

# **An Octoroon: Dramaturgical Notes**

by Dr. Daphne Sicre

Re-opening L.A.'s theater season with *An Octoroon* after having been on a hiatus due to the Covid-19 pandemic and shutdowns might seem as a controversial choice, but it is indeed a conscious choice. As audience members, you are about to embark on a satiric version of Dion Boucicault's 1859 Antebellum melodrama, *The Octoroon*, which in itself is an adaptation of Thomas Mayne Reid's novel *The Quadroon*. Except in this version, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins samples *The Octoroon* and deconstructs it with a gaze of U.S. slavery not often taught in U.S. textbooks.

This sampling and deconstruction allows Jacobs-Jenkins to transform Boucicault's wildly popular melodrama into his own play. Although, one will argue, both plays follow the same plot, Jacobs-Jenkins' version makes critical changes to the universe of *The Octoroon*, mainly by removing many of the White characters in *The Octoroon* (notably the plantation owners) and giving critical lines to the enslaved Black women. He also mixes the original dialogue with contemporary speech, as a reminder that this is a play-within-a-play and a critique. Thus, *An Octoroon* is a perfect example of embodying critical performance race theory, as it takes a deep look into the relationship of race, racism and power on stage while making you confront the controversial truths of racial history that still plague the United States today.

Boucicault's portrayal of race and class made his play controversial in its time — so much so that American audiences made him change the original ending. But in Jacobs-Jenkins' version, racial classifications take a different perspective. A Black actor plays both the White hero, George, and White villain, M'Closky, in white face; a White actor plays the Native American character, Wahnotee, in red face; and a "racially ambiguous" actor plays two Black characters, Pete and Paul, in blackface, juxtaposing the original production of *The Octoroon* where Black characters were played by White actors in blackface because Black actors were not allowed on stage.

Jacobs-Jenkins' intentional use of make-up critiques the nineteenth-century prejudicial and stereotypical casting of White actors in blackface to play Black characters—and, in the case of *The Octoroon*, the enslaved characters. The use of blackface, whiteface and red face are a clear critique of Boucicault's story and the racist attitudes of his characters, while also prompting us to examine how ridiculous color-blind casting can be. This critique is here to remind us of the racist stereotypes and theatrical conventions that have perpetuated theater for decades and that still exist today. It is a clear reminder of how racist theater itself has been throughout time, and thus why, in the last year, thousands of BIPOC performers have created organizations and written manifestos and letters demanding change in our theatrical practice, education and artistry.

An exploration of identity and how it is represented on stage is also a key part of this play. Although racial classifications might seem at the heart of the play, Jacobs-Jenkins wants us to dig deeper. If smearing on makeup can transform a Black person into a White person, what does that say about our casting policies and choices? What does it mean to be a Black actor or in Jacobs-Jenkins' case, a playwright?

The first lines in the play say, "I'm a Black playwright. I don't know exactly what that means, but I'm here to tell you a story." What does that mean? And what stories can, and are Black playwrights supposed to, write? In this opening monologue, Jacobs-Jenkins pokes fun at our theatrical conventions, while making you think about race, labels, and identity. Pay attention to what he says, because it is at the heart of why he is telling this story, and why this story matters now. The goal of the play is beyond exploring racial stereotypes and theatrical representations; it's to make us feel something now and hopefully act on it.

There are many other theatrical conventions at play and in use in *An Octoroon*. Unfortunately, I cannot divulge them, as it would remove the element of surprise. But keep in mind: this performance is designed to make you feel uncomfortable and self-conscious while simultaneously making you laugh. Jacobs-Jenkins' intent is to create an emotional impact and to make you feel, even if that feeling is discomfort. At the end of the day, talking about racism and its lived experience is not easy.