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CURRENT REVIEWS from

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An Octoroon



Photo by Jenny Graham

Fountain Theatre

The first production to be delivered live and in person since the world nearly ended since March of 2020 would of course have to come from the intrepid folks at the Fountain Theatre, one of the most inventive, prolific, brave, determined—and scrappy—small theatre entities in Los Angeles.

Complete with interruptions by circling helicopters, garbage-loading sanitation trucks, and those typically tiny-dickers' incredibly loud mufflers as they cruise down Fountain Avenue looking for adventure, LA's premier return to live theatre is presented by the Fountain in the complex's impressive newly created outdoor space where their parking lot usually fills to capacity in less dramatic times past. The west coast premiere of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' controversial and decidedly subversive Obie-winning Best New American Play *An Octoroon* could not be a more perfect choice to prove our intrepid community is ready and able to rise like an urban phoenix from the ashes of that mindfucking Covid-19.

Based on Dionydius Lardner Boucicault's mid-19th-century melodrama, itself based on Thomas Mayne Reid's 1856 novel *The Octoroon or, A Lover's Adventure in Louisiana*, Jacob-Jenkins takes no prisoners in his highly contemporary—yet often eerily not—adaptation, peppered with characters in blackface and peppered with more use of the notorious "N-word" than a Richard Pryor set at the old Comedy Store.

Before his death in 1890, Boucicault wrote more than 150 plays, his body of work considered part of the “sensation drama” tradition, a popular derivative of Victorian melodramas using cutting-edge Victorian technology to create grand stage spectacles featuring gimmicks such as real waterfalls and burning ships. *The Octoroon*, a quintessential example of a sensation drama, opened at the Winter Garden in New York City in 1859, premiered four days after the hanging of slave-rebellion leader John Brown in Harpers Ferry, a factor that proved to be a hot-button issue both onstage and off.

Despite its problematic timing, *The Octoroon* played to sold-out houses in Union territory and parts of Great Britain with Boucicault himself playing the character of Wahnotee. It was even scheduled for a twelve-performance run at Washington D.C.’s Ford’s Theatre and would have opened immediately following Lincoln’s assassination on April 14, 1865, something that understandably never was to happen.

According to Boucicault’s biographer Richard Fawkes, *The Octoroon* uniquely “touched a nerve” with the citizenry of both our young country’s North and South. Some hailed the play as a call to action for its vile depiction of slavery, while others saw the production as sympathetic to the Southern way of life. Chicago theatrical legend Joseph Jefferson, a member of the original 1859 cast, wrote, “[*The Octoroon*] was produced at a dangerous time...a drama told so well had a great effect on the audience, for there was at this time a divided feeling in New York with regards to the coming struggle... Then there were various opinions as to which way the play leaned...the truth of the matter is, it was non-committal.”

So here we are smackdab in the middle of another of A’murka’s most dangerous times when topic of racial injustice and bigotry have accelerated to the point of madness, thanks to the skewed sense of ugly entitlement fueled by our destructive former Celebrity Appresident as his Troglodyte followers spent four-plus years crawling out from under their proverbial rocks. And of course, in our exaggerated and out-of-control era of “cancel culture,” the Fountain has taken an enormous risk presenting such volatile and possibly easily misunderstood material.

Set in antebellum New Orleans, *An Octoroon* tells the story of a plantation owner named George (Matthew Hancock) as he falls in love with Zoe (Mara Klein), a comely servant who despite her returned feelings knows romance between them can never be since she is an eighth African-American. Unlike most of the people of the times, however, George refuses to let this stop his intentions to marry her—that is until villainous overseer M’Closky (also played by Hancock), who has deviously wangled himself into ownership of half the estate, forges paperwork to show Zoe’s freedom papers are not valid and in the downsizing of the financially-troubled plantation plans to sell the girl with the rest of their “property.”

Hancock also begins the play entering the bare stage in his underwear and addresses the audience as a character called BJJ, a struggling African-American playwright who can’t seem to unravel how to present his adaptation of an obscure 1859 play he feels needs resurrection

since all his troupe's Caucasian actors refuse to appear in blackface. This makes BJJ (initials looking familiar yet?) decide to play the leading role of George himself, sitting down at a makeup table to smear white makeup on his own face as his plans unfold.

