

## Nakkiah Lui reimagines *An Octoroon*: 'It appeals to the contrarian in me'

*The playwright-actor's directorial debut reinterprets a blistering drama about race in America for an Australian context*



*'Why don't we import new works by people of colour?' asks Lui. 'Why are all our classics by white people?' Photograph: Stephen Henry/Queensland Theatre*

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When Nakkiah Lui first read the script for Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' play *An Octoroon*, she was "kind of angry and really jealous".

"My first thought was, why didn't I write this play?" she says.

Her second thought was more practical: "Why isn't anyone putting this work on?"

Lui – playwright, actor, columnist whose previous theatre credits include *Black is the New White* and *Kill The Messenger* – had recently been appointed to the national artistic team at Queensland Theatre, along with other emerging and established artists including The Sapphires director Wayne Blair and indie theatre company Elbow Room's Marcel Dorney. When she first brought Jacobs-Jenkins' play to the company's artistic director, Sam Strong, it was out of a desire to see more black works on stage.

“Why don’t we import new works by people of colour? We don’t really do that,” she explains. “Why are all our classics by white people? White men, but white people? Why aren’t we bringing in new works to put on, overseas plays, that are by people of colour, that discuss racial politics?”

When we speak, it’s a week into rehearsals for Queensland Theatre’s production of *An Octoroon*, with Lui in her directorial debut. She had no specific ambition to direct the work herself, but her passion for it is obvious – and who better to put an Indigenous Australian spin on an African-American meta-commentary on an Irish stage adaptation of an American novel? Yes, it’s that complicated.

Jacobs-Jenkins’ play is a contemporary American reinterpretation of the 1859 melodrama *The Octoroon* by Irish playwright Dion Boucicault. (Boucicault himself was adapting a novel, *The Quadroon*, by Thomas Maine Reid.) The central narrative concerns a plantation owner, George Peyton, who arrives home from a trip to find himself financially ruined due to the mismanagement of his estate by his caretaker, M’Closky.

While being courted by wealthy socialite Dora, who may save his fortunes, George falls in love with Zoe – the daughter of his uncle and a slave, and the “octoroon” of the title (the derogatory term is used to describe a person who is one-eighth black by descent). But M’Closky is also in love with Zoe, and knows that, due to her heritage, she is legally part of the property. So he plots to use this to his advantage – to have her sold off, to prevent her marrying George.



*Nakkiah Lui says that surprisingly little of the script needed to change in order to make it work in an Australian context. Photograph: Queensland Theatre*

The plot alone is complicated enough, but Jacobs-Jenkins' script reorients Boucicault's work to his own perspective: the central character becomes a playwright called "BJJ" – script directions state he is to be "played by an actual playwright, African-American actor, or black actor" – who breaks the fourth wall, initially to complain that all the white actors have quit his production, leaving him to play a number of key (white) roles himself.

What follows is Boucicault's narrative – more or less – reimagined by BJJ, and punctuated by cutting and hilarious commentary.

And Lui is taking the whole thing a step further – with Jacobs-Jenkins' blessing – removing the play from the context of the United States' south and giving it an Australian spin. The African-American characters in the script become Indigenous Australian (the cast includes Colin Smith, Melodie Reynolds-Diarra and Shari Sebbens among others) and the plantation in question shifts to far north Queensland.

Lui says surprisingly little of the script needed to change in order to make it work for an Australian context: "It's been a surprise in the room how those words fit into an Aboriginal vernacular and twang."

Part of the reason the shift works, says Lui, is because there are commonalities between the experiences of black Americans and Indigenous Australians. But while Australian audiences demonstrate a clear capacity to be critical of history and politics when it comes to the US, Lui says, they are remarkably less critical of what happens in their own backyard.

"It's interesting, as an Aboriginal person in Australia, that people are more willing to engage with the history and be empathetic – sympathetic – with overseas diasporas than they are for people here," she says.

"We will go see *Django Unchained* and we will cheer for Django, and we will watch *12 Years a Slave* and we will lament about how bad slavery is; we will look at Charlottesville and we will think gee, isn't Trump a racist. We will question them about their xenophobia for building a wall; we're so empathetic at times.

"I think Australia has this capacity ... to be critical of overseas history and politics but yet in Australia we just do not mention it. And if you mention it, you are creating a victim narrative, just for wanting the truth recognised."

She hopes that using "an overseas lens" will help cut through to local audiences.



*Nakkiah Lui and Colin Henry in rehearsals for An Octoroon. Photograph: Stephen Henry/Queensland Theatre*

Boucicault’s play prompted debate over slavery: some saw it as an abolitionist work, while others thought it was sympathetic towards slavery. (Boucicault denied his play was imbued with a political message at all.) These days, the word “octoroon” is considered a dated slur, and Jacobs-Jenkins’ script both acknowledges and skewers the racism of the original text with humour and self-reflexivity – not least by having Boucicault himself appear in the play as a belligerent drunk.

Lui says that *An Octoroon* spoke to her because of the way it handles everything from the racism of the original title – which “appealed to the contrarian in me” – to the way it inverts tropes such as blackface, in ways that are both comical and deeply political.

“It’s all about ‘passing’ – not about this idea of authentic identity but ‘passing’ – as in, this is what someone *thinks* you are, which is what race is in many ways,” Lui says.

She namechecks queer independent Melbourne-based theatre outfit Sisters Grimm as artists doing similar subversive experiments with concepts of identity in theatre. “I wouldn’t say [*An Octoroon*] is a piece of queer theatre, but [it plays with] this idea of what it is to reconstruct, to use stereotypes and to use people’s assumed knowledge, and to use tropes and to skewer them. And the play uses whiteface, it uses blackface, it uses brownface. It plays with this idea of inauthenticity and caricature.”

In practical terms, one of the biggest questions for Lui was how to transpose the politics of the play to the specificities of the Australian context. As she puts it: “If Aboriginal people are black, and we are [also] First Nations, then what is the role of the First Nations character – the Native American – in that text, and how does that meaning have currency here?”

As for the issue of how slavery translates to the Australian context, for Lui this is straightforward: “Stolen wages weren’t stolen wages; it was slavery. Let’s call a pig a pig.”

In the past, Lui has been described as a young Indigenous leader, though she has also expressed discomfort with the term as it is applied to her – the term “leader”, that is, though she is vocal about the way her Gamilaroi/Torres Strait Islander heritage is used to define her, too. In a recent Facebook post, Lui took aim at journalists who insist on referring to her as an “Indigenous playwright” while white playwrights will be named without qualifiers: “You are saying to be a playwright is to be white. To be an authentic and good playwright, you NEED to be white,” she wrote.

It’s not surprising this is on Lui’s mind: it’s a theme addressed explicitly within *An Octoroon*. “Hi, everyone, I’m a ‘black playwright’,” BJJ says, in the very first lines of the script. Then: “I don’t know exactly what that means.”

“Our classics are so racialised,” Lui says. “When we talk about classics really we’re talking about work from the white diaspora.”

“Black theatre started as a political movement here. It was the National Black theatre; it was Superboong in *Basically Black* on ABC ... [which] played on this idea of taking stereotypes and caricatures and racism and satirising it, and I think that this work speaks to that hugely. I wanted this work to go on for myself as an artist and as a writer, because I do think it’s a game-changer.

“It changes the way we tell stories, not just as black people but the way that white people see black theatre.”

• *An Octoroon* runs until 8 October at Bille Brown Studio, Queensland Theatre, as part of Brisbane festival