



AN OCTOROON

BY BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



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AN OCTOROON was presented by Soho Rep (Sarah Benson, Artistic Director; Cynthia Flowers, Executive Director), in association with John Adrian Selzer, at Soho Rep in New York City, opening on May 4, 2014. It was directed by Sarah Benson; the original music and musical direction were by César Alvarez; the choreography was by David Neumann; the set design was by Mimi Lien; the costume design was by Wade Laboissonniere; the lighting design was by Matt Frey; the sound design was by Matt Tierney; the projections were by Jeff Sugg; and the production stage manager was Amanda Spooner. The cast was as follows:

BJJ/GEORGE/M'CLOSKY.....Chris Myers
 PLAYWRIGHT/WAHNOTEE/LAFOUCHE ... Danny Wolohan
 ASSISTANT/PETE/PAUL Ben Horner
 ZOE.....Amber Gray
 DORA Zoë Winters
 MINNIE.....Jocelyn Bioh
 DIDO.....Marsha Stephanie Blake
 GRACE Shyko Amos

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

This is the suggested doubling for the play, with actor ethnicities listed in order of preference:

BJJ — played by an African-American actor or a black actor.

GEORGE — played by the same actor playing BJJ.

M'CLOSKY — played by the same actor playing BJJ.

PLAYWRIGHT — played by a white actor or an actor who can pass as white.

WAHNOTEETEE — played by the same actor playing PLAYWRIGHT.

LAFOUICHE — played by the same actor playing PLAYWRIGHT.

ASSISTANT — played by a Native American actor, a mixed-race actor, a South Asian actor, or one who can pass as Native American.

PETE — played by the same actor playing ASSISTANT.

PAUL — played by the same actor playing ASSISTANT.

ZOE — played by an octoroon actress, a white actress, a quadroon actress, a biracial actress, a multi-racial actress, or an actress of color who can pass as an octoroon.

DORA — played by a white actress or an actress who can pass as white.

MINNIE — played by an African-American actress, a black actress, or an actress of color.

DIDO — played by an African-American actress, a black actress, or an actress of color.

GRACE — played by an African-American actress, a black actress, or an actress of color.

BR'ER RABBIT — played by the actual playwright or another artist involved in production.

RATTS — played by the same actor playing BR'ER RABBIT.

“If such an imitation of human beings, suffering from their fate, be well contrived and executed in all its parts, the spectator is led to feel a particular sympathy with the artificial joys or sorrows of which he is the witness. This condition of his mind is called the theatrical illusion. The craft of the drama is to produce it, and all its concerns conduce to, and depend upon, this attainment.”

— Dion Boucicault
The Art of Dramatic Composition

AN OCTOROON

THE ART OF DRAMATIC COMPOSITION: A PROLOGUE

BJJ enters an empty, unfortunate-looking theatre, mostly — if not completely — naked. He holds a remote control and surveys the audience for a moment, before:

BJJ. Hi, everyone. I'm a "black playwright." (*Beat.*)
I don't know exactly what that means,
but I'm here to tell you a story:
"Let's find a way to help you deal with your low-grade depression,"
my therapist recently said to me.
"Okay ..."
"What makes you happy?"
"I don't know."
"Really? Nothing makes you happy?"
"Not really."
"What about work? Doesn't the theatre make you happy?"
"I mean ... Some of it. Not all of it."
"So you're not excited about your work?"
"I mean I'm not-not excited."
"Do you have any career goals?"
"No ..."
"Anyone's career you admire? Any professional role models?"
"In the theatre?"
"Yeah — are there any playwrights who you admire?"
" ... "
"Anyone?"
"I don't know —"
"Just — just say the first name that comes to mind."

“Dion Boucicault?”

“Who is that?”

“He’s a playwright. He’s dead. He wrote in the nineteenth century.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“Yeah — no one cares about him anymore. He’s dead.”

“... So your role model is someone no one cares about?”

“I mean, people cared about him when he was alive.”

“Oh, okay ... And what did he write?”

“Um, well, he’s probably best known here for writing this play called *The Octoroon*?”

“*The ‘Octoroon’?*” What’s an ‘octoroon?’”

“It’s a person who is one-eighth black.”

“Ah ... And you ... like this play?”

“Yes.”

“Okay ... Well here’s an idea:

Why don’t you try adapting this ‘*Octoroon*’ — for fun.

I think it’s important to re-connect with things you feel or have felt positive feelings for.”

So I did. Or I tried to.

But then all the white guys quit.

And then I couldn’t find any more white guys

to play any of the white guy parts,

because they all felt it was too “melodramatic.”

I went back to my therapist and she was like,

“Do you think that maybe you’re angry at white people?”

“Uh — what?”

“I said, ‘Do you think that maybe you’re angry at white people?’”

And I was like, “Uh, I don’t think / so — ”

“Like subconsciously?”

“Um. No. Like most of my best friends are white ... ”

Then my therapist was like, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I am literally surrounded by white people all the time.”

“Are you really, really sure though? Like 100% sure?”

I looked at my therapist, who was white. (*Beat.*)

“Well, who needs white guys?” she said, nervously.

“Do you really need them? Why can’t you just play the parts?”

“Me?”

“Yes. Isn’t ‘colorblind casting’ a ‘thing’?”

And isn’t that how the theatre started for you? As an actor?

Maybe it's worth going back to the source of your relationship with this ... thing you do."

"Okay ..."

"So why don't you try playing the parts you need?"

Maybe you'll learn something from it ..."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is you learn from the theatre.

