

Theater: Not So Mysterious "Love & Sex;" Brilliant "Octoroon"

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THE MYSTERY OF LOVE & SEX ** out of ****

AN OCTOROON *** 1/2 out of ****

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LINCOLN CENTER THEATER AT THE MITZI E. NEWHOUSE

In this new play by Bathsheba Doran, the setting is described as "The outskirts of major cities in the American south." For a realistic drama set in contemporary times (as opposed to some fantastical tale), why such a bizarrely vague sense of place? In fact, the only two locations are a college and the childhood home of our heroine Charlotte, a home which is probably set around Atlanta or perhaps Savannah or even -- who knows? -- Nashville. And why the "outskirts?" Is it in the city? In the suburbs? Is it rural? And why "the American south" instead of "the American South" or even just "the South?" To avoid being seen as a "Southern" play? That instinct to lean towards the vague and generic rather than the specific and telling runs throughout *The Mystery Of Love & Sex*, a work that is vague and generic from start to finish.

Charlotte (Gayle Rankin) and Jonny (Mamoudou Athie) are best friends from childhood; now they're college students and all but married. An awkward visit from Charlotte's parents Howard (Tony Shalhoub) and Lucinda (Diane Lane) raises that very point. Are they lovers? Are they getting married? Howard clearly doesn't think it's a good idea, though the fact that Jonny is black doesn't seem germane. The scene is subpar Neil Simon, with the meal a bare-bones salad and Howard groaning as he has to sit on a cushion on the floor. Despite Howard being a best-selling author, somehow Charlotte and Jonny are the only college students in America who can't be bothered to rustle up four chairs for a meal with her folks (not to mention a meal).

The situation is a little odder than that schtick implies: Charlotte and Jonny are best friends but while they are joined at the hip and she thinks they're all but engaged, they've never had sex. Jonny is a virgin and a Baptist. Charlotte is taking Gender Studies and admits to a crush on a very butch girl. (In typically ham-handed fashion, the fact that this girl is apparently brutishly masculine qualifies as a running gag.) Charlotte disrobes and practically demands Jonny lose his virginity with her; when he simply looks away, well hmm, what are we to think?

A great deal happens in *The Mystery Of Love & Sex*, though none of it is convincing or interesting. Sexual identities are explored and defined; friendships destroyed and repaired. At one point Charlotte is almost pathologically clingy to Jonny. We're told she has a drinking problem, not to mention the rather disturbing fact that she attempted suicide... at 9 years old! (The revelation of why is dramatically flat.) Jonny's mother is ill and then dies. The marriage of Howard and Lucinda teeters and then collapses. Charges of racism and betrayal fly. All of it, I'm sad to say, is boring.

It's telling that the characters barely seem any different at the end of all this turmoil than they do at the beginning. The plot twists are so generic and seem to come out of nowhere and head nowhere, so what impact could they possibly have? At a banal level, one example of this random accretion of detail is that Jonny and his ailing mother write each other all the time... but Charlotte doesn't know? There's no reason for this and it's utterly

unbelievable given their symbiotic life together. Both characters have Secrets, but this surely would not be one of them. And yet we're not supposed to wonder at how Charlotte could be out of the loop -- it's not a plot point, not something meaningful, just typical of the unconvincing nature of the show.

At one point Jonny suddenly accuses Howard of never really accepting him into their home, not really. He also thinks Howard's series of mysteries are racist and develops both a paper and a lecture series based in part on that belief. Well, if Howard doesn't really like -- or is even uncomfortable with Jonny because he's black -- shouldn't we actually see or at least sense that?

At the beginning of the show, Howard is adamantly opposed to what Charlotte claims is the impending marriage of her and Jonny. But his instincts are excellent, as even Jonny should readily agree. Yet soon when Howard imagines Charlotte can't live without Jonny, he just as eagerly works to convince Jonny to marry her.

Early on, Howard pushes Jonny to call his dying mother on the phone. Maybe Howard is being an interfering person but it seems a well-intended and kind concern nonetheless, the sort any adult might express towards an honorary member of the family. But no, Jonny insists Howard never really accepted him and is sexist and racist to boot.

In a tone deaf passage, Doran has Jonny remember back in high school when a football player boyfriend of Charlotte came to dinner and Howard immediately referred to this new kid as "son." Why didn't Howard ever call Jonny "son," he demands? Like me, you're probably immediately thinking, "Because a New York Jew and a writer no less is smart enough about language to know 'son' is a highly offensive phrase for a white man to use when talking to a black man, even if he is young enough to be the man's son." Despite his supposed skill with words, Howard doesn't even make this obvious retort.

