

AN ABBEY THEATRE PRODUCTION



# AN OCTOROON

A RADICAL REBOOT OF DION BOUCICAULT'S PLAY, THE OCTOROON

ABBAY THEATRE  
21 APRIL — 14 MAY

ABBAYTHEATRE.IE  
#ANOCTOROON

## —Caitríona McLaughlin

I saw, or rather witnessed, *An Octoroon* by Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins at the National Theatre in London four years ago. I say witnessed because the play seemed to testify to something both urgent and necessary. Yes, it both shocked and thrilled me that night, but it also interrogated with ferocious wit and intelligence a play I thought I knew. It turned it upside down and illuminated new angles. This, I thought, is one way we can reinvigorate the canon, engaging head on with what might otherwise be dismissed. Dion Boucicault is a major Irish writer of the Victorian era. He was born on Gardner St. just around the corner from the Abbey. Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins' fearless and profound reworking of Boucicault is an important contemporary take on a flawed-classic, challenging accepted narratives around race and identity, provocatively reframing the original by questioning the melodramatic form itself.

On becoming Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre *An Octoroon* was one of the first plays to make it onto the list for my first year's programme. Here's why.

In the last 25 years Ireland has changed. We are no longer an outlier, perceived as an odd collection of stone walled fields surrounded by water at the edge of Europe. We are a significant European country offering opportunity and the possibility of change. People from across the globe want to come here to visit, yes, but more significantly to build lives and homes here. Many of us were still leaving in our droves, convinced there was no place for us here when we noticed others were arriving, staying and building a world of possibility. Our whole world is changing right now, but I wonder, is this current turn bringing us in a new direction or is it another curve on the cycle of repeating past horrors? The role of the artist is to interrogate, question, and challenge and so with that particular question preoccupying me I cannot but wonder are we, on this island, adapting fast enough to support a significant cultural shift? Where do we start our interrogation? At a time when we examine concerns about diversity, equality, sustainability, and planetary survival, should we prioritise national identity and what it means to be Irish?

I believe I have two responsibilities, as Artistic Director. The first is to protect, elevate and enhance the art forms that are theatre practice; the second to engage artistically with the cultural, political, and social moment. *An Octoroon* satisfies both responsibilities while also achieving a third criteria of the role which is to examine the Irish theatrical canon in a meaningful way for a contemporary audience.

This is an exceptional piece of theatre that has huge significance to an Irish audience. It presents an opportunity to examine how well we in Ireland carve the space and develop support for a new wave of Irish peoples with mixed heritage and a multiplicity of lived experiences. It's the first of a series of works we have planned at the Abbey to explore these questions. Our programme choices this summer embrace uncomfortable past mistakes, to demonstrate our appetite for different perspectives, new voices and a new generation of artists.

The fact that we are beginning this exploration of what our cultural future might be with an adaptation of play from our literary history is also significant. We have a rich diverse culture of playwrighting and theatre artists in Ireland. As artistic director of the Abbey Theatre my exploration of themes and issues of the day will always be predicated on the understanding that it will be examined in the context of our rich and diverse literary canon. A canon from which we have a lot to learn. So programming this play does three things: it engages us with our historical canon in a meaningful way; it uses an old antebellum trope to examine contemporary racism in a very smart way; and it teaches young playwrights how they might use provocative and even inflammatory and insulting material and refocus its gaze to challenge outmoded ways of thinking.

Dion Boucicault is known as the originator of the 'sensation' scene in theatre: "And then the boat explodes. (Beat.) Sensation."

Anthony Simpson-Pike and Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins have not let him down on that score. This production is thrilling and shocking in equal measure, and sensational, yes. We're deeply proud to be producing it and bringing this company of artists and creatives together to mark a cultural shift in the Irish artistic landscape, and to share such vital and important work with our audiences. I hope you enjoy it.



## —Anthony Simpson-Pike

*An Octoroon* by Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins is a challenging, provocative, incisive, and witty play based on *The Octoroon* by Dion Boucicault. Boucicault was one of Ireland's most significant theatre artists and an important part of the Irish canon. His play about slavery in America, *The Octoroon*, was wildly popular in the 19th century. There is a power in the descendant of enslaved people, Jacobs-Jenkins, adapting Boucicault's problematic play and making something new to speak to today. This production of *An Octoroon* is the first in Ireland, staged at the Abbey just around the corner from Boucicault's birthplace, it looks at the heritage of his work and asks us to reckon not only with how he represented slavery and enslaved black people then, but also how that heritage of misrepresentation and stereotype affects our culture today. Race is the biggest form of theatre in Jacobs-Jenkins view. Ideas about racialised people are based on creations of the mind that often bear little resemblance to reality. In other words, race is a performance and we see this most clearly in the heritage of minstrelsy. That form involved white performers, mostly Irish migrants in America, acting out an image of blackness that wasn't real but supported what white supremacists wanted to believe was true of black people to justify slavery and oppression.