Sympathy? Compassion? Maybe even ...

understanding?" *(BJJ presses a button on his remote control and the intro to a loud, vulgar, bass-heavy, hypermasculine hip hop track begins to play on a loop. BJJ retrieves a vanity table and folding chair from somewhere and is starting to set up his makeup station, when he remembers something and pauses the music.)*

Just kidding. I don't have a therapist. *(Unpauses it, repauses it.)*

I can't afford one. *(Unpauses it, repauses it.)*

You people are my therapy. *(BJJ unpauses the music again and the actual song plays as he finishes setting up his makeup station. He finds a bottle of wine or some alcohol in a drawer, opens it, and chugs the entire thing. The alcohol has no visible effect on him, now or ever. Then BJJ gets into whiteface — possibly tries to cover his entire body with it. This should go on for some time. After he is satisfied, he slowly turns around and, without taking his eyes off the audience, very, very slowly and very, very stoically gives himself an incredibly powerful wedgie. He takes the remote and turns the music down to underscoring. During the following, he continues getting into makeup, touching up, finessing.)*

I believe an important part of being a good artist is recognizing your limits.

So I can respect the pussies who pussy out of a project.

I respect it when they get their "people" to be all like,

"Well, such-and-such doesn't really get the stuff about slaves."

I'm like, "What is there not to get? It's slavery.

And I'm not even asking you to play the slaves.

You're playing the goddamn slave owner."

I mean, God forbid you ask a black guy

to play some football playing illiterate drug-addict

magical negro Iraq vet with PTSD who's

secretly on the DL with HIV but who's

also trying to get out of a generic ghetto with his

pregnant obese girlfriend who has anger management issues

from a history of sexual abuse —

in fact, everyone's been sexually abused —
and someone's mother has a monologue
where she's snorting out of her nose and crying everywhere
because she's been caught smoking crack
and fired from her job as a hotel maid ... *(Beat.)*
(I just made that up ... Dibs.) (Beat.)
God forbid any actor of color not jump at the chance
to play an offensive bag of garbage
so far from his own life
but which some idiot critic or marketing intern is going to describe as
a gritty, truthful portrayal of "the Black experience
in America," but the minute you ask a white guy
to play a racist whose racism isn't
"complicated" by some monologue
where he's like
"I don't mean to be racist!
It's just complicated!"
he doesn't return your phone calls?
Then my therapist was like,
"Don't you think you ought to not shit where you eat?"
and I was like,
"Well, what happens if I shit where I starve?" *(Playwright enters, also
mostly — if not completely — naked and stands in the back, listening.)*
"Black playwright."
I can't even wipe my ass
without someone trying to accuse me
of deconstructing the race problem in America.
I even tried writing a play about
talking farm animals once —
just to avoid talking about people —
and this literary manager was like, "Oh my God!
You're totally deconstructing African folktales aren't you?"
I'm like,
"No. I'm just writing about farm animals."
And she's like,
"No, no. You're totally deconstructing African folktales.
That's totally what you're doing."
And I was like, "Bitch!
I'm not fucking deconstructing
any fucking African fucking folktales!"

I'm writing a fucking play about
my issues with substance abuse
and then I am attributing the dialogue to a
fucking fox
and a fucking rabbit
to protect identities! *Fuck you!*
Give me a fucking break!"

And, by break, I mean a production. (*BJJ puts a blonde wig on —
the final touch. If the music hasn't ended by now, BJJ pauses it.*)

So then my therapist asked me about my dreams.

And I told her about this dream I had recently.

A dream I keep having.

Basically, I am being attacked by a swarm of bees.

I am covered in bees. Bees are all over me —

all over my arms and legs, my chest —

all over my neck, all over my face, in my eyes —

and I can't see a thing.

And, I don't know if you know this,

but the majority of deaths resulting from bee swarms

are not from bee stings —

but actually from suffocation.

Basically, bees have evolved,

to locate your breath and they follow it

to your face, where some of them

cover your eyes to blind you

and others climb inside your nostrils and mouth,

causing you to choke to death.

It's all very organized. (*Beat.*)

But, anyway,

in my dream, it occurs to me that I need to

figure out something to do

before the bees asphyxiate me.

And I start to panic. Every time. And it occurs to me that

I should call for help, and so,

I start screaming. I'm like: "SOMEBODY!

HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP!

HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP!" (*Beat.*)

And then, every time, I realize that I'm screaming.

And that, if I were actually suffocating,

I wouldn't be able to scream. (*Beat.*)

AN OCTOROON

by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

WINNER OF THE 2014 OBIE AWARD FOR
BEST NEW AMERICAN PLAY

10M, 5W (doubling)

Judge Peyton is dead and his plantation Terrebonne is in financial ruins. Peyton's handsome nephew George arrives as heir apparent and quickly falls in love with Zoe, a beautiful octoroon. But the evil overseer M'Closky has other plans — for both Terrebonne and Zoe. In 1859, a famous Irishman wrote this play about slavery in America. Now an American tries to write his own.

“AN OCTOROON invites us to laugh loudly and easily at how naive the old stereotypes now seem, until nothing seems funny at all ... Mr. Jacobs-Jenkins is using a genre associated with exclamation points to ask questions not only about the portrayal of race in America but also about the inadequate means we have for such portrayals. I don't think it's too much of a spoiler to reveal that this show ends — spectacularly and hauntingly — with all of us in the dark.”

—**The New York Times**

“Super oxygenating — despite moments of palpable fear and disquiet, we leave feeling somehow healthier, as though the theater has given us a violent shake and a pep talk.”

—**Time Out New York**

“[A] wildly imaginative new work by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. AN OCTOROON simultaneously gives us [Dion Boucicault's] great melodrama and its contemporary reverberations. [The play] might induce vertigo, but it insists that making theater can be the best way to talk back to history.”

—**The Village Voice**

Also by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins
APPROPRIATE
NEIGHBORS

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