

An Octoroon **by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins**

Audio Description Programme Notes **for the performance in the Abbey Theatre** **Saturday 14th May 2022, at 2pm**

Welcome to the audio description introduction to **An Octoroon**, written by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins.

This production is directed by Anthony Simpson-Pike. Set Design is by Sabine Dargent, with Costume Design by Molly O’Catháin, and Lighting Design by Stephen Dodd. Sound and Composition is by Giles Thomas. The Movement Director is Annie Lunnette Deakin-Foster, and the Fight Director is Ciarán O’Grady.

The performance runs for approximately two hours and forty minutes with one twenty-minute interval.

ABOUT THE PLAY

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ radical reboot of Irish playwright, Dion Boucicault’s notorious 1859 play *The Octoroon* became “this decade’s most eloquent statement on race in America today.” (quote from *The New York Times*)

Both old and new, both disturbing and hilarious, the original storyline of this flawed Irish classic is remixed into a bigger, wilder, more subversive version.

The Peytons’ failing Louisiana plantation is in financial ruin. Everything and everyone they own is going to be auctioned. Can Zoe escape the clutches of the devious Jacob M’Closky?

After productions in New York and London, the Abbey Theatre presents the Irish premiere of **An Octoroon** in Boucicault’s hometown. What might it mean for Ireland today?

Content Advice: **An Octoroon** uses caricatures and racial comedy to challenge societal conventions. It features murders, racial violence, and obscene language, including the N-word.

ABOUT THE SET

As the audience arrives, the stage is bare. The floor is painted a deep red, with a lumpy, uneven surface, streaked with grey and black smudges. At the back wall hangs a massive screen, like a metal shop shutter, also a deep red. The sides of the stage are clad in the same dark timber as the walls of the auditorium, with gaps to allow the performers come and go. A narrow set of steps go from the auditorium floor to stage level on the far left of the stage.

There is a Prologue in this performance, where an actor addresses the audience as the writer, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, or BJJ. During this scene, performers bring in dressing-room tables on casters, with mirrors surrounded by light bulbs, and plastic folding chairs, applying make-up as they continue to talk to us. During this Prologue, the house lights stay lit in the auditorium.

When the shutter screen is lifted, the full depth of the stage is revealed, including a back wall built out of bales of picked cotton, with gaps forming two upper windows, and a doorway at stage level. This represents the Peytons' cotton plantation. More cotton bales sit on the stage, with a fruit crate beside one on the right. At this point, a cellist enters and sits on the far right with her back to the audience for the rest of the performance. She holds her cello, and follows the action, playing from the sheets of music on a stand in front of her.

Later still, out in the fields, the back wall of cotton bales is replaced by a huge screen with an image of a cloudy evening sky, bathed in golden yellow.

After the interval, we return to the Plantation and to a large room with two crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The back wall is now a continuation of the wooden panelling of the Abbey Theatre. A long table is set against the back wall, and covered in a fluffy cotton cover, down to the floor. There is a box set at the end on the left, and a gavel and block left on the table. A set of steps leads up to the table top on the end on the right. Close to the edge of the front of the stage, 5 ornately carved dining chairs are spaced evenly, about a metre and a half apart from each other.

After this, the rear walls of the stage are removed; exposing the brick wall at the back of the building, and blue light fills the stage. A large mirror is lowered at the back, so that as the performers address the audience directly again, the audience is dimly lit, and reflected in this mirror. Black and white photographs are projected onto the surface of the cotton bale walls, now angled to the left and right at the back of the space.

The final setting in this production is a small cottage – a simple cut-stone dwelling with a lone window and door – which is lowered from the rafters onto the stage. Faint light from a gas lamp gently illuminates the window, while the rest of the stage is in shadow.

ABOUT THE CAST AND COSTUMES

Many of the performers in this production play several characters each, and the writer has specified that the casting should allow for performers of one ethnicity, playing roles of several others. The costumes are from the Victorian period, for the most part. Some performers play in white-face, with bright white face paint covering their faces down to the jawline, and exaggerated features like rosy cheeks added. Others use black-face, with matt black paint applied to the face, avoiding the eyes, and bright red paint around the mouth. One character, in portraying a Native American, employs red-face, with scarlet paint across his forehead and cheeks. In the descriptions below, the performers' ethnicity will be described, as well as the characters, where it is relevant to the production. With thanks to the cast for their advice and cooperation in compiling these descriptions.

We first meet actor **Patrick Martins**, who is Black Irish, playing the role of the writer, **Branden Jacobs-Jenkins**, or **BJJ**. A tall and muscular man with close-cropped black hair, and an athletic build, BJJ enters wearing just a pair of blue cotton jersey briefs. He later paints his face bright white, with rosy cheeks, and dons a blonde wig, to play **George**, a relative of the Peytons. As George, he wears a cream frock coat, with white shirt, blue silk cravat and floral embroidered waistcoat, with beige tapered trousers and tan leather slip-on shoes. A straw top hat with a band of linen sits atop his head.

