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Hybrid Place, Hybrid Play: We Players' Ondine at Sutro Baths

BY SF WEEKLY STAFF

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In the margin between the white lines on the asphalt parking lot and the wild crash of the sea on the west side of San Francisco lie the ruins of the Sutro Baths, created by millionaire and former mayor Adolph Sutro in 1896. Once the world's largest indoor swimming complex, a fire in 1966 left behind only a skeletal footprint of the edifice. Now grown over with grasses and brush, the concrete walls are crumbling alongside the natural erosion of the cliff faces, leaving the twist of metal rods to tarnish in the salt air. Like many publicly accessible park reserves, the space falls between nature and culture, and it is here that We Players sets their production of Jean Giraudoux's *Ondine*, co-directed by Carly Cioffi and Ava Roy, on view through June 7. Putting the

audience on the same footing as its players, the production is partly a hike through the park grounds, partly an escape to a fantasy world of knights and water nymphs that constantly comments on the brutal intrusion of reality within the constructed universe of dreams.

[jump] Part child, part immortal, the title character Ondine (Roy) embodies contradiction: She is petulant and delightful, a creature who succumbs to the apparent frivolity of love at first sight with the vain knight Hans von Wittenstein zu Wittenstein (Benjamin Stowe). Still, she adheres to her vows with the fiercest loyalty. She is every exaggeration about love ever devised by poets and dreamers, yet her commitment to their value makes them true through action, and the result is devastating as it is hilarious — the same plain honesty that makes Ondine’s love so vast and uncompromising is what makes her ingenuous comments about the grossness of the mortals she encounters so cruel and funny (“You’re not very bright, are you? No. You are stupid,” she announces to her beloved when he desires to eat a fish cooked alive in boiling water).

Lovers are a type, a caricature, given to absolute proclamations that intimate immortality, eternity, and the transcendence of all that makes us mortal. Yet being mortal themselves, these rare types prove their humanity through transgression. In *Ondine*, the enormous cast, from the humble fisherman Auguste (Jack Halton) and his wife Eugenie (Jennie Brick), who adopt the changling Ondine, to a spoiled king (Nick Medina) and his sassy Lord Chamberlain (Nathaniel Justiniano) in the nameless court that Hans serves, to the wise and powerful sea king, the Old One (Olive Mitra), might all be cartoons, each devoted to the narrow logic of their oddly intersecting realms. Yet together (though frequently double-cast), they produce an image of a world that seems both like and unlike our own, just as the world reflected in water is blurred and refracted, flattened and kaleidoscopic.

This hybridity also governs the immersive experience of a production that asks its audience to imagine a fisherman’s lonely cottage at Point Lobos, a king’s court inside the Sutro Heights Park, and yet demands that they measure the incline of the very earth beneath their feet with each step they take and confront the changing weather conditions created by ocean, wind, and fog. An ensemble of ondines sing and dance while gusts of air whip their sand colored cloaks; the sirens of the city interrupt the dialogue and remind of the real destruction we wreak upon ourselves.

“When you have reached my age, you will understand that life is a very poorly constructed play,” says the Lord Chamberlain in the second act, hoping the Illusionist, who both is and isn’t the Old One in disguise, will pull off a trick more satisfying than the ill-conceived world of disappointments that actually lies one layer beyond the frail plane on which he plays, a layer

buffered by the audience standing, sitting, and sprawling over the park lawn. It's one of those uncanny moments of recognition, the feeling that perhaps the world of fantasy and the world of reality share more blood than water.

Wear comfortable shoes and warm layers. Bring a blanket and maybe some snacks. Be ready to experience the magic and mechanics of the theater and the wonders and woes of the natural world.

We Players presents *Ondine*, Fridays through Sundays, May 1 – June 7, 4:30 p.m., at Sutro Baths, 680 Point Lobos Ave, 415-547-0189. Tickets \$40-\$80.