

Creating a Sensation: Dion Boucicault's OCTOROON

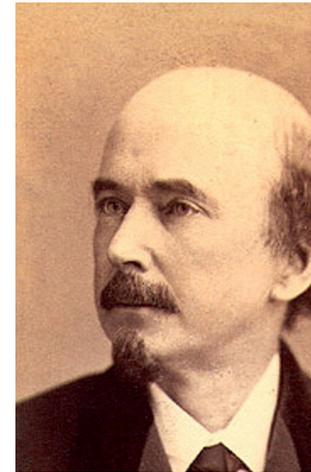
by Moss Madigan & Catherine Ritter

An *Octoroon* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins is based on the famous nineteenth century melodrama *The Octoroon* by Dionysius Lardner Boucicault, itself an adaptation of Thomas Mayne Reid's novel *The Quadroon*.

Born in Dublin, but raised in London, Boucicault was a well-known playwright and shrewd businessman. Before his death in 1890, Boucicault wrote more than 150 plays and led a campaign that established American copyright laws for drama. Boucicault's work is considered part of the "sensation drama" tradition.

An incredibly popular derivative of Victorian melodramas, sensation dramas used cutting-edge Victorian technology to create grand stage spectacles like real waterfalls and burning ships. Not only were these impressive theatrical feats intended to "wow" an audience, they were also meant to appear real and elicit strong emotions from theatre-goers.

The Octoroon, an example of a sensation drama, opened at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York City in 1859. The production premiered four days after the hanging of slave-rebellion leader John Brown in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and was controversial both on and off the stage.



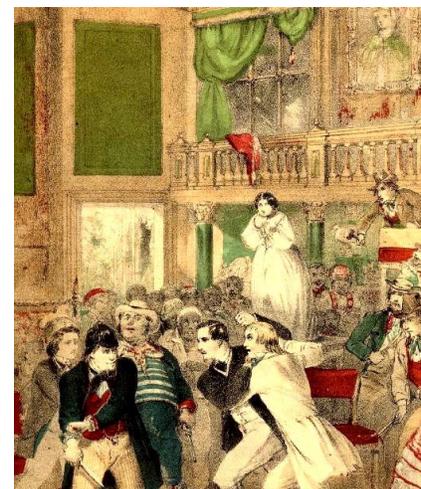
Dion Boucicault



As Boucicault's biographer Richard Fawkes explains, *The Octoroon* uniquely "touched a nerve" with both the 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. 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."

For all of its controversy, *The*

Octoroon played to sold-out houses in Union territory and parts of Great Britain with Boucicault himself playing the character of Wahnotee. *The Octoroon* 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. Those twelve performances never happened.



THE OCTOROON, Act IV, 1859