

# Los Angeles Theatre Review: 'An Octoroon'

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During intermission while watching *An Octoroon* (written by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and directed by Judith Moreland) at the Fountain Theatre, an old white woman randomly came up to me and asked what I found so amusing in this play. First, I had to get over the shock that a live human being was touching me (without permission) and getting up in my face to ask this question because, after all, this was my first time watching a play with a live audience (albeit in an outdoor theater) in 16 months. Second, what WAS I, and primarily all the other POC audience members, laughing about?

It was here when I knew I was watching a play that simply did **not play it safe** as the white people in the audience (there were many) got so *incredibly uncomfortable* throughout the performance, the old touching lady included. It was here when I knew I was watching something truly special.




Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/ss41ttrYgVM>

The events of 2020 have radically altered our way of living, with the pandemic being the most obvious factor. But the global Black Lives Matter movement, spurred by the murder of George Floyd, brought upon a reckoning in the re-evaluation of so many facets of life, particularly that of PWI (Predominantly White Institution) theatre companies across this nation and the plethora of issues they carry -- from their all-white leadership boards, their selection of plays with the token minority play, and their treatment of BIPOC/PGM actors & creatives.

It had personally affected me in such a way that how I would be critiquing plays & musicals here in Los Angeles for The Nerds Of Color would be drastically altered. I bring all of this up because these were the expectations placed upon me before watching *An Octoroon*.

LOS ANGELES PREMIERE

THE  
FOUNTAIN  
THEATRE  
ULTIMATE  
EXCELLENCE



AN  
OCTOROON  
BY BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS

*The Los Angeles premiere of **An Octoroon**, a radical, incendiary and subversively funny Obie award-winning play by MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant” recipient **Branden Jacobs-Jenkins**, inaugurates the **new outdoor stage** at **The Fountain Theatre**. A spectacular collision of the*

*antebellum South and 21st century cultural politics, An Octoroon is a gasp-inducing deconstruction of a moustache-twirling melodrama by 19th century playwright Dion Boucicault that twists a funhouse world of larger-than-life stereotypes into blistering social commentary.*

How fitting then, that the entire premise of *An Octoroon* is that of a Black playwright's attempt to adapt and reframe Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (which premiered in 1859) to our current times. For the vast majority of us unfamiliar with that old play and the word "octoroon," the term signifies a person of one-eighth African ancestry and it is the center where all the melodrama, romance, and suspense occurs for the original play.

What the audience will witness is BJJ, the playwright, figuring out the process while retaining much of the dialogue and characters from the original play. The twist? BJJ (played with such astounding dexterity by Matthew Hancock) takes on the roles of George and M'Closky, both white characters with one being the heroic lead and the other being the villain of the original play. And yes, he puts on whiteface to inhabit these roles, and its effect is delivered in such an astoundingly hysterical degree.

But this is only the beginning.

Surrounding BJJ are the characters that inhabit his mind as he makes sense of the adaptation, with the two biggest ones being Playwright and the Assistant. These three are the core of *An Octoroon* and the source of the delightful discomfort that was palpable within the white folks.



There is no question that Matthew Hancock absolutely anchors the play and flexes so much of his acting talent (and physical stamina for a particular scene that deserves an MVP award for sheer brilliance) but it is with the Playwright and the Assistant that the sheer absurdity of this play truly delivers.



*L to R: Hazel Lozano as Assistant and Rob Nagle as Playwright*

Rob Nagle completely demolishes his Playwright role as the drunken manifestation of Dion Boucicault himself, which comes with so much rage, frustration, and lunacy that Nagle expertly delivers. All of those emotions and chaotic energy carry over when he takes on the

Indigenous character of Wahnotee, complete with the racist practice of putting on redface to inhabit the role. Before we get more into that, we need to talk about the Assistant.

The Assistant is played by Hazel Lozano and at first, the character seems to be a wallflower comedic foil that dutifully fulfills with much heaving resignation what the drunken Playwright asks of them to do. But the two roles that the Assistant inhabits for the play within the play segment is, I daresay, may be the primary source of the shock I sensed in the white audience members.

In a way that can be compared to *Bamboozled* with a POC (Filipina American in this case), the Assistant puts on blackface to portray Pete and Paul, the former being the enslaved individual in charge of the house and the latter being an



absurd racist pickaninny depiction of a Black enslaved child. I know how incredibly crazy this sounds and there is no doubt in anyone's mind that this is no easy role for any actor to do, but my goodness does Hazel commits to the challenge with incredible gusto and made more noteworthy that the part is originally intended for a man to play.

