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RELS 451: Religion, Racism, and Social Justice

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An Octoroon; Race and Social Justice in a Theatrical Setting

“I just don’t know how blackness onstage works. It’s just a thing that has always confused me. I don’t know what anyone is talking about when they talk about black theatre, black drama, black actors. I don’t know. No one walks around saying white theatre or white actors”¹. In *An Octoroon*, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins uses the taboo theatrical convention of blackface to parallel modern racial politics with those of the late 1850s, when *The Octoroon* was written. He does this in an attempt to bring attention to the relative lack of progress in American racial politics and call for social reform.

The Octoroon, by Dion Boucicault was a tale of doomed love in the American South in 1859. The play is a melodrama, written in five acts, and uses the dramatic conventions of melodrama to tell the tale of Zoe Peyton, a white-passing girl who is one eighth black (at the time known as an octoroon). The plot follows the sale of Terrebone, a Louisiana plantation on which Zoe happens to live. Judge Peyton, the owner of Terrebone, dies, and his nephew, George, comes to town from Paris and immediately falls in love with Zoe. M’Closky (the villain of the story) is a white landowner from nearby, who is also in love with Zoe. When it comes out that her “free papers” are not valid, M’Closky becomes determined to buy Zoe and have her for himself. At the same time, Paul (a young slave), and his Native American friend, Wah-no-tee, go to retrieve the papers that would prove Zoe free. M’Closky thwarts their plot, and kills Paul, taking the papers for himself. Unfortunately for M’Closky, just before the murder Wah-no-tee was playing with George’s newfangled camera, and accidentally

¹ Eliza Bent, "Branden Jacobs-Jenkins: Feel That Thought," American Theatre, last modified May 15, 2014, accessed April 7, 2019.

took a picture of the murder. Zoe thinks that all is lost after she is sold to M'Closky at auction, and returns home to take poison and kill herself. In the American version of the play, Zoe succeeds in this deed and is found dead when George returns to tell her the good news, that M'Closky is a murderer². All in all, Boucicault's *The Octoroon* is considered by many to be an outdated piece of theatre that comments on outdated social situations, and is generally quite racist. So what does this piece have to do with modern race relations and social justice in the 21st century?

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, a young black playwright from Washington, D.C. read Boucicault's play in the mid-2000s, and found not an outdated piece of theatre, but a story that he saw reflected in his daily life. Jacobs-Jenkins took the same basic plot from *The Octoroon* and updated it, added to it, and racialized it in such a way that forces the modern audience to compare our social situation with that of the American South in the times of slavery. Jacobs-Jenkins subverts racial norms and questions the prejudices and assumptions of audience members of all races by presenting characters in makeup that changes the way in which we perceive their race. The play presents three actors in makeup portraying a race that is not their own. The first, "BJJ" (unmistakably meant to represent Branden Jacobs-Jenkins), is played by a black actor in white face. The second, "Playwright" (clearly meant to represent Dion Boucicault), is played by a white actor in redface. The third, "Assistant," is "played by a Native American actor, a mixed-race actor, a South Asian actor, or one who can pass as Native American" in blackface³. Each of these actors portrays three different characters throughout the show, sometimes portraying multiple characters onstage at once. This subversion of taboo convention leads to many thought-provoking scenes throughout the show—for instance, in Act Two, M'Closky (a black actor in white face), kills Paul (a Native American actor in black face) onstage. This plot point from the original *The Octoroon* is deeply complicated by Jacobs-Jenkins portrayal of race onstage. Not only

² Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon* (n.p.: Dramatists Play Service, 2015)

³ Ibid.

does the audience witness a white character kill a black character, but they also witness a black actor “killing” a Native American actor. Though this social commentary may not be clear to all audience members, this is but one example of the deeply thoughtful and complicated social justice commentary throughout the script.

Jacobs-Jenkins further complicates his narrative by presenting characters that are as based in stereotype/archetype as they were in Boucicault’s original *The Octoroon*. Jacobs-Jenkins does not change the two dimensional way in which the characters are given to the audience through text; in fact, he actually supports this archetypal convention by changing the text of the black women in the show (who are played by black women) to update their vernacular to a more modern speech. He begins Act One with a stage direction that reads “I’m just going to say this right now so we can get it over with: I don’t know what a real slave sounded like. And neither do you”⁴. Interestingly, however, he maintains the typical vernacular used for slaves in the lines of Paul, the young slave played by a Native American actor. In relation to Jacobs-Jenkins use of these conventions, one reviewer noted that he “uses satire and archival re-creation, jolting anachronisms and subliminally seductive music to try to get at its horrible, elusive center: the imponderably far-reaching legacy of American slavery”⁵.

Jacobs-Jenkins asserts that *An Octoroon* is “engaged in the act of looking at how the theatre interacts with questions of identity” and poses a very difficult question on the topic of social justice; “why do we think of a social issue as something that can be solved?”⁶. Though Jacobs-Jenkins poses this question literally in the above interview, he also poses this question time and time again through his script. His script “perpetually examines itself, from every possible angle, and yet manages to

⁴ Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, 17.

⁵ Ben Brantley, "Review: 'An Octoroon,' a Branden Jacobs-Jenkins Comedy About Race," *The New York Times*, last modified February 26, 2015, accessed April 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/27/theater/review-an-octoroon-a-branden-jacobs-jenkins-comedy-about-race.html>.

⁶ Bent, "Branden Jacobs-Jenkins," *American Theatre*.

transform self-consciousness from something that paralyzes into something that propels”⁷. He uses the ultra-meta convention of allowing the audience to watch the actor transform into a new identity onstage to thoughtfully critique the society in which we live and provide an engaging commentary on the social construct of race in the specifically American context. As one reviewer noted, “the face paint and silly props show how superficial our markers of identity are, and yet how much weight we attach to them. Race might be a social construct, but it spawned a system of classification that presumed to rule on an individual’s basic humanity”⁸. Though Jacobs-Jenkins does not directly call for social reform in our modern era anywhere in his script, he clearly intends to make the audience think; where do our own prejudices lie? How does our society in the 21st century reflect the society of American slavery? Jacobs-Jenkins does not answer any of these questions, he merely promotes discussion and discourse about a seemingly unsolvable problem. Is this a social issue that can be solved?

⁷ Brantley, "Review: 'An Octoroon,'" The New York Times.

⁸ Helen Lewis, "The National Theatre's An Octoroon is a challenging take on American race relations," New Statesman America, last modified June 20, 2018, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/2018/06/national-theatre-octoroon-branden-jacobs-jenkins-review>.

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