The performativity of race is elucidated by the fact that when black performers did minstrelsy, they too had to perform a white supremacist idea of blackness, rather than act as they really were. They were performing someone else's idea of blackness. This racial theatre, a set of expectations of different communities based on their appearance, has real, violent consequences and permeates through to Western culture today. In my research for the play, I discovered that minstrelsy was a tool some Irish migrants in America used to become white. Being racialised as somehow 'other' at the time in America, the idea was that performing a grotesque version of blackness could at least mark them as not that. It was a way of saying, see how much more similar we are to other white people than these black caricatures we are performing. So significant was the prominence of Irish minstrels in America that black minstrel performers such as Ruben Crowler had to change their names to sound more Irish for work. He became Ernest Hogan.

Minstrelsy is the basis of modern Western entertainment. The first talkie featured blackface, and cartoons as we know them still carry the legacy of minstrelsy in recognisable ways, think of the white gloves characters like Mickey Mouse wear. Minstrelsy directly led into cartoons and many cartoons, being watched by children, carried racist ideas before it became less acceptable. Racial stereotypes, which this play inflates and explodes, are still present on stage, screen and on the street. I recently encountered someone in blackface on the way to a party who assured me they were just portraying a Somali pirate.

The performance of race isn't limited to black people in the play either. Boucicault himself originated the part of Wahnotee, the drunk Indigenous American in *The Octoroon*. And in *An Octoroon*, the white characters are also performers including Boucicault, who here becomes a sort of stage Irishman. White characters in the play perform according to the etiquette that they believe separates themselves from enslaved black people—they are wedded to a sort of minstrelsy that allows them to separate themselves as white people from the racialised people they oppress. That is the genius of choosing the form and the vocabulary of melodrama to explore race, a form that deals heavily in the performance of stereotypes of villain, hero, damsel in distress among others. No-one is performing a real representation of race because all race is theatre. And at its heart there is Zoe, stuck in a middle place, who gives us the commonplace story, authored by white writers, of the 'tragic mulatto' itself a stereotype of the time about mixed people who suffered because they could not be fully white nor did they want to be black.

*An Octoroon* explodes these misrepresentations to hilarious effect by making them hyper visible, impossible to ignore, forcing us to reckon with them and laugh at their ridiculousness. In it, laughter becomes a weapon. But it also clarifies that Western culture has always been laughing at these stereotypes without an interrogation of what that means. I wanted to do this production specifically because it was in Ireland. What does it mean that Boucicault wrote like this about black and indigenous people? Where does *The Octoroon* sit in the Irish theatre canon? And how can we look, clear eyed, at how black and racialised people have been misrepresented by one of Ireland's leading lights and what legacy that has today? Ireland is changing along with the world. The conversation about race needs to take a step forward. *An Octoroon* uses large sections of Boucicault's original text, and the racist language he used in it. That language is part of Ireland's theatrical heritage having been written by one of its leading artists, so this play is part of Irish history as well as American history. The offer of this play is to come together to look at that, without hiding, because you can't heal a wound that you can't see. And in that looking, we can laugh at the ridiculousness of the theatre of race and clear the way to see each other truly.



# — *Cast*



**JEANNE**



**JOLLY**



**LEAH**



**LORÉ**



**MAEVE**



**MARA**



**PATRICK**



**RORY**



**SATIN**



**UMI**

## — *Creatives*

### CAST

**Assistant / Pete / Paul** Jolly Abraham  
**Br'er Rabbit / Captain Ratts** Loré Adewusi  
**Dido** Mara Allen  
**Cellist** Satin Beige  
**BJJ / George / M'Closky** Patrick Martins  
**Zoe** Umi Myers  
**Grace** Jeanne Nicole Ní Ainle  
**Playwright / Wahnotee / Lafouche** Rory Nolan  
**Dora** Maeve O'Mahony  
**Minnie** Leah Walker  
**Writer** Branden Jacobs-Jenkins  
**Director** Anthony Simpson-Pike  
**Set Designer** Sabine Dargent  
**Costume Designer** Molly O'Cathain  
**Lighting Designer** Stephen Dodd  
**Sound & Composition** Giles Thomas  
**Movement Director** Annie Lunnette Deakin-Foster  
**Assistant Director** Esosa Ighodaro  
**Assistant Designer** Choy-Ping Clarke-Ng  
**Dramatherapist** Wabriya King  
**Hair and Makeup** Leonard Daly  
**Hair Assistant** Stephanie Nwambu  
**Costume Supervisor** Síofra Ní Chiardha  
**Voice Director** Andrea Ainsworth  
**Casting Director** Sarah Jones  
**Casting Consultant** Chandra Ruegg  
**Fight Director** Ciarán O'Grady

