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AN OCTOROOON *** 1/2 out of ****

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SOHO REP

An Octoroon is precisely the sort of play you hope to catch when venturing Off Off Broadway to see the first mounting of a new work by a buzzed-about, talented young playwright. It's bold, messy, ambitious, filled with very talented actors committed to a fresh voice, engaging, funny, sprawling and -- this is exciting, too -- feels like a little sharpening will make it even better.

It begins in a WTF fashion, with Chris Myers (marvelous throughout), stepping into the spotlight like some avant-garde stand-up comic. He starts talking about his therapist and conflicted feelings over the theater and how his work is perceived. It's wittily done and confessional and just long enough to make you warily wonder where exactly it's going.

Myers is playing the playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, nominally sharing how he came to tackle a piece inspired by the 19th century melodrama *The Octoroon* by Dion Boucicault. It was one of the most popular plays of its time and Boucicault a towering figure, though as Jacobs-Jenkins says, he's mostly forgotten now. (True, though in fact, a recent revival of his *London Assurance* at the National in London was a delight.)

In the blink of an eye, the play morphs into a staging of that melodrama, though Jacobs-Jenkins is deconstructing the hell out of it. A southern plantation is falling into bankruptcy. Our hero George (Myers again) has arrived from Paris to see to its affairs. He's hounded by the wealthy and tiresome Dora (played with Carol Burnett-like relish by Zoë Winters) but falls for the beautiful and inevitably tragic Zoe (a solid Amber Gray), the title character and a mulatto treated almost like a member of the family but doomed in her desire for a happy life by the dreaded drop of black blood that poisons her system.

The moustache-twirling villain is M'Closkey (Myers, yet again), who lusts after the beautiful Zoe and does all he can to have her, from killing a young slave boy delivering the mail (it contains a reprieve for the family in the form of a letter of credit) to buying Zoe at auction and trying to kill George. The original playwright Boucicault also pops in for a word (played wonderfully by Danny Wolohan) and soon dons red makeup to play an Indian.

Wandering in and out of the action are the slaves, with a go-for-broke Ben Horner playing old Pete and the excellent duo Marsha Stephanie Blake and Jocelyn Bioh as Dido and Minnie, two characters with up-to-date street slang that turns their dialogue into an hilarious routine that's also a running commentary on both the

status of slaves then and the status of women and poor black people today, somehow both celebrating their cultural uniqueness in the face of horrific injustice then and endemic poverty today, all while messing with your mind just a little bit. If that doesn't discombobulate you enough, the actual playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins pops in wearing a Br'er Rabbit-like costume, doing bits of business between scenes. Somehow, that's not nearly as odd as it sounds.

So to sum up, you've got one actor donning "white face," another actor donning "red face," and yet another donning "black face" in a show that combines every imaginable acting style, sometimes playing the hammy melodrama for laughs, other times delivering the emotions as strongly as possible, and still other times stopping the story so the "playwright(s)" can describe the cool effects you'd be seeing (a burning ship!) if they had more money or had been able to cast more white actors. Myers as Jacobs-Jenkins is a bit woeful when he admits he sorely underestimated the number of white actors the play would call for. On the plus side, that means he gets to stage a huge fight with himself since Myers plays both the hero and the villain -- Blazing Saddles-style, he's holding a knife to himself and soon rolling and thrashing about the stage as the rest of the cast gasps in terror. Amidst all the thoughtful and button-pushing on race and American history, An Octoroon is also a playful look at the history of theater as well.

Meta? You bet, but in a smart and always entertaining style. It feels slightly unfocused towards the end of the two and a half hours of the show, though you're certainly never bored. When a play pulls the rug out from under you repeatedly (we're never quite sure what the "rules" are for this work), that can be exhausting no matter how successful each element may be. The Octoroon wants to barrel towards a big finale while An Octoroon wants to dig deeper.

