?”

An Octoroon, by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and staged at the Fountain Theater’s new (and fabulous) outdoor theater space is a funny, disturbing one-of-a-kind play, directed by Judith Moreland. It’s also timely – but when is a play about race in this tragically divisive nation of ours ever not timely?

Jacobs-Jenkins wrote this stygian satire after reading *The Octoroon* (note the difference in article), a 19th century melodrama by Irish-born playwright, actor and producer Dion Boucicault. *The Octoroon* premiered in 1859 at the Winter Garden Theater in New York, running for 200 nights and scoring several successful cross-country tours as well. Based on a novel by another prolific Irish writer, Thomas Mayne Reid, and alternatively titled (with snide accuracy, I presume) *Life in Louisiana*, it revolves around a star-crossed romance between a white male heir to a plantation and the octoroon (1/8 Black) daughter of his uncle by an enslaved woman.



Pam Trotter, Vanessa Claire Stewart, and Hancock

“The result is a wonderful, messy, complicated stew of a play encompassing slapstick, wildly different styles of performance and incendiary questions about race and identity that admittedly are never answered — but oh, they are intriguingly posed!”

Notably progressive for its time, Boucicault’s play is nonetheless a conventional work, top heavy with racist and gender stereotypes that are ripe for parody. What’s singular about Jacobs-Jenkins’ spin is that, rather than merely burlesquing these tropes, he juxtaposes his redo with the troubled and troubling discourse of a contemporary playwright, whose name, BJJ, corresponds to his own initials own.

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We meet BJJ (Matthew Hancock), dressed in his undies, complaining to his unseen (and possibly imaginary) therapist of the expectations laid upon him as a Black playwright — to only write about issues relevant to race. He’s further frustrated because his efforts to cast a version of *The Octoroon* are being stymied by white actors’ refusal to play enslavers, forcing him to don whiteface and undertake to play multiple white characters himself, including both the romantic lead and the dastardly villain.

As BJJ is venting, another character, The Playwright (Rob Nagle) appears; this is the incarnation of Boucicault, very drunk and distressed at the tawdry surroundings of the playing space compared to the regal extravagance of the 19th century Winter Garden Theater. Soon, The Playwright is also “making up,” smearing his face with red as he prepares to assume the role of a Native American in the play-within-a-play to come.



Lozano, and Rob Nagle

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We are then launched into the melodrama proper. In brief: George is smitten with Zoe (Mara Klein) but they are legally forbidden to marry given her “race.” Meanwhile, the estate of George’s dead uncle, including Zoe herself, is about to be auctioned off, possibly to a cruel overseer, to pay off debts. George is also being pursued by a wealthy hot-to-trot debutante (Vanessa Claire Stewart), while the household staff of slaves (Pam Trotter, Kacie Rogers, Hazel Lozano and Leea Ayers) engage — in a sort of antebellum *Upstairs Downstairs* way — in their own rivalries and ruminations, utilizing, from time to time, modern lingo. Periodically, the character of Brer Rabbit (Ayers), a folk figure historically spun out of Louisiana, ambles in and out of the story.

The bizarre double and triple casting in tandem with twists and turns in the plot achieve an apex of hilarious inanity when hero and villain, both played by Hancock in high octane mode, wrestle each other in a duel to the death (fight director Jen Albert). The other comic highlight is Nagle’s entire first scene as the inebriated (red-faced even without the makeup) Boucicault. It’s the production’s standout performance.

An Octoroon isn’t about laughs, however, which are there for the most part to get our attention. Instead, Jacobs-Jenkins has written this play to make us think — and feel. And, to be absolutely sure we grasp what to think and feel about, there’s a *very* protracted pause in the action midway through Act Four, when the infamously graphic photograph of the August 7, 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana is projected against the proscenium backdrop.

During intermission too, a lineup of old 1940s and 50s cartoons (video design, Nicholas E. Santiago) are displayed that are rife with grossly offensive stereotypes of people of color. If you’re my age or thereabouts, you recognize with horror how you’ve grown up with these grotesque images permeating your brain.

All of the above — plus having several members among the ensemble with sterling track records — point in the direction of a powerhouse production. Under Moreland’s direction, however, that hasn’t materialized — or, to put a more optimistic spin on it — hasn’t yet.

As limber a talent as ever there was, Hancock delivers his complex opening monologue expositionally rather than otherwise. But why? This is twisty fire-up-from-the-belly stuff; abounding with irony, it speaks to the kernel of torment for an artist of color (and it sure seems personal for Jacobs-Jenkins himself, with the character bearing his initials and all). But the actor seems not to have been counseled this way.

When we get to the parodied melodrama, I had the sense of performances undercooked, with many among the ensemble overly projecting the stiff, stylized manner of performance of 19th century theatricals. Still missing (Nagle excepted) is the spark of truth that lights up a caricature to make it funny and real despite its cartoonish elements. Let’s hope that improves with the run.

I also couldn't help wondering about a central element of Frederica Nascimento's scenic design, which has the action revolving around a bulky set piece that evokes neither any aspect of the Old South nor any reflection of the artist's internal strife. Yes, it has doors and windows for the actors to dodge in and out of, but why such a dull heavy piece? It takes up a lot of space that the actors might creatively use for their antics.

My guest and I also speculated how effective it might be if those reactionary 40s and 50s cartoons were run prior to opening curtain as well as during intermission.

Sound designer Marc Antonio Pritchett effectively weaves the noxious notes of Dixie ("I wish I were in the land of cotton") into the musical backdrop of the narrative. Costume designer Naila Aladdin Sanders and prop master Michael Allen Angel contribute effective period color. And as video master, Santiago, in tandem with lighting designer Derrick McDaniel, conjures a memorably fiery image to reflect one of the tragic threads in this story's denouement.

The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Hollywood; Fri.-Mon., 7 p.m.; (dark July 30-31 and Aug. 27-28); through Sept. 17. www.FountainTheatre.com; Running time: two hours and 30 minutes with an intermission.