I also truly appreciated Kacie Rogers and Pam Trotter as Dido and Minnie, the two enslaved women in the meta-play portion, as they spoke about their horrifying troubles but done so casually as if it was a modern comedy banter between two best friends. The actresses' comedic timing were on perfect point as well their balance to shift into the dramatic when the occasion called for it. Their "slave auction" scene however was priceless (Lozano's Pete character makes one hell of a closer for this scene) and overall, their characters added to the absurdity that flows throughout this play.



*From L to R: Pam Trotter as Minnie and Kacie Rogers as Dido*

Rounding out the rest of the cast are Mara Klein as Zoe, Vanessa Claire Stewart as Dora/Captain Ratts, and Leea Ayers as Grace/Bre'er Rabbit. Zoe is the titular octoroon and Klein richly imbibes the role with delicious pride that later turns into an immense tragedy

when her bloodline is discovered and ruin falls upon her. As Dora, Vanessa Claire Stewart plays her character so well to such an insufferable pompous degree that you simply love to hate her every time she shows up on stage. And though Grace isn't in the play as much as the others, Leea Ayers makes her mark with not only that character but in the wordless strange delight that is Bre'er Rabbit, who appears throughout the play and breaks the fourth wall illusion in her otherworldly ways.



*From L to R: Vanessa Claire Stewart as Dora, Leea Ayers as Bre'er Rabbit, and Hazel Lozano as Paul*

With the bewildering usage of donning on a face not native to their own for the three main leads, the play also shakes your comfort zone as the N-word is used quite frequently throughout, most of them coming from BJJ in whiteface and the Assistant in blackface for their respective play characters. The journey is never a settling one and we are taken for a roller coaster as we're in the front of BJJ figuring out the adaptation and the potential folly of such an endeavor while addressing current events at the same time.

It can seem like a mess. For many, particularly to white people and those who see themselves as white, it can also be utterly confusing. But the play is created this way by design and thus what I am most struck by is how it completely warps with one's expectations in our understanding of race. Will this be to everyone's liking, even if they understood it? No. But it's a bold piece of work and thus no surprise that critics at *The New York Times* ranked it the second-greatest American play of the past 25 years.



You wouldn't know it if you were in the audience I was with. The majority of the laughs came from people of global majority while all the white folks were incredibly quiet, so quiet to the point that Pam Trotter as Minnie addressed it right after the intermission (which got a massive guffaw out of me). Director Judith Moreland wisely lets the words do much of the heavy lifting while guiding the actors to achieve their fullest potential with already great written material and elevate it even further.

But this play isn't for everyone. Like the woman who asked me earlier, some may indeed scratch their head and ask "what's everyone laughing at?"

The answer? There are some things that white people just won't get.

#### **WHEN:**

***Performance Schedule:*** Friday, June 18 – Sunday, Sept. 19

***Dark:*** June 21, July 30, July 31, Aug. 1, Aug. 2, Aug. 27, Aug. 28, Aug. 29, Aug. 30

- **Fridays at 7 p.m.:** through Sept. 17 (dark July 30 and Aug. 27)
- **Saturday at 5 p.m.:** June 19 ONLY (Juneteenth event for follow the performance)
- **Saturdays at 7 p.m.:** through Sept. 18 (dark July 31 and Aug. 28)
- **Sundays at 7 p.m.:** through Sept. 19 (dark Aug. 1 and Aug. 29)
- **Mondays at 7 p.m.** through Sept 13 (dark June 21, Aug. 2 and Aug. 30)

#### **WHERE:**

The Fountain Theatre  
5060 Fountain Ave.  
Los Angeles CA 90029  
(*Fountain at Normandie*)

#### **TICKET PRICES:**

\$25 – \$45:

- Regular Seating: **\$45**
- Seniors 65 or older: **\$35** (regular seating only)
- Students: **\$25** (valid ID required)
- Monday nights: Regular seating (**\$45**) and **Pay-What-You-Want** (subject to availability)



## **Published by**

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**Edward Hong**

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I am the Cinnabon Monster, hear me eat calorie-ridden fat pastry products. [View all posts by Edward Hong](#)