Jacobs-Jenkins ends the laughter abruptly by displaying a now iconic photo of an actual lynching. That allows the finale of the show to have a more sober, powerful effect. It doesn't milk the original play's doomed fate for Zoe for either humor or tears, choosing it to occur offstage, in a way mirroring the indifference society had at the time to such uncomfortable reminders of the mingling of the races. Zoe could exist on stage only if she died at the climax. Here we end suddenly in song, the theater plunged into darkness while the voices of the cast implore us to think on what might replace our sorrow, our prejudice, our stereotyped vision of our country and each other and ourselves.

Credit to the entire technical team, which makes the most of modest resources to create vivid costumes (Wade Laboissonniere) and sets (by Mimi Lien) with some flashy, old-school tricks up their sleeves. The strong score by Cesar Alvarez is ably played by the on-stage cellist Lester St. Louis, who somehow never flinches at all the goings-on around him. You know a playwright is one to watch when they can attract the best talent. That's certainly the case here with an excellent ensemble. They're all strong, though Bioh (who also starred in his play Neighbors at the Public) is especially hilarious as Minnie and the handsome, intelligent Myers is truly impressive in his various roles and ability to switch styles of acting at the drop of a hat. Director Sarah Benson keeps them all on the same page, even as the page they're on switches from melodrama to satire to drama to comedy from moment to moment. I can't wait to see this show again when it's perhaps refined even further and am just as eager to see what Jacobs-Jenkins will do next.

Here's a talk back with the playwright and the director:

FORBIDDEN BROADWAY COMES OUT SWINGING *** out of ****
DAVENPORT THEATRE

What to do? The natural inclination with Forbidden Broadway is to checklist each new edition, list the big numbers that have been added and tell which ones score the most zingers. But I'm a relative newbie to Gerard Alessandrini's long-running poisonous valentine to the theater. I only caught it for the first time when it came back in 2012.

Thirty two years on from its 1982 opening, Forbidden Broadway is still fresh as a daisy to me. I'm still delighting in its essentially loving mockery of the Great White Way and a cast that over the years has given a boost to the likes of Jason Alexander and Dee Hoty, but whom are good enough you still expect any moment to jump from this to Saturday Night Live or better yet a big budget musical.

I worried about returning to the show too "soon." Little did I know Alessandrini, with additional dialogue by co-director Phillip George, would turn out so much new material. Perhaps some of it is slightly tweaked from days gone by? (I'll never know but with so many shows revived on Broadway you could hardly blame them for taking advantage of it.) Les Miserables practically has its own mini-musical edition at the end of act one, with an actress singing "On My Phone" to the tune of "On My Own" and the turntable seeking pity for being unemployed. (Scott Richard Foster shows off his impressive pipes here to best effect as Jean Valjean singing "One Run More." He's also dead-pan terrific mocking Once and Sylvester Stallone.)

I assume the cast has a (good-natured?) rivalry to steal the show and/or make one another laugh. Each shines at a certain point, but Mia Gentile is perhaps the best, spoofing Patina Miller in Pippin and especially scoring with a deadly take on Idina Menzel as the queen of the pre-school set, simultaneously showing off her voice to great effect and hilariously pushing it into the red a la Menzel's louder than loud style. It's the show's best combination of an actor's innate talent with a star ripe for parody.

Carter Calvert is such a good Liza Minnelli, they must have rejoiced when Cabaret was revived so she could pull that out of her arsenal of tricks. Marcus Stevens has fun again with Mandy Patinkin. Together, their best number was a take-down of The Bridges Of Madison County. Carter was also amusing as Carrie Underwood, drawing her way through The Sound Of Music and duly impressed by Mia Gentile's Audra McDonald.

Bullets Over Broadway could have been dismissed with one quick jab ("Yes, We Have No Composers" to the tune of "Yes, We Have No Bananas") but I still don't get the jibes at Trey Parker and Matt Stone as guys dismissive of musical theater; they seem to love it. Similarly, they toss in a Neil Patrick Harris as Hedwig cameo, but haven't figured out the soft underbelly of that one yet. (Maybe they love it too much?)

Frankly, that's half the fun of the show (which includes David Caldwell working hard on piano) -- seeing which catty comments sync with your own and comparing notes with your fellow theater-goers after it's over about which ones they liked or thought missed the mark. We'll be doing that for many years to come, if the quality of this edition is anything to judge by. Now who's going to play Tupac Shakur?

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