Of course, Howard doesn't make this obvious retort because these aren't real characters in a real scene exchanging real thoughts. (A scene that degenerates into a very unlikely bit of wrestling. These two guys are not warriors.) They're all cardboard stand-ins for real characters, as meaningless and uninteresting as saying a play is set on "the outskirts of major cities in the American south."

With a setting that indeterminate, one might forgive Andrew Lieberman for his equally generic set design. Long flowing diaphanous curtains line the back of the stage and they open and close at various times to sort of indicate a change in setting or time of day or maybe a hallway. It's so vague that they just plop a desk in one corner, expose it by pulling back a curtain and call that "an office." It's as lazy and uninteresting as can be, but really what else could he do? All other tech elements, including the anonymous direction of Sam Gold, are right in line with it.

Happily, there is the cast, which somehow gins up interest and makes the evening passable entertainment, if awfully lengthy. Athie is the least impressive, but then he has the least impressive role, a tamped down enigma who barely knows himself. Rankin is little better as Charlotte but she has a lot more to do and embraces her role's extremes. The real if modest pleasure comes from Shalhoub and Lane. He invests all his skill in making Howard a specific and real person. He can't quite succeed but Shalhoub does what he can to wrest some humor and humanity out of the part.

Lane's character is arguably the most hackneyed of all, a Southern belle who snaps her fingers repeatedly whenever she's angry or longing for a cigarette. It's pure sitcom-level humor (and not a good sitcom) arising out of some therapeutic advice and plays just as stupidly as it sounds. But Lane is inherently appealing and uses her considerable charm and skill to liven things up. Here's hoping she keeps returning to the stage more often.

The play reaches what end it can...and then goes on for another ten minutes. In Doran's confused sense of drama, the final moment of empathy comes between the mother Lucinda and Jonny. This makes no sense since these are the two characters who have the least need to establish a new understanding or show of affection.

They've never been at loggerheads for a single moment so why does the final grace note belong to them? Who knows, but it's nice to see Lane in the spotlight one last time.

AN OCTOROON *** 1/2 out of ****

THEATER FOR A NEW AUDIENCE AT POLONSKY SHAKESPEARE CENTER

I first saw [An Octoroon at Soho Rep](#) last May and named it (along with [Father Comes Home From The War Parts 1, 2 and 3 by Suzan-Lori Parks](#)) as the best play of the year. But last May? If you'd asked me I would have guessed I saw it in October or November, weeks ago rather than more than half a year ago. The show has remained that vividly in my mind.

Transfers are a scary thing. Maybe An Octoroon benefitted from the shock of the new, the excitement of hearing a new voice in playwright in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins? Maybe that brilliant original cast caught lightning in a bottle? (Most of the actors in this mounting are new to the play.) Maybe the gritty, bare-bones staging at Soho Rep was more appropriate for the play than than the jewel box that is the Polonsky Shakespeare Center? Maybe a second viewing won't wow as much?

Not to fear. While all those concerns were in my head during the play's intentionally disconcerting opening scene, once the drama kicked in my fears were calmed. An Octoroon is playful and toys with theatrical conventions with glee. It has white people in black face and black people in white face. It has slaves speaking in ghetto dialect and an actor playing both the hero and the villain in staging that climaxes with him fighting himself a la Blazing Saddles. It holds up very strongly ten months later and I'm sure it will hold up ten years later when this show is revived.

[Check out my original review](#). Everything I said then holds true, especially if you're seeing the show for the first time. It takes a melodrama from the 1800s as a starting point for absurdist and very pointed theater. Everything from a Brer Rabbit-like creature to the all-too-real horrors of lynching are present.

A second viewing didn't take my breath away -- though it did thrill my guest, who was seeing it for the first time and reacted the way I did on my first performance. But I was able to appreciate even more the craft at work, the canny way in which Jacobs-Jenkins employed every trick in the book to see both the past and the present in a new light. One of his brilliant touches is to have female slaves speak in stereotypical ghetto fashion when they're alone. It's hilariously funny throughout but it also works on so many levels that ultimately it proves disquieting and provoking.

Wildly entertaining, An Octoroon is still hardly a commercial slam dunk and I'm thrilled [Theater For A New Audience](#) is presenting it again. Thrilled because I got the chance to see it again and thrilled because I can send everyone who missed it the first time around. Don't make that mistake again.

THEATER OF 2015

[Honeymoon In Vegas](#) **

[The Woodsman](#) ***

[Constellations](#) ** 1/2

[Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s](#) ** 1/2

[Let The Right One In](#) **

Da no rating

[A Month In The Country](#) ** 1/2

[Parade in Concert at Lincoln Center](#) ** 1/2

[Hamilton at the Public](#) ***

[The World Of Extreme Happiness](#) ** 1/2

[Broadway By The Year 1915-1940](#) **