Later still he plays **M'Closky**, who was Overseer on the Peytons' plantation. Here the actor dons a brown-haired wig, and a comical false moustache. M'Closky wears a navy military-style coat with red buttons, lapels and cuffs, over a gold waistcoat, blue and red cravat, and the same beige trousers, with knee-high black leather riding boots. A riding crop is stuck into his left boot, and a black leather whip hangs from his belt loop. M'Closky relishes his status as villain, often rubbing his hands together gleefully, or licking his lips lasciviously.

Rory Nolan, a White Irish actor, plays **The Playwright**, also known as Dion Boucicault. A tall man with close-shaved auburn hair and a goatee beard, he is the only cast member not to speak in an American accent. He first appears in shabby, faded, dusty clothes: a silk paisley dressing gown, pale yellow long johns, with cotton socks and pale brown moccasins. He puffs out his hairy, bare chest, and wears a red velvet fez at a jaunty angle.

Later, he paints the upper half of his face bright red to play the Native American **Wahnotee**. He wears a long, feathered war bonnet, a red and white striped, fringed blanket, and yellow cotton trousers, with a leather pouch for his tomahawk.

Later still, he plays **LaFouche**, an elderly white man, though his face is still covered in red paint. He wears a pale blue frock coat, white shirt, pale gold cravat and waistcoat, pale grey trousers and leather shoes. He dons a tufty grey-haired wig stuffed under a pale blue top hat.

Jolly Abraham, a South Asian actor, plays the **Assistant**. A short, slim woman with short black hair, the Assistant wears a black cotton long-sleeved top and trousers, black runners and a black make-up bag on a strap across her chest. A lanyard with a staff badge hangs around her neck.

Jolly also plays **Pete**, a elderly slave who works in the Peyton house, with a grey Afro wig, face painted jet black, and wearing round, gold-rimmed glasses. Pete's clothes are old and worn, with mismatched patches here and there. Pete wears a black coat, black and white striped waistcoat, cream and navy check trousers and old, black shoes. He wears a stiff white collar and red neckerchief.

As the young boy, **Paul**, Jolly wears a black afro wig, blue and white gingham shirt and red trousers that are frayed at the hem, and too short for him. On his feet, Paul wears yellow socks and cotton plimsolls. He carries a red bandana which he sometimes wears in his hair.

Mara Allen, a Black British actor, plays **Dido**, a slave working in the Peyton house. A woman of average height, she wears a floor-length cotton dress with a fitted top and long sleeves, in a striped blue and navy fabric. She also wears a white cotton apron, a white shawl tied loosely around her shoulders, and lace-up ankle boots. Her hair is covered by a red headscarf tied with a bow at the top of her forehead.

Leah Walker, also a Black British actor, plays **Minnie**. She wears the same blue and navy striped dress, white apron and ankle boots as Dido, and a white, patterned headscarf covers her hair, tied more loosely at the nape of her neck. Minnie is a little shorter than Dido.

Umi Myers, a tall young woman, plays **Zoe**, a character who is one eighth black (referred to in the play as an Octoroon). Umi is half African-Caribbean and half white British, with a tan complexion, curly dark brown hair, and blue eyes.

As Zoe, she wears her long hair tied into a low bun at the nape of her neck, and a sky blue, floor-length dress, edged with white scallop detail on the bodice, cuffs, waist and hem. There are white silk buttons dotted down the front. Zoe wears pearl stud earrings.

Jeanne Nicole Ní Áinle, a tall, trim, light-skinned black Irish actor, plays **Grace**. Grace, one of the slaves working in the fields of the Peyton plantation, is noticeably pregnant, with clothes that are sun-bleached, dusty and threadbare. Grace wears a cream floral blouse, faded and frayed pink skirt, pale blue apron and black boots, with a yellow headscarf covering her hair.

Maeve O'Mahony, a White Irish actor, plays **Dora**. A slim young woman, she wears a white crinoline dress with hooped skirt, and gold ribbon embellishments on the bodice, cuffs, waist and hem, and gold silk buttons down the front. Dora carries a small gold purse, and sometimes a white lace parasol. Her long brown hair is tied up in ornate plaits, dressed up with white lace and gold ribbons.

Loré Adewusi, a Black Irish actor, first appears as **Br'er Rabbit**. Wearing a grey shirt and grey-blue plaid trousers, with a wine waistcoat, wine socks and suede moccasin shoes, Br'er Rabbit also has a massive white fluffy rabbit's head with ears pointing upwards, white paw mittens on his hands, and a white fluffy tail on his bum. He hops around the stage, feet together and paws held neatly together in front of his chest. Br'er Rabbit never speaks.

Later he plays **Captain Ratts**, still with his rabbit's head on, but with a military jacket similar to the one worn by M'Closky – navy, with red lapels and cuffs, and a peaked officer's cap.

Lastly, the **Cellist** is **Satin Beige**, a young woman dressed in a long-sleeved black top, navy waistcoat and brown corduroy trousers, with black ankle boots.

That concludes the audio description introduction for **An Octoroon**. It was prepared by Bríd Ní Ghruagáin, who will also provide audio description for the performance. Audio description at the Abbey Theatre is provided by Arts & Disability Ireland with support from The Arts Council.

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Thank you. Go raibh maith agaibh.

