

BWW Review: AN OCTOROON Plays (With) The Race Card

broadwayworld.com/los-angeles/article/BWW-Review-AN-OCTOROON-Plays-With-The-Race-Card-20210624

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June 24, 2021

First production at the Fountain Theatre's new outdoor stage runs through September 19

How exhilarating it is to have a work of drama be live and in your face once again.

Actually, the L.A. premiere of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' AN OCTOROON is more than in one's face. Judith Moreland's cunning production for The Fountain Theatre sneaks up behind you, gooses, tickles, sings, brays and pretty much does everything but give everyone in the audience a wedgie. Ping-ponging between subtlety and heavy-handedness, these two and a half hours spent with Moreland's spot-on ensemble and equally skilled technical team will give you fodder for contemplation and, yes, perhaps also for some outrage. Times being what they are, a play like this can't play it safe, and the pre-curtain disclaimer warns about potentially offensive language. Consider us warned, but Moreland and her team know exactly the type of kerosene they are playing with and how close to bring the lit match.



Offensive? Oh, raucously and gleefully so by almost any definition, but the work is so very smart. Jacobs-Jenkins' celebration/take down of Dion Boucicault's 19th century melodrama THE OCTOROON begins with a prologue in which an angst-ridden self-described "Black playwright" named BJJ (played by Matthew Hancock) confronts an artistic conundrum which he decides to solve by playing the white characters in whiteface. While he's at it, he also puts white actors in blackface to play slaves and white actors in redface to play Native Americans. And away we blithely sail!

Set in an empty theater (more on that later) the play's first act gives BJJ a honey of a scene-establishing monolog. As he's wrapping up, he starts chalking his face before donning a blond wig that Alec Baldwin might have used for his Trump tenure on SNL. Nearly ready, BJJ is intruded upon by The Playwright (Rob Nagle), an emotional and probably soused Irishman who yammers on about all of his contributions to the theater ("I brought you copyrights. I invented matinees, bitches! Look it up."). Hancock and Nagle's clever and quite profane mirror act is worthy of the Marx Bros., as well as a hint of the craziness yet to come.



Prologues concluded, we move into the tale of THE OCTOROON, a la Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins. Boucicault's play is set on the Louisiana plantation of Terrebonne and concerns a heroic but financially bereft land owner George Peyton (played by Hancock) who falls in love with Zoe (Mara Klein), a freed former slave with 1/8 Black blood. The villainous overseer M'Closky (Hancock again) will go to any means to get both Terrebonne and Zoe for himself. There's a southern Belle named Dora (Vanessa Claire Stewart) in love with George. Being an heiress, she figures she can save the imperiled estate through their marriage. We also have a good old fashioned murder involving the slave boy Paul (Hazel Lozano) and the Native American Wahnotee (Nagle), the resolution of which involves images from a camera.

The plot, as noted, is Boucicault's and every bit of its Antebellum age. Brandon-Jacobs's overlay jazzes up, modernizes and problematizes every trope it can get its hands on. So you've got the house slaves Dido (Kacie Rogers) and Minnie (Pam Trotter) clucking and kibitzing as though they were dishing at Starbucks. Fellow slave Grace (Leea Ayers) informs Minnie that "everyone finds the way you act kinda ghetto. It's embarrassing to the community." And, yes, those are fighting words.

As the pre-curtain notification warns, in this play about the politics of slavery, the language is rough - modernized or otherwise. F-bombs and N-words pepper the action, often delivered by performers (Lozano most principally) who are playing caricatures. Even when there is no dialog, Moreland's production never eases up on the throttle. During intermission, the video screen runs a greatest hits montage of racially insensitive cartoons, movie scenes and other choice nuggets. (Mickey Rooney in Breakfast at Tiffany's, anyone?) The video design by Nicholas E. Santiago is used to powerful effect both here and during a climactic fire sequence.

And then there's the projection. In its fourth act, we are shown an image and left in silence to study and ponder it for what feels like a very long time. This makes for an uncomfortable moment which will probably spark more than a little bit of post-curtain reflection.

The Fountain Theatre has a solid history of putting talented players on the stage and AN OCTOROON adds to this legacy. Company favorite Hancock, so electric in the company's HYPE MAN, is both cerebral and a ball of fire here. His opening monologue is triumphant and his one-person George vs. M'Closky battle is pulled off with real deftness. Stewart's O'Hara-esque send-up and Nagle's scenery-devouring turns as the Playwright and the exploited Native American Wahnotee make for great comic bookends. Major kudos also to Lozano for bringing off the two slaves and the Playwright's assistant with equal parts style, grace and humor.

AN OCTOROON marks the launch of The Fountain Theatre's new outdoor stage, a venue set up in the theater's parking lot that can be easily assembled and taken down for summer productions. Constructed in part so the company could return to live performances post-

COVID, the stage is smartly built with great sight lines, decent sound (although you may hear some noisy traffic) and plenty of versatility. With AN OCTOROON, the production's scenic designer Frederica Nascimento christens it splendidly.

One of the play's scenes is described as "an empty, unfortunate-looking theatre." Well, sorry folks, but after 15 months of dark playhouses and Zoom performances, there is nothing unfortunate about this theatre. And how very fine it is that an audience can be back in person to excise the emptiness.