## — *Company*

**Producer** Craig Flaherty  
**Production Manager** Sally Withnell  
**Company Manager** Danny Erskine  
**Company Stage Manager** Brendan Galvin  
**Deputy Stage Manager** Tara Furlong  
**Assistant Stage Manager** Orla Burke  
**Producing Assistant** Aoife McCollum  
**Technical Production**  
**Co-Ordinator** Grace Halton  
**Props Master** Eimer Murphy  
**Props** Adam O'Connell  
 Dylan Farrell  
 Neasa Flannery  
**Costume Dressers** Yvonne Kelly  
**Costume Team** Gillian Carew  
 Theresa Czerniac  
 Breege Fahy  
 Tara Mulvihill  
 James Seaver  
 Jim Wallace  
 Simon Burke  
**Chief Electrician** Morgan Dunne  
**Sound Supervisor** Sean McKeown  
**FOH Mixer** Christine Caldbeck  
**Radio Mic Technician** Theatre Production Services  
**Set Builder** Pat Dillon  
**Flymen** Adrian Leeke  
 Pawel Nieworaj  
 Davy McChrystal  
 Pat Russell  
**Stage Crew** Larry Jones  
 Emma-Kate O'Reilly  
 Philip Hughes  
 Darren Magnier  
 Quiver  
 Sandra Butler  
 Maura Campbell  
 Fergus Hannigan  
 Jack O'Dea  
 Sharon Sorohan  
 ZOO.  
 Bobby Zithelo  
 Ros Kavanagh  
**CNC Routing**  
**Scenic Artist**  
**Marketing**  
**Social Media**  
**Press**  
**Graphic Design**  
**Publicity Images**  
**Production Photography**  
**Irish Sign Language**  
**Interpreter** Amanda Coogan  
**Audio Description** Bríd Ní Ghruagáin  
**Captioner** Jen Sinnamon  
**Co-Directors** Caitríona McLaughlin  
 Mark O'Brien



ISL interpreted performances feature a professional interpreter who translates the production into Irish Sign Language.



Audio Description is a live verbal commentary fed through an ear-piece that captures the visual elements of a production as it unfolds, that a blind or partially sighted person might otherwise miss.



Captioning is similar to television subtitling and gives deaf and hard of hearing audiences access to live performance.

*Audio Described and Captioned performances are provided by Arts & Disability Ireland with funding from the Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon*

**Running Time:** :  
2 hours and 40 minutes including a 20 minute interval.

# —Supporters



## PRINCIPAL PARTNER



## PROGRAMME PARTNERS



## CORPORATE GUARDIANS



ARTHUR COX



### GOLD AMBASSADORS

Behaviour and Attitudes

### SILVER AMBASSADORS

Trocadero

### DIRECTORS' CIRCLE

Tony Ahearne  
Richard and Sherril Burrows  
Pat Butler  
The Cielinski Family  
Deirdre Finan  
Donal Moore  
Sheelagh O'Neill  
Dr. Frances Ruane  
Susan and Denis Tinsley

### SILVER PATRONS

Frances Britton  
Catherine Byrne  
Tommy Gibbons  
Dr. John Keane  
Andrew Mackey  
Eugenie Mackey  
Eugene Magee  
Gerard and Liv McNaughton  
The Kathleen Murphy Foundation

# —Next up at the Abbey

AN ABBEY THEATRE PRODUCTION

## LUCK JUST KISSED YOU HELLO

*Written by Amy Conroy*

*Directed by Wayne Jordan*

29 APRIL - 14 MAY  
ON THE PEACOCK STAGE



AN ABBEY THEATRE AND LYRIC THEATRE BELFAST CO-PRODUCTION

## TRANSLATIONS

*Written by Brian Friel*

*Directed by Caitríona McLaughlin*

13 JUNE - 13 AUGUST  
ON THE ABBEY STAGE

# —22



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