As he speaks, another of the company's other playwrights (Rob Nagle, presumably echoing the spirit of Boucicault) watches from the wings, grumbling about what he is seeing and hearing as he consistently pulls from a near-empty liquor bottle. Soon he and his assistant (Hazel Lozano) are themselves seated at the now abandoned makeup table, he to cover his face in red greasepaint in anticipation of playing the role of Wahnotee, a stereotypical firewater-guzzling "Injun," while she applies blackface to take on the role of an ancient "house" slave called Old Pete.

These three performers are the backbone of *An Octoroon*, their committed versatility standing out among some glaring inconsistencies in the production's playing styles. Hancock is always a noteworthy addition to any production, but here as brilliant as he is as BJJ, he later struggles a bit finding just the proper amount of grandness and overplaying while trying to pay deference to the true message the real-life BJJ is trying to convey. One physically exhausting eleventh-hour scene, however, where he battles himself as George and M'Closky duke it out, shows just where he—and this entire production, presumably—will go when it settles into its long run.

LA's stalwart theatrical hero Nagle is as usual hilarious throughout as Wahtonee and later, when the exaggerated humor gradually transforms into something meant to be far less humorous, he's downright scary playing the slave merchant LaFouche. Still, Lozano gives the breakout performance of the evening, her humble and consistently "yaas, ma'am"-ing Old Pete emerging as the most endearing slave yet, coming off as a highly non-PC cross between Stepin Fetchit and Ben Vereen as Chicken George.

Vanessa Claire Stewart is a comedic delight as Dora, the parasol-twirling, overly-petticoated Southern belle with an accent that could melt *butta* who is spurned by George no matter how hard she tries to show him what a delicate flower she is—something that rarely ever works for most Southern belles. Kacie Rogers and Leea Ayers, who also seamlessly doubles as a mysterious Br'er Rabbit, that infamous trickster hero of early African-American folktales, are both enormous assets here as two of the plantation's most outspoken slaves, yet it is the deadpanning Pamela Trotter as their cohort Minnie who gets most of the laughs despite a few uncomfortable line flubs on press night.

This was a huge and daring venture for the Fountain to choose as their inaugural return to producing, something that I know worried its creators as possibly too objectionable in our industry's current overly-regulated #MeToo cultural witch hunt and even leading the Fountain's Producing Director Simon Levy to seek out my Native-American partner Hugh after the performance to see how Nagle's drunken Wahtonee antics might have sat with him.

In general, *An Octoroon* is a wildly successful effort, perfectly kicking off the complex's ingenious outdoor barebones stage as it surely defines how future productions could be mounted in this same converted playing space, something the theatre is already planning to make an annual summer thing. And although Frederica Nascimento's set design is a bit puzzling and unwieldy while Nicholas Santiago's unnerving video designs deserve a better pulpit, Naila Aladdin-Sanders' rich period costuming and Derrick McDaniel's evocative lighting plot—that is after sunset which, due to the production's neighborhood-pleasing 7pm start time, occurs in Act Two—are both tremendous assets to the proceedings.

The biggest problem here is Judith Moreland's surprisingly clunky—or at least unfinished—direction, which feels as though the company could have used a few more rehearsals before facing its public. Right now it all seems stuck in the midst of finding a uniform playing style where, as envisioned by its playwright, its unique tone and rhythms desperately need to consistently fall somewhere between Brecht at its biggest and the signature work of Matt Walker's genre-busting Troubadour Theatre Company. Still, I have complete confidence that as the production shakes off the yammy-yammies of press night and opening a difficult show in a brand new environment surely with many challenges along the way during its creation, the missing idiosyncrasies written into updating an old now unfashionable warehouse of a play will bubble to the surface with fine results.

Still, Branden Jacob-Jenkins' radical and subversive riff on Dion Boucicault's once popular but long forgotten mustache-twirling satire provides a clear and urgently indispensable juxtaposition of the inequities of antebellum South with our dastardly current cultural politics since a monster named Donald Trump attempted to destroy everything we hold dear. Despite some completely understandable growing pains as presented in this new untried venue, the Fountain's courageous and no-holds-barred mission to create a gasp-inducing satirical mounting of *An Octoroon* proves to be a tale told through outrageous humor without ever losing sight of the important and timely social commentary Jacob-Jenkins so craftily espouses.

**THROUGH SEPT. 19: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Av., LA. 323.663.1525
or fountaintheatre.com**
