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The Challenges of Staging Ondine at Sutro Baths

BY SF WEEKLY STAFF

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For some, the thought of a night at the theater brings to mind the image of a long, cramped evening spent squinting toward an over-lit stage, trying to block out the sound of someone unwrapping cough drop after cough drop. Local theater troupe **We Players** doesn't think it should be like that. In their newest rendition of Jean Giraudoux's *Ondine*, the group ditches a traditional theater setting and moves to the great outdoors. Audiences are suddenly turned into part of the action, as they follow the play through Sutro Baths and Sutro Heights Park. And the intimacy that goes along with such an interactive show is a tremendously tricky task.

SF Weekly caught up with We Players Artistic Director Ava Roy, to discuss the massive amount of detail and preparation that go into producing a show as unique as *Ondine*.

[jump] **If someone was unfamiliar with We Players, how would you describe your work to them?**

For our audiences, the work is immersive and interactive. Audiences must physically move as the story unfolds throughout a given landscape. The distance and trajectory that the audience takes is shaped by each unique venue.

With *Ondine* at Sutro, audiences will walk throughout the greater Sutro Baths and Sutro Heights Park environs, but will pause at just a few distinct locations where they can sit and settle for the major action of the play.

Our work is fundamentally about making phenomenal theatre and using our art to help connect people with place, to inspire and support deeper engagement with the gems of our local landscape. Our work is intended to catalyze personal connection with the sites in which we perform and to activate all of the senses. With *We Players*, you do not only watch the actors and listen to the story, you feel the blazing sun or the cold wet fog, you smell the salt spray, you are distracted/enchanted in moments by whales breaching, or hawks soaring, or wild flowers blooming, or the sunset, or the moonrise. Our performances are multi-dimensional and challenge our audiences to look above them, behind them, below them, into the distance, and to get their noses right up to the edge of the action.

Is that something that's important to *We Players* — putting some sort of “twist” on a traditional piece?

For me, it's all about setting a play in a place. Rather than setting a play in a specific time, it's the significant historical time periods relevant to each site that significantly informs the staging and design choices.

With *Ondine*, it's the colors and textures of the natural environment that have influenced our design choices as well as the Sutro heyday of the late 1890's, when the baths were opened and in their height of glory and public use. We partnered with California College of the Art's “soil to studio” class to dye silk with natural dyes sourced from locally gathered coastal plants. So it's more about building the show into and for the site — rather than applying a contemporary twist. Of course, as far as putting a 'personal twist' on the piece, to my mind that is both inevitable and the job of a director and ensemble of performers, to tell the story through me, through ourselves, the actors instrument is their body, voice and life experience and so necessarily our personal experiences shape and inform the way we are able to tell a story.

How does taking a play out of a theater — and then turning it into site specific work — change the direction of that particular piece?

[By] being in direct and close conversation with the space, responsive to the natural features of

the environment and the weather, and allowing the elements to inform and guide the work.

Our work is site-integrated, meaning that it is not only site-specific, performed in unusual and outdoor venues, but also carefully built into and exclusively for each site. We spent a great deal of time and energy investigating the historical, cultural, and environmental significance and sensitivities of the sites in which we work and let these histories and environmental influences shape our story telling and influence design and aesthetic choices.

And how the evening will actually work? What can audiences expect when coming to see *Ondine*?

Audiences meet above the Sutro Baths at Land's End. There is a large parking lot and on the far side of the lot, opposite from the Visitor's Center audiences check in, receive their "audience signifier" and a briefing from the front of house team on how to safely navigate the terrain and position themselves so they can best see and hear. Foam kneelers are provided for those who are comfortable sitting on the ground, closest to the action, small folding stools are available as well, and those who wish to stand should position themselves behind those seated. For those who arrive early, there is time to explore the baths below, or simply to stand at the 'observation level' and relax while taking in the incredible view and hopefully, dropping into their senses and the environment a little bit. Audiences are cued to "follow the fisherman when he leaves the lake." From that point on, the audience follow the actors and flag bearers from location to location as the show unfolds throughout the greater Sutro environs.

Audiences should dress warmly. Seriously! Many, many layers, windbreakers, down coats, hats, gloves, scarves, plus sunglasses and sunscreen. There can be glare off the water, or thick fog. It can be very cold, damp, and very windy on the cliffs above the ocean. You can always take layers off! We encourage people to over prepare to maximize their comfort during this outdoor adventure.

The rest should be left a mystery, no? Follow the fisherman, follow the flag bearers, open your senses, explore the environment, let go of reality, enter the fairy tale.

We Players presents *Ondine*, Friday, May 1, 4:30 p.m., through June 7 at Sutro Baths and Sutro Heights Park, Ocean Beach. Tickets \$